Beyond Pragmatism

Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus

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Abstract

This study provides an in-depth analysis of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus after the collages of the Soviet Union. Using a non-foundationalist theoretical framework, it offers a new perspective towards the issue, deviating from the popular argument of considering Iran's behaviour in the region pragmatic. Here, Iran's agency as a foreign policy actor is assumed to be decentred. It is continuously produced by various competing and intertwined discursive and recognitive practices. Based on this ontological premise, new conceptualizations of identity, interests, and policies are introduced that allow looking into different aspects of Iran's behaviour in the aforementioned region.

The research investigates Iran's policies in the South Caucasus during the presidencies of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-213) as its main case studies, and each of them is discussed in corresponding three empirical chapters. The latter are based on a discourse analysis of extensive textual data from the respective periods. The result is a more complicated image that shows how dualities, hesitance, status anxiety, and routinized practices are an integral part of Iran's policies in the South Caucasus. In this way, the study puts forward a different understanding of the issue and tries to move beyond the ideology vs. pragmatism debate in the literature on Iranian foreign affairs.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis titled “Beyond Pragmatism: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus” is my own. No part of the thesis has been presented for another degree at this or any other institution.

Note on Transliteration

The Persian language sources used in this thesis have been transliterated based on the transliteration scheme of the *Iranian Studies* journal. For commonly used proper nouns, their widely established English forms are used.

List of Abbreviations

BSEC – Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation

CA – Central Asia

CaSCO – Caspian Sea Cooperation Organization

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States

CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization

ECO – Economic Cooperation Organization

EU – European Union

FM – Foreign Ministry

FPA – Foreign Policy Analysis

GUUAM – GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova) Organization for Democracy and Economic Development

IR – International Relations

IRI – Islamic Republic of Iran

IRIB – Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting

IRNA – Islamic Republic News Agency

ISNA – Iranian Students News Agency

LIO – Liberal International Order

NAM – Non-Aligned Movement

NIGC – National Iranian Gas Company

OIC – Organization of Islamic Conference

ORCD – Organization for Regional Cooperation and Development

OSCE – Organization of Security and Cooperation of Europe

PDT – Poststructuralist discourse theory

SC – South Caucasus

SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organization

SNSC – Supreme National Security Council

SOCAR – State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic

U.S. – United States

UN – United Nations

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

WTO – World Trade Organization

Introduction

In early January 1990, hundreds of people gathered at both sides of the border between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Soviet Union near the Iranian city Poldasht. Standing at the opposite banks of the Aras River, Soviet Azerbaijanis and their relatives on the Iranian side were waving at each other and chanting slogans of reunification.[1] In Iran, it was seen as a symbolic moment that epitomized the re-establishment of lost connections between them and the region of the South Caucasus.[2]

It was in this tumultuous period that Iran's foreign policy in this region started taking shape. What followed is often discussed in the literature as an example of pragmatic behaviour on the side of the Islamic Republic. Even the English language Wikipedia page on Iranian foreign affairs brings up the policies in the South Caucasus as a sign of Iranian pragmatism.[3] This research deviates from the dominant narrative and illustrates a more complicated picture.

The study takes issue with analysing Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus in the context of the ideology vs. pragmatism debate. The main argument here is that just because the Islamic Republic has a certain level of ideological detachment from this region, it does not mean that its policies are just a result of clear-cut strategic calculations often dubbed as pragmatic steps. The research shows how Iran's behaviour can be flexible but at the same time oscillatory, hesitant, and even contradictory. In addition, this behaviour is shaped by routinized practices and status-seeking efforts.

[1] "Muslims Exchange Slogans," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 7, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-005).
[2] "Soviet Youths Cross Border," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 6, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-005).
[3] "Foreign Relations of Iran," in *Wikipedia*, August 7, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Foreign_relations_of_Iran&oldid=1037606615.

To illustrate the complicatedness of Iran's policies, this work uses a poststructuralist discourse theoretical approach that helps to investigate Iran's identity, interests, and policies in the selected regional context from a new perspective. Specifically, it relies on the conceptual contributions of the Essex School of Discourse Theory, as well as some theoretical notions on the struggle for recognition in the field of International Relations. The theoretical starting point is assuming a decentred and discursive ontology, where Iran's foreign policy is performed by a set of articulatory and recognitive practices. Having such a perspective, this work studies Iran's foreign affairs in the South Caucasus by answering the following research questions:

1) How are identities and interests articulated in Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus?
2) How do certain policies emerge, get implemented and/or contested?

These questions are answered by providing a close observation of Iran's policies in the respective region during the presidencies of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), and Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) in the corresponding three empirical chapters. The latter are based on analysing a large pool of textual data (government documents, statements by high-ranking officials, politicians, and religious figures, as well as media coverage of events related to the South Caucasus).

The research shows that the Iranian government has not developed a coherent strategy of engagement with the South Caucasus during the studied period, neither was there a specific foreign policy approach that could be extrapolated in the region. In general, there were multiple articulations of interests and policy options that were made possible by the social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities. These social logics, which represent the most sedimented and routinized aspects of Iran's foreign policy, illustrate the dispersed

nature of the Iranian discursive space and the possibility of having contradictory policies. This characteristic is visible in the case of the South Caucasus as well.

One of the primary contributions of this study is demonstrating that the Islamic Republic was pursuing objectives that were not always in line with one another. On the one hand, the Iranian side self-identified as a central regional player and tried to have active engagement in shaping the developments in the South Caucasus. It also tried to limit the presence of its antagonistic Others (mainly, the United States and Israel) in the region and was looking for allies in that endeavour. On the other hand, it often showed a cautious and passive attitude towards various issues, trying to avoid complications that could be caused by involvement in the affairs of a tumultuous region. On certain occasions, the Islamic Republic also toned down its confrontational attitude towards the presence of the antagonistic Others to show preparedness to be engaged in regional initiatives without preconditions.

The second contribution, which derives from the first one, is showing how the dissonance between Iran's self-proclaimed role as a key regional player and its limited influence in many instances was a constant source of frustration. This situation often triggered a set of recognitive practices by the Islamic Republic. One of the primary indications of this struggle for recognition was the fact that Iranian officials held regular discussions with their counterparts in the South Caucasus on large-scale bilateral and regional projects, the implementation of which was questionable. Despite their unlikeliness, having discussions on such initiatives was a source of validation for Iran's agency as a major actor.

Another contribution of the study is the observation that certain aspects of Iran's behaviour became routinized over time and helped to maintain continuity in times of uncertainty. This characteristic especially refers to bilateral relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. A convention of holding regular negotiations with the officials of these states often helped to maintain a certain level of friendliness in bilateral ties and prevent potential crises from

unfolding. Here as well, the frequent encounters had a recognitive value, as a state of cordial relations was performed through them.

Finally, this research argues that the Islamic Republic was simply stuck on some occasions or was forced to make difficult choices concerning the South Caucasus. The dilemma of showing support to Muslims during a military conflict and avoiding costly involvement in it is a vivid example of such a situation caused by the simultaneous presence of contradictory articulations of interests and obligations that often put the Iranian side in an uneasy position.

In general, the research tries to deliver the point that Iran's behaviour in the South Caucasus escapes a parsimonious explanation. There are multiple factors at play that need appropriate reflection for a comprehensive understanding of the object of study. This research tries to provide that understanding in the following manner. It starts with a literature review of the works on Iran and the South Caucasus and shows the need for a new study. Then it provides an overview of the scholarly works on Iranian foreign affairs in general that helps to have a closer look at the peculiarities of the agency of the Islamic Republic and choose a theoretical framework that fits the objectives of the study.

The chapter on the theoretical framework follows the literature review. Here, a de-centred understanding of Iran's agency is introduced that is continuously produced by various discursive practices. The concepts of nodal points, hegemony, social and political logics are presented that help to understand how certain identities, interests, and policies are articulated. Then the notion of the struggle for recognition is introduced as another crucial factor in Iran's pursuit of a certain aspirant identity actualized. The theoretical framework helps to construct an understanding of a multi-faceted, malleable, and often even contradictory foreign policy. Its open-endedness helps to appreciate the nuances of the selected topic.

The next section illustrates the research design of the study. Here the object of analysis – Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus in the post-Soviet period – is discussed in detail. Then the research questions and the reasoning behind them are provided. The section on data collection follows, where it is illustrated what kind of textual materials are collected and how. Finally, the part on data analysis shows that a poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis is used. It is a process of double reading for identifying eventualities, as well as presenting the nodal points and subject positions at play in the discursive space of Iran's foreign policy. The two readings are then put together for answering the research questions.

Finally, the empirical part of the research is divided into three chapters that cover Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus during three presidencies, as noted above. Each chapter touches upon three themes: Iran's attempts at regional engagement, its policies concerning security issues, and bilateral ties with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. They have been identified as the main areas where Iran's foreign policy is performed in its complicatedness.

Literature Review

Synthesis: Iran and the South Caucasus

Since the independence of the states in the South Caucasus from the Soviet Union, a number of studies have been conducted concerning Iran's policies towards them. The literature review shows that there is a general pattern in these works. Usually, they start with comments on how complex these relations are, where factors ranging from natural resources to cultural affinities are involved. However, most of them end up emphasizing a few variables as the primary determinants of the way Iran acts in this region.

There is no wide variety of arguments concerning this topic. The predominant claim identified in the literature is that Iran's foreign policy towards Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia is a result of strategic calculations aimed at pursuing conventional national interests in the existing regional and international environments.[4] Fred Halliday presents it in a very straightforward way: "… for Iran the main importance of Transcaucasia is not an Islamic connection or Identity, or even that of territoriality, but that of strategic balance and security, combined with the maintenance and, if possible, development of economic ties."[5]

[4] Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (Taylor & Francis, 2000); Mahmood Monshipouri, "Pipeline Politics in Iran, Turkey, and the South Caucasus," in *The Great Game in West Asia*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 57–82; Abdollah Baei Lashaki, Masoumeh Rad Goudarzi, and Davood Amraei, "The Roots of Tension in South Caucasus: The Case of Iran- Azerbaijan Relationship," 2013, https://doi.org/10.5539/jpl.v6n4p141; Nika Chitadze, "Geopolitical Interests of Iran in South Caucasus and Georgian-Iranian Relations," *Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2012): 5–12; Kaweh Sadegh-Zadeh, "Iran's Strategy in the South Caucasus," *Caucasus Review of International Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2008): 7; Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010); Manochehr Dorraj and Nader Entessar, "Iran's Northern Exposure: Foreign Policy Challenges in Eurasia," 2013, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/708817; Richard Giragosian and Tornike Sharashenidze, "Engaging Iran: Implications for the South Caucasus" (European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), September 18, 2015), www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_engaging_iran_implications_for_the_south_caucasus4022.

[5] Fred Halliday, "Condemned to React, Unable to Influence: Iran and Transcaucasia," in *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, ed. John Wright, Richard Schofield, and Suzanne Goldenberg, 1st edition (Routledge, 1995), 73.

The argument that national interests matter the most is made (tacitly or explicitly) in the wider context of the ideology vs. pragmatism debate in the literature on Iranian foreign affairs. Most of the works state that the Islamic Republic has been pragmatic in this region. Interestingly enough, calling Iran pragmatic is their conclusive remark, and the analysis does not go much further. The dichotomous context of these studies, where showing whether Iran's behaviour is ideological or not has primacy, making exploring the peculiarities of that pragmatic foreign policy secondary. What pragmatism and ideology mean is not always clear, as both of these terms are defined in opposition to each other. Often, they are grouped together with other underdefined signifiers, such as "rational" and "moderate" vs. "radical" and "revolutionary." This issue is then extrapolated on the analyses of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. Specifically, Iran's behaviour in this region is mainly defined by being different from policies concerning the Middle East. It is argued that the Islamic Republic has been more restrained and mostly avoided revolutionary adventurism. As Mahmood Monshipouri states: "when geopolitical interests conflict with commitments of Islamic ideology, beliefs, and solidarity, Tehran almost always prioritizes its security and economic considerations above others."[6] His claim is illustrative of the general narrative in the literature – in the case of the South Caucasus, pragmatism trumps ideology.

The dominance of this theme is a result of path-dependence in the literature. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the texts written by Mohiaddin Mesbahi, Edmund Herzig, John Calabrese, and David Menashri set the tone of the academic discussions on this topic. While going over different aspects of Iran's foreign policy towards the newly emerged states in the post-Soviet South, their main finding was how the Islamic Republic acted more pragmatically in this case (i.e., different from its behaviour in the Middle East). For instance, David Menashri argued how a radical regime had adopted a moderate approach towards the South Caucasus

[6] Monshipouri, "Pipeline Politics in Iran, Turkey, and the South Caucasus," 60.

and Central Asia.[7] Edmund Herzig showed that "conventional vital national interests" had primacy in Iran's calculations.[8] Mohaeddin Mesbahi and John Calabrese argued how Islamic identity was "deideologized" to make it more compatible with the interests of the Iranian state in this new region.[9]

Considering the novelty of the topic at the time, pointing out the comparably pragmatic nature of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus was a valuable finding. It showed the importance of moving beyond analogous reasoning for understanding the policies of the Iranian side in this particular case. However, the studies that followed mainly restated the same argument and did not take a step further. In 2008, Farhad Atai concludes his analysis writing: "It can be argued that Iran has pursued a rational and positive course of action in Central Asia and the Caucasus."[10] In her 2010 book named Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era, Shireen Hunter states: "Iran's policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus has been nonideological and pragmatic."[11]

Most of the reviewed works black-box Iran's agency, presenting it as a regional power that tries to navigate in a difficult environment and balance against other players. Systemic variables are emphasized, and the South Caucasus is presented as a terrain of struggle between great and middle powers, Iran being one among them.[12] Mehran Kamrava's 2017

[7] David Menashri, "Iran and Central Asia: Radical Regime, Pragmatic Politics," in *Central Asia Meets the Middle East*, ed. David Menashri, 1st edition (London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998), 73–98.
[8] Edmund Herzig, "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia," *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 503–17, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2004.00395.x.
[9] Mohiaddin Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy," *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 2 (September 1, 2004): 109–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930410001310508; John Calabrese, *Revolutionary Horizons: Regional Foreign Policy in Post-Khomeini Iran*, 1st edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).
[10] Farhad Atai, "A Look to the North: Opportunities and Challenges," in *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics and Conflict*, ed. Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 134.
[11] Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, 173.
[12] Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus: Relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia*, 1st edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2019); Stephen J. Flanagan, "The Turkey–Russia–Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 163–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.751656; Houman A. Sadri, "Iran and the Caucasus States in the 21st Century: A Study of Foreign Policy Goals and Means," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 14, no.

book presents this notion very clearly. The title "The Great Game in West Asia" already shows that Iran's relations with the South Caucasus are primarily understood by the power games with Turkey, Russia, as well as the United States and the European Union.[13] These studies confirm the arguments of the above-mentioned earlier works that the Islamic Republic acknowledges the limitations it faces in the region and tries to balance against the influence of its adversaries, such as the United States, by different measures, such as aligning with the policies of Russia.

Alongside illustrating this balancing game, many of the observed studies emphasize economic matters as key determinants of Iran's national interests in its relations with the South Caucasian states. They argue that the Islamic Republic seeks cooperation and stability in the region for the purpose of having commercial benefits.[14] Here as well, ideological proclivities are toned down to make room for cooperation and confidence-building with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, as well as other states that have a strong regional presence. Nevertheless, the attempts at cooperation often stumble upon obstacles, as the

3 (September 1, 2012): 383–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2012.720787; Alex Vatanka, "Tangle in the Caucasus," October 6, 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-01-15/tangle-caucasus; Mandana Tishehyar, "The New Regionalism between Iran and Russia in Eurasia," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, no. 41 (2014 2013): 49–66; Giragosian and Sharashenidze, "Engaging Iran: Implications for the South Caucasus"; Josef Kraus and Emil Souleimanov, "A Failed Comeback? Understanding Iranian Policies in the South Caucasus," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 18, no. 5 (September 2, 2016): 448–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2016.1196024; Chitadze, "Geopolitical Interests of Iran in South Caucasus and Georgian-Iranian Relations"; Dorraj and Entessar, "Iran's Northern Exposure"; Tornike Sharashenidze, "The Role of Iran in the South Caucasus," Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD) (Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, 2011), https://css.ethz.ch/publikationen/externe-publikationen/details.html?id=%2Ft%2Fh%2Fe%2Fr%2Fthe_role_of_iran_in_the_south_caucasus.

[13] Mehran Kamrava, ed., *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[14] Monshipouri, "Pipeline Politics in Iran, Turkey, and the South Caucasus"; Suleyman Elik, *Iran-Turkey Relations, 1979-2011: Conceptualising the Dynamics of Politics, Religion and Security in Middle-Power States*, 2013; Anthony Cordesman et al., "U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Turkey and the South Caucasus" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 6, 2013), https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition-turkey-and-south-caucasus-0; Evanthia Balla, "Turkish and Iranian Interests and Policies in the South Caucasus," Policy Brief (The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, 2013).

interests of the states in the region are not always compatible. The case of the Caspian Sea is presented as a vivid example.[15]

In all, the observed studies mainly present Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus as a set of steps aimed at defusing external threats and developing, albeit limited, economic cooperation. By reiterating the general point on pragmatism, they filter issues related to culture, ethnicity, religion, and historical legacy through this prism, often presenting them as residual variables. Some of the works also discuss these matters as mere instruments for satisfying the national interests of the state. For instance, claiming that "Islamic ideology is increasingly used as a mask for realpolitik" is a clear expression of it.[16] It could be argued that their analyses hint at the dominance of a particular conceptual approach. They give primacy to a few variables and mostly engage in discussions on relative gains and limited cooperation. In other words, these works look at their object of study from the vantage point of (neo)realist theories in International Relations (IR) and make a case for pragmatic foreign policy.

The one exception, in this case, is that identity-related issues have been more extensively discussed in studies about Iran-Azerbaijan relations. For instance, Touraj Atabaki and Brenda Shaffer provide in detail observations about the issues of "Iranian Azerbaijan," a region located in the northern part of the Islamic Republic and bordering the South Caucasus.[17] Specifically, they look into how Azeris in Iran self-identify, the reasons behind their previous political movements, and how the post-Soviet reality has affected their affinities. Little is said about the position of the Islamic Republic on this matter. Shaffer just claims that the government of Iran is very sensitive towards any ethnicity-related issues,

[15] R. Hrair Dekmejian and Hovann H. Simonian, *Troubled Waters: The Geopolitics of the Caspian Region* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).
[16] Dorraj and Entessar, "Iran's Northern Exposure," 20.
[17] Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, 2000; Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, 2002.

considering them separatist tendencies. Atabaki thoroughly discusses the approach towards Azeris during Reza Shah's rule, but not much is said about the attitude of the Islamic Republic towards Azerbaijan. Other works on this topic mainly concentrate on studying the historical roots of diverging identity narratives for checking their legitimacy and trying to find out which identity is dominant among Iranian Azeris.[18] As a result, the foreign policy application of the mentioned studies is sparse. Not much is said beyond the argument that contrasting perceptions of identity and history create tension in Iran's relations with Azerbaijan.

Since most of the studies predominantly concentrate on reaffirming the argument about Iran being a pragmatic actor in the South Caucasus, other factors have been understudied. The above-mentioned key works of the early period have also pinpointed a number of aspects that did not receive due attention. For instance, in his 1995 study, Edmund Herzig claims that the absence of ideological path-dependence allowed the Islamic Republic to act differently in the newly formed region.[19] What this ideological path-dependence means and how it influences foreign policy needs further exploration that has been missing so far. Mohaeddin Mesbahi refers to prestige and self-image that push the Iranian side to seek a role of a central player in the South Caucasus. In a 1996 article, Hanna Yousif Freij discusses Iran's "messianic" motives in the post-Soviet South.[20] These are factors that the argument of having a pragmatic foreign policy is ill-suited to explain. Some other works mention how

[18] Hamid Ahmadi, "The Clash of Nationalism: Iranian Response to Baku's Irredentism," in *The Great Game in West Asia*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105–40; Nasib Nassibli, "Azerbaijan-Iran Relations: Challenges and Prospects" (The Belfer Center for Scientific and International Affairs, 1999), https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/azerbaijan-iran-relations-challenges-and-prospects; Emil Souleimanov, Kamil Pikal, and Josef Kraus, "The Rise of Nationalism Among Iranian Azerbaijanis: A Step Toward Iran's Disintegration?," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 71–91; Shireen T. Hunter, "Azerbaijan: Search for Identity and New Partners," in *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, ed. Ian Bremmer, Ray Taras, and Robert Conquest (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 225–60.
[19] Edmund Herzig, *Iran and the Former Soviet South* (London: Chatham House, 1995).
[20] Hanna Yousif Freij, "State Interests vs. the Umma: Iranian Policy in Central Asia," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 1 (1996): 71–83.

revolutionary causes were articulated differently to emphasize their cultural side and build relations based on them.[21] It is necessary to have a deeper look into this process and see what role it had in shaping the policies of the Islamic Republic.

In addition, the argument about pragmatic/rational foreign policy is an inconvenient fit with the statements made in the academic and policy circles inside the Islamic Republic concerning their government policies towards the South Caucasus. Some of them argue that the Islamic Republic has not been able to achieve its objectives in the region.[22] Others state that there has been no proper government strategy in this regard.[23] While being Russo-centric was considered a pragmatic step in some studies, others have criticized it as compromising national interests.[24] The overall critical tone and the sense of dissatisfaction in these remarks hint at the necessity of looking beyond the claim about pragmatism and see how Iran's policies are shaped and lead to a particular set of outcomes.

These observations show that there is a need for further research on Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus that will provide a new understanding of the matter and tackle the issues raised above. A crucial factor here is moving away from the ideology vs. pragmatism dichotomy and recontextualizing the topic in the wider discourse of Iranian foreign affairs in a different way. This task presupposes looking into the agency of the Islamic Republic closely and illustrating how the policies related to this particular region are situated in the broader context of Iran's foreign policy behaviour.

[21] Calabrese, *Revolutionary Horizons*; Herzig, "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia."
[22] Elaheh Koolaee and Mohammad Hossein Hafezian, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics," *Iranian Studies* 43, no. 3 (June 1, 2010): 391–409, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210861003693935.
[23] Mohiaddin Mesbahi and Mohammad Homayounvash, "Iran and the Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus," in *The New Geopolitics of the South Caucasus*, Ed. Shireen Hunter (London: Lexington Books, 2017), 195–222.
[24] Vatanka, "Tangle in the Caucasus."

The Broader Context

After identifying the need for a new study, having an appropriate theoretical framework that will allow one to appreciate the nuances of Iran's foreign policy and look at the targeted issue from a new angle is the next step. The search for such a framework leads to the broader literature on Iranian foreign policy, where the intricacies of its agency and behaviour are widely discussed. Here, I look into the contributions of the existing key studies and illustrate how their analyses help to identify a theoretical perspective appropriate for understanding the selected topic.

As stated above, many of the works in the field engage with the question of whether the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is ideological or pragmatic. A number of them consider ideological proclivities mostly epiphenomenal and claim that the Iranian state pursues its exogenously given national interests, which are merely formulated through revolutionary narratives.[25] They share the conceptual approach popular in the studies on Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. In contrast, others tend to emphasize the centrality of ideological factors, such as revolutionary principles, that shape Iran's agency as a foreign policy actor.[26] The debate is far from being settled, and there is a wide range of arguments and approaches.

Many scholars abstain from choosing a side. For instance, Fred Halliday claims that Iran is both pragmatic and ideological in its behaviour. Borrowing from E. H. Carr, he introduces the idea of "dual policy" of revolutionary states. According to it, states develop more

[25] Adam Tarock, *Iran's Foreign Policy Since 1990: Pragmatism Supersedes Islamic Ideology* (Commack, N.Y: Nova Science Pub Inc, 1999); Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy*, 1st edition (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015).
[26] Maaike Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions*, 2013 edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*, 2001; Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 3 (October 1, 2005): 265–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920500280623.

accommodating behaviour in post-revolutionary periods, but they do not fully give up their revisionist tendencies; hence, the duality. Halliday uses this framework to explain Iran's foreign policy, stating that "Iran will continue to pursue a "dual policy" of diplomatic contact and revolutionary appeal, speak with two voices, and postpone consistency."[27] Hamid Ahmadi makes a similar claim. He states that Iran oscillates between realist and idealist tendencies, depending on the particular case.[28] While their analyses provide valuable input into illustrating duality as an integral factor in Iranian foreign policy, the applicability of this approach is challenging. Further research is needed for explaining in what cases and why Iran acts in a certain way and not the other.

There are also works that emphasize the complexity of Iran's agency and call for using an eclectic approach for understanding its foreign policy.[29] They argue that various theoretical components need to be brought together for explaining the many components of the issue at stake. For instance, in her book Iran's Foreign Policy in the post-Soviet Era, Shireen Hunter discusses different cases without using an overarching theoretical approach.[30] Her take on Iran's attitude towards the South Caucasus uses "rationalist" conceptual lenses, while the latter are not necessarily applied in other instances.

Using an eclectic approach has demonstrable benefits. As Sill and Katzenstein argue, these pragmatic moves help to break away from paradigmatic confines and tackle practical issues appropriately.[31] However, the way analytical eclecticism has been applied in the studies on Iranian foreign policy presents certain limitations. Specifically, using different conceptual

[27] Fred Halliday, "An Elusive Normalization: Western Europe and the Iranian Revolution," *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 2 (1994): 311.
[28] Hamid Ahmadi, "The Dilemma of National Interest in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Iran in the 21st Century*, ed. Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2008), 28–40.
[29] Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*; Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad* (Ithaca Press, 2008); Kouhi-Esfahani, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus*.
[30] Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*.
[31] Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms: Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics*, 2010.

tools for different cases has led to bracketing those cases from one another. A systemic approach is compromised and, instead, we usually have a collage of arguments. Often, this is the very approach that has led to justifying analyses about Iran's policies in the South Caucasus that disengage the issue from the discussions on the complexity of Iranian foreign affairs. Therefore, following the same path would not correspond with the above-mentioned objective of recontextualizing the targeted issue in a different way.

Other researchers have shifted the attention from the state to individuals and factions as the main actors determining Iran's behaviour.[32] Most of these studies argue that Iranian foreign policy is a result of juxtapositions between worldviews, positions, and interests of high-ranking officials and political factions. They argue that Iran's policies can be complicated and sometimes even contradictory because there are diverging perspectives among these actors.

These works make a convincing case about the above-mentioned complexity. However, such an approach still leaves certain questions unanswered. It is under-analyzed how the interests and identities of these actors are shaped and how they are expressed in different cases. Certain conceptual issues regarding the role of ideas, institutions and other factors remain unaddressed. In a way, these studies just move issues of foreign policy from one level of analysis (state) to another (individual and/or factional) without presenting a major conceptual innovation. This problem is typical of various agent-oriented studies on Foreign Policy Analysis. Overemphasizing the role of agency of these actors is not a solution to the

[32] Masoud Kazemzadeh, *Iran's Foreign Policy: Elite Factionalism, Ideology, the Nuclear Weapons Program, and the United States*, 1st edition (S.l.: Routledge, 2020); David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* (RAND Corporation, 2010); Shahram Chubin, *Wither Iran?*, 1st edition (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2002).

existing conceptual problems, as the properties of the same agency are not a priori given but can be shaped by structural mechanisms.[33]

Several key studies in the field pay particular attention to the properties and the role of identity, culture, and civilization. R. K. Ramazani claims that Iran has a particular "diplomatic culture" that can be traced back to the times of Cyrus the Great, where the tension between ideological and pragmatic behaviour has been a key feature.[34] Ariane Tabatabai also mentions historically consistent features in her latest book called *No Conquest, No Defeat*. She states that Iranian strategic thinking has the following fundamental features: persistent distrust towards great powers and the international order, self-reliance, and deterrence.[35] She shows how traumatic experiences in Iran's past and collective memories about them have made these notions bedrock attributes of its behaviour.

Others argue that the complicated nature of Iran's foreign policy stems from the differing ideational features of its agency. Borrowing from Abdolkarim Soroush, Ali Ansari argues that Iranian foreign policy has three civilizational foundations – national, western, and Islamic.[36] Walter Posch (2017) claims that there are four pillars of Iranian foreign policy – nationalism, traditional Shi'ism, Third-Worldism, and revolutionary Islamism.[37] He states that those pillars, which have incompatible features, are brought together under the overarching principle of system expediency *(maslahat-e nezām).*[38] Shahram Akbarzadeh

[33] For a theoretical engagement on this issue, see: Nina Tannenwald, "Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (April 1, 2005): 13–42, https://doi.org/10.1162/1520397053630619.
[34] R. K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (2004): 549–59.
[35] Ariane M. Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
[36] Ali M. Ansari, "Civilizational Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of Iran," in *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*, ed. Brenda Shaffer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 241–62.
[37] Walter Posch, "Ideology and Strategy in the Middle East: The Case of Iran," *Survival* 59, no. 5 (September 3, 2017): 69–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1375256.
[38] Walter Posch, "The Third World, Global Islam and Pragmatism: The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy" (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, April 3, 2013), https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/iran-the-third-world-global-islam-and-pragmatism/.

and James Barry make a similar claim, stating that "Iran's corporate identity is triangulated in three key elements of a new nationalism: Iranism, Islam and Shi'ism."[39] They state that decision-makers in the Islamic Republic are aware of this complexity and try to negotiate between the three components.

It appears that the observed properties of Iranian identity can help to grasp the complexities of its foreign policies and construct a more informed analysis of its behaviour towards the South Caucasus. However, the conceptual contributions that these studies offer have their limitations, which are mainly related to the lack of discussions on ontological properties. In Heideggerian terms, they investigate the *ontical* dimension of identity while not observing its ontological properties. To put it crudely, the ontical level of analysis looks into the 'content' of identity, while the ontological level studies "its existential preconditions:" how these identities emerge, persist, change, and get disrupted, how they co-exist in relation to one another, how they are produced in particular contexts, etc.[40]

These studies provide descriptions of what nationalist, western, Islamic, and other elements represent and argue that they influence foreign policy. For instance, Ansari (2006) states that the way Iran behaved during the war with Iraq is to a great extent due to its Islamic cultural foundation. However, they do not go any further. It is not clarified why some foundational features are more influential in one case but not the other, how it is possible to have an identity with such contradictory features, or how the features of Iranian identity/culture/civilization get expressed in different foreign policy contexts.

There are works on Iran's foreign policy that do address these matters with a more deliberate conceptual engagement. In his book called *Iran in World Politics*, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

[39] Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 614, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1159541.
[40] D. Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After: Structure, Subjectivity and Power*, 2013 edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, 1st edition (London New York: Routledge, 2007).

showcases how a narrative of utopian romanticism emerged in Iran and changed the foreign policy culture, making certain behaviour possible and appropriate. He discusses this process by using a four-dimensional dialectic of culture: externalization, objectification, internalization, and introjection.[41] Then he illustrates how Iranian foreign policy is practised in this new reality. Adib-Moghaddam's work provides more insight into the ontological properties of culture than the previous studies. However, there are certain unanswered questions here as well.

First, his research on Iranian foreign policy is a story of the emergence, rise, and dominance of one narrative.[42] Accordingly, he concentrates more on the dynamics of this particular narrative rather than presenting a comprehensive picture of the respective context, where different interpretations compete. He only mentions that this new dominant culture is challenged by a "counter-culture," which also influences foreign policy decision-making. However, his conceptual framework does not showcase how a challenging narrative can change foreign policy. Another issue concerns Adib-Moghaddam's approach towards the so-called "religious passion." In addition, in the empirical part of his study, he talks about "ideational points of fixation" such as pro-Palestinian sentiments. It is not stated what role these fixation points play in terms of maintaining, changing, or reproducing the culture of foreign policy in different environments.

In their quest for understanding Iran's foreign policy, a few studies have decided to look into the role of discourses. Citing the writings of David Campbell, Roxanne Doty, and Henrik Larsen, Homeira Moshirezadeh argues that interests and positions in foreign policy acquire meanings through discourses.[43] In Iran's case, the discourses of independence,

[41] Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007), 42, https://trove.nla.gov.au/version/44356441.
[42] Adib-Moghaddam, "Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran."
[43] Homeira Moshirzadeh, "Discursive Foundations of Iran's Nuclear Policy," *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007): 521–43.

justice, and resistance shape Iran's agency. They serve as "meaning structures" that make certain policies become acceptable. Shabnam Holliday also considers such discourses as the primary object of study for Iran's foreign policy. She states: "there continue to be multiple constructions of Iranian national identity, which coexist and compete with each other. These constructions can be better understood as discourses of national identity."[44] She borrows different concepts from the field of Critical Discourse Analysis to illustrate that discourse is the means through which ideologies and values take shape. In a 2020 article, Holliday uses Ernesto Laclau's theorization of populism to illustrate how Iran's agency is constituted by an antagonistic frontier built against its "enemies."[45] Laclau's theoretical contributions are also used by Mahdi Mohammad Nia, who claims that Iran's foreign policy is shaped by several dominant discourses that are brought together under the nodal point of "anti-western revolutionary identity."[46]

These contributions take a crucial step towards exploring the ontological properties of Iran's agency from a discourse-theoretical perspective. They provide valuable insight into the complexity of a multi-faceted identity and how it is played out. However, their theoretical engagement still remains limited. Moshirezadeh, Holliday, and Mohammad Nia do not go much further than giving brief definitions of the concepts they use in their works. Holliday's 2020 article reflects on the properties of populism more extensively but is limited to discussing that one factor. There is room for deeper conceptual reflections that can help to build a robust discourse-theoretical approach towards studying Iran's foreign policy.

[44] Shabnam J. Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance*, 1st edition (Farnham: Routledge, 2011), 3.
[45] Shabnam J Holliday, "Populism, the International and Methodological Nationalism: Global Order and the Iran–Israel Nexus," *Political Studies* 68, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 3–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718817476.
[46] Mahdi Mohammad Nia, "Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 3, no. 11 (November 1, 2012), http://irfajournal.csr.ir/article_123416.html.

Finally, a group of studies on Iranian foreign affairs look into the role of status and recognition. Louise Fawcett presents a historically grounded analysis on the importance of status as a regional power that shapes Iran's revisionist behaviour.[47] Maysam Behravesh also explains the prevalence of revisionism in Iran's foreign policy by the desire for recognition of its aspirant identity, which serves as a source of ontological security. Hooman Majd states how Iran is sensitive towards disrespect, which triggers measures to have its self-identified status recognized.[48] The most extensive work that discusses the role of recognition is Constance Duncombe's book called *Representation, Recognition and Respect in World Politics: The Case of Iran-US Relations.* She provides a theoretically in-depth analysis on how the struggle for recognition has shaped the relations between Iran and the United States concerning the former's nuclear enrichment program.

These studies showcase another important dimension of Iran's foreign policy: the desire for recognition is a decisive factor in its behaviour. They have been an important first step towards understanding the role of recognition and status. Further interrogation into this matter can help to tackle a number of issues that have been observed in Iran's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus. For example, the importance of Iran's self-image in the region, as mentioned by Mohaeddin Mesbahi, can be analyzed with the help of a certain conceptual understanding of recognition and status.

In all, there are numerous perspectives in the literature on Iran's foreign policy. They offer varying ways for tackling different aspects of the issue. While most of these studies still leave certain questions unanswered, they demonstrate what factors need to be taken into account when building a theoretical framework for analyzing Iran's foreign policy in the

[47] Louise Fawcett, "Iran and the Regionalization of (in)Security," *International Politics* 52, no. 5 (September 1, 2015): 646–56, https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2015.21.
[48] Hooman Majd, "Pride and Prejudice in Tehran," *Foreign Policy* (blog), July 16, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/16/pride-and-prejudice-in-tehran-iran-farsi-nafs/.

South Caucasus. Specifically, they show how complex Iran's foreign policy is and merely calling it pragmatic or ideological leaves out important nuances. In addition, they show how the Islamic Republic has multiple and often even contradictory foundational features that lead to a wide range of policies and frequent oscillations in Iran's behaviour. Finally, the overview of the literature hints at the necessity of looking into the ontological properties of those foundational features in order to understand how they are played out in a particular case.

The theoretical framework presented in the following section is built on the observations of different studies that are presented above. In a way, this research follows the footsteps of some of the works in the field and develops the concepts they discuss for the purpose of a more comprehensive analysis. On the other hand, it departs from the dominant approaches in the literature on Iran's foreign policy and, axiomatically, positions itself as a critique of their analysis. However, such criticism does not imply negation. This research does not make a claim of presenting a "better" conceptual framework in general. Instead, it develops a new conceptual framework that is suitable for the objectives of this study and can become one of the many ways of interpreting Iran's foreign policy, contributing to the plurality of perspectives in the field.

Conceptual Framework: A Discourse-Theoretical Approach to Foreign Policy

Introduction

As stated in the previous section, the complicated nature of Iran's foreign policy has been observed by multiple works in the field. This chapter tries to address that complicatedness by introducing a new conceptual framework that is based on the contributions of the Essex School of discourse theory. In addition, it incorporates certain ideas of the Hegelian recognition theories in the field of International Relations. This chapter goes over a number of concepts, such as *nodal points, social and political logics, antagonism and otherness, and recognitive practices* that are used to build a framework of analysis. The end result is a non-essentialist approach that manages to appreciate the nuanced and multi-faceted nature of Iran's behaviour.

First, this chapter shows that Iran's agency is de-centred, and its foreign policy is articulated through the potentially contradictory *social logics of sovereign states* and *resistance communities*. Second, it touches upon the role of the *political logics of equivalence and difference* that influence the decision-making processes in the Islamic Republic. Finally, it is argued that Iran seeks recognition of its aspirant identity articulated by the two social logics, and its policies often serve this purpose.

It is worth mentioning that the concepts illustrated below do not provide a particular explanation of Iran's behaviour. What they do instead is opening up space for looking into the object of study from a different perspective and provide an analysis that goes beyond the popular but somewhat limited argument of pragmatic foreign policy in the South Caucasus. In other words, the conceptual framework is a vantage point, and understanding Iran's foreign policy requires a close look into the empirical data, which does not merely serve as a means for testing certain theoretical claims.

Abandoning Essentialism: Basic Ontological Assumptions

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's seminal work called *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*[49] is the central text, around which new paradigmatic articulations of political affairs have been developed that are collectively referred to as the Essex School or Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT). Their ideas have also been used in the field of International Relations.[50] Roxanne Doty, Jenny Edkins, Thomas Diez, and Lene Hanses have been the first who have carried out impactful IR research with the help of the conceptual contributions of the Essex School.[51] However, their pioneering work did not lead to a wide application of this approach in the field, as observed at a 2019 symposium on the topic.[52] Only in recent

[49] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
[50] Frank A. Stengel and Dirk Nabers, "Symposium: The Contribution of Laclau's Discourse Theory to International Relations and International Political Economy: Introduction," *New Political Science* 41, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 248–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2019.1596683; Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism & International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999); Dirk Nabers, *A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics*, 1st edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Ty Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses*, Configurations. Critical Studies of World Politics (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Jakub Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy: Germany and the Iraq War*, 1st edition (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).
[51] Roxanne Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, First edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Edkins, *Poststructuralism & International Relations*; Thomas Diez, "Europe as a Discursive Battleground: Discourse Analysis and European Integration Studies," *Cooperation and Conflict* 36, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 5–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/00108360121962245; Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[52] Stengel and Nabers, "Symposium."

years has there been burgeoning literature, where several studies provide a more comprehensive use of PDT for analyzing a wide range of IR-related issues.[53] The conceptual approach of this work heavily relies on their contributions.

The starting point of using such a framework is reflecting on its ontological assumptions. The Essex School defines discourse as "a differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly renegotiated."[54] It is argued that the world around us becomes accessible through discourse. As Laclau and Mouffe put it: "every object is constituted as an object of discourse."[55] The main point here is that there is no extra-discursive meaning or vantage point. Having an anti-essentialist discursive ontology, this approach argues that the social reality is continuously produced through "relational systems of signification."[56]

The Essex School does not limit the concept of discourse to the linguistic domain. Here, it is assumed that meaning is constructed through articulatory practices, where discourse "links together contingent elements – linguistic and non-linguistic, natural and social – into relational *systems* [emphasis in original], in which the identity of the elements is modified as a result of the articulatory practice."[57] In this context, foreign policy is seen as an articulatory practice that is made possible in a particular discursive formation and constitutes that formation when performed. This notion is in line with the general poststructuralist approach that policies are not mere effects of pre-existing fixed factors: they are constitutive

[53] Dirk Nabers, *A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics [Electronic Resource]*, Palgrave Studies in International Relations (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy*; Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses*; Eva Herschinger, "'Hell Is the Other': Conceptualising Hegemony and Identity through Discourse Theory," *Millennium* 41, no. 1 (September 1, 2012): 65–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829812449501.
[54] Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek*, 1st edition (Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 85.
[55] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 107.
[56] Jacob Torfing, "Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges," in *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*, ed. David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 14.
[57] David Howarth, "Introduction: Discourse, Hegemony and Populism: Ernesto Laclau's Political Theory," in *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique*, ed. David Howarth (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 6.

practices, through which identities and perceptions take shape.[58] As Hansen puts it: "The ontological starting point for post-structuralist discourse analysis is a conceptualization of policy as always dependent upon the articulation of identity, while identity is simultaneously produced and reproduced through the formulation and legitimation of policy."[59]

This conceptualization introduces a new understanding of identity formation. Here, it is assumed that subjects do not have a transcendental agency: there is no static centre, around which one's Self is built. Instead, the subject is merely a position in a discursive system, where the latter is also incomplete and inherently unstable.[60] The last point needs an emphasis, as it is where the Essex School departs from the Althusserian structuralist understanding of the social order. There is no totalizing structure that can provide closure to the subject's identity, as discursive orders are constantly being dislocated. Hence, all the subject has is "a failed structural identity."[61]

In this regard, the meaning of Iranian identity is based on how its subject position is articulated in various chains of signification. For example, the signifier "Iran" can be linked with "Islam," "Justice," "Independence" and presented in opposition to "the United States," "Exploitation," "Zionism." These two groups of signifiers are put together in a certain discursive framework to constitute the Iranian Self in relation to its Other(s). These chains of signifiers, in which the subject is positioned, are not fully fixed and can change over time and from case to case; hence, the meaning of Iranian identity does not need to be the same in different situations. Besides, each meaning of the subject is continuously contested by

[58] Ty Solomon, "Social Logics and Normalisation in the War on Terror," *Millennium* 38, no. 2 (December 1, 2009): 269–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829809347513; Diez, "Europe as a Discursive Battleground."
[59] Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 211.
[60] Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).
[61] Torfing, "Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges," 17.

interpretations of other discursive orders. Therefore, there is no single Iranian subject; instead, there are multiple Iranian subject positions.

Nonetheless, applying a discursive theory does not mean considering that everything is in constant flux. The Essex School provides valuable input for understanding how this discursive reality can and does have tentative stability. Ernesto Laclau's theorization of *nodal points* or *empty signifiers* plays a central role here. These are the temporary anchors of discursive orders that are vague enough to combine different articulations. As Thomas Diez puts it: "[nodal points serve] as the instrument for a limited fixation of meaning."[62]

For example, it can be argued that the signifiers "independence" and "justice" serve as nodal points in Iranian articulations. This claim is based on a reading of Homeira Moshirzadeh's analysis of the discursive foundations of Iran's foreign policy from a PDT perspective. As stated above, she shows how "independence" and "justice" are consistent values that play a definitive role in shaping Iran's foreign policy.[63] However, while appearing as pillars of Iran's agency, they are linked to multiple varying signifiers, and, as a result, have become *empty* of a specific meaning. The abstract descriptions of what they represent hint at that. For instance, Moshirzadeh introduces an understanding of hyper-independence to show how expansive its meaning is in Iranian discourses. This observation indicates that "independence" has been stretched to such a point that it has become an all-encompassing signifier – a nodal point in the Iranian discursive space.

The emptiness of such signifiers serves a crucial structural purpose: nodal points are used as a reference point for different and even contradictory narratives. In this way, "independence" and "justice," as well as other nodal points, create a sense of holistic agency and bring partial fixity. As Jacob Torfing states: "as such, nodal points like 'God', 'Nation',

[62] Diez, "Europe as a Discursive Battleground," 17.
[63] Moshirzadeh, "Discursive Foundations of Iran's Nuclear Policy."

'Party' or 'Class' are not characterized by a supreme density of meaning, but rather by a certain emptying of their contents, which facilitates their structural role of unifying a discursive terrain."[64]

Different discourses constantly struggle over making their interpretations of these nodal points the dominant ones. Those who succeed achieve what Laclau calls a hegemonic status. *Hegemony* is a "certain particularity which assumes the role of the impossible universality."[65] To put it simply, a discourse becomes hegemonic when it defines "the common sense" in the society. For instance, a particular interpretation of "justice" can become hegemonic in the Iranian discursive space when it marginalizes other articulations and presents itself as an "objective" interpretation. However, its position is never fully secured. There is a constant need to stabilize a hegemonic order, as it is continuously challenged and can be dislocated. In short, the concept of hegemony encompasses the very idea of tentativeness. It shows that while some identities can be stable, reaching a total closure is impossible.[66]

Assuming such ontological properties creates space for new reflections on some of the existing observations about the agency of the Islamic Republic. As stated in the previous chapter, various studies have argued that Iran's identity is complex and has many properties, such as national, Islamic, western, etc.[67] Some of them go as far as stating that there are contradictions between the fundamental pillars of Iran's Self.[68] Such claims already hint at a de-centred characteristic of agency. The Essex School gives the opportunity to put these

[64] Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse*.
[65] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 115.
[66] Ernesto Laclau, "The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1, no. 3 (October 1, 1996): 201–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569319608420738.
[67] Ansari, "Civilizational Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of Iran"; Posch, "Ideology and Strategy in the Middle East"; Akbarzadeh and Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy"; Holliday, *Defining Iran*.
[68] Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy"; Posch, "Ideology and Strategy in the Middle East."

observations in a suitable theoretical context. Based on the above-mentioned ontological assumptions, it introduces the concepts of social and political logics that can help to understand how foreign policy is performed as a discursive practice.

The Social Logics of Sovereign States and Resistance Communities

To study Iran's foreign policy based on the presented ontological presuppositions, first and foremost, it is necessary to analyze what is called *social logics*. The latter represent the most naturalized aspects of a certain discursive system. They are sedimented and open-ended regularities that are continuously reproduced by different discursive practices and simultaneously provide the conditions of possibility for them to occur.[69]

In the case of the Islamic Republic, there are many peculiarities in the different instances of its foreign policy; however, almost all of them share certain patterns, which are what the social logics represent. They maintain continuity through repetitive practices. This repetition creates stability in a discursive order, where certain regularities represent how one's agency is performed.[70] What possible shape an actor's foreign policy can have is determined by social logics. As Jakub Eberle states:

> They [social logics] describe the rules that govern it [a foreign policy practice], the actors that can legitimately participate in it, the identities that these actors adopt, the relations that are constructed between them, the institutions that are involved or the key words and narratives that are used to justify it.[71]

To use Laclau's words, as an "ensemble of sedimented practices," social logics are what set the limitations to the "horizon of options."[72] In other words, they play a decisive role in

[69] Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*.
[70] Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, "International Practices," *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (February 2011): 1–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297191000031X.
[71] Jakub Eberle, "Germany as a Dividual Actor: Competing Social Logics and Their Political Articulations," *German Politics* 30, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 20, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1620210.
[72] Ernesto Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso Books, 2000), 83.

determining what policy options are credible. This notion of credibility is emphasized by Frank Stengel in a 2019 article.[73] As he argues, "just like articulations can fail because they clash with sedimented practices, so can they gain credibility when they resonate, and actively draw on, sedimented discursive practices."[74] Accordingly, if a certain foreign policy articulation is in contradiction with the social logics in the Iranian discursive space, it runs the risk of being marginalized. As "a system of rules drawing a horizon," social logics set the terrain on which articulatory practices, including foreign policy, are performed.[75]

While considering social logics relatively stable phenomena, it is important not to essentialize them. They are not fixed identity foundations that determine foreign policy in a process of diachronic causation. Their open-ended nature offers a certain level of freedom for varying articulations to emerge. Instead, it can be argued that social logics provide the condition of possibility for policies to occur. Besides, they depend on those policies for keeping their dominant role. As stated above, policies, being discursive practices, play a constitutive role in identity formation. In the case of social logics, these practices validate them by maintaining the sedimented nature of these regularities through repetition. Hence, a synchronic co-constitutive process is applicable here.

There can be multiple social logics in the same discursive formation. In the case of Iran's foreign policy, two have been identified in the framework of this study – *the logic of sovereign states* and *the logic of resistance communities*. This identification is based on revisiting the literature on Iran's foreign policy from the perspective of the selected theoretical framework. It is also a result of a to and fro process between constructing the theoretical framework and analyzing the collected empirical data. Here, the resemblances of

[73] Frank A. Stengel, "Securitization as Discursive (Re)Articulation: Explaining the Relative Effectiveness of Threat Construction," *New Political Science* 41, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 294–312, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2019.1596682.
[74] Stengel, 302.
[75] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 117.

a wide spectrum of foreign policy instances are observed in order to formulate these two social logics. They can be seen in the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the way political institutions are constructed, the everyday practices of the government, and the interpretations of the subject positions of Iran, other actors, and the international system.

It is important to note that this observation has an interpretative component on the researcher's behalf. Generalizing the sedimented practices of Iran's foreign policy in the form of social logics can have variations. Hence, this study does not make a claim that grouping the above-mentioned resemblances under these two social logics is the only possibility. Instead, it claims that the presented option, being based on extensive observation of patterns in Iran's foreign policy, is a viable formulation that illustrates key features of the discursive topography in the selected case.

The first group of regularities are brought together under the social logic of sovereign states. The latter represents some of the key patterns in today's international system and the conduct of foreign policy.[76] Unsurprisingly, they are present in Iran's foreign affairs as well. This logic articulates the identity of the Islamic Republic as that of a state. Iran is seen as a polity with distinct national borders separating inside of the country from the outside.[77] Its territorial integrity is emphasized, where the government is in charge of making decisions and representing the people. Besides, the government has independence from actors outside the mentioned borders when carrying out its policies.[78] Since Iran's agency is defined by the

[76] Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy*.
[77] Heidarali Masoudi, "Metaphorical Incarnations of the 'Other' and Iranian International Relations Discourses," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 748–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119828184.
[78] "The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran" (Islamic Consultative Assembly, 1989), https://en.parliran.ir//UploadedData/89/Contents/original/635996064834543008.pdf.

Westphalian notion of the state, its policies and aspirations are formulated in terms of national interests.[79]

The logic of sovereign states accepts and reproduces the current international order, assuming a thinner understanding of the concept. Specifically, a pluralist version of it, using Andrew Hurrell's conceptualization, is applicable here, where the international order is "made up of separate, sovereign states, which are, in turn linked through various kinds of political practices and institutionalized structures."[80] This presupposes a minimal institutional framework of cohabitation and cooperation that is meant to guarantee the principle of sovereignty and avoid conflicts.

As Jakub Eberle states, a crucial aspect of this framework is reciprocity.[81] For instance, keeping your territorial integrity is directly linked to respecting others'. Non-intervention in the affairs of other states is considered a key norm.[82] This reciprocity is practised through recognizing the independence of each other, becoming members of the United Nations, appointing ambassadors, signing conventions, etc. Iran's presence in different organizations, its signature under a number of international treaties, and the compliance to a shared framework of engagement with other actors show how embedded the social logic of sovereign states is in its foreign affairs, much like in the case of many other states.[83]

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[79] Mahmood Sariolghalam, "Understanding Iran: Getting Past Stereotypes and Mythology," *The Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (September 1, 2003): 69–82, https://doi.org/10.1162/016366003322387118.
[80] Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society*, 1st edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.
[81] Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy*.
[82] Mohammad Javad Zarif, "What Iran Really Wants," *Foreign Affairs*, June 2014, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141209/mohammad-javad-zarif/what-iran-really-wants.
[83] Shabnam Moinipour, "UN Treaty-Based Bodies and the Islamic Republic of Iran: Human Rights Dialogue (1990–2016)," ed. Mark Bendall, *Cogent Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 1440910, https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2018.1440910; Hossein Karimifard, "Iran's Foreign Policy Approaches toward International Organizations," *World Sociopolitical Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 35–68, https://doi.org/10.22059/wsps.2018.65218.

The second key factor is diplomacy – the primary means of interaction. Iran has dozens of diplomatic missions abroad and hosts many more in its territory.[84] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is tasked with the work to represent the sovereign state of the Islamic Republic and negotiate on its behalf. For instance, the negotiation process concerning Iran's nuclear program is a manifestation of how Iran's behaviour is practised through the social logic of sovereign states and validates this very logic with its compliant attitude regarding the respective processes of negotiation.[85]

In all, the social logic of sovereign states is an amalgamation of regularities that establishes a particular framework in which Iran's foreign policy is performed. A set of sedimented practices have institutionalized and ritualized statehood as a foundational component of Iran's agency. Through this logic, respective government bodies and individuals acquire a position to carry out foreign policy. Certain rules of engagement with other actors in international affairs are followed and reproduced.

It is important to restate that the social logic of sovereign states is a generalization and not a fixed ideational structure. Sovereignty itself is a loaded term with a noticeable degree of variations and historically contingent meanings.[86] There is extensive debate in the IR literature on the properties of the concept.[87] This research does not aim to engage in that debate by providing a specific understanding of the term. What sovereignty means in Iran's foreign policy is context-specific, as the logic of sovereign states is open-ended and can be

[84] "Iran - Embassies & Consulates," EmbassyPages, June 15, 2021, https://www.embassypages.com/iran.
[85] "Documents on JCPOA," I.R. Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran), accessed July 23, 2021, https://en.mfa.ir/portal/viewpage/en.mfa.ir.
[86] Neil MacFarlane and Natalie Sabanadze, "Sovereignty and Self-Determination: Where Are We?," *International Journal* 68, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 609–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702013511184.
[87] Andreas Osiander, "Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth," *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (ed 2001): 251–87, https://doi.org/10.1162/00208180151140577; David A. Lake, "The New Sovereignty in International Relations1," *International Studies Review* 5, no. 3 (September 1, 2003): 303–23, https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1079-1760.2003.00503001.x; Stephen D. Krasner, *Power, the State, and Sovereignty: Essays on International Relations* (Routledge, 2009); Janice E. Thomson, "State Sovereignty in International Relations: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Empirical Research," *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (June 1, 1995): 213–33, https://doi.org/10.2307/2600847.

manifested in different ways. Here, the objective is to illustrate the most naturalized aspects of what the foreign policy of a sovereign state encompasses.

As regards the social logic of resistance communities, it is more peculiar to Iran and, to a certain extent, other so-called revisionist powers.[88] The key idea here is that certain communities, such as the Muslim Ummah or the Third World, do not have the place they deserve in the international system. The latter is based on unjust hierarchical relations.[89] Here, the topographical image of the world is imagined differently from that of nation-states with their clear-cut boundaries. It encompasses understandings of common identities that go beyond national borders. Identifications based on similar religious, cultural, civilizational, socio-economic features emerge. This social logic opens up space for new subject positions, such as Shias, Muslims, the West, the Non-Alignment Movement, developing countries, etc.

The literature review illustrates how prevalent these subject positions are in Iran's foreign policy discourses.[90] While there are substantial differences in what they represent, they are all articulated in the context of this notion of resistance. Specifically, this logic gives ground to discourses that question the legitimacy of the current international order on behalf of the communities mentioned above. Mission-driven foreign policy narratives that aim to change the above-mentioned hierarchical relations are articulated through this logic. Causes, such as struggling for the liberation of the oppressed become dominant.[91] As a result, the logic of

[88] For more on revisionist powers, see: David C. Kang, "The Theoretical Roots of Hierarchy in International Relations," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 58, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 337–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/1035771042000260110; Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[89] Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Ideal International System," in *Iran and the International System*, ed. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Reza Molavi, 1st edition (Routledge, 2011), 43–58.
[90] Posch, "The Third World, Global Islam and Pragmatism: The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy"; Holliday, *Defining Iran*; Adib-Moghaddam, "Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran."
[91] "'Support for the Oppressed' in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy," text, Khamenei.ir (Khamenei.ir, February 3, 2021), http://english.khamenei.ir/news/8328/Support-for-the-oppressed-in-the-Islamic-Republic-of-Iran-s.

resistance communities makes it possible to define Iran's interests not only by its statehood but also by being a part of a larger community.

It is noteworthy that the notion of resistance is not exclusive to Iran's foreign policy. There is a growing tendency of showing discontent towards the Liberal International Order by different actors both in its periphery and the core.[92] Its club-like character that is claimed to privilege western states has been a target of criticism in many countries.[93] However, what makes Iran's case stand out is that the idea of resistance has reached the level of a social logic. After the 1979 Revolution, challenging the legitimacy of the existing international order has become a ritualized and institutionalized feature of the way Iran performs its agency.[94] Being a resistant actor is a regularity observed in different cases of Iranian foreign policy.[95]

The patterns of the logic of resistance communities can be identified in multiple instances. Their embeddedness is depicted in the articulations of government documents, official statements, as well as political commentary and media reports. For example, the points against exploitation, colonialism, and the foreign policy principle of "fraternal commitment to all Muslims" illustrate how this logic is in play in the Iranian Constitution.[96] Continuous articulations on showing solidarity to the oppressed, fighting against foreign domination, establishing authentic systems in different communities are based on this logic as well.[97]

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[92] Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, "Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents," *International Organization*, 2020, 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000454.
[93] David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (ed 2021): 225–57, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636.
[94] Maximilian Terhalle, "Revolutionary Power and Socialization: Explaining the Persistence of Revolutionary Zeal in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (September 18, 2009): 557–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903133076.
[95] Holliday, *Defining Iran*.
[96] "The Constitution."
[97] Mohammad Nia, "Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy"; Davoud Gharayagh Zandi, "Conceptualization of Islamic Solidarity in Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2008 2007): 69–91.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's remarks that Iran should play a pivotal role in creating a new world order falls in the framework of this logic.[98] Former President Mahmood Ahmadinejad's statement at the 67th UN General Assembly is a particularly vivid illustration of it.[99] When discussing Iran's foreign policy priorities, different foreign ministers have mentioned the need for reshaping the international order, showing the tendencies of resistance illustrated above.[100]

The social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities provide the discursive arsenal with which Iran's foreign policy is articulated. Since both of them occupy a dominant position in the Iranian discursive space, they are often manifested in an intertwined manner. For instance, Iran usually acts as a resistant state, where the idea of sovereignty is tied with eliminating any attempt by "global arrogance" to exert influence over it.[101] Here, articulations of threats to Iranian national interests are shaped by a sense of hyper-alertness, as Ervand Abrahamian puts, towards the interventionist policies of hegemonic powers.[102] Supreme Leader Khamenei's statement on the need for fighting against "global arrogance" is illustrative in this regard:

> … you have to understand that the primary feeling of a nation towards arrogance is not a religious feeling. Rather, it is a feeling of national passion. It is a feeling of identity and existence. This is because when the arrogant powers enter a country and manage to dominate that country, they will start to deny the national identity of the people of

[98] Ali Khamenei, "Bayānāt dar didār bā a'zā-ye majles-e khabaregan-e rahbari," text (www.khamenei.ir, September 4, 2014), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=27356.
[99] Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, "Address by H.E. Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Before the 67th Session of the United Nations General Assembly" (Islamic Republic of Iran Permanent Mission to the United Nations, September 12, 2012), https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/67/IR_en.pdf.
[100] Ali Akbar Velayati, Tarek E. Masoud, and Zaid A. Ashai, "Iran, Islam, and the New World Order," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 4, no. 1 (1997): 3–13; Zarif, "What Iran Really Wants."
[101] Ali Mohammadi Masiri, Mohammad Jafar Javadi Arjmand, and Mohammad Bagher Mokaramipoor, "Resistance Orientation in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Contemporary Researches on Islamic Revolution* 7, no. 3 (November 22, 2021): 97–121.
[102] Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, First edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

> that country. Then, they will start to rob that country of its resources and will interfere in the political affairs of that country.[103]

However, there is a limit to the mentioned convergence. Often, these two logics are an inconvenient fit. One logic makes it possible to have credible policy options that are in contradiction with the sedimented notions of the other. The takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979 is a vivid example of it. For 444 days, 52 U.S. citizens were held hostage in the Islamic Republic. This step was articulated as a legitimate action in the framework of the social logic of resistance communities. It was a manifestation of Iran's defiance against the "unjust world order."[104] However, taking diplomats hostage was in violation of the rules of conduct of the social logic of sovereign states. As Adib-Moghaddam states, the siege of the U.S. embassy "was perhaps the most explicit rejection of the pillars of international society and here specifically the institution of international law."[105] In other cases, the principle of showing solidarity to the oppressed, a key notion of the logic of resistance communities, is compromised for the sake of following the conventional interests of the Iranian state articulated through the logic of resistance communities. The relative silence concerning the issues of Uighurs in China, as well as the Chechen crisis of the 1990s and early 2000s, is an example of this dynamic.[106]

There can be a multiplicity of legitimate policy options that often clash with each other. This situation leads to oscillations in Iranian foreign affairs and observations that the Islamic Republic is both pragmatic and ideological.[107] The difficulty in formulating foreign policy

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[103] Ali Khamenei, "The Supreme Leader's View of Global Arrogance" (Khamenei.ir, September 10, 2009), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=101179.
[104] Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Iran's Hostage Crisis: International Legitimacy Matters," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 2 (2005): 273–78.
[105] Adib-Moghaddam, "Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran," 280.
[106] Kourosh Ziabari, "Why Iran Won't Cross China on the Uighurs," *Asia Times*, February 21, 2021, https://asiatimes.com/2021/02/why-iran-wont-cross-china-on-the-uighurs/; Qassem Maleki, "Reports: The Meeting of Iranian and Russian Foreign Ministers: The Chechen Crisis," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 4 (2000): 563–67.
[107] Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy"; Imad Salamey and Zanoubia Othman, "Shia Revival and Welayat Al-Faqih in the Making of Iranian Foreign Policy," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 197–212, https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2011.591983.

priorities in a clear way, as observed by many studies in the field, is a vivid indicator of the incompatible features of the two social logics. For example, Fred Halliday's observation of the dual nature of Iran's foreign policy can be explained by the fragmented nature of Iran's discursive space at the most sedimented level.[108]

In all, the social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities provide a zoomed-out perspective and illustrate the most general patterns that are shared by most of the discourses on Iran's agency. They show how the discursive space of Iran's foreign policy is structured. Identifying these social logics allows looking into the most stable aspects of Iran's foreign policy without spiralling into an essentialist conceptualization. They show how there is friction among the most commonsensical notions in Iran's foreign policy discourses. To show how certain policies emerge and get implemented in such a discursive terrain, it is necessary to study the role of the political logics of equivalence and difference. The next section reflects on their properties and how they can help to understand matters related to foreign policy.

The Political Logics of Equivalence and Difference

The social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities tell part of the story. Their manifestation in particular cases can vary to a great extent due to their open-endedness. They do not show how certain discursive practices emerge, become dominant, and how they are (re)produced and/or contested. To answer this "How?" question, it is necessary to introduce another concept – *the political logics of equivalence and difference*.[109]

The latter are not fully contextual as social logics and do not have much to do with the content of discourses. Instead, equivalence and difference represent the ontological

[108] Halliday, "An Elusive Normalization."
[109] Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy*.

processes in which signifiers are grouped to constitute subject positions, interests, policies, etc.[110] They show how a particular case is articulated in a discursive order. These two logics represent opposite processes, and it is amidst the tension between them that foreign policy is performed. As Laclau and Mouffe put it: "the logic of equivalence is the logic of simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity."[111]

Equivalence and Building Antagonistic Frontiers

The logic of equivalence splits the discursive terrain into two groups of signifiers – "us vs. them." It is through this abstract process that a certain discourse becomes hegemonic, constructing a sense of holistic agency around nodal points. As Laclau argues, the struggle for discursive hegemony is an attempt at closure, which is "impossible but at the same time necessary."[112] Social identity needs closure for fixing meaning. Since there is no positive foundation of identity, that struggle for an ultimate fixation can never be achieved. In such a situation, a sense of coherent Self becomes possible by introducing a constitutive outside. The latter is articulated in the image of an antagonistic Other in opposition to which it becomes possible to have a sense of unity.[113] As Eva Herschinger states, hegemonic discourses can emerge in the case of creating a contrariety between a Self and an antagonistic Other.[114]

The logic of equivalence draws these antagonistic frontiers, where the signifiers on one side of the dividing line are perceived to be equivalent to each other and opposed to those on the

[110] Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*.
[111] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 130.
[112] Laclau, "The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology," 302.
[113] Nabers, *A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics*.
[114] Herschinger, "'Hell Is the Other.'"

other. Different components of a fragmented identity come together as a part of a united whole in the contrariety against the antagonistic Other. As Ty Solomon argues:

> … the construction of a constitutive outside cannot occur through reference to positive differences that can be located outside of discourse. Rather, it can only be represented through groups, or chains, of signifiers that suppress differences among 'interior' elements of an identity in relation to 'outside' elements of an 'other'.[115]

In the case of Iran's foreign policy, certain discursive practices have managed to become hegemonic in their attempts at building antagonistic frontiers and defining the Self of the Islamic Republic in that context. As Shabnam Holliday illustrates, a vivid example of it is Iran's solidarity to the struggle of the Palestinian people.[116] Here, a set of subject positions and other signifiers, which do not necessarily have any a priori association with each other, are brought together in two opposing camps – "Iran," "Palestine," "people," "the oppressed," "dignity," "victimhood," "justice," "independence" vs. "Israel," "the Zionist regime," "the United States," "imperialists," "Satan," "aggression," "usurpation," "colonization."[117] In this binary articulation, the signifiers of one side appear in unison, giving an impression that different aspects of Iranian identity form a coherent totality. Here, antagonism towards the other side becomes their main feature. As Lasse Thomassen puts it, "the equivalent signifiers are equivalent insofar as they are all opposed in the same way to the antagonistic Other."[118]

In this process, the social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities are used in a diffused way. The Palestinian issue is articulated as a fight for statehood and self-determination, as well as a manifestation of Islamic awakening and resistance against

[115] Solomon, "Social Logics and Normalisation in the War on Terror," 275.
[116] Holliday, "Populism, the International and Methodological Nationalism."
[117] Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad*; Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "Discourse and Violence: The Friend-Enemy Conjection in Contemporary Iranian-American Relations," in *Iran and the International System*, ed. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Reza Molavi (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 150–67.
[118] Lasse Thomassen, "Antagonism, Hegemony and Ideology after Heterogeneity," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10, no. 3 (October 1, 2005): 297, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310500244313.

"global arrogance." Meanwhile, Israel, whose very existence is questioned, is presented in diametric opposition to these principles.[119] It is presented both as an obstacle in the path of establishing sovereignty and as an embodiment of the unjust hierarchical relations in the world.[120]

Here, the struggle of the Palestinian people is no longer a stand-alone issue. Instead, it symbolizes a more general demand by being linked with the nodal points of "justice" and "independence." The elusiveness of these signifiers is compensated by the discursive practice of protecting them from the antagonistic Other. While it might be hard to define what "justice" means in Iran's foreign policy, there is a certainty that standing by Palestinians is what embodies it. In this way, nodal points are validated and reproduced, giving a sense of solidity to Iran's Self. As Holliday argues, supporting Palestine is necessary for maintaining the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic.[121]

Such hegemonic discourses represent the "ideational points of fixation" that Adib-Moghaddam discusses in his analysis of Iranian foreign affairs. Here, the struggle against the antagonistic Other is ritualized, and alternative articulations to the good vs. evil equivalentail narrative are sidelined. The constitutive significance of such discursive practices makes the Islamic Republic sensitive to any deviation from it. For instance, changing the position of supporting Palestine or abandoning the nuclear enrichment program under the pressure of the United States could be dislocatory experiences for the identity of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, the latter remains consistent in its attitude towards these matters.

[119] Ali Khamenei, "Bayānat dar khetbeh-ha-ye namāz-e jom'e-ye Tehrān" (www.khamenei.ir, December 15, 2000), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3040.
[120] Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, "Pāsekh-e Ahmadinezhad be yek 'mādar-e Āmrikayi'" (Aftab News, March 19, 2007), http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/58887.
[121] Holliday, "Populism, the International and Methodological Nationalism."

To put it simply, Iran needs the struggle against an antagonistic Other to reproduce its identity, and foreign policy is the discursive practice through which that happens. This radical Otherness is also discursively constructed. Different actors can assume that position, such as the United States, Israel, the West, Saddam's Iraq, Saudi Arabia.[122] The boundaries of the antagonistic Other are not fixed either and depend on historically contingent articulations. In post-revolutionary Iran, the discourses that have become hegemonic as a result of the transformative events in 1979 often articulate the United States and Israel (sometimes with their allies) as the antagonistic Other. A survey of the literature on Iran's foreign policy shows how persistent and dominant anti-American and anti-Israeli notions have been, where the two states are articulated as posing an existential threat to the Islamic Republic and the values for which it stands.[123]

There is a tendency for the logic of equivalence to dominate in foreign policy instances where these actors are involved. The chains of equivalential signification can expand to include many different issues, articulating them in the context of the struggle against the antagonistic Other. Therefore, relations with the United States and Israel are overwhelmingly confrontational in most cases. While there have been deviations from this tendency, such as Iran showing support to the U.S. operations in Afghanistan in 2001,[124] they are exceptions to the rule. Cooperation between Iran and these states remains improbable.

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[122] William O. Beeman, *The Great Satan vs. the Mad Mullahs: How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (University of California Press, 2017); Mohammad Soltaninejad, "Iran and Saudi Arabia: Emotionally Constructed Identities and the Question of Persistent Tensions," *Asian Politics & Policy* 11, no. 1 (2019): 104–21, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12435.

[123] Mahmood Sariolghalam, "Prospects for Change in Iranian Foreign Policy," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 20, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/20/prospects-for-change-in-iranian-foreign-policy-pub-75569.

[124] Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, First edition (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007).

In all, the political logic of equivalence constructs antagonistic frontiers that help to validate the elusive and fragmented agency of the Islamic Republic. The discursive practices that have become hegemonic through a process of othering serve as the primary sites of performance for Iran's Self against its Other. The dominance of the logic of equivalence "harbours the possibility of more populist and revolutionary politics."[125] In the case of Iranian foreign affairs, this logic makes antagonism a prevalent factor in certain policies, which have been often described as radical, revolutionary, or ideological.

The Logic of Difference and Dismantling Binaries

As regards the logic of difference, in simple terms, it represents the opposite process. It questions the way equivalence divides the discursive space and, instead, emphasizes the differences between signifiers. It calls for reconsidering binary constructions and generates plurality in the discursive space.[126] In this case, antagonism recedes, making room for "a more institutionalist or reformist politics."[127] Articulating a foreign policy issue through this differential process has the following features. Interpretations of that particular issue escape totalizing narratives. The issue is bracketed out of a general context and often presented as a standalone specificity.[128] In this case, differences become legitimate and make it possible to have articulations of subject positions beyond binaries.

This logic plays a crucial role in maintaining a discursive system. While equivaletial articulations are there to create a sense of fixed agency, they can also have a destabilizing effect if stretched too far.[129] After all, the logic of equivalence represents a process of distortion, where signifiers are stripped of their specific meanings by being filtered through an "us vs. them" prism. It is possible that a hegemonic discourse can clash with either of the

[125] Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, 150.
[126] Nabers, *A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics*.
[127] Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, 151.
[128] Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse*.
[129] Doty, *Imperial Encounters*.

social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities if it expands such binary articulations so far that they start undermining the sedimented regularities in Iran's foreign policy.[130]

The takeover of the U.S. embassy in November 1979 is an illustrative example. As stated above, the logic of resistance communities made it possible to have a legitimate policy option that went against the basic features of the logic of sovereign states. At a moment of high antagonism, that option, which articulated the subject of the U.S. embassy in Tehran as "the den of espionage," became the hegemonic narrative.[131] Storming the embassy was considered a manifestation of the struggle against oppression. The norms of diplomatic engagement, a key aspect of the logic of sovereign states, were ignored in this totalizing equivalential articulation because the subject position of the embassy was stripped of its specific meaning of a diplomatic representation and was seen as the enemy.

If such events were frequent, where every actor is either a friend or an enemy, and every action is a struggle against that enemy, the discursive order of Iran's foreign policy would be destabilized. The logic of difference plays an important role in preventing such a scenario by dismantling binary narratives and bringing complexity to the discursive space. This complexity opens up space for having articulations that deviate from the existing hegemonic discourses. In this way, a particular issue can be detached from equivalential chains of signification, so it is not articulated in a way that poses a threat to a social logic.[132]

An example of differential articulation can be seen in the case of Iran's 25-year strategic agreement signed with China. The deal made headlines in June 2020, when it became known that China was going to make a USD 400 billion investment in the Islamic Republic, gaining

[130] Stengel and Nabers, "Symposium."
[131] Maysam Behravesh, "The Ayatollah's Den of Espionage," November 12, 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-11-12/ayatollahs-den-espionage.
[132] Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse*.

substantial influence in its economic sector.[133] The news triggered a wave of criticism, which was articulated in the framework of the hegemonic discourse of not compromising Iran's independence to global powers.[134] Iranian government representatives put forward a countering differential articulation of the agreement, challenging the attempts at linking it with the nodal point of "independence." They emphasized the specificities of the deal, calling it a document that facilitated sectoral cooperation.[135] Here, the subject position of China was articulated as that of a partner that had shared interests with the Islamic Republic.[136] The deal was presented in a "business as usual" fashion, where the criticism about "selling out" was considered wrong and manipulative.[137] This differential articulation prevented constructing an antagonistic image of China as yet another global power that was trying to undermine Iran's independence.

Such an articulation of China's subject position shows that the logic of difference makes it possible to have multiple types of Otherness. As Lene Hansen argues, identity is not simply constructed through a "Self-Other duality."[138] In foreign policy, the logic of difference creates the opportunity for having a variety of subject positions, such as a friendly neighbour, a strategic partner, or a regional competitor. In this case, differences in interests and official positions are not articulated in the context of antagonism. The logic of difference

[133] Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2020, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html.
[134] "Iran Promises to Publish Details of Pact With China As Negative Reactions Grow," *Radio Farda*, July 10, 2020, https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-promises-to-publish-details-of-pact-with-china-as-negative-reactions-grow/30719558.html.
[135] "Zarif Dismisses Criticism of China Pact As 'Rumors' by Ill-Wishers," *Radio Farda*, July 13, 2020, https://en.radiofarda.com/a/zarif-dismisses-criticism-of-china-pact-as-rumors-by-ill-wishers-/30722320.html.
[136] Maziar Motamedi, "Iran and China Sign 25-Year Cooperation Agreement | Business and Economy News | Al Jazeera," *Al Jazeera*, March 27, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/27/iran-and-china-sign-25-year-cooperation-agreement-in-tehran.
[137] "Sanad-e rāhbordi-ye Irān va Chin; āncheh bāyad bedānim va āncheh nemi guyand!," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 31, 2021, sec. سیاست < سیاست خارجی, https://www.irna.ir/news/84280511/سند-راهبردی-ایران-و-چین-آنچه-باید-بدانیم-و-آنچه-نمی-گویند.
[138] Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 41.

stressed the peculiarities of such Others, making it possible to have policies in relation to them that go beyond the notions of confrontation or unconditional support.

However, as in the case of the logic of equivalence, there is a limit to how far the logic of difference can be stretched. Continuously cutting the equivalential links leads to a fragmentation of the discursive space, where signifiers become dispersed elements.[139] Constructing identity and making foreign policy meaningful is not possible in such a process of total disassociations. Therefore, while they subvert each other, the two political logics always go together. As Laclau states, "equivalence and difference are ultimately incompatible with each other; none the less, they require each other as necessary conditions for the construction of the social."[140] Jacob Torfing's explanation of the dynamic is spot on in this regard:

> The relation between difference and equivalence is, in other words, undecidable. The discursive identities are inscribed both in signifying chains that stress their differential value, and in signifying chains that emphasize their equivalence. The tension between the differential and equivalential aspects of discursive identities is unresolvable, but political struggles may succeed in emphasizing one of the two aspects.[141]

There can be no total sameness or difference. Instead, all discourses exist somewhere on the spectrum between pure equivalence and difference. This is what we witness in Iran as well. In certain cases, the logic of equivalence dominates which leads to adopting an antagonistic attitude; in other instances, the logic of difference collapses binary narratives and defuses antagonism. There is a constant struggle between these two political logics in the process of articulating an issue of foreign policy. Illustrating this process is crucial for understanding how different policy options emerge, become dominant, or how they are contested.

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[139] Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy*.
[140] "Iran Condemns Occupation, Use of Force by Any Country - President"; "Iran Says Karabagh Conflict Should Not Affect Ties with Neighbours," *BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, March 3, 2019, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=5W3N-7Y21-DYRV-33P1&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[141] Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse*, 97.

Recognitive Practices in Foreign Policy

The final theoretical aspect is the concept of recognition that has been discussed in several works on Iran's foreign policy, as said in the literature review. It is a means for affirming one's identity and coping with the above-mentioned lack of ultimate closure. Different studies in the field of IR have shown that (mis)recognition is a key factor in determining the behaviour of states.[142] It has been emphasized especially in scholarly works concentrating on non-western agencies. The advent of modernity has led to the political, economic, and cultural primacy of the West, creating a hierarchical order with non-western political entities in an inferior position.[143] This structural set-up has been generative of existential anxiety among non-western states. Observations about stigmatization, emulation, ontological splits illustrate the fundamental uneasiness of these countries regarding defining their identities in current international affairs.[144] It is a challenge to find one's place in a system designed and dominated by others. Therefore, seeking recognition becomes a crucial factor in understanding how non-western actors, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, act and requires due attention.

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[142] Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017); Reinhard Wolf, "Respect and Disrespect in International Politics: The Significance of Status Recognition," *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (February 2011): 105–42, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971910000308; Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alexei Tsinovoi, "International Misrecognition: The Politics of Humour and National Identity in Israel's Public Diplomacy," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 3–29, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066117745365; Erik Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[143] Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, "Struggles for Recognition"; Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

[144] Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia*; Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Psycho-Nationalism: Global Thought, Iranian Imaginations* (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004); Marco A. Vieira, "Understanding Resilience in International Relations: The Non-Aligned Movement and Ontological Security," *International Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (June 1, 2016): 290–311, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw002.

Taking such factors into account, this study also investigates the role of recognition in foreign policymaking by using Michell Murray's theorization of it.[145] Murray, in turn, borrows from Patchen Markell's analysis of the matter, especially his reading of the Hegelian parable of the struggle for recognition.[146] It could be argued that combining their contributions and the conceptual tools of the Essex School is a step towards theoretical appropriation. Hence, there is an issue of compatibility that needs to be addressed.

The Essex School is no stranger to Hegelian ideas of subjectivity. However, their engagement has been limited and mediated by a Lacanian perspective pioneered by Slavoy Žižek.[147] Ernesto Laclau's ideas on the need for closure were enriched by a Lacanian understanding of the subject's desire for unattainable fulfilment.[148] Charlotte Epstein shows how the latter can be combined with Markell's theorization of the struggle for recognition.[149] While there are substantial differences in Laclau's, Žižek's, and Markell's approaches, these works show that there is a shared point that the need for recognition or fixation, in Laclau's terms, cannot be fulfilled.[150] This common ground on subjectivity opens a pathway to link Laclau's ideas on the struggle for unattainable closure with the Hegelian struggle for recognition.[151]

This concept of recognition shows another dimension of relational identity. The key feature here is that the self-certainty of a subject is dependent on others. As Michell Murray puts it: "Self-consciousness is confronted with the vulnerability inherent in the experience of

[145] Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*.
[146] Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003).
[147] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Second Edition edition (London: Verso, 1989).
[148] Jason Glynos, "The Grip of Ideology: A Lacanian Approach to the Theory of Ideology," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2001): 191–214, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310120053858.
[149] Charlotte Epstein, "The Productive Force of the Negative and the Desire for Recognition: Lessons from Hegel and Lacan," *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 5 (December 2018): 805–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210518000347.
[150] Markell, *Bound by Recognition*.
[151] Combining Laclau's and Markell's concepts on agency is a cautious step that has limitations and is meant to serve the purposes of this research. Making an abstract theoretical claim in this regard is outside the boundaries of the study.

intersubjectivity: its own self-satisfaction is not within its immediate control and instead is intrinsically linked to and dependent upon the unpredictable responses of another actor."[152] As a result, states attempt to actualize their aspirant identities by seeking recognition from others. This condition makes states sensitive towards being misrecognized, which is seen as a threat to the self-certainty of the subject and leads to status-seeking measures.

The sensitivity towards misrecognition is especially important when studying the behaviour of states that have discontent towards the western dominated Liberal International Order (LIO).[153] The so-called outsiders of the order see it as an extension of western dominance, where they acquire an inferior status. In this situation, non-western states are denied their desired recognition by significant Others – "already recognized actors that by virtue of their established status have the authority to decide the boundaries of the particular identity group."[154]

This hierarchical setup goes against the aspirant identity of states like the Islamic Republic, where misrecognition by significant Others, such as the United States, is registered as disrespect.[155] This issue is extensively discussed by Constance Duncombe in her above-mentioned book, where she illustrates how the struggle for recognition has shaped the relations between Iran and the United States concerning the former's nuclear enrichment program.[156] She shows how the Islamic Republic aims to interact with this significant Other on an equal footing and, consequentially, perform its aspirant identity of a "respected" actor. As a result, Iran's behaviour concerning this particular issue becomes a recognitive practice.

[152] Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*, 34.
[153] Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, "Struggles for Recognition."
[154] Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*, 55.
[155] Majd, "Pride and Prejudice in Tehran."
[156] Constance Duncombe, *Representation, Recognition and Respect in World Politics: The Case of Iran-US Relations*, first edition (Manchester University Press, 2019).

Its firm stance is not only determined by not making concessions to the antagonistic Other but also having its understanding of the Self recognized by that very Other.

This is one way the desire for recognition is expressed in Iran's case; however, it does not show the whole picture. What becomes a recognitive practice in Iran's foreign affairs is directly tied to the two social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities. The Islamic Republic tries to show the validity of these sedimented aspects of its identity in the eyes of other actors in international affairs.

Specifically, the recognitive practices shaped by the logic of sovereign states and aimed at validating them try to acquire the "respected" position mentioned above. The Islamic Republic seeks acknowledgement of its status as a sovereign and equitable member of the international community.[157] This type of recognition is different from the legalistic one often discussed in IR. In the case of the latter, Iran is already a member of the United Nations, and its status as an independent state is acknowledged. What is at stake here is a "thick" recognition – acknowledgement by significant others of Iran's self-perceived status.[158] Here, the United States, being the most influential actor in international affairs, is denying Iran its desired status by considering it a rouge state.[159] Labels, such as irrational, fundamentalist, and radical, are used to articulate an image of the Islamic Republic that is far from being a 'normal country" and should be pushed to the fringes of international affairs.[160]

This situation has triggered recognitive practices on the Iranian side, where the latter tries to perform an identity of an actively engaged and cooperative state in regional and international

[157] Here, acknowledged and recognized are used as synonymous terms. Hence, this study does not adopt Markell's theorization of acknowledgement as a distinct category. See Markell, *Bound by Recognition.*
[158] Duncombe, *Representation, Recognition and Respect in World Politics*.
[159] The New York Times, "At U.N., Trump Singles Out 'Rogue' Nations North Korea and Iran (Published 2017)," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2017, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/19/world/americas/united-nations-general-assembly.html.
[160] Beeman, *The Great Satan vs. the Mad Mullahs*; "US Does Not Seek War with Iran, Says Mike Pompeo," *BBC News*, May 14, 2019, sec. Middle East, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48272208.

affairs and challenges the narrative of being isolated. For instance, Iran's relations with Russia and China are often performed in this light. The way they are articulated in Tehran's foreign policy discourses showcases the recognitive component, where it is emphasized that the status of the Islamic Republic is recognized by these key actors in international affairs.[161]

Another example is the behaviour of the Islamic Republic regarding the developments around the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In its articulations of the deal, the Iranian side performs its aspirant identity of a constructive actor that complies with international law and attaches great importance to multilateral diplomacy. In this way, it positions itself in opposition to the policies of the Trump administration, which is argued to violate core principles of international law.[162] In a way, the Iranian government mirrors the articulations of its antagonistic Other, calling it an isolated state in international affairs.[163] Such a recognitive practice aims to show that it is Iran acting like a "normal country," as opposed to the unreasonable behaviour of Washington. These articulations challenge the narratives about Iranian revisionism and try to solidify the core features of the logic of sovereign states.

As regards the logic of resistance communities, it triggers a different set of recognitive practices. Here, the Islamic Republic tries to act as the flagbearer of a number of causes that challenge the existing international order. The attempts at elevating the role of organizations such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organization for Islamic Conference (OIC) and having primacy in them is indicative of this tendency.[164] In this way, Iran tries to

[161] Ariane Tabatabai and Dina Esfandiary, *Triple-Axis: Iran's Relations with Russia and China* (Place of publication not identified: I.B. Tauris, 2018).
[162] "Zarif Calls on Int'l Community to Stop US Destroying International Law," *IRNA English*, August 12, 2020, sec. News > Politics, https://en.irna.ir/news/83904531/Zarif-calls-on-int-l-community-to-stop-US-destroying-International.
[163] "US Isolated in World, Zarif Says - Politics News," *Tasnim News Agency*, November 7, 2020, /en/news/2020/11/07/2384518/us-isolated-in-world-zarif-says.
[164] Edward Wastnidge, "Détente and Dialogue: Iran and the OIC during the Khatami Era (1997–2005)," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 12, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 413–31,

perform a key role in the fight for justice and the rights of the oppressed/downtrodden. Its involvement in the Palestinian and Lebanese affairs is also articulated with the symbolic significance of the resistance against oppressors.[165] The way certain past events, such as the occupation of the U.S. embassy in November 1979, are remembered also showcase the recognitive aspects present in foreign policy discourses articulated through the logic of resistance communities.[166] Considering it legitimate is a recognitive practice that is meant to show Iran's commitment to challenging the existing international order and validates the logic of resistance communities.

Iran's aspirant identity of being the forefront fighter for justice is also misrecognized by the West, especially the United States. This dissonance triggers varying steps on Iran's side to validate the social logic of resistance communities. On the one hand, Tehran tries to make its struggle appear legitimate in the eyes of significant others, such as western countries. The most evident example of this is Khatami's dialogue among civilizations, which was an attempt at presenting a less confrontational articulation of Iran's resistance causes.[167] On the other hand, misrecognition is also articulated in an inverted way. Specifically, the paradoxical feature of this process is that being misrecognized by the antagonistic Other, which tries to maintain the unjust hierarchical order, is a sign of recognition of Iran's pivotal role. In other words, the United States acknowledges Iran's self-identification by having an adversarial position towards it.[168]

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https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2011.624411; Houman A. Sadri, "Trends in the Foreign Policy of Revolutionary Iran," *Journal of Third World Studies* 15, no. 1 (1998): 13–37.

[165] Calabrese, *Revolutionary Horizons*; Rola El Husseini, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (July 1, 2010): 803–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502695.

[166] R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy: Contending Orientations," *Middle East Journal* 43, no. 2 (1989): 202–17.

[167] Mohammad Khatami, *Islam, Liberty and Development* (Binghamton, N.Y: Global Academic Publishing, 1998).

[168] Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad*.

Iran carries out the recognitive practices of both social logics and, hence, performs the fragmentedness of its agency. Not reproducing one of them will lead to a dislocation of the current identity of the Iranian subject as a foreign policy actor. As ultimate closure is not attainable, the mentioned recognitive practices are reoccurring phenomena and often become routinized. Consequentially, duality becomes an integral feature of Iran's foreign policy. The Islamic Republic is in the constant mode of status-seeking. Even unsuccessful attempts at recognition give a "fleeting sense of social security."[169] An imaginary audience always has a presence in the perceptions of the subject regarding its actions. As Jenny Edkins states, "we behave to be observed: to produce ourselves as subjects within the social or symbolic order. Without the audience, we are nothing."[170] This factor shows the pervasiveness of the desire for recognition, which penetrates multiple foreign policy issues and perpetuates the dividual nature of identity.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrated the theoretical tools that have been used for analyzing Iran's foreign Policy in the South Caucasus. Having the idea of relational identity as the ontological starting point, these concepts help to show how foreign policy is carried out as a discursive practice. They provide the analytical means for reflecting on the complexity of Iran's behaviour and showing how it can have varying and even contradictory features.

The decentred nature of Iran's agency becomes visible when discussing the dominant social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities. These logics provide the discursive preconditions for identities, interests, and policies to emerge. The differences in them create

[169] Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*, 49.
[170] Edkins, *Poststructuralism & International Relations*, 62.

the ground for a diversity of policy options. The key point here is that conflicting perspectives can be considered credible and create dilemmas for the Islamic Republic.

While the social logics make certain articulations of identities, interests and policies possible, it is the political logics of equivalence and difference that determine how those articulations emerge, become hegemonic or get challenged. The logic of equivalence constitutes the radical outside of Iran's agency, where its Self is constructed in opposition to an antagonistic Other. An equivalential articulation of a foreign policy issue leads to situating it in the context of fighting the antagonistic Other. As a result, adopting a confrontational attitude becomes the norm. The logic of difference subverts this process and leads to articulations, where Otherness is not necessarily tied to antagonism. Here, nuances and particularities become more prevalent, and the specificity of that situation is emphasized, resisting attempts at wider associations. As both logics are present in the Iranian discursive space, and each of them has tentative dominance in particular cases, both confrontational and accommodating behaviours can be seen in its foreign policy.

Finally, it is argued that foreign policy also has a recognitive dimension. The absence of full closure in the identity of the Islamic Republic is projected on other actors from whom the Islamic Republic seeks recognition. To put it differently, the Islamic Republic acts as a status-seeking state and carries out a number of recognitive practices to strengthen its self-certainty by receiving acknowledgement from others. These practices are meant to validate the two social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities. The desire for recognition makes the Islamic Republic take steps where it is (as if) performing its aspirant identity.

These theoretical aspects show how there can be continuities, changes, inconsistencies, and vacillations in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. In other words, they provide the conceptual prisms through which a new understanding of Iran's behaviour in the South

Caucasus can be formed. Using such an approach, this study makes a radical departure from the literature. It abandons assumptions on static identities and exogenously given interests, making room for looking beyond the argument of pragmatism in the policies towards the targeted region.

Research Design

The Object of Analysis and Research Questions

The object of analysis of this study is Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus in the post-Soviet period. This statement contains three components that need further elaboration: 1) Iran's foreign policy, 2) the South Caucasus, and 3) the post-Soviet period. The chapter on the conceptual framework already gives the answer to the first one: this research treats foreign policy as an articulatory, as well as recognitive, practice, which is made possible in a certain discursive framework and reproduces that framework when implemented. The study illustrates how this practice is performed in a particular regional context.

As regards the South Caucasus, it is necessary to state the reasons for treating it as a regional unit and showing what it encompasses. The question of whether the South Caucasus (also known as Transcaucasia) is a region does not have a clear answer. In general, what constitutes a region is a contested matter.[171] While it is hard to give a precise definition, at least, it can be stated that the signifier "South Caucasus" is routinely articulated as a term referring to a geographic area that comprises the countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.[172] There is a commonsensical understanding of what it represents, and the question of whether it can be considered a region is often overlooked.

However, there are cases when the South Caucasus is not studied as a separate unit. The most common alternative is considering it in combination with Central Asia.[173] While there is merit in having such an approach, especially in regard to economic affairs, considering

[171] Louise Fawcett, "Exploring Regional Domains: A Comparative History of Regionalism," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 80, no. 3 (2004): 429–46.
[172] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Edmund Herzig, *The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, Chatham House Papers (London; New York: Royal Institute of International Affairs; Pinter, 1999).
[173] Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia."

the South Caucasus and Central Asia as a single region raises certain questions. Buzan and Waever present an important point on this matter. They argue:

> Should the Caucasus and Central Asia be treated as one region? They share Turkic languages in most countries, Russian as a lingua franca, and a common Soviet past with legacies such as infrastructure. Among the differences are political developments, with ex-communists still in power in Central Asia whereas the Caucasus have seen often violent changes of elites (and sometimes back again). Most decisively for an RSC [regional security complex] analysis, the two are relatively separate. The Caspian Sea unifies in relation to fish and hydrocarbons, but geopolitically it divides and not much securitisation happens across it (and when finally the dispute over territorial division of the Caspian is resolved, even less will tie the two sides together).[174]

Alongside these distinctions, there is a variation in the presence of certain regional and extra-regional actors. For example, China is actively engaged in Central Asian affairs;[175] however, the same cannot be stated about the South Caucasus, where Beijing remains much less active.[176] The opposite can be observed in the case of the European Union, where the states of the South Caucasus have been included in its Eastern Partnership initiative.[177] Such differences introduce diverging configurations in these two areas and challenge the notion of considering them as a single region.

Taking these factors into account, the study treats the South Caucasus as a regional unit but does not limit its boundaries in a strict sense. Looking into Iranian foreign affairs in cases where Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have been involved is the starting point. The South Caucasus can be articulated in different ways in Iranian foreign policy discourses. It is an issue that needs to be tackled in the empirical part of the research. Therefore, an open-ended

[174] Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: A Guide to the Global Security Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 419.
[175] Roy Allison, "Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Regime Security in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 185–202, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930802355121.
[176] Emil Avdaliani, "The Limits of China's Involvement in South Caucasus," *Chinaobservers* (blog), December 8, 2020, https://chinaobservers.eu/the-limits-of-chinas-involvement-in-south-caucasus/.
[177] Michal Jiráček and Florian Carmona, "Three Eastern Partnership Neighbours in the South Caucasus | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament," Fact Sheets on the European Union - 2021 (European Parliament, June 2021), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/172/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-in-the-south-caucasus.

perspective of what the South Caucasus means has been used in the data collection and analysis.

Finally, one needs to show what the post-Soviet period means and how it is studied. In general terms, it includes the timeframe from the collapse of the Soviet Union until the present day. To illustrate Iran's foreign policy in this period, the presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), and Mahmood Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) have been selected as case studies. The purpose of concentrating on them is to strike a balance between providing detailed examinations of particular cases and making overall observations about the research topic. Having a much broader temporal framework would make it difficult for conducting an in-depth analysis due to the sheer volume of data, while a narrower scope would create difficulties in making generalizable claims. The limitations regarding the time available for carrying out the research and the acceptable length of the thesis were key factors that made studying Iran's foreign policy during the three presidencies the most feasible option.

It is still necessary to justify why these presidencies have been chosen. The reason is that Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad are the figures that represent the variety of foreign policy perspectives of the Iranian government in the post-Soviet period. Studying Iran's policies in the South Caucasus during their terms helps to illustrate how they were performed in the context of these different approaches. Rafsanjani is known as the arch-pragmatist figure in the Iranian political elites,[178] while Khatami and Ahmadinejad are famous for having reconciliatory and confrontational approaches in foreign affairs, respectively.[179] As for Hassan Rouhani's presidency (2013-2021), it is associated with returning to the

[178] Haleh Esfandiari and Shaul Bakhash, "The Long Career of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani," *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/rafsanjani-iran-khamenei-khomeini/512507/.
[179] R. K. Ramazani, "The Shifting Premise of Iran's Foreign Policy: Towards a Democratic Peace?," *Middle East Journal* 52, no. 2 (1998): 177–87; Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad*.

pragmatic approach advocated by Rafsanjani and his supporters.[180] When making a choice between the two pragmatists, studying the early years of the post-Soviet period has been prioritized, considering the importance of understanding how certain articulations emerged in this new environment. As a result, Rafsanjani's, Khatami's, and Ahmadinejad's terms have been selected.

These reflections on how the post-Soviet period is studied also show that the selection of the cases is based on a temporal division. Such a choice derives from having an open-ended perspective concerning the spatial scope of the object of analysis. This choice rules out options, such as dividing the empirical discussion of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus into its relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Making such a decision before starting the data analysis reduces the object of study to bilateral relations and can lead to attempts at fitting certain foreign policy articulations into pre-existing perspectives. Similar issues can arise in other ways of spatial divisions; therefore, a temporal approach to identifying the case studies has been chosen.

In all, this research tries not to be too restrictive in defining the targeted object, while providing an understanding of its scope. The above-mentioned points illustrate how Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus in the post-Soviet period is seen here. The study explores this topic by answering the following open-ended research questions:

1) How are identities and interests articulated in Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus?
2) How do certain policies emerge, get implemented and/or contested?

Formulating research questions in this way reflects the ontological assumptions on which this study is based. They are answered by identifying the social and political logics at play,

[180] Alex Vatanka, *The Battle of the Ayatollahs in Iran: The United States, Foreign Policy, and Political Rivalry since 1979*, 2021.

as well as the recognitive practices, and discussing them in the respective context of the object of analysis. For providing a better understanding of this process, it is necessary to clarify where the researcher has looked for data and how certain discursive practices have been observed. The following sections on data collection and analysis discuss these matters in detail.

Data Collection

The conceptual framework of this study presupposes a certain attitude towards empirical data. From a discourse-theoretical perspective, data collection and analysis are not a mechanical process: the researcher makes certain choices and judgements that need to be illustrated.[181] The first choice is about the type of data used for this study. While a PDT perspective means that data are treated as text, certain distinctions have been pinpointed. In this regard, David Howarth offers a typology, where he distinguishes between linguistic (documents, interviews) and non-linguistic (participant observations, images and architecture), as well as reactive (interviews, participant observations) and non-reactive (documents, images and architecture) types of data.[182] Each of the types requires a particular way of methodological engagement, and the relevance of their use is dependent on the selected topic of research.

This study is based on analyzing a large pool of non-linguistic and non-reactive data (i.e., documents). The discursive practice of Iran's foreign policy over a period of three presidencies can be best observed by looking into this type of empirical materials. They are the primary and most accessible means for studying the peculiarities of the object of this

[181] Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy*.
[182] David Howarth, "Applying Discourse Theory: The Method of Articulation," in *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*, ed. David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 316–49.

research.[183] Unsurprisingly, document analysis is the option many IR and FPA studies choose for researching an issue from a discourse-theoretical perspective.[184]

Selecting documents as the type of data leads to the second choice that is related to the questions of what materials need to be studied and how. In general, discourse analysis can be conducted in two ways: 1) an in-depth examination of a few texts or 2) an observation of numerous documents of various kinds. There have been various epistemological and methodological discussions on this matter. Edward Said's critique of Foucault for not valuing the importance of individual texts and authors is a prime example of it.[185] This research does not aim to get into such debates. Instead, considering the specific purposes of the study, a choice has been made to observe a wider set of discourses rather than concentrate on analyzing specific linguistic nuances. This choice is based on the open-ended nature of the research questions, as well as the interest in looking for patterns of reproduction, contestation, and transformation of foreign policy articulations.

Identifying the scope and starting point of data collection becomes an important matter when having such a macroscopic framework. Lene Hansen and David Campbell provide valuable insight regarding where to start.[186] They state that the analysis should begin from the official arena, where the "privileged storytellers" are. Considering that the topic of this research is the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, the speeches and interviews made by the President, the Foreign Minister, the Supreme Leader, as well as deputy ministers and

[183] There is also the possibility of doing elite interviews, which can serve as a valuable primary source for understanding how Iran's foreign policy is articulated. This option has not been used for two reasons. The first one is the issue of accessibility. Having a sufficient number of interviews with high-ranking Iranian officials that would generate representative data was not feasible. Secondly, interviewees would be engaging in a retrospective reconstruction of past events dependent on their present perspectives. Hence, there could be differences from the articulations during the selected period, causing distortions in the data.
[184] Hansen, *Security as Practice*; Doty, *Imperial Encounters*; David Campbell, *Writing Security*, Revised edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
[185] Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).
[186] Hansen, *Security as Practice*; David Campbell, *Politics Without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics, and the Narratives of the Gulf War* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Pub, 1993); Campbell, *Writing Security*.

ambassadors have been considered first. However, the data collection does not stop there. It is also necessary to look into the intertextual links of these official texts. In other words, one should observe how the mentioned discourses are located in a broader societal arena. Hence, the research also looks into texts produced by other politicians (i.e., those in the opposition) and media outlets.

For a clearer understanding of the scope of the data, Lene Hansen's approach to intertextual research models is used. The latter resemble concentric circles, where models 1, 2, 3A, and 3B refer to official discourse, broader political debates, cultural representations, and marginal political discourses, respectively.[187] Hansen argues that it is up to the researcher to decide what intertextual models need to be applied. This research uses materials included in models 1 and 2. In other words, official discourses (text by government officials and bodies) and broader political debates (texts by the political opposition and the media). Considering the structure of political institutions in the Islamic Republic, statements by religious figures are included in the second model as well. In sum, this research looks into the following materials: official texts, parliamentary debates, speeches by politicians and religious figures, and media texts.

It is also necessary to clarify what temporal boundaries have been set for the data collection. This question has already been answered in broad terms. Stating that the study covers the presidencies of Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad gives a certain understanding that the observed empirical materials are from the years 1989 to 2013. However, these boundaries have not been strictly defined, especially in regard to the exact temporal starting point. Specifically, the developments preceding Rafsanjani's presidency – most notably, his visit to the Soviet Union as the Speaker of the Parliament of Iran in 1989 – have been studied

[187] Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 64.

as well. In general, the data collection process goes back to the second half of 1987, as it was the period when the first protests started in the South Caucasus. As for the endpoint, the answer is more straightforward here: the data collection stops with August 2013, which is the last month of Ahmadinejad's presidency.

After making these clarifications, it is necessary to state how a sufficient number of materials has been collected for making substantiated claims about the research topic. In the case of discourse analysis, there are no objective criteria that can be applied in a general manner, and the judgement of the researcher plays a crucial role.[188] As an alternative, the research followed the guideline of covering "a maximum of eventualities, by reading as much as possible from as many genres as possible."[189] Since, it is still quite general, below a detailed discussion of the data collection process is provided.

The empirical materials of the first intertextual model are not available in a single or even a few databases. Different methods were used for identifying and accessing them. The only exception is the speeches made by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei that were retrieved from his official website (Khamenei.ir). The latter has a searchable archive that allows locating an exhaustive number of remarks (15 units of texts) related to the South Caucasus in the original Persian. As regards the statements made by the other high-ranking officials, many of them were found in the periodicals published by the IRI Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Alongside academic articles, these journals present collections of speeches and interviews of government officials concerning the South Caucasus and Iran's foreign policy in general. Specifically, such materials were taken from the following Persian and English language periodicals:

[188] Howarth, "Applying Discourse Theory: The Method of Articulation."
[189] Dunn and Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research*, 69.

- *Motāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz (Central Asia and the Caucasus Studies Quarterly),*
- *Siyāsat-e Khāreji (Foreign Policy Quarterly),*
- *Ruydād-ha va tahlil-ha (Events and Analyses),*
- *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies,*
- *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs.*

All the issues of these journals published in the period of 1987-2013 were considered, and around 90 units of texts were identified for discourse analysis. They include statements made by the three Presidents, Foreign Ministers and their deputies, their interviews to the respective journals and different outlets, transcripts from roundtable discussions with various government officials, as well as articles written by them.

In addition to these publications of the IRI Foreign Ministry, the issues of *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* have been observed as well. This journal is published by an Iranian think-tank called the Centre for Scientific Research and Middle East Studies. Many of its issues include extensive interviews and roundtable discussions with high-ranking Iranian government representatives and policy analysts. In total, 12 units of text were selected for discourse analysis from this journal. A few of the interviews and speeches of high-ranking government officials were retrieved from other academic journals, such as *Motāle'āt-e Khāvar-e Miyāneh (Middle East Studies)* and *Zhiyopolitik (Geopolitics).*[190]

Several other sources were used for collecting texts in the category of the first intertextual model. Specifically, an English language collection of President Khatami's speeches called *Islam, Liberty and Development* was used.[191] Some of the remarks made by President

[190] These journals were studied during two research trips to the Library of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran.
[191] Khatami, *Islam, Liberty and Development*.

Ahmadinejad were found on the official website of the Government of the Islamic Republic (Dolat.ir). The databases of the United Nations and the Economic Cooperation Organization helped to access statements made by Iranian government representatives from their platforms. Finally, various interviews by high-ranking officials that were given to domestic and international newspapers were retrieved from their respective websites.

The vast majority of the collected data (several hundred units of texts) are from Iranian media outlets. These sources present both the articulations of the government and those made by different political circles. While Iran ranks poorly in press freedom,[192] there are multiple papers that present a wide range of perspectives mostly based on their affiliations with different political factions.[193] The availability of their materials concerning the South Caucasus varies significantly, depending on the outlet and the time of publication.

Here, the databases of the *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)* and *BBC Monitoring* have been used extensively. Their search tools and deliberate documentation of Iranian media coverages allows identifying multiple eventualities in the discourses about the South Caucasus. These databases served two purposes. First, they showed where to look for texts produced by the Iranian media on the object of analysis. Second, they provided access to a large volume of materials that were not available in the archives of the outlets that had produced them. The latter case especially refers to the documents from the earlier parts of the post-Soviet period. In all, the empirical data were retrieved mainly from the following media outlets:[194]

[192] "Iran: One of the Most Oppressive Countries | Reporters without Borders," Reporters without Borders, accessed August 9, 2021, https://rsf.org/en/iran.
[193] Shahram Rafizadeh and Mahsa Alimardani, "The Political Affiliations of Iranian Newspapers," Iran Media Program (Center for Global Communication Studies, June 2015), https://repository.upenn.edu/iranmediaprogram/5.
[194] The combination of these outlets is sufficiently representative of the media landscape in the Islamic Republic. This claims is based on the observations made in the following sources: Tara Mahtafar, Mohammad Khiabani, and Golnoush Niknejad, "Iran Media Guide" (The Tehran Bureau, December 10, 2009), http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/12/media-guide.html; "Iran Profile -

State-run	Government-affiliated	Conservative/ hardliner	Centrist	Reformist-oriented
IRNA, ISNA, IRIB, Tehran Times, Press TV.	Fars News Agency, Mehr News Agency.	Kayhān, Resālat, Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi, Javān, Abrār, Tasnim News, Hemāyat.	Ettelā'āt, Hamshahri, Kārgozarān, Tabnāk News.	Mardom-Sālāri, Āftāb-e Yazd, Salām, Hayāt-e No, Noruz, Donyā-ye Eqtesād.

It is noteworthy that the texts categorized in the second intertextual model were mostly retrieved from the sources mentioned above. In addition to them, the transcripts of six parliamentary debates were used, where issues related to the South Caucasus had been discussed. These transcripts can be accessed in the online archives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (ical.ir).

In sum, the collected empirical data include a wide variety of materials with the purpose of capturing multiple eventualities and different articulations of them. The details provided above are meant to illustrate the process of data collection in a transparent way in order to provide an opportunity to evaluate whether the gathered materials are sufficient and/or relevant. The next section shows how these texts were analyzed for answering the research questions of the study.

Data Analysis

This research follows the footsteps of different post-structuralist works in the field of IR and Political Science that use discourse analysis as the primary means for treating the collected

Media," *BBC News*, June 15, 2021, sec. Middle East, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14542234; Rafizadeh and Alimardani, "The Political Affiliations of Iranian Newspapers."

textual data.[195] The analysis starts with a broad reading of pre-selected materials. This is the first stage of a dual reading process. Here the objective is to form a basic understanding and conduct a preliminary observation. Thick descriptions of multiple eventualities are provided at this stage in the form of annotations and notes.

Alongside providing familiarity with the data and a preliminary understanding of the issue at stake, this process is aimed at identifying the materials for the second stage of reading. There is no precise guideline based on which some of the observed texts should be selected. Here as well, the judgement of the researcher plays the primary role. In general, those texts were prioritized that had central positions in the observed intertextual links. Then the repetitions and contestations of their articulations were considered.

The goal of the second reading is to identify how different elements of discourses related to Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus are linked to one another for constructing meanings. For this purpose, the following two analytical tools are used: subject positioning and identifying nodal points. They are applied quite extensively in various post-structuralist studies.[196] Looking for subject positions means asking "who speaks" or "is spoken to/about."[197] This process helps to pinpoint the main actors in the articulations of foreign policy and see how they are positioned in the respective discursive systems and in relation to each other.

[195] Howarth, "Applying Discourse Theory: The Method of Articulation"; Dunn and Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research*.
[196] Jennifer Milliken, "The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods," *European Journal of International Relations*, July 25, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005002003; Dunn and Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research*.
[197] Charlotte Epstein, "Who Speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity in International Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (2011): 327–50, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066109350055.

As for the nodal points, identifying them helps to investigate how dominant and rival discourses are intersected.[198] The theoretical chapter of this study already shows the structural significance of nodal points in a discursive space. Their relative emptiness allows them to become points of intersections for multiple articulations, which try to fix particular meanings of these nodes as the dominant ones. The empirical chapter shows how "independence," "justice," "national security," "regional cooperation," "obligations to others" and variations of these and some other signifiers serve as nodal points in the articulations of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. Observing them makes it possible to illustrate the struggle for constructing identities and interests in a certain context.

The next step is putting the results of the two readings together in order to construct the social and political logics, as well as the recognitive aspects of discursive practices. From this point on, major interpretative steps are taken that need to be acknowledged. In the case of the social logics, repetitions that appear natural are studied. They are the conditions of possibility that become visible when situating the observed subject positions within the above-mentioned thick descriptions. The social logics are also identified by looking for similarities in different and even contradictory articulations of the above-mentioned nodal points. The identified regularities are then reviewed in combination with the discussions made in the literature. Since the study claims that the social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities refer to Iran's foreign policy in general, rereading the literature from this perspective becomes necessary for making such an argument.

The political logics of equivalence and difference become visible when looking into the relations between subject positions, as well as the way they are linked to different nodal points. Equivalence and difference are abstract processes, and the theoretical reflections in

[198] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

this study show how they are played out in a discursive space. The dominance of the logic of equivalence entails fixing a meaning around nodal points through building antagonistic frontiers. Hence, the data analysis process identifies how this logic is performed by looking into relations of contrariety between different subject positions articulated in chains of significations with certain nodal points in them. As regards the logic of difference, it brings complexity to the discursive space. Its presence is observed by looking into attempts at dismantling chains of equivalence, where certain subject positions are articulated through the prism of non-antagonistic Otherness.

The final and one can say the most interpretative part of the analysis is the identification of the recognitive aspects of the observed practices. In this case, the study will show the extent to which the observed subjects articulate an aspirant identity and try to perform it. Explicit and repeated narrations of Iran's status in the region and the world can help to pinpoint the recognitive aspects of Iran's foreign policy. Articulations of misrepresentation, disrespect, and denials of status are also indicative of the recognitive aspects in observed eventualities. In this particular case, the data analysis looks into attempts at making self-identifications of the Islamic Republic dominant in the struggle of contrary articulations of its subject position by other actors.

In conclusion, the research design of this study is built around the theoretical framework illustrated in the previous chapter. It shows a strong exploratory orientation by opting for positing open-ended research questions rather than hypothesis-testing. The data collection and analysis tools have been selected based on the factors of relevance and feasibility. While the presented research design is an attempt at providing a systematic approach to analyzing the collected data, the interpretative moves taken by the research should not be downgraded. Hence, they are acknowledged above. As a result, the research design has helped to look

into the topic from a new perspective and construct arguments about Iran's foreign policy that are presented in the following three empirical chapters.

Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus during Rafsanjani's Presidency

Introduction

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997) coincided with a period of dramatic changes. First, 1989 was a watershed year for the Islamic Republic marked by major constitutional reforms and the death of Rohullah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Revolution.[199] Second, the Cold War was coming to an end, leading to global transformations. Finally, the Islamic Republic had to face a new reality in its northern neighbourhood due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In these times of uncertainty, there were different articulations of Iran's identity and interests in relation to the newly emerged environment in the former Soviet South. This chapter illustrates these processes in relation to the South Caucasus and shows how certain policies were developed based on them.

It starts with discussing the broader context of Iranian foreign policy during Rafsanjani's presidency. Here, it is shown how the discursive space was opened up in this so-called post-Khomeini period. In these times of change, the logic of difference became more dominant in Iranian discourses, making it possible to have multiple articulations of identities and interests. By illustrating the interplay of various foreign policy discourses, the chapter illustrates the extent and peculiarities of the relative flexibility in defining issues and determining policies. It displays what foreign policy narratives were dominant in the Iranian discursive space in which the South Caucasus emerged.

[199] Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: Iranian Second Republic* (Routledge, 1994).

This section is followed by an analysis of Iran's behaviour during the last years of the Soviet Union. It shows how a transition was made in Iran's foreign policy to establishing ties with the USSR and what the first articulations regarding the South Caucasus were. In this period of volatility in the region, there were various competing narratives in Iran regarding how to react to the fast pace of changes. The section shows how Iran was ill-prepared and hesitant to act when it came to the clashes in the region and the emergence of new states.

The next three sections present Iran's foreign policy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The first one discusses Iranian articulations of regionalism, and how the states in the South Caucasus were positioned in it. It shows how different narratives on religion, civilization, culture, as well as socio-economic conditions, were put together to build certain regional identities, interests, and respective policies. It is followed by a discussion on peace and security issues, where Iran's position towards the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict is presented. The final part discusses Iran's relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. It demonstrates what particular issues were prioritized in these bilateral ties and why.

In all, the chapter shows the layered and contested nature of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. It was an amalgamation of different narratives and practices that resulted in occasional experimentation, hesitance, and inconsistency on the one hand, and flexibility on the other. It is argued that there was no overarching strategy concerning the region, and Iran's foreign policy was quite fluid and often ambivalent. Rafsanjani's administration had the objective of establishing a strong foothold in the newly emerged region, but there were major obstacles and uncertainties in the way.

Articulations of the International Order and Iran's Place in It

Rafsanjani's tenure is considered to represent a period of transition towards a rather institutionalist attitude as opposed to the more populist/revolutionary one observed in the

early years of the Islamic Republic.[200] He is widely considered to be the face of Iranian pragmatism.[201] In an interview with the Middle East Insight, he called the years of his presidency the "construction decade" with an emphasis on recovery and stability.[202] There was a shift from confrontational approaches in foreign policy to a more cooperative attitude with an emphasis on economic development.[203] The almost decade-long war with Iraq that had devastating effects on the country was a sobering event that contributed to these changes.[204] It showed how overstretching equivalential chains of signification and articulating most of the foreign policy issues through the notion of fighting the antagonistic Other could have a destabilizing impact.

The hegemonic position and expansive nature of the discourse of the Revolution – fighting against the oppression of "global arrogance" inside the country and beyond its borders – posed a threat to the social logic of sovereign states. Calls for exporting the Revolution were prevalent and challenged the norm of non-intervention in the affairs to other states.[205] As mentioned above, the 1979 Hostage Crisis violated the basic principles of diplomatic conduct in the name of that struggle. As Ramazani puts it, "The seizure of the US embassy on November 4, 1979, and the 444-day hostage dispute that followed became the crucible of an idealistic revolutionary foreign policy that set Iran against much of the rest of the

[200] The terms "populist" and "institutionalist" represent the logics of equivalence and difference respectively, as stated in the chapter on the theoretical framework. For more, see Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*.
[201] Ali Ansari, *Modern Iran: Reform and Revolution*, 2nd edition (Place of publication not identified: Routledge, 2016).
[202] "Report on Recent Interview with Hashemi-Rafsanjani," *Tehran Times*, July 10, 1995, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-136).
[203] Evaleila Pesaran, *Iran's Struggle for Economic Independence: Reform and Counter-Reform in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2011).
[204] Ray Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (July 1, 2010): 365–83, https://doi.org/10.3751/64.3.12.
[205] Rouhollah K Ramazani, "Iran's Export of the Revolution: Its Politics, Ends, and Means," in *Independence without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 128–47.

world."[206] Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie for his novel The Satanic Verses also had a similar effect.[207]

When transitioning into a period of relative stability, there were continuous attempts at validating the social logic of sovereign states through various recognitive practices. Specifically, the Iranian government tried to convey the message that the Islamic Republic was not a rogue state that disregarded international norms and undermined the global order. Rafsanjani's administration was seeking recognition as a full member of the international community that was prepared to have bilateral and multilateral engagement with other actors in a constructive manner. Therefore, Iranian officials and media started building an image of "benevolent" Iran that prioritizes peace and cooperation.

In this regard, Rafsanjani made multiple statements that Iran was committed to International Law and gave great importance to regional and global peace and security.[208] Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati also made such claims, stating that Iran "will never interfere militarily in other countries."[209] To emphasize its peaceful image, the Iranian government had to justify its armament projects as well. For instance, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said:

> We need to equip ourselves with arms for defensive purposes alone. In this respect, we intend to stand on our own feet in spite of dislike for allocating the country's wealth to purchasing arms. We do not favor militarism. Yet we regard legitimate defense based on the people's faith as our right.[210]

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[206] Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 206.
[207] Haleh Esfandiari, "Rise of the Post-Khomeini Era: 1989 Was a Watershed Year in Iran: Constitutional Changes, a Fatwa against Rushdie, Reconstruction from the Iran-Iraq War, and the Death of Ayatollah Khomeini," *The Wilson Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (June 22, 2014), https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=03633276&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA378558525&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs.
[208] "Ra'is-e jomhuri: dargiri-ha va nezā'ha-ye mantageh-ye khatari jadi barāye solh va sabbāt-e jahāni mahsoob mi shavad," *Ettelā'āt*, February 13, 1993; "Barnāmeha-ye āmuzesh va parvaresh bāyad be su-ye tarbiyat-e niru-yi movarrad niyaz bakhsh-e san'at-e hedāyat shavad," *Ettelā'āt*, January 31, 1994.
[209] "Gozāresh-e didārha-ye doktor Velāyati bā maqāmha-ye boland pā-ye jomhuri-ye Torkmenistan dar 'Ashqābād," *Ettelā'āt*, January 31, 1993.
[210] Ali Khamenei, "Bayānāt dar didār-e jam'i-ye az farmāndhan va kārkonān-e niru-ye havāyi-ye artesh" (Khamenei.ir, February 8, 1993), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2654.

Another crucial component of building an image of a peaceful actor was rearticulating the role of Islam in Iran's foreign policy. Here, the Iranian government tried to disassociate Islam from extremism. In an interview with Le Figaro, Rafsanjani addressed this issue: "A moderate is a person who exercises moderate not extreme policies. This interpretation of the term "moderate" has been derived from the Holy Quran, which identifies the Moslems as the "Middle Ummah.""[211] In the same interview, he also stated that Islam abstained from intervening in the affairs of other countries.

Iranian officials tried to paint a picture, where supporting Islamic causes did not violate the sovereignty of other states. When referring to this issue, Rafsanjani made the following statement in his 1993 New Year speech:

> We still follow our past policy of avoiding adventurism, but we shall play an active role in the pursuit of our cause throughout the world. We will introduce our religion without interfering in the affairs of others and strongly oppose terrorism, forceful impositions, and hegemonic ambitions…[212]

On the same topic, Iranian daily Kayhān reported:

> As has been repeatedly said by the present leader of the Islamic Republic and the president, supporting Islamic movements and efforts towards increased Islamic awareness anywhere in the world, and particularly in the region constitute an integral part of Iran's foreign policy. But of course supporting these movements in other countries is not tantamount or intended to be meddling in internal affairs of other countries.[213]

Other discourses tried emphasizing the cultural dimension of Islam to mitigate concerns over interventionism. In this regard, Abbas Maleki argued: "We believe that Islam is the core value upon which cultural interaction can be realized with the Muslim world and sound

[211] "Rafsanjani's Interview with Le Figaro," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 3–4 (1995 1994): 585.
[212] "Positions: Rafsanjani's New Year Speech," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 5, no. 3 and 4 (1994 1993): 782.
[213] "Editorial Compares Iranian, Turkish Press Reports," *Kayhān International*, June 20, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-132).

and equal relationships made possible with the West."[214] Presenting Islam in this light was an attempt at showing its less revisionist side and dismantling equivalential articulations where it was linked with irrational and radical behaviour.

However, these narratives on moderation raised questions on what issues the Iranian government prioritized. For instance, it was not clear how policymakers should deal with situations when supporting Muslims was not compatible with other interests of the state. Simply abandoning the principles of the 1979 Revolution was not an option. While the country was going through a transition, the latter does not entail rejecting its previous behaviour. The Revolution and the events following it were the primary sources of legitimacy of the Iranian government. They had acquired great symbolic significance and led to establishing a set of regular practices categorized under the social logic of resistance communities; hence, negating them would be putting the agency of post-revolutionary Iran under question. The principles of struggling against unjust international hierarchies and showing solidarity to the "oppressed" have become sedimented aspects of Iranian discourses on foreign affairs.[215] Hence, instead of rejecting them, it was necessary to show their compatibility with Iran's aspirant identity as a cooperative and non-interventionist actor.

As a solution to this uncertainty, the concept of *maslahat-e nezām* (expediency of the system) was introduced. Khomeini himself used it to argue how governance should not be solely bound by traditional legalistic notions of Sharia jurisprudence.[216] As Walter Posch illustrates, it has also become a crucial component of Iran's foreign policy.[217] Here, the expediency of the Islamic Republic was of the highest priority, and other causes could be

[214] Abbas Maleki, "The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy: The View from Iran," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 4 (1996): 749.
[215] Khamenei, "The Supreme Leader's View of Global Arrogance"; "The Constitution."
[216] Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).
[217] Posch, "Ideology and Strategy in the Middle East."

compromised for that purpose. In other words, *maslahat-e nezām* rejected rigidity and opened space for situational judgment.

Mohammad-Javad Larijani, who was the Deputy Head of the Foreign Affairs Commission at the Iranian Parliament, introduced a similar solution in his 1990 book called Topics in National Strategy (*Maqulāti dar estrāteji-ye melli*). In this work, he argues that Imam Khomeini has found a way of combining traditional national interests with Islamic principles through introducing the concept of *Umm Al-Qura*, which here means the political and religious centre of Muslims. Protecting *Umm Al-Qura* is the greatest priority. As Iran has assumed that role since the Islamic Revolution, its interests need to be considered first. To put it in his words: "At times, one must have a moderate approach towards some countries despite their oppression and decadence in order to protect Umm Al-Qura… and for the protection of Umm Al-Qura, "a cup of poison" can also be taken."[218]

These concepts, which are often presented as signs of pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy, did not necessarily solve the above-mentioned dilemma but tried to normalize it instead.[219] They are manifestations of the political logic of difference that complexify the discursive space of Iran's foreign policy, allowing deviations for the hegemonic articulations of supporting the oppressed against the antagonistic Other. Larijani's words on having a "moderate approach" illustrate how foreign policy issues can be detached from hegemonic articulations in order not the destabilize the system of discursive practices that constitute the Self of the Islamic Republic.

However, these measures for reconciling potential contradictions in Iran's self-identification were not enough. It was not clear how far *maslahat-e nezām* or *Umm Al-Qura* could be

[218] Mohammad-Javad Larijani, *Maqulāti dar estrāteji-ye melli* (Tehran: Markaz-e tarjomeh va nashr-e ketāb, 1990), 21.
[219] Posch, "The Third World, Global Islam and Pragmatism: The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy."

stretched. For instance, if they were used to compromise the cause of supporting Muslims at every step, then Iran's aspirant identity as the vanguard of their interests could become obsolete. In this situation, it would be hard for Iran to speak on behalf of the Islamic community. Consequentially, the core principles of resistance against global injustice would be questioned. Therefore, alongside the fluidity in its definitions of foreign policy, in some cases, the Islamic Republic needed to perform the role of *Umm Al-Qura* rather clearly to make sure its self-identification did not become irrelevant.

In other words, there was a limit to the dominance of the logic of difference. This limitation especially refers to the antagonistic frontiers that were built in the previous decade. Struggling against the antagonistic Others, such as the United States and Israel, were necessary means through which the Self of the Islamic Republic was performed. Therefore, making a diametric change in the adversarial attitude towards them would pose a challenge to the very agency of the Islamic Republic.[220] This change was especially difficult in the case of issues that had acquired symbolic significance by becoming the primary sites of performance of Iran's constitutive confrontations. As said above, showing support to the struggle of the Palestinian people against their oppressors is one of those cases, where this particularity has become the embodiment of the nodal points of "independence" and "justice" in Iran's foreign policy discourses. Hence, continuity was observed especially in those situations.

In short, antagonism drew the boundaries of Iranian foreign policy. Even in their statement on how peaceful and cooperative the Islamic Republic was, Iranian officials were rather uncompromising in the position towards Israel and the United States. On Israel, Rafsanjani stated: "The Islamic Republic of Iran opposes the recognition of Israel by any Islamic or

[220] For a theoretical reflection on the constitutive role of antagonistic frontiers, see: Herschinger, "'Hell Is the Other.'"

third-world countries, because Israel is an outlaw state which should be isolated by all countries."[221] Though the attitude towards the United States was not as radical, it left little room for reconciliation. In this regard, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Maleki argued that Iran was not engaging in a dialogue with the American government due to their national interests and Islamic values.[222] He stated that Iran was ready to establish friendly relations with all countries except those two.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War (the so-called unipolar moment), such a situation created difficulties for the Islamic Republic in its struggle for recognition. Antagonism against the apparent hegemon of the time was often associated with being ostracized from the international community. The Iranian side was actively fighting against this narrative. Rafsanjani's interview with the French daily Le Figaro in 1994 showcases this notion. When asked about Iran's isolation from the rest of the world, he gave the following answer:

> Why is it that you do not take into account our relations with countries such as China, India, Indonesia, and Russia, which include a great part of the global population, and claim that Iran is isolated just because it has no relations with the U.S. and Israel?[223]

Iran was trying to show that a state's identity and position in international relations should not be decided solely based on its relations with the United States. That is the reason why certain discourses in Iranian foreign policy, which were articulated through the social logic of resistance communities, presented a vision of the international system where the United States did not play such an influential role. In particular, there were multiple statements in Iranian political and academic circles regarding the unipolar order of that period. For instance, Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that the world should step on the path of

[221] "Ra'is-e jomhuri: dargiri-ha va nezā'ha-ye mantageh-ye khatari jadi barāye solh va sabbāt-e jahāni mahsoob mi shavad."
[222] Maleki, "The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy: The View from Iran."
[223] "Rafsanjani's Interview with Le Figaro," 586.

becoming multipolar.[224] Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Maleki argued that the seeking to have a unipolar liberal order was counterintuitive.[225]

These discourses often tried to show that a unipolar system under American dominance violated the principle of equality among sovereign states. The vision of a more equal and multi-polar world can be seen in Velayati's speeches at the UN General Assembly. At its 50th session, he stated that the existing international economic and trade policies were not fair towards developing countries.[226] He called for revising the exploitative nature of these relations that benefited the western world alone.

The question of inequality in a unipolar world was frequently raised when discussing the rights and interests of Muslims. For instance, Abbas Maleki stated: "Yes, we are unhappy with certain aspects of the global system which marginalizes Muslims economically, crushes their voice politically, and literally murders them militarily."[227] Such statements were accompanied by declarations on the necessity of consolidation among Muslim communities, so they could become influential stakeholders in a more multi-polar system. For instance, Supreme Leader Khamenei called for unity in the Islamic Ummah in order to fight against the oppression of the "arrogant powers."[228]

Having such multipolarity assumed a stronger collective identity not only among Muslims but also other groups of non-western states. That is the reason why the representatives of the Iranian government argued for keeping the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).[229] They did

[224] Ali Akbar Velayati, "Siyāsat-e beynalmelal va tahavvolāt-e eqtesād-e jahāni," *Pazhuheshha-ye Ejtemā'i-ye Eslāmi* Summer, no. 1 (1995): 85–102.
[225] Abbas Maleki, "Myth and Reality of the New World Order: Challenges to Iranian Foreign Policy," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 5, no. 2 (1993): 311–17.
[226] Ali Akbar Velayati, "Speech: Velayati at UN 50th Session of General Assemmbly (26 September 1995)," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 4 (1996): 903–13.
[227] Maleki, "The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy: The View from Iran," 749.
[228] Ali Khamenei, "Bayānāt dar didār-e jārgozārān-e nezām" (Khamenei.ir, March 24, 1994), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=11684.
[229] "Future of Nonaligned Movement Viewed," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 19, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-100).

not agree that the movement had become obsolete in the post-Soviet period and called for the member states to engage in more practical activities, such as advocating for meaningful participation in the decision-making processes in the United Nations (UN). On a similar topic, Kamal Kharazi, Iran's representative in the UN, stated: "The consciousness of developing countries is growing in international assemblies… Developing countries must demand their rights, no one will offer them their rights."[230]

The geopolitical vision of a multipolar world also included having regions with great independence and minimal intervention from outside powers. In his speech at the 46th session of the UN General Assembly, Velayati stated that a strong region requires limiting foreign intervention in its affairs.[231] Various religious, cultural, and civilizational characteristics were used to show that countries in regions such as the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus had shared identities and interests and should work together regarding issues related to security and economic affairs.

However, there was a caveat in these narratives. Specifically, articulations about independence and sovereign regions were combined with Iran's imposition of its own perspective on what interests non-western countries had and how they should behave. These narratives carried the risk of building an image of a meddling actor despite Iran's intensive rhetoric against interventionism. Besides, being accompanied by criticism towards the unjust international system, the narratives on regionalism often created an impression of a revisionist foreign policy that could backfire and undermine the very status-seeking efforts mentioned above. The section on Iran's efforts at regional engagement addresses this issue in more detail.

[230] "Interview with Kamal Kharrazi," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 4 (1996): 918–19.
[231] "Forty Sixth Session, General Assembly, Provisional Verbatim Record of the 5th Meeting" (United Nations, September 26, 1991), https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/PRO/N91/612/23/PDF/N9161223.pdf?OpenElement.

In all, the Islamic Republic was seeking recognition as a compliant actor in international relations. For this purpose, there were multiple attempts at rearticulating the foundational causes of the 1979 Revolution in ways that would appear compatible with basic international norms. In addition, the concepts of *maslahat-e nezām* or *Umm Al-Qura* were used to legitimize deviations from certain principles. However, these rearticulations did not make dramatic changes in the attitude towards the United States. The latter still occupied the position of an antagonistic Other in Iran's foreign policy discourses.

Having such relations with the United States created major challenges for Iran's struggle for recognition. The Iranian side often expressed frustration that its agency was defined by the adversarial attitude between the two states. Hence, Rafsanjani's administration challenged this notion by calling for a multipolar world order, where the Islamic Republic and other non-western actors would have their aspirant identities actualized. The vision of multipolarity presupposed having independent and integrated regions with the Islamic Republic playing a central role in some of them. However, it was often unclear how this vision needed to be realized, where Iran could be actively engaged and at the same time avoid associations with interventionism.

This was the situation in which the South Caucasus emerged in the horizons of Iranian foreign affairs. Timing is of great essence here. As Edmund Herzig argues, there was no ideological path-dependence and it helped Iran formulate its interests and policies in different ways.[232] This observation can be developed further with the help of the selected theoretical framework. Since the South Caucasus was virtually absent from the foreign policy discourses of the early revolutionary period, no particular understanding of the region was fixed through the dominant equivalential discourses of the time. There was no issue of

[232] Herzig, *Iran and the Former Soviet South*.

continuity, such as in the case of the Palestinian struggle. The first attempts at constructing interests and identities in relation to this region occurred in a period of transition in the Islamic Republic when dismantling binary articulations was gaining ground. Hence, issues related to the South Caucasus were situated in a complexified discursive terrain, making it possible to have a multiplicity of articulations. The following sections illustrate how these articulations created varying policy options that were regularly contested.

Before the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Iran's engagement in the South Caucasus started a few years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Considering religious and cultural affinities, the Islamic Republic was especially interested in establishing relations with Soviet Azerbaijan. Using the novelty of the situation, Rafsanjani's administration articulated its ties with Baku in a flexible manner in order to avoid a confrontation with Moscow. However, the other side of this flexibility was hesitance, which became apparent when the states in the South Caucasus made steps towards independence. Below it is shown how the clash of different discourses created a situation of undecidedness for the Iranian side.

As Rafsanjani's government was trying to avoid adventurism, relations with Soviet Azerbaijan were seen possible only in the framework of having friendly ties with Moscow. His 1989 trip to the Soviet Union was the first step in this process. It was a landmark event that embodied a departure from the high tension in relations between the two states.[233] Using Gorbachev's reforms as an indication of change, the Iranian government tried to reinterpret the ties with the Soviet Union by disassociating the latter from its previous policies. The

[233] Robert Owen Freedman, "Russia and Iran: A Tactical Alliance," *SAIS Review* 17, no. 2 (1997): 93–109, https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.1997.0032.

main narrative here was that the Soviet Union had gone through a transformation. As Rafsanjani stated:

> By changing their policy, that is, by withdrawing from Afghanistan and weakening the support for leftist currents in Iran, the changes in the leftist view of the world, the exposure of international Marxism as an empty ideology, leaving the people to observe their religious duties, and loss of concessions which they have previously obtained, the Soviet leadership brought about the necessary ground for such a relationship.[234]

The Iranian government attached great value to relations with the Soviet Union and decided to put significant efforts into redefining them. First, they looked promising for boosting Iran's economic growth, which was one of the primary objectives of Rafsanjani's administration.[235] It was the main theme of the negotiations during the 1989 trip. In Moscow, the representatives of the two states laid down a long-term program of cooperation in multiple sectors until the year 2000.[236] Second, the Islamic Republic, being a status-seeking state, tried to use these relations to show that it was not isolated, and a global power such as the Soviet Union recognized its political system. In an interview right after his trip, Rafsanjani made the following remarks about the approach of the USSR government: "they have comprehended the reality of the revolution and the nature and essence of our revolution and have adjusted themselves accordingly…"[237]

Improving relations with the Soviet Union also provided an opportunity for engaging in the religious and cultural life of Muslims in another country without violating the latter's sovereignty. Establishing ties with Soviet Azerbaijan had a recognitive value in this regard. Hence, after the meetings in Moscow and Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), Rafsanjani's delegation travelled to Baku. This trip was meant to show that the Islamic Revolution had

[234] "Hashemi-Rafsanjani Delivers Friday Prayers," *Tehran Domestic Service*, June 30, 1989, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-89-125).
[235] Massoud Karshenas and M. Hashem Pesaran, "Economic Reform and the Reconstruction of the Iranian Economy," *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 1 (1995): 89–111.
[236] Francis X. Clines, "Gorbachev Cheers Iranian in Moscow," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1989, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/21/world/gorbachev-cheers-iranian-in-moscow.html.
[237] "Rafsanjani Interviewed," *Tehran Domestic Service*, June 24, 1989, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-89-121).

significance beyond Iran's borders. It can be seen from the way Iranian political figures and the media articulated it. As IRNA reports: "Hojjat ol-Eslam Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani gave a speech to a cheering audience of Soviet Muslims and offered them condolences on the sad demise of the leader of the Islamic Revolution."[238] Later, Rafsanjani himself stated: "The slogans they shouted and the emotions they displayed were just like those of our people."[239] Any expression of religious sentiments was presented as a sign of Islamic revival credited to the 1979 Revolution. In this regard, Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi wrote on Rafsanjani's address in Baku:

> [It] demonstrates the intense affection that the people of the Muslim-inhabited areas of the Soviet Union have for Iran. This is in fact reaffirmation by these Muslims for Islam's 'center of gravity' and proves that Iran has a special place in the hearts of all Muslims.[240]

These articulations show that Azerbaijanis' religious identity was emphasized, and certain involvement was assumed in their lives on behalf of the Iranian government that carried the mandate of the Revolution. After the visit, Foreign Minister Velayati stated that Iran was planning to develop "special relations" with Soviet Azerbaijan by facilitating cultural and educational ties, as well as supporting Soviet Muslims to exercise their religious identity more actively.[241] The socio-cultural life of Soviet Azerbaijan was presented as an area where Iran could be actively engaged without violating the core principle of non-intervention.

Considering these factors, Iran started initiating various projects with Soviet Azerbaijan. During the second half of 1989, there were multiple official visits between Tehran and Baku on expanding cultural and educational ties. The Iranian government tried to encourage

[238] "Hashemi-Rafsanjani Speaks in Baku," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 23, 1989, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-89-121).
[239] "Rafsanjani Interviewed."
[240] "Impact of Hashemi-Rafsanjani's USSR Visit," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, June 26, 1989, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-89-141).
[241] "Velayati, Iravani Discuss Foreign Policy," *Tehran Television Service*, June 30, 1989, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-89-125).

Soviet Azerbaijanis to travel to Iran and visit their holy shrines. The facilitation of cultural relations also helped to boost economic cooperation. For instance, an exclusive exhibition of Iranian products was held in Baku.[242] Trade protocols were signed between the two sides on exchanging goods.[243] There were also talks about starting flights between the two capitals.[244]

For a brief period, Iran managed to reach out to a Muslim community in another country without triggering any major concerns or controversies. The situation changed from January 1990 onwards. At the beginning of the month, hundreds of Soviet Azerbaijanis started protesting near the Iranian border. It was not clear what exactly they demanded, but the slogans mainly referred to gaining religious and cultural freedom, as well as reconnecting with their relatives on the other side of the border. There were even chants against the Russian invasion in the 19th century and the Turkmenchai treaty.[245] People gathered on the Iranian side of the border too and started encouraging these protests. Some tried to cross the Aras River from the Nakhichevani side.

On the one hand, the Iranian media presented these events in a positive light to show that people in Soviet Azerbaijan had an affection towards the values of the Islamic Revolution. They emphasized how the protesters were praising Khomeini and how women were wearing

[242] "'Exclusive' Trade Exhibition Held," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 2, 1989, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-89-195).
[243] "Soviet Chain Stores to Display Khorasan Products," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 30, 1989, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-209).
[244] "Charter, Purchase of Soviet Aircraft Discussed," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 28, 1989, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-89-249).
[245] "Soviet Azerbaijanis Chant Islamic Slogans," *Tehran Domestic Service*, January 4, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-003); "Soviet Youths Cross Border."

hijabs. On the other hand, they tried to convey the message that Iran would not take any measures that could violate the territorial integrity of the Soviet Union.[246]

In addition, the Iranian government tried to tame these unrests. For instance, Karim Shafei, a Majles deputy from Marand city, was sent to the border to talk to the protesters. He stated that Iran wanted to have closer ties with Azerbaijanis, but it could be done only within the existing regulations of the Soviet Union.[247] The Islamic Republic could not do much beyond such tacit measures. Outright criticism towards Soviet Azerbaijanis was not possible. Taking a position against the Soviet Union was not a favourable option either. Therefore, the preferable scenario was preventing possible escalations in the unrest in Azerbaijan.

The Iranian government also tried to work with Moscow to solve this problem. Interestingly enough, they offered their assistance as a country that had deep cultural and religious ties with Azerbaijanis and understood their desires. During his meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, Mahmoud Vaezi, a political deputy of Iran's Foreign Minister, stated that it was crucial to understand the true intentions of Soviet Muslims and show a moderate reaction to their demands.[248]

These measures did not work out. On January 19-20, 1990, the USSR government implemented a massive crackdown on the civilian population in Baku that later became known as Black January. The first time Soviet Azerbaijan received wide coverage in Iranian media was in light of these events. It created doubts in Gorbachev's reforms, which were the premise for establishing friendly relations with the Soviet Union. As a result, it became an irritant for the newly formed friendly ties.

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[246] "'Taking Advantage' Rejected," *Tehran Times*, January 8, 1990, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-009).
[247] "Muslims Exchange Slogans."
[248] "Va'ezi Returns from Moscow, Comments on Talks," *Tehran Domestic Service*, January 11, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-008).

The tumultuous situation in Azerbaijan was mainly articulated through the social logic of resistance communities. It was argued that what a Muslim population in the Soviet Union truly desired and needed was the revival of their Islamic identity. Their discontent was perceived as a result of being deprived of the opportunity to exercise religious freedom. Khamenei himself stated that there were no ethnic and nationalist motives behind the movements in Azerbaijan. He said: "These sentiments are Islamic and have an appeal for one-billion Muslims around the world."[249] Velayati also made a similar argument: "regrettably currents based on hostility towards Islam, launched an organized effort to turn genuine and peaceful trend into ethnic clashes…"[250]

Presenting the issue in the wider context of Islamic resistance led to associations with the antagonistic Other of the Islamic Republic. In particular, the United States and the western world were often presented as the ones responsible for the atrocities against Azerbaijanis. Iranian dailies accused Washington of meddling in the affairs of Soviet Azerbaijan and argued that the western media was spreading anti-Islamic propaganda.[251] Interestingly enough, the West was held as much responsible for these events as the Soviet government. Moreover, there were reports on "western-Zionist" conspiracies that manipulated Gorbachev to put pressure on Muslims.[252]

[249] Ali Khamenei, "Bayānāt dar didār-e jam'i-ye az bānvān-e sarāsar-e keshvar" (Khamenei.ir, January 17, 1990), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2251.
[250] "Foreign Ministry's Statement," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 20, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-014).
[251] "Azerbaijan 'Massacre' Condemned," *Resālat*, January 20, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-022); "IRNA Discusses Western Coverage of Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 24, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-017).
[252] "Western Media 'Fueling' Fire," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 19, 1990, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-014); "Commentary on West's 'Trap' for Gorbachev," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, January 25, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-026).

The same sentiments were evident among Iranian Majles representatives. Many of them considered the U.S. a perpetrator of the clashes in Azerbaijan.[253] There were also statement condemning Gorbachev for misrepresenting the demands of Muslims in Azerbaijan, who were just struggling for their basic rights. They considered it unfair that people in Eastern Europe and Soviet Azerbaijan were treated differently despite showing similar sentiments. As Majles deputy Motahhar Kazemi stated: "[Gorbachev] gives freedom to one and to the other he sends tanks."[254] There were also radical speeches in the Majles, stating that Azerbaijan was an organic part of Iran and was unlawfully separated from its Islamic roots due to the Golestan and Turkmenchai treaties.[255]

These equivalential articulations tried to fix a particular meaning of the situation, where the subject position of Soviet Azerbaijan was linked to the Iranian Self, and both were in a struggle against the antagonistic Other. In other words, Iran and Azerbaijan were in the same resistance community, and a sense of solidarity towards each other's endeavours was assumed. In such a situation, showing support to Soviet Azerbaijanis appeared as a credible policy option. There was pressure on Rafsanjani's administration to take action. Some of the Majles representatives argued that the Islamic Republic could not remain indifferent.[256] During a Friday Prayer sermon, Ayatollah Mousavi Ardabili stated: "We are duty bound to

[253] "Surat-e mashruh-e mozākerāt-e Majles-e Showrā-ye Eslāmi: dowreh-ye sevom, ejlāsi-ye dovvom, yekshanbeh, hashtom-e bahman mah 1368" (Islamic Consultative Assembly, January 28, 1990), https://www.ical.ir//UploadedData/284/Contents/636504130089469709.pdf.
[254] "* 2 Feb Session," *Resālat*, February 3, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-052).
[255] "Surat-e mashruh-e mozākerāt-e Majles-e Showrā-ye Eslāmi: dowreh-ye sevom, ejlāsi-ye dovvom, seshanbeh, sevom-e bahman mah 1368" (Islamic Consultative Assembly, January 23, 1990), https://www.ical.ir//UploadedData/284/Contents/636504121278938549.pdf.
[256] "Surat-e mashruh-e mozākerāt-e Majles-e Showrā-ye Eslāmi: dowreh-ye sevom, ejlāsi-ye dovvom, yekshanbeh, āval-e bahman bah 1368" (Islamic Consultative Assembly, January 21, 1990), https://www.ical.ir//UploadedData/284/Contents/636504120907930354.pdf.

help the Muslims of Azerbaijan who have accepted, with all their being, Islam and the Koran and our regime, who have asked for a helping hand."[257]

It was a difficult situation for the Iranian government. The above-mentioned credible policy option could pose a threat to the logic of sovereign states. In other words, any step aimed at defending Azerbaijanis against Soviet oppressions could be seen as an intervention in the domestic affairs of another country. Besides, the interests of the Iranian state were at stake. The efforts put into establishing cooperation with the Soviet Union and building an image of a peaceful actor could be nullified. As a result, the Islamic Republic found itself in an uneasy situation: bound to act but with limited options.

When facing this dilemma, the Iranian government decided to communicate its concerns to the Soviet Union with great caution. Foreign Minister Velayati sent a letter to his Soviet counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze, where he stated that Iran was troubled by the situation of Muslims in the Soviet Union. In the same letter, he also emphasized that the Islamic Republic fully respected the principle of non-interference.[258] The Iranian government tried to make it explicit that raising the issues of Muslims in Soviet Azerbaijan was not an act of meddling in the domestic affairs of the Soviet Union. In this regard, President Rafsanjani stated:

> Usually when the oppressed people of the world make a legitimate demand, they will be supported by the Islamic Republic. This is part of our international policy. Let them not accuse us falsely that the export of the revolution means that we wish to interfere in the affairs of others, neighbors or others. We will not interfere, but the world should have enough fairness to allow us to express our views. If someone in the world desires

[257] "Musavi-Ardabiii on Rushdie Edict, Azerbaijan," *Tehran Domestic Service*, February 23, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-037).
[258] "Velayati Urges Peaceful Solution in Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 24, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-017).

> to follow us, he should not be denied this right. God's peace and blessings be upon him.[259]

It was also necessary to make it clear that these complaints did not mean adopting an antagonistic position towards the USSR authorities. Instead, the Islamic Republic showed readiness to deal with the issue in a constructive manner. In this regard, the Iranian ambassador to the Soviet Union stated that they were ready to discuss the problems in Azerbaijan to find a suitable solution. He also said: "We would like to see the issue resolved through right reason and peaceful means, and that is why we do not consider use of force a principal solution."[260]

Expressing concerns regarding the rights of Muslims and simultaneously emphasizing the domestic nature of the crisis in Soviet Azerbaijan showed the nature of the in-betweenness of Iran's behaviour. The Iranian government did not have a precise strategy on how to deal with the issue at stake. Its foreign policy was in the crisis management mode merely trying to get through this period of unrest. As a result, Rafsanjani's administration did not change much in its approach: it continued engaging with the Muslim population in Soviet Azerbaijan while trying not to sabotage the relations with the Soviet Union.

The strategy of waiting until the storm settles showed that the Iranian government was ill-prepared for the fast pace of changes happening in its northern neighbourhood. The sentiments for establishing an independent Azerbaijani state were growing exponentially. It is noteworthy that discourses of religious and cultural revival were intertwined with this cause. The Iranian side was uncertain about how to react to these processes. It was hard

[259] "Hashemi-Rafsanjani Holds News Conference 7 Mar," *Tehran Television Service*, March 7, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-049).
[260] "Tehran, Moscow to Cooperate in Defense," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 27, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-040).

promoting one cause and abstaining from the other. Ayatollah Mousavi-Ardabili's recollection of his trip to Baku is very illustrative of this situation:

> … when we entered the mosque, they started shouting slogans… They are just like our own slogans, and they were saying them in Persian… This was the enthusiasm, not for me, it was for Iran, the revolution, and Islam… and then they say: Death to, I don't know, America, death to the Soviet Union. I told them quietly: we don't say death to the Soviet Union any more. They said: No, we say it![261]

The ambivalence in Iranian foreign policy became more evident when the states in the South Caucasus started making significant moves towards independence. Iran preferred to see the Soviet Union remain intact in order to avoid any instability in its North. As Tehran Times reported: "Iran believes that the disintegration of the Soviet Union will result in an undesirable wave of instability in the region, and for that reason Iran is against some of the extremist nationalist movements in some of the republics of the Soviet Union."[262] On the other hand, Rafsanjani's administration did not want to miss out on engaging with these newly emerging countries.

When the states in the South Caucasus declared independence, the Islamic Republic decided to expand its relations with them but still hesitated to recognize them. In this regard, Mohammad Besharati, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran, stated: "Within the framework of our relations with Moscow we are ready to expand our political, economic, and cultural relations with the republics and this is what our policy has been about until now."[263] In November 1991, Foreign Minister Velayati had a meeting with his Armenian counterpart to discuss mutual ties. The following month he paid a visit to Baku and signed a memorandum

[261] "Musavi-Ardebili Delivers Friday Prayers Sermon," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 19, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-077).
[262] "Editorial Views Relations with Azerbaijan," *Tehran Times*, August 18, 1991, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-164).
[263] "Besharati Denies Velayati Statement," *Abrār*, December 2, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-237).

of understanding with the Azerbaijani government concerning economic cooperation. However, in both cases, Velayati avoided the question of formal recognition.

Such hesitation triggered criticism in Iranian media. According to a number of outlets, the Islamic Republic could not afford to be so indecisive regarding the independence of a Shia Muslim country. On this topic, Abrar reported: "If we wish to be the political leaders of the Muslim world, we should firmly declare our stance and convey our wishes to our friends and proponents of the Islamic Revolution."[264] There was also a push from conservative political circles. Specifically, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi and several other parliamentarian hardliners put forward a bill on giving priority to recognizing Azerbaijan's independence.[265]

Despite these efforts, Rafsanjani's government still decided to wait. On December 10, the Majles voted against passing the mentioned bill and decided that the issue of recognition "should be moved in due order along with other bills."[266] Hassan Habibi, the Vice-President of the Islamic Republic, stated that the government of Iran chose to wait and see how the situation in the Soviet Union unravelled before officially establishing relations with the newly formed states. The government of Iran finally recognized the independence of the states in the South Caucasus on 25 December 1991, the day the Soviet flag was lowered in Moscow for the last time.[267]

In a short period of time, the Islamic Republic found itself bordering a number of newly independent states. The changes in the political map of the region created certain challenges for the Iranian side. As Tehran Times reported: "Tehran is not happy with Gorbachev's exit

[264] "Commentary Notes 'Conflicting' Reports," *Abrār*, December 1, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-237).
[265] "Majles To Delay Considering Ties," *Paris AFP*, December 10, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-238).
[266] "Va'ezi Supports Ties with Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 10, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-238).
[267] "Foreign Ministry on Recognition of Republics," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, December 25, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-249).

from the political arena…"[268] In its pursuit of stability and reconstruction, Rafsanjani's government found itself in a highly uncertain geopolitical environment. There were both threats and opportunities for Iran. The next three sections show how they were articulated in Iranian discourses and what policies emerged from them. Each of the sections touches upon one dimension of Iran's policies in the South Caucasus: regional cooperation, peace and security, and bilateral relations.

Regionalism with Iranian Motifs

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, various articulations appeared in the Islamic Republic concerning its role in this new environment. Many of them presented a vision of regional integration and institution-building with Iran at its centre. That vision reflected the above-mentioned foreign policy discourses on multipolarity and independent regions. Various national, religious, civilizational, cultural, and socio-economic features were brought together for constructing a sense of regional Self in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Rafsanjani's administration considered that the Islamic Republic had multiple commonalities with the states in the post-Soviet South that could be utilized for forming a shared political identity. Iran was envisioned to play the central role in this process and become the locus of that identity. Regional integration became a widely discussed topic in Iranian foreign policy circles. The Foreign Ministry started investing in research and policy development on this concept, which was used to advocate for consolidating efforts in order to have a united region.

[268] "Editorial Views Post-Gorbachev CIS Developments," *Tehran Times*, December 30, 1991, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-005).

Religious and cultural heritage was considered the main feature that could bring Iran and the states in the former Soviet South together. The process of integration was not presented as a new phenomenon but rather a return to the original identity. During the International Congress on Scientific and Cultural Cooperation in Central Asia, Foreign Minister Velayati argued that Iran and those countries were part of an "organic totality." When referring to the defining features of the newly independent states, he stated:

> A thorough comprehension of these identities and the exhortation of their interactions would deem [*sic.*] impossible without due reference to the Iranian culture, the role of the Persian language, this country's rich tradition of mysticism and, not least the heritage of Islam.[269]

The Minister of Commerce of the Islamic Republic made similar remarks. At a seminar on the Process of Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus, he said: "Common cultural interests and deep sentiments towards the Iranian culture in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus are the most significant bonds which necessitate multilateral collaboration and cooperation."[270]

In these articulations of shared identity, Islam was linked to signifiers "culture" and "civilization," stretching the boundaries of its meaning beyond religiosity. "Islamic culture" or "Islamic/Iranian civilization" became frequently used expressions in the arguments about regional integration. They were presented as a prerequisite for cooperation. Rafsanjani's address during the second International Meeting on the Silk Road shows how religious identity was seen in this context:

> …with the advent of Islam and its acceptance by the Iranians and the integration of the sacred religion and Islamic doctrines into the Iranian civilization, Islamic Iranian civilization has emerged in this country. The effects of this spiritual civilization can be

[269] "International Congress on Scientific and Cultural Cooperation in Central Asia, Tehran, 15-18 November 1992," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 5, no. 1 (1993): 239.
[270] "Seminar on the Process of Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 3 and 4 (1995 1994): 569.

observed by tracing the Silk Road, which starts from China and stops in the heart of Europe.[271]

In some cases, civilizational and cultural features of Islam were even combined with having shared Aryan roots with people in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Foreign Minister Velayati (1993) made such a statement during the inauguration of the Central Asia and the Caucasus Studies Journal (*Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*).[272]

In other words, the above-mentioned attempts at rearticulating the roles and meanings linked to Islam can be observed in this regional context as well. Here, Islam was associated with shared legacy. Stressing its cultural and civilizational dimension had the purpose of constructing a perception of its embeddedness in the regional context. In this way, Iranian officials tried to show that embracing Islam was the "natural" path, and their calls for it were not just derivative of revolutionary propaganda. Historical references were used to build a narrative that Iran was not trying to construct a new regional identity but reviving what had existed latently.

Religious links were not the only factor around which narratives of a regional identity emerged. Geographical proximity was also articulated as an indication of belonging to a shared cultural, civilizational, and political space, where inward-looking cooperation was advocated. As is shown below, such discourses became the prism through which the issue of utilizing the resources of the Caspian Sea was perceived. According to them, a fair engagement with outsiders (i.e., the West) was possible, if the littoral states acted in unison. It was argued that the states of the Caspian basin should have an institutionalized partnership

[271] "Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani: Address to the Second International Meeting on the Silk Road, 212-24 April 1997," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 2, no. 1 (1997): 163.
[272] Ali Akbar Velayati, "Negāhi-ye dobāreh be tārikh-e Āsiya-ye Markazi," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 1, no. 1 (1993): 1–4.

and speak with one voice to the outer world.[273] A discourse of a regional Self that included the littoral states of the Sea was introduced.

A crucial aspect of these narratives is that a shared identity presupposed common interests. This is the part when the issue of Iran imposing its position on others becomes visible. While stressing the importance of independence, it appeared that Iran was dictating the newly independent regional states what identities and corresponding interests they had and what policies they should implement. For instance, it was often argued that the Muslim countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus should be cautious in their relations with the West and avoid the latter's infiltration into the region. Statements about imperialism and neo-colonialism were used to argue that true independence for Muslim states was possible only through a unified resistance against western dominance.[274]

These discourses often shifted from bringing states together to drawing boundaries and excluding others. Iran's vision of a regional Self was often articulated in opposition to the United States and western powers in general. The latter were positioned as the antagonistic Other that stood in the way of having a politically integrated and independent region in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. In this context, the objective of establishing a regional structure based on the core principle of non-intervention by external powers became a prevalent aspect of these narratives.[275] Here, we can see the logic of equivalence at play, as the articulations of common identity carried the implication that the states in the region were supposed to share Iran's antagonism against the United States.

[273] "Caspian Sea Pact Established," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 17, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-032).
[274] "International Congress on Scientific and Cultural Cooperation in Central Asia, Tehran, 15-18 November 1992."
[275] Ahmad Haji Hosseini, "The Prospects of the Caspian Sea Region in the 21st Century," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1996): 207–14.

Articulating such a vision of regional identity was an inconvenient fit with the status-seeking efforts of Rafsanjani's administration. The antagonistic aspects of these narratives entailed subscribing to Iran's confrontational attitude towards the United States and its allies. While Rafsanjani's administration often expressed its frustration over reducing the agency of the Islamic Republic to anti-Americanism, the discourses on building regional frontiers for excluding certain actors could create such associations for the states in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Considering this situation, the Iranian government also tried to show that it was capable of putting aside revisionist tendencies and become part of regional initiatives without any preconditions of excluding others. These narratives are discussed in detail below. It is illustrated how the Islamic Republic was oscillating between them and the articulations of building regional frontiers. As a result, its behaviour appeared ambivalent for the states in the post-Soviet South, making them hesitant to cooperate with it on large-scale regional endeavours. The following pages show how this dynamic can be observed in the cases of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Caspian Sea.

Iran and the Economic Cooperation Organization

Iran's most ambitious attempt at regional integration in the post-Soviet space was the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). The latter was established in 1985 by Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan. It is a successor to the Organization for Regional Cooperation and Development (ORCD) that was founded in 1964. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Iranian government extrapolated its vision of region-building on this organization. It actively advocated for its expansion, and by the end of 1992, ECO already had seven new members: all the post-Soviet Muslim countries, as well as Afghanistan.[276]

[276] "About ECO: History," Economic Cooperation Organization, September 7, 2017, http://www.eco.int/general_content/86055-History.html?t=General-content; Richard Pomfret, "The

The Treaty of Izmir, the canonical text of the organization, emphasizes that ECO is an economic entity.[277] It has no reference to religion, and shared cultural and historical heritage is mainly mentioned as means for facilitating economic cooperation. In its struggle for recognition as a compliant actor, the Islamic Republic tried to show that it was committed to these principles, and the expansion of ECO was carried out within the scope of its foundational document. However, Rafsanjani's administration also had a vision of the organization that went beyond the provisions of the Izmir Treaty, a position that was not shared by the other member states.

The tension regarding the character of ECO was already evident at the first summit of the organization in Tehran on 16-17 February 1992. During the press conference after the first meeting, Rafsanjani already had to clarify that ECO was not a political but an economic entity. He also blamed the western media for creating ambiguity concerning the purpose of the organization.[278]

However, this ambiguity was inherent to the process mainly due to the mixed signals sent by the Iranian government. Rafsanjani's speech at the summit is very illustrative in this regard. He stated that ECO was an economic entity, and its primary goal was to establish a common market. Then he went on talking about the Palestinian issue and supporting Muslims in the world. Besides, he made remarks on injustice in the existing international system that echoed the values of resistance against "global arrogance." Specifically, he

Economic Cooperation Organization: Current Status and Future Prospects," *Europe-Asia Studies* 49, no. 4 (1997): 657–67.

[277] "Treaty of Izmir" (ECO Secretariat, September 14, 1996), http://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3512/1499586597300jk8s96cm6jnohhj2556coont44.pdf; Shamshad Ahmad Khan, "ECO: Its Role and Prospects," *Strategic Studies* 15, no. 2 (1992): 101–6.

[278] "ECO as Political Entity Ruled Out," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 17, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-032).

stated: "Humanitarian principles, particularly justice and equality for all nations must form the basis of new international relations."[279]

Another example of this ambiguity was revealed during the noted press conference when reporters raised a question regarding the role of religion in the organization. Specifically, they asked Rafsanjani whether non-Muslim states were eligible to join ECO, considering that the Izmir Treaty did not exclude such a possibility. He answered that it was a matter that had not been clarified yet, but they would seriously consider a request for membership from a non-Muslim country.[280] Rafsanjani avoided giving a clear answer, as he did not want to emphasize the exclusionist nature of their perception regarding ECO.

In fact, the Iranian government envisioned the organization to be an Islamic entity despite the absence of any such principle in its foundational documents. Abbas Maleki stated that ECO was meant to help to create an Islamic common market.[281] Therefore, when the government of Armenia expressed interest in joining the organization, the Iranian side did not consider the request, tacitly hinting that ECO was for Muslim states.[282]

Prioritizing the Islamic identity of ECO directly led to politicized articulations on economic integration that highlighted the principle of independence from the West. While government officials generally abstained from expressing such ideas, the Iranian media and policy experts showed their prevalence rather clearly. For example, when reporting on Rafsanjani's trip to Turkmenistan, the Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran made the following claim:

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[279] Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, "1st Summit Inaugural Speech of Hashemi Rafsanjani" (ECO Secretariat, February 17, 1992), http://www.eco.int//parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3440/1497169049330ujine1tfo1370frm2v3i7h9pt7.pdf.
[280] "ECO as Political Entity Ruled Out."
[281] "ECO Secretary General Previews Tehran Summit," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 13, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-031).
[282] "Armenian Foreign Minister Arrives, Meets Velayati," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 8, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-027).

> To confront this hegemonist American policy, the Islamic Republic of Iran and certain regional states are endeavoring, by reliance on the cultural and Islamic bonds with the peoples of Central Asia and through creating regional cooperation, to neutralize the hegemonist policies of the West. The membership of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan in the regional cooperation organization known as ECO is one of the most important moves in this regard.[283]

As Elaheh Koulaei notes, Iran had the objective of using the organization for preventing western economic dominance in the post-Soviet South. It aimed to consolidate support for this purpose by starting a joint initiative with the states in the region.[284]

The Islamic Republic stressed such anti-western narratives in ECO also for the sake of giving legitimacy to its own antagonistic foreign policy. As a status-seeking state, it tried to use the organization to show that its sentiments were shared by other countries as well. For this purpose, the Iranian government was invested in increasing the international standing of the organization. Therefore, Foreign Minister Velayati started actively working on establishing ties between ECO and other international institutions after becoming the rotating chairman of its ministerial council.[285] Speaking on behalf of a regional organization was assumed to give more recognition to the Islamic Republic and facilitate its engagement in international initiatives.

Finally, Iran occasionally tried to use ECO for dealing with security issues in the region. In the absence of a regional security structure, the organization was seen as a platform for coordinating initiatives concerning peace and stability.[286] In August 1993, the Iranian government took a step in this direction. Specifically, Foreign Minister Velayati wrote a letter to the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, who was the chair of the ECO ministerial council

[283] "Summit May Be 'Turning Point,'" *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, May 10, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-091).
[284] Elaheh Koulaei, "Mavāneh-ye hamgerāyi dar Ekou," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* Winter, no. 16 (1997): 45–62.
[285] "Reports on ECO Activities, Plans," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 29, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-189).
[286] "Seminar on the Process of Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus."

at the time, urging the organization to take measures regarding the danger posed by the Armenian "invasion" of Azerbaijan. He stated in the letter:

> The cooperation and similarity of views between member countries of the ECO dictate that other member countries should pay heed to the problems of the fellow member country of Azerbaijan and that they should take appropriate coordinated action to alleviate the difficulties and relieve the suffering of the Muslim people of that country.[287]

The message fell on deaf ears. It shows that Iran was more interested in strengthening ECO and expanding its functions than the other states. For the other members, the organization was just one of the regional and international initiatives with which they were trying to engage. In contrast, ECO became the cornerstone of Iran's regional vision. Its meaning was overstretched in Iranian foreign policy discourses, encompassing multiple issues beyond mere economic cooperation. The subject position of the organization was situated in the discourses of multipolarity with politically independent regions.

The objective of turning ECO into such a regional entity was based on the above-mentioned assumption that religious, historical, cultural, and civilizational commonalities meant having shared interests. In Iranian foreign policy discourses, there was a pre-existing articulation of what the "true" interests of a developing Muslim country were. This understanding was used in the case of ECO, creating certain expectations that economic partnership can become a starting point for deeper integration. Later developments showed that these expectations were misplaced. The most striking example in this regard was the concern raised by the President of Uzbekistan during the 1996 ECO Summit in Ashgabat. He threatened to leave the organization if Iran continued to raise political issues and criticize the United States and Israel.[288]

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[287] "Velayati Urges ECO Assistance," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, August 29, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-166).
[288] "ECO Summit Concludes in Ashgabat," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 15, 1996, https://www.rferl.org/a/1080613.html.

The dissonance regarding ECO's role increases when considering the role of Turkey and Russia too. The Islamic Republic was quite ambivalent in its relations towards them in matters related to regional integration. While Rafsanjani's government tried to avoid any tension with these regional powers, at the same time, it was mistrustful towards their initiatives.[289]

Specifically, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Pact, which was promoted by Turkey and signed in June 1992, was received quite negatively in Iran. It put a start to a regional organization that included the three states of the South Caucasus and was seen as a potential competitor to ECO. Iranian media presented this initiative as a sign of Turkey's expansionist economic policies in the region.[290] Considering that Turkey is a founding member of ECO, such articulations created major inconsistencies in the vision of turning the organization into a homogenous political entity.

As for Russia, there were concerns in Iran on the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was seen as a competitor organization too. These concerns became explicit when the Iranian media outlets started arguing that Russia was forcing Azerbaijan to join CIS.[291] However, these articulations did not become dominant. Much like in the case of the Soviet Union, the Iranian government tried to avoid any tension with Russia. Instead, they started arguing that there was no conflict between ECO and CIS. They also claimed that Russia could benefit from ECO as well.[292] As a result, instead of denying

[289] "Seminar on the Process of Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus."
[290] "Commentary Views 'Hasty' Black Sea Countries Pact," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, June 25, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-124).
[291] "Azerbaijan Seen Pressed to Join Russia, CIS," *Abrār*, September 12, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-181); "Turkish Premier's Visit to Moscow, Nagorno-Karabakh Viewed," *Jahan-e Eslāmi*, September 13, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-180).
[292] Abbas Maleki, "Dowramā-ye ravābet-e Irān va Rusiye tā sāl-e 2000," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* Spring, no. 12 (1996): 7–14.

Russia's engagement in the region, Rafsanjani's administration decided to accommodate its own vision in accordance with theirs.

In all, Iran disregarded the asymmetric commitment among the member states and the differences in their perceptions concerning the role of the organization. This situation created various obstacles for implementing the objectives that the organization had. Specifically, it was planned to establish the following institutions in the framework of ECO: a trade and development bank, a reinsurance company, a shipping company, and an ECO airline. By the end of Rafsanjani's presidency, none of these institutions was operational. In 1994, during the inaugural ceremony of the Islamic Trade Fair in Iran, President Rafsanjani criticized the lack of tangible results in the organization.[293] Iran's Minister of Transport also expressed his concerns regarding the limited cooperation between the member states and encouraged them to put more effort into the ECO initiatives.[294] Over time, such complaints from the Iranian side became routine, showing that the organization was constantly underperforming.

The Caspian Sea and Two Sides of Regional Cooperation

The issues related to the Caspian Sea were also articulated in the framework of Iranian narratives of regional cooperation. Being rich with natural resources, the Sea attracted the attention of many countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, there were major uncertainties concerning the utilization of these resources, as its legal status was undecided after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In such a situation, the coastal states needed to negotiate on the issues of delimitation, navigation, and non-navigational uses.

[293] "Daily on Implications of Peres' Visit to Tashkent," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, July 4, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-134).
[294] "Transport Minister Torkan Addresses ECO Meeting," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 10, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-006).

Here as well, Iran's primary concern was limiting the possible infiltration by foreign powers, especially the United States. Therefore, the Islamic Republic took immediate measures to build a framework for deciding Caspian issues solely with the other four littoral states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan). Just a few months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a meeting was held between the representatives of the five states, where it was decided to establish the Caspian Sea Cooperation Organization (CaSCO).[295] In October 1992, another session was held in Tehran, and a communique was signed on forming six committees to deal with legal, environmental, and transportation issues in the Caspian Sea.[296]

In the Iranian foreign policy discourses, it was assumed that establishing CaSCO would not allow extra-regional powers to violate the sovereign rights of the littoral states.[297] A regional perspective with anti-western motifs was emphasized. For instance, Ahmad Haji-Hosseini, the head of Institute of Political and International Studies (IPIS), made the following statement on the security issues in the Caspian Sea: "Any decision on the Caspian Sea's security architecture should be made solely by the representatives of the littoral states and be based on the premise that all of these states enjoy equal political rights."[298] It was argued that western involvement in the region was a matter of concern due to its "imperialistic" tendencies.[299]

In such a situation, it was deemed necessary to decide the legal status of the Caspian Sea to solve the mentioned issues collectively. Without a legal regime, it would have been difficult

[295] "Caspian Sea Pact Established."
[296] "Session Ends; Joint Communique Issued," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 5, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-193).
[297] Abbas Maleki, "Developmental Requirements of the Caspian Sea Basin," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (1997): 45–55.
[298] Hosseini, "The Prospects of the Caspian Sea Region in the 21st Century," 208.
[299] Abbas Maleki, "Caspian Sea: Environment and Economic Issues," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1996): 17–25.

to actualize the Iranian perspective of cooperation among the littoral states.[300] Settling this issue was no easy task since it was not determined whether Caspian was a sea or a lake. In each case, a different set of international laws and regulations apply regarding resource exploitation, delimitation, and navigation. This body of water has certain geographic qualities that make it difficult to classify it in one way or another.[301] As a result, it was left to the coastal states to decide this matter and determine how the natural resources of the Caspian Sea were to be used.

Rafsanjani's government preferred establishing a condominium, which meant that the resources of the Sea would be exploited collectively. Iran had Russia's support on this matter and tried to utilize it for pushing forward its agenda.[302] In contrast, other littoral states, such as the Republic of Azerbaijan, aimed to have the seabed divided that would give them a large share of the natural resources. Due to these contrasting positions, the littoral states did not manage to come to an agreement, and the legal status of the Sea remained unresolved.

In such a situation, staying committed to the principle of collective action was not easy for the Islamic Republic. The Azerbaijani government was ready to move forward without deciding the legal regime of the Sea and exploit its resources with the help of western oil companies. While the Iranian side was quite critical towards this approach, it did not want to be left out from regional initiatives due to its insistence on deciding the legal regime first and keeping the external actors out.

Therefore, Rafsanjani's administration also started highlighting the geographical benefits of transporting the Caspian oil through Iran alongside the arguments that the resources of the

[300] Mohammad Ismail Nourian, "Negareshha-ye motafāvet darbāreh-ye rezhim-e hoquqi-ye dariyā-ye Khazar," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* Summer, no. 14 (1996): 105–25.
[301] Sergei Vinogradov and Patricia Wouters, "The Caspian Sea: Quest for a New Legal Regime," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 9, no. 1 (March 1996): 87–98, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156596000052.
[302] Abbas Maleki, "Dowramā-ye ravābet-e Irān va Rusiye tā sāl-e 2000," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* Spring, no. 12 (1996): 7–14.

Sea should not be extracted unless its legal status was decided. To put it bluntly, Iran did not want to be excluded from the commercial projects in the Caspian Sea that it was criticizing. The role of the Islamic Republic as a transit country was discussed widely by Iranian experts. As Mohammad Sarir wrote:

> In view of Iran's unique geographical position in the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, it can rightly be termed as the world's "energy bridge" and the main artery link between the Caspian Sea littoral states and the West, South, and the East. It also serves as the best and most economical transit route.[303]

The ambivalence in Iran's policies concerning the Caspian Sea becomes apparent when looking into the so-called "Contract of the Century." The latter is an agreement signed between the government of Azerbaijan and a number of international companies on 20 September 1994. Based on the agreement, a consortium was established to exploit a significant part of the oil resources of the Caspian Sea.[304]

The first reaction of the Iranian government towards this agreement was quite negative. In an interview with IRNA, Hassan Rouhani, who was the National Security Advisor to the President at the time, stated that the resources of the seabed should be exploited only in the framework of an agreement between the five littoral states. He also emphasized that the Russian government shared this position. Rouhani claimed that the Iranian side would push forward this principle, stating: "This point of view if accepted will nullify all pacts drawn between Baku and the West. So long as this matter is not explicitly resolved, the Westerners would not be able to invest in the region."[305]

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[303] Mohammad Sarir, "Utilization of Oil and Gas in the Caspian Region," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (1997): 1–16.
[304] Caroline Cox, John Eibner, and International Herald Tribune, "Opinion | Leverage for a Caspian Peace," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1994, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/21/opinion/IHT-leverage-for-a-caspian-peace.html.
[305] "Rowhani on Relations with U.S., Europe," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 27, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-209).

However, nearly two months after the contract had been signed, it became known that Iran was going to take a five per cent share of the consortium. In return, the Iranian government was going to contribute around USD 300 million to the project.[306] At the same time, the Iranian sources stated that Moscow supported the consortium deal, citing the Azerbaijani ambassador to Russia.[307] For a brief period, the criticism towards the oil agreement was toned down. Instead, the discourse on Iran being a transit route became dominant.[308] It seemed that the Iranian government was ready to make compromises regarding its position on excluding foreign powers and deciding the legal status of the Sea.

This situation did not last long either. When it became known that Azerbaijan had cancelled the deal on giving Iran the five per cent share, the arguments on legal issues and foreign intervention became dominant again. In this regard, Foreign Minister Velayati stated: "It is our definite decision that the legal status of the Caspian Sea must be defined… The Russian government has clearly announced that it opposes the start of the explorations before the legal status of the Caspian Sea is defined."[309] On another occasion, he said: "The Caspian Sea belongs to the five littoral states and no country outside the region has the right to meddle in the sea's affairs."[310] The strategic relations between Russia and Iran were highlighted again. On this topic, Mahmood Vaezi told the Russian Deputy Parliament

[306] "Azeri Oil Deal Viewed As 'Politically Significant,'" *Telegraph*, November 14, 1994, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-222).
[307] "Azeri Official: Yeltsin Supports Baku Oil Deal," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 21, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-225).
[308] "Azeri Ambassador on U.S. Criticism of Oil Deal," *Tehran Times*, February 8, 1995, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-033).
[309] "Minister Explains Cancellation of Azeri Oil Deal," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, April 13, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-072).
[310] "IRNA Details Velayati Meeting," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 31, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-210).

Speaker that "Russia's commitment to its obligations and its resistance to the US proves that it can be a good partner for Iran."[311]

After the cancellation of the deal with Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic tried to show that its position on the Caspian issue was unequivocal. However, the events that followed show that the Iranian government was still concerned about spiralling into self-isolating policies. Just a few months after the cancellation, the Azerbaijani government invited Iran to take part in a joint drilling initiative at the Shah-Deniz gas field.[312] For a while, the Iranian government was undecided about accepting this offer, showing the dilemma existing in Iranian foreign policy discourses regarding the Caspian Sea.

Eventually, it was announced that a private Iranian company was going to cooperate with the Azerbaijani side on this project, where it was going to have a ten per cent share. This new deal raised some questions even in the Iranian media. The opposition newspaper Salām wrote:

> The question remains that if the non-definition of the legal status of the Caspian Sea regime is detrimental to our national interests, why is this company - which is alleged to be affiliated with the official Iranian oil company - becoming a member in the consortium?[313]

This criticism shows how inconsistency was a major factor in Iran's policies towards the Caspian Sea. The Iranian government had a vision of building a regional framework, but there were doubts about its plausibility. Therefore, it also decided to take measures in order not to be excluded from the commercial projects in the Caspian Sea. Both approaches remained dominant in Iranian discourses throughout Rafsanjani's presidency. Alternating

[311] "Cites Resistance to U.S. Pressure," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 11, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-113).
[312] "Agrees To Form Joint Oil, Gas Company," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 12, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-200).
[313] "Iran: Validity of Azerbaijani Oil Deal Questioned," *Salām*, June 6, 1996, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-120).

between them illustrates how difficult it was to provide precise definitions of Iranian interests in particular situations. The simultaneous presence of various articulations led to the already-mentioned fluctuations.

In general, regionalism by Iranian motifs presents a complicated image. Though there was more flexibility to define identities and interests in the post-Khomeini period, the anti-American position of the Islamic Republic heavily influenced its regional perspectives. Often, the Iranian government tried to depict a more moderate version of it or show that it could put aside antagonism for the sake of cooperation. These oscillations created certain obstacles for collaborating with the other countries in the region.

Iran's policies concerning ECO and the Caspian Sea were its two main attempts at regional cooperation in the newly emerged space after the collapse of the USSR. Interestingly enough, the South Caucasus was not articulated as a regional unit within its conventionally defined boundaries in either of the cases. The initiatives aimed at constructing regional identity left Armenia and Georgia out of the picture. Highlighting the role of Islam led to including only Muslim-majority countries under the signifier "Central Asia and the South Caucasus." The other unifying factor was the Caspian Sea, where CaSCO was meant to bring together the coastal states. Hence, among the states in the South Caucasus, it was only Azerbaijan that was included in the articulations of regional cooperation. Policies concerning Armenia and Georgia were mostly articulated in the context of bilateral ties, as is demonstrated below.

In a way, the developments concerning ECO and the Caspian Sea show that the post-Soviet South was a site of exploration for the Islamic Republic. The novelty of the situation provided Rafsanjani's administration with an opportunity to test their visions of region-building. Different discourses appeared that intersected at the nodal point of "regional

cooperation." By emphasizing their commitment to peace and cooperation, the Iranian government managed to establish frameworks of multilateral engagement.

However, further progress in terms of integration was intangible. The antagonistic Other of the Islamic Republic was casting a long shadow, and Iranian narratives on regional cooperation often turned into establishing a front against its adversary. The newly independent states in Central Asia and the South Caucasus were not prepared to join hands with Iran in its struggle. Consequentially, they were hesitant to take a step further in terms of implementing the projects of regional integration spearheaded by the Islamic Republic.

Iran's Security Concerns and the Nagorno-Karabagh Conflict

In Iranian foreign policy discourses, peace and stability in the South Caucasus had high priority. In the immediate aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, Rafsanjani's government tried to avoid getting involved in any military conflict. It was a period of rehabilitation for the country, where the articulations on having a secure state and a peaceful region prevailed. Hence, any conflict in the neighbourhood was seen as a threat to the country. Besides, instability in the region was seen as a major obstacle for economic cooperation, which was a high priority issue for Rafsanjani's government.[314]

In the South Caucasus, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabagh (NK) was articulated as the biggest threat to the security of the Islamic Republic. It overshadowed other security-related issues in the region, such as the wars of Abkhazia (1992-1993) and South Ossetia (1991-1992). Iran's reaction towards these disputes was limited to making several statements on respecting the principle of territorial integrity.[315] In contrast, the NK

[314] Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour, "The Relationship between Security and Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 3–4 (1994): 510–19.
[315] "Embassy To Be Opened in Georgia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 26, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-229).

issue had a strong presence in Iranian foreign policy discourses during Rafsanjani's administration. Therefore, this section concentrates on Iran's policies in this particular case.

There are several reasons why the NK conflict drew so much attention. First, it was a territorial dispute embroiled in strong ethnic and nationalistic sentiments between Armenians and Azerbaijanis that could trigger separatist tendencies inside the Islamic Republic. Second, it was perceived that this issue could be used as a tool by the United States and NATO to increase their influence in Iran's northern neighbourhood. In addition, Shia Muslims were involved in this war. It added a new dimension to the articulations on Iran's role in it. Finally, the fighting was taking place very close to the Iranian border, posing a threat to the territorial integrity of the country and leading to an influx of refugees. The following pages discuss how Rafsanjani's government acted in this crisis situation. The first part touches upon Iran's mediation efforts. It is followed by a discussion on Iran's behaviour after the failed attempt at reconciling the sides.

Mediation Efforts

Considering the above-mentioned threats, the Iranian government took measures to end the war right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In February 1992, Foreign Minister Velayati stated that the Islamic Republic had received a request for mediation from both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides and was considering acting upon it.[316] The Iranian government saw mediation as the most appropriate response to this conflict mainly for the following reasons.

First, it gave Iran certain control over the developments in its northern neighbourhood. The unpredictable nature of the conflict was a major source of anxiety for the Islamic Republic. The uncertainty surrounding it was articulated as a source of threat, which in turn was linked

[316] "Armenian Foreign Minister Arrives, Meets Velayati."

to Iran's antagonistic Other. When discussing the NK conflict, Tehran Times reported: "The Western powers are fanatically seeking a way to intervene in the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute over Nagorno-Kharabagh…"[317] To avoid such intervention, the Islamic Republic decided to facilitate a resolution between the two sides and end the clashes as early as possible. Becoming a mediator was seen as gaining some leverage to end the conflict or at least make it manageable. In this regard, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Morteza Sarmadi stated: "If no solution is found, continuation of the clashes between these two new neighbours of the Islamic Republic will encourage the hegemonic powers to interfere in the region."[318]

The Islamic Republic tried to show that it was the most suitable candidate for mediation, and there was no need for extra-regional powers to intervene. Therefore, it was critical of Turkey's efforts to get involved in the process, fearing it could open a pathway for the United States and NATO. It was argued that the latter were in competition with Iran for assuming the leading role in the settlement processes. As Abrar reports:

> … it seems that the initial successful mediation of the Islamic Republic in the dispute have [*sic.*] not been to the liking of the United States, certain Western countries as well as Turkey, which claims to be the policeman of the region. These countries do not want to see Iranian mediation to resolve the dispute between the two neighbors, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and directly and indirectly are trying to sabotage Iranian efforts.[319]

Second, mediation was presented as a way of stopping atrocities against Muslims. Since Shia Azerbaijanis were one of the conflicting sides, a discourse of supporting them was articulated under the nodal point of "obligation to others." However, highlighting religious identity did not necessarily mean siding with Shia Azerbaijanis against Christian Armenians.

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[317] "Efforts of 'Western Powers' Discounted," *Tehran Times*, March 16, 1992, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-057).
[318] "Spokesman Urges Armenia, Azerbaijan to End War," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 7, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-027).
[319] "Attempt at 'Sabotage' Seen," *Abrār*, March 5, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-057).

As said above, there was room for moving beyond such equivalential articulations of Islamic principles in the post-Khomeini period. In the case of Nagorno-Karabagh, choosing the subject position of a mediator was articulated as a step towards fulfilling Iran's duty to protect the rights of Muslims. Besides, the act of mediation was presented as a policy based on Islamic values. For instance, Ayatollah Emami-Kashani stated: "the Islamic Republic's policy in mediating between the two republics stems from Islamic and humanitarian principles, which may help to establish peace and take care of both parties' interests."[320] In short, mediation was a suitable option for Iran to perform its agency as an advocate of Muslims' rights and Islamic values without getting entangled in a new military conflict.

This discourse was challenged by an alternative articulation of the nodal point of "obligation to others." Specifically, having such a rather moderate position was criticized by some conservative circles in Iran. Their voice was mainly expressed by the Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi newspaper, which made the following statement on Iran's mediation efforts:

> This is a report of a massacre of Shiites in the region of the country of the Lord of the Time the base of pure Muhammadian Islam… Do we have no responsibility in the face of these crimes? … should Iran's obligation be limited to this political effort [mediation]? What is the meaning of Hadith: he who hears the call asking Muslims to rise and does not respond is not a Muslim? Where is Muslim honor? Who is supposed to halt all this bloodshed?[321]

However, the pressure to support Azerbaijanis against Armenians was not strong enough to get Iran involved in a new military conflict. The Nagorno-Karabagh issue had emerged in the post-Khomeini period and had a minimal association with the highly populist discourses of the revolutionary times. It did not generate significant symbolic attachment such as in the cases of Palestine and Lebanon. As a result, the Iranian government had the flexibility to interpret the meaning of Islamic duty differently. The contrast can be seen in Ayatollah

[320] "Nagorno-Karabakh Viewed," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 13, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-051).
[321] "'Duty' Toward Azerbaijan Seen," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, March 2, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-047).

Emami-Kashani's speech mentioned above. While he combined Islamic values with the principles of peace and humanism in the case of Nagorno-Karabagh, his position towards Israel was quite belligerent, arguing that "the Islamic world must rise to confront "global arrogance" and Zionist plots and help the Muslim mujahidin in Lebanon and Palestine."[322]

Finally, the Islamic Republic, being a status-seeking state, saw mediation as an opportunity to promote its image internationally. As a mediator in this conflict, Rafsanjani's government was in active communication with Russia, certain European states, the United Nations, and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). The fact that Iran was working in coordination with various regional and global actors was presented as an indicator of its status.[323] It was a source of recognition for the Islamic Republic, as it performed a role of a regional peacemaker, challenging the narratives of an isolated and radical actor.

These are the main reasons that motivated Iran to become a mediator in the NK conflict. The Islamic Republic started taking intensive measures in this regard a few months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. By the end of February 1992, Foreign Minister Velayati made his first trip to the republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan to do the groundwork for starting the mediation process.[324] Several weeks later, the first draft of a ceasefire agreement was presented that referred to stopping the hostilities, as well as exchanging prisoners and corpses.[325]

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[322] "Nagorno-Karabakh Viewed."
[323] "Karabakh Peacekeeping Force 'Under Review,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 26, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-060); "Va'ezi Reports on Karabakh," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, March 29, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-062).
[324] "Velayati Comments on Azerbaijan-Armenia Mediation," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 25, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-037).
[325] "'Draft Agreement' Proposed," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 15, 1992, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-051).

Mahmood Vaezi from Iran's Foreign Ministry was put in charge of coordinating the process with the respective stakeholders. In March and April 1992, he had visits to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabagh to observe the situation and came to the conclusion that there were many complications in the conflict.[326] Hence, he maintained intensive communication with the two sides. His efforts of shuttle diplomacy resulted in the Tehran Communique signed on 7 May 1992, between the President of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan and the acting President of Azerbaijan Yagub Mammadov. It was an eight-point agreement that emphasized the necessity of settling the dispute through peaceful means and stated that Vaezi would continue his mission.[327]

However, the peace was short-lived, as the day after the agreement Armenian forces captured Shushi/Shusha, a strategically important town in Karabagh. The Iranian foreign ministry condemned the escalation in an official statement.[328] It was followed by Vaezi's unsuccessful attempts at bringing the two sides back to the bargaining table. Moreover, major political changes happened in Azerbaijan shortly after signing the Tehran Communique that undermined Iran's role as a mediator. Specifically, Abulfaz Elchibey came to power. He had strong anti-Iranian sentiments and shut down all the channels that Iran had for mediation.[329]

This is how Iran's mission as a mediator came to an end. Despite receiving some criticism, it was considered a highly preferable policy option that had a significant recognitive value, provided leverage over influencing further developments and validated Iran's Self as a

[326] "Va'ezi Returns from Armenia, Azerbaijan Mission," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 13, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-071).
[327] "Terms of Eight-Point Plan for Karabakh Outlined," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, May 8, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-092).
[328] "Summit May Be 'Turning Point.'"
[329] John Calabrese, "Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998): 75–94.

vanguard of Islamic principles. After the attempt ended without any success, Rafsanjani's administration found itself in an uneasy situation. The next section discusses it in detail.

Escalation and Iran's Reaction

The end of Iran's mediation efforts led to a shift in the narratives about the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. First, government representatives started accusing the Armenian side of violating Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. For instance, Vaezi himself made the following statement: "The recent attacks by the Armenian forces on Azerbaijan are flagrant aggressions… Iran considers the mountainous part of the Kharabagh region as the inseparable part of Azerbaijan."[330] Iran's ambassador to Azerbaijan also made a similar claim condemning Armenian "aggression" in Azerbaijan's territory.[331] Territorial integrity became a key point in the articulations of the conflict. The Islamic Republic was categorically against any changes in state borders, as there could be ramifications for its domestic situation as well. Khamenei himself stated that territorial integrity was one of the most sacred ideals of the Iranian people.[332]

These narratives were intertwined with the discourse of carrying out the Islamic duty towards the Azerbaijani people. It was a point of convergence between the social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities. Rafsanjani's administration needed to show that its efforts to defend Muslims did not simply disappear with the termination of the mediation. Hence, upholding the principle of territorial integrity was presented also as an act of defending the rights of a neighbouring Shia community. For instance, during a

[330] "Official Cited on Armenian 'Flagrant Aggressions,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 19, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-098).
[331] "Envoy to Azerbaijan Cited on 'Transient Propaganda,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 11, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-114).
[332] Ali Khamenei, "Sokhanrāni-ye rahbar-e enqelāb dar ejtemā'-ye 'azim-e mardom-e Tabriz" (Khamenei.ir, July 27, 1993), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=10527.

roundtable discussion on the South Caucasus, Mahmood Vaezi stated: "We cannot ignore our Islamic duty… We have always believed that Kharabagh is an Azerbaijani territory and belongs to Azerbaijan."[333]

Second, concerns over foreign intervention increased. Alongside Turkey and the United States, Russia was criticized by Iranian media outlets. It was argued that Russia tried to limit Iran's influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia and, hence, undermined its involvement in the settlement processes.[334] Besides, Russia was accused of prolonging the clashes by supplying weapons to both Armenians and Azerbaijanis.[335] Moreover, the Iranian government was criticized for adopting a soft position towards Russia, considering its involvement in atrocities against Muslims.[336]

The situation became dire once Armenian forces took over the Kalbajar region in April 1993 and started moving towards the South – beyond the borders of the former Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). Criticism towards Armenians became much more intense. Iranian outlets started arguing that the Armenian offensive was a national security threat to the Islamic Republic, as the clashes were getting closer to its border.[337] Moreover, more than 150 Iranian parliamentarians signed a letter condemning Armenian "aggressions" and urged the Iranian government to revise its relations with the Republic of Armenia.[338]

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[333] "Part III [Third and Last Installment of a 'Roundtable' Discussion on the Caucasus and Karabakh]," *Resālat*, September 5, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-198).
[334] "U.S. Policy of 'Blocking, 'Deterring' Iran Seen," *Abrār*, January 14, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-013).
[335] "Russia Reportedly Behind Republic's Clashes," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 24, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-036).
[336] "Ties With Russia Said to Need New Stance on Serbs," *Jahan-e Eslāmi*, March 29, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-065).
[337] "Students Support Intervention in Karabakh," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 13, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-070).
[338] "Deputies Criticize Armenian 'Aggression,'" *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 14, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-070).

There were also critical statements from high-ranking officials. President Rafsanjani stated: "The government of the Islamic Republic will have to adopt a more severe stand if the clashes drag on."[339] During his visit to Tabriz, Khamenei said:

> The Armenian government and Armenians in Kharabagh are oppressing Muslims in that region and we condemn the recent actions of Kharabagh Armenians carried out with the support of the Yerevan government… We expect Armenians inside the country [Iran] to condemn the behavior of Armenians in that region.[340]

It is noteworthy that after this speech the representatives of the Armenian community in Iran issued a statement against the advance of Armenian forces.[341]

In all, the narrative of bringing peace to Nagorno-Karabagh receded, and accusations of violating the principle of territorial integrity, creating an insecure regional environment, and aggression against Azerbaijanis became the dominant articulations concerning the conflict. This shift, however, did not mean that the Iranian government was prepared to take drastic measures. It was still committed to the position of neutrality. The unequivocal nature of this approach was communicated to the Azerbaijani side in April 1993, when Vice President of Azerbaijan Panah Huseynov paid a visit to Iran. He requested military assistance from the Islamic Republic to counter the attacks of Armenian forces. However, the Iranian side made it clear that its efforts would not go much beyond condemning aggression.[342] Moreover, there was criticism in Iranian media towards the Azerbaijani government for trying to drag Iran into a military conflict.[343]

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[339] "President Urges Azerbaijan, Armenia to Resume Talks," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 12, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-069).
[340] Khamenei, "Sokhanrāni-ye rahbar-e enqelāb dar ejtemā'-ye 'azim-e mardom-e Tabriz."
[341] "Armenian Community Lauded for Condemning 'Aggression,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 31, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-146).
[342] "Meets With President," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 12, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-068).
[343] "Azerbaijani Request for Military Assistance Criticized," *Paris AFP*, April 13, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-069).

At this point, expressing mere condemnation was considered satisfactory for carrying out the Islamic duty. It was much in line with Rafsanjani's position on Iran's foreign policy expressed during a news conference in 1990. When talking about stopping aggressions against Muslims, he stated: "In a place where we have strength, we will tie their hands. In a place where we do not have strength, we will protest and express our views."[344] It is a clear indicator of how far Rafsanjani's government was ready to go in such situations, especially when the conflict did not have great symbolic significance for performing the Self of the Islamic Republic.

Nonetheless, keeping this rather neutral position became difficult from August 1993 onwards, as Armenian forces continued to advance. The language of concerns and condemnation were substituted with direct warnings. In particular, the Foreign Ministry of Iran issued an official statement warning the Armenian government that the Islamic Republic would be forced to act if the aggression continued.[345] In late August, it was reported that shots were being fired across the Iranian border.[346] This is when Garnik Badalyan, the Armenian chargé d'affaires in Iran, was summoned to the Foreign Ministry to communicate the warnings of the Islamic Republic. In this regard, Rafsanjani stated: "The Islamic Republic will never tolerate insecurity near its borders."[347] In addition, there were

[344] "Hashemi-Rafsanjani Holds News Conference 7 Mar."
[345] "Armenia Warned to Withdraw From Azerbaijani Territory," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, August 12, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-155).
[346] "Armenian Forces Cause 'Material Damage' in Border Area," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 24, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-163).
[347] "Hashemi-Rafsanjani Returns from Central Asia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 29, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-208).

major concerns regarding the influx of a large number of Azerbaijani refugees into the Iranian territory that amplified the rhetoric against the Armenian side.[348]

Criticism against the policies of other actors intensified too. In an official statement condemning Armenia's aggression against Azerbaijan, Khamenei also stated that the conflict was a pre-planned American initiative to destabilize the region.[349] In addition, there were comments from hardliner papers arguing that the Armenian expansion was just a means of spreading Russian influence.[350] Expression such as "Russian imperialism" became popular in this context.[351] In this regard, the Russian government was also considered to be responsible for undermining Iran's national security. This tension became evident when the Islamic Republic started upgrading its security forces near the Azerbaijani border in September 1993. These measures were followed by a statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry urging Iran to exercise self-control.[352] The statement was not received positively in Iran, leading to claims of revising the "good-neighbourly" relations with Russia.[353]

The Iranian side was at a critical juncture. The threats posed by the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict were becoming more prevalent. In addition, the policies of other players, such as the United States and Russia, were observed with dissatisfaction and concern. Remaining passive in such a situation was becoming difficult, especially considering Iran's self-identification as a key regional actor. On the other hand, getting involved could create a set

[348] "Refugees on Border, Troops Dispatched," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, August 27, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-166).
[349] "Armenian Community Lauded for Condemning 'Aggression.'"
[350] "'Forces of Islamism' To Sever Azerbaijan from Russia," *Kayhān*, September 13, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-181).
[351] "Iranian, Turkish Roles in Azerbaijan Viewed," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, December 2, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-238).
[352] "Editorial Views Russian 'Expansionism,'" *Tehran Times*, September 13, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-180).
[353] "Daily: Tehran Cannot Ignore Clashes Near Border," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 3, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-212).

of problems and liabilities, which Rafsanjani's administration tried to avoid considering its priorities of stability and growth. The choice that the Iranian government made showcases an important feature of its behaviour towards the conflict and the South Caucasus in general.

Here, Iran decided to follow Russia's lead despite having reservations about its policies. The primary reason is that Moscow was seen as a crucial counterbalance against the American and Turkish influence. For instance, its opposition to involving Ankara in the peace-keeping operations was presented as a positive move.[354] Therefore, even in a period of high tension, Rafsanjani's administration was coordinating its moves with the Russian government.[355] While the Iranian side still showed a willingness to act as a mediator,[356] it was also ready to comply by a settlement arranged by Moscow. In this regard, Foreign Minister Velayati stated that "Iran will support any peaceful solution to this and other regional conflicts."[357]

This decision is illustrative of Iran's Russo-centrism in the South Caucasus, as has been observed by different studies. Such an attitude is at odds with a popular argument in the literature that the Islamic Republic is highly sensitive towards having an independent foreign policy.[358] So why was that sensitivity mostly absent in this case?

This question can be answered by revisiting the role of independence as a nodal point. While independence occupies a central place in Iranian foreign policy discourses, it does not have a fixed conceptual foundation that leads to particular policies. What independence means can be articulated in different ways due to its relative emptiness. This fluidity is compensated by the rather clear association with the antagonistic Other: the nodal point of independence

[354] "Turkish Premier's Visit to Moscow, Nagorno-Karabakh Viewed."
[355] "Azerbaijan's Aliyev Briefs President on 'Crisis,'" *IRIB Television First Program Network*, September 15, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-178).
[356] "Envoy Sent to Mediate," *Paris AFP*, January 4, 1994, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-003).
[357] Ali Akbar Velayati, "The Constructive Role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Maintaining Regional Security," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1996): 188.
[358] Moshirzadeh, "Discursive Foundations of Iran's Nuclear Policy."

is validated by protecting it from this Other. Hence, compromising it is primarily viewed in the context of Iran's relations with the United States and its allies. As Russia's presence was weak in this antagonistic association, it was possible to adopt a more accommodating position in the South Caucasus without spiralling into an identity crisis.

These post-mediation events tested the limits of Iran's influence in the South Caucasus. In a way, they were at odds with the recognitive practices of Rafsanjani's administration aimed at creating an image of a central regional player. On the one hand, there were heavy rhetoric and frequent warnings about not accepting certain developments. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic perpetuated its marginal role by choosing to remain a bystander. Eventually, Rafsanjani's government had to make an uneasy choice of band-wagoning with the Russian Federation. It helped Iran stay away from unfavourable complications in its foreign policy but also became an indicator of having a residual role.

Overall, the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict created an uneasy situation for Rafsanjani's administration. The articulations of its mediation efforts showcase how the Iranian side aimed to be engaged in this matter and what objectives it had. After its failure, the Iranian government found itself in challenging circumstances. The often-proclaimed principles of showing support to Muslims and not allowing instability and territorial changes near its borders were in dissonance with the passivity in the post-mediation period. A combination of continuous frustration and inability to act became the defining feature of the situation Iran was facing. Therefore, it is not surprising that Rafsanjani's government called for a rapid solution to the conflict.[359]

[359] Velayati, "The Constructive Role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Maintaining Regional Security."

Establishing Bilateral Relations

Establishing and developing bilateral relations with the newly independent Republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia was one of the central aspects of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. The previous sections show that Iran did not attach the same level of importance to relations between these three states. As this part illustrates, Azerbaijan had the highest priority. Having friendly ties with Armenia had certain significance too. Meanwhile, the policies in relation to Georgia mostly had an exploratory nature.

Despite the differences, these ties shared a key feature. In all of the cases, the Islamic Republic emphasized that it was restarting relations with these states that were severed due to the Russian and Soviet rule. Statements on bilateral ties were flavoured with remarks on revival and return to the original state of affairs, much like in the above-mentioned visions on regionalism. Hence, shared historical and cultural heritage was used to show that Iran and the countries of the South Caucasus were familiar with each other and should be comfortable working together.

Having these commonalities as a starting point, Rafsanjani's administration established bilateral relations with the governments of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia shortly after their independence. The ambivalence to officially recognize them during the last days of the Soviet Union was substituted with intensive measures to cooperate with them. Below it is shown how Iran's relations with each of these states developed.

Iran and Azerbaijan: Unrealized Expectations

As stated previously, the Islamic Republic saw significant potential in deepening relations with Azerbaijan and attached great importance to this endeavour. Even during the Soviet period, the Iranian government made an effort to facilitate ties with Baku in the field of cultural, religious, and economic affairs. When talking about Iran's position towards

Azerbaijanis, Mahmood Vaezi stated: "We can say that they are one of the closest nations to us."[360]

Iran had high expectations from these ties during Rafsanjani's presidency. Ethnic, cultural, and religious commonalities were assumed to lead to deep political and economic integration. The initial plan was to bring Azerbaijan into Iran's political orbit. Articulations of such an integration dragged Iran into competition with Turkey, as well as the West, that became a key feature of Iranian discourses about relations with Baku.

The struggle for Azerbaijan's soul started before its independence. As early as June 1990, it became apparent that Iran and Turkey were competing in this regard. For instance, The Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi newspaper criticized the "Azerbaijan Today" congress in Kayseri, Turkey, where it was offered to use the Latin Alphabet in Azerbaijan.[361] It was assumed that Turkey was putting efforts into promoting its socio-political model in the Soviet republic. Therefore, two months later, a government delegation left for Baku from Iran with the aim of revitalizing Shia Islamic values in the country.[362]

More vivid signs of this competition emerged when Azerbaijan started making concrete moves towards independence. Specifically, there were concerns over Turkish infiltration after Ayaz Mutalibov assumed the position of Azerbaijan's first president. It was argued that Mutalibov surrounded himself with advisors of Turkish origin. This step was articulated as a deliberate plan by the Turkish and U.S. governments to limit Iranian influence in the country.[363]

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[360] "Minister Explains Cancellation of Azeri Oil Deal."
[361] "'Recommendation' to Azerbaijan Criticized," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, June 17, 1990, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-134).
[362] "Theological Delegation Leaves for USSR," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 2, 1990, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-90-150).
[363] "Daily Warns of U.S. Influence in Muslim USSR," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, September 17, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-192).

Even when the Islamic Republic was hesitating to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, it took steps to match Turkey's activities. For instance, in November 1991, Ayatollah Mousavi-Tabrizi, the Prosecutor General of Iran, made a trip to Baku to consult its government on Islamic jurisprudence.[364] In this way, the Iranian side tried to increase the role of religious values in the political system of Azerbaijan, assuming the latter would emulate the Islamic Republic by adopting the values of the 1979 Revolution.

These measures were augmented after Iran recognized Azerbaijan's independence. The Iranian government tried to advance its ties in multiple sectors. Initially, there were high hopes that were mainly based on the above-mentioned commonalities. Paradoxically, the same shared features, which were meant to bring the states together, became a source of tension. Much like in the case of Iran's regional vision, there was a questionable assumption in Iranian discourses that the Republic of Azerbaijan was bound to behave in a certain way. Any deviation was perceived quite negatively. As is shown below, often there was a sense of betrayal in Iranian articulations of Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

The first episode of such tension occurred just several months after the establishment of official relations between the two states. Specifically, the country, which various media outlets in Iran assumed would follow the path of the Islamic Revolution, elected Abulfaz Elchibey, an openly anti-Iranian political figure, as their president. Elchibey's ascent to power in June 1992 was considered a Turkish-American initiative aimed at undermining Iran's position in the region. The Iranian media compared him to Saddam Hussein.[365] His foreign policy was considered hostile and contradictory to the values and interests of the

[364] "Musavi-Tabrizi Leaves for Azerbaijan Visit," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 19, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-225).
[365] "Hostile Remarks Assailed," *Abrār*, June 28, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-130).

Azerbaijani people.[366] This criticism was amplified when the Azerbaijani government started developing ties with Israel.[367]

This and various other consecutive issues became a source of mistrust in the Islamic Republic towards its northern neighbour. Though the latter's behaviour was considered deceptive, it did not lead to making significant revisions in Iran's foreign policy. Azerbaijan continued to be considered a brotherly country in Iran. This combination of suspicion and commitment to improving relations became a defining feature of the way Rafsanjani's administration built its policies towards Azerbaijan. Regardless of the problems, it was always considered that the two countries could overcome them.

The idea of a friendly country was maintained in Iranian discourses by separating the Azerbaijani government from the people. It was argued that Shia Muslims living in Azerbaijan carried the values of the Islamic Revolution and did not share the position of their government. For example, Iranian outlets stated that Azerbaijanis supported Palestine and did not favour the establishment of relations with Israel.[368] In an interview with *Kayhan*, Mahmood Vaezi claimed that the problem was the president of the country. He said: "The reason no Iranian official has responded to his comments is that we respect the Azerbaijani people and we do not want to say anything that might offend the people."[369]

The social logic of resistance communities made it possible to have discourses that emphasized the existence of a special bond with the Azerbaijani people. The subject positions of Iranians and Azerbaijanis were articulated as part of a united whole. The role of national boundaries was mitigated in this case. Accordingly, policies that targeted the

[366] "Daily Views 'War of Attrition' in Caucasia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 22, 1992, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-124).
[367] "Commentary--Israel Running Azerbaijani Government," *Resālat*, July 14, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-146).
[368] "Commentary--Israel Running Azerbaijani Government."
[369] "Va'ezi Discusses International Developments," *Kayhān*, July 21, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-155).

Azerbaijani populace on the other side of the Aras River and often bypassed the government were rendered acceptable.

As a result, the Islamic Republic was actively engaged with different stakeholders in Azerbaijan while having strained relations with Elchibey's administration. Specifically, the Iranian government established a relief camp and allocated substantial resources in order to provide humanitarian aid to Azerbaijani refugees. Besides, it was actively working with Nakhichevan – an autonomous administrative area inside Azerbaijan. In August 1992, Heyder Aliyev, who was the governor of Nakhichevan, visited Iran and had meetings with various high-ranking officials, including Khamenei himself.[370] The visit helped to facilitate cooperation with this region of Azerbaijan. For instance, despite the tension between the two countries, the Iranian government continued granting visas to Azerbaijani truck drivers for transporting goods to Nakhichevan.[371]

These ties were important in terms of improving relations between the two governments. In a way, they kept the door open for a rapprochement. Therefore, once Elchibey's administration realized that its antagonistic attitude towards Iran was too costly, it was possible to revive the ties with Iran quickly. In November 1992, there were signs of noticeable progress in this regard. Specifically, the sides came to an agreement to open a branch of an Iranian bank in Azerbaijan.[372] A delegation from Azerbaijan attended the

[370] "Views Azerbaijan with Khamene'i," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, August 26, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-167).
[371] "Envoy to Azerbaijan Interviewed on Ties," *Etela'at*, November 8, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-227).
[372] Ibid.

Middle East Railway conference in Tehran to explore the possibilities of cooperation in this sector.[373] The first meeting of an Iran-Azerbaijan economic session was held in Baku.[374]

The Iranian government still had suspicions towards Elchibey's administration, but the above-mentioned events show that it was prepared to move forward with more modest expectations, assuming that the situation was temporary. Another factor that made it acceptable to work with a pro-Turkish government in Azerbaijan was the perception that the Islamic Republic should try to avoid competition with Turkey in order not to drain its resources. This idea was put forward in the foreign policy circles in Iran, where they argued against making competition a defining feature of the policies in the South Caucasus.[375] Besides, Iranian officials made reassurances to their Azerbaijani counterparts that their policies in the region were not about competition and working with Iran did not mean choosing it over Turkey.[376]

This setup was good enough for developing bilateral economic cooperation for the following two years. In December 1992, Iran and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum of understanding that touched upon various issues, including partnership in the banking sector, selling hydrocarbon resources, and establishing railway connections.[377] In February 1993, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine struck a deal on building a gas pipeline to transport natural gas

[373] "Middle East Railways Conference Opens in Tehran," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 1, 1992, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-214).
[374] "Economic Cultural Delegation Leaves for Baku," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 16, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-225).
[375] Hooshmand Mirfakhraei, "Gozāresh-e kāmel "konferāns-e degarguniha-ye ettehād-e showravi-ye sābeq va peyāmadha-ye ān barā-ye jahān-e sevom," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 1, no. 1 (1992): 140–50.
[376] "Discusses Issues with Rafsanjani," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, December 29, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-250).
[377] "Details of Iranian-Azerbaijani Cooperation Memo," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 30, 1992, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-252).

from Iran to Europe.[378] A trade protocol was signed between the two countries in August 1993 to import essential goods from Iran to Azerbaijan.[379] Two months later, they came to an agreement on transporting cargo to a third country.[380]

Rafsanjani's trip to Azerbaijan in October 1993 was a landmark event in the economic partnership between the two states. During this trip, 14 agreements were signed between the sides, depicting their high level of cooperation.[381] At that moment, it was claimed that Iran had the most advanced economic relations with Azerbaijan among all the Muslim states in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. When commenting on this topic, Velayati stated that Iran was Azerbaijan's biggest economic partner after the Russian Federation.[382] These developments had their reflection on the level of trade between the two countries. If in 1992 it was USD 100 million, in 1993, reportedly, it reached up to USD 400 million.[383]

The developments in economic cooperation continued during 1994 too. Iran and Azerbaijan signed contracts on transporting gas and starting joint drilling operations. The highlight of the year was Aliyev's visit to Iran in June 1994. During this trip, various issues were discussed, including building the Khoda Afarin dam over the Aras River, linking Iranian and Azeri railways in the Astara region, and transporting electricity from Iran to

[378] "Tehran Signs Gas Export Agreement with Ukraine," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 13, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-030).
[379] "Trade Protocols with Azerbaijan Signed 27 Aug," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, August 27, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-165).
[380] "Agreement on Transport Signed with Azerbaijan," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, October 23, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-205).
[381] "Commentary Views President's Trip to Baku," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, October 27, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-206).
[382] "Velayati on Central Asia, Regional Issues," *Al-Safir*, November 27, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-228).
[383] "Commentary Views President's Trip to Baku."

Azerbaijan.[384] In all, Iran was becoming an important economic partner for the newly independent republic in the South Caucasus.

Interestingly enough, the progress made in the field of economic cooperation, which occurred in quite a volatile period, was not representative of the dynamics in other spheres of bilateral relations. The clarity in the position of the two governments regarding commercial affairs was absent in other cases. Here, the presence of two contrasting approaches in Iranian discourses created difficulties in constructing a clear position. While the Iranian side tried to tame its ambitions concerning Azerbaijan, it was still quite unhappy with its openly pro-Turkish government. The decision to avoid competition with Turkey did not necessarily eliminate Iran's anxiety towards its influence. For instance, there were concerns in Iranian media over Turkey's president Turgut Ozal's trip to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. It was considered a way of disseminating pan-Turkist ideas.[385]

Besides, the Iranian government still had more expectations from relations with Azerbaijan, even when it was trying to be careful with expressing any expansionist intentions. Hence, the policies of the Azerbaijani government were still received with criticism in Iranian political circles. In this regard, Vice President Hassan Habibi stated:

> … it is necessary for the Azerbaijani people to also show attachment and affection toward the Iranian people. We have no doubts about Azerbaijani people. But we have complained about certain comments by some of their officials. We said this clearly and frankly.[386]

In addition, there was no clear idea of how the desired further integration between the two states would happen. The lack of precision in Iran's vision became apparent when a domestic

[384] "Aliyev, Hashemi-Rafsanjani Open Talks," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, June 29, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-126).
[385] "Tehran Views Ozal's Visit to Turkic Republics," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 9, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-067).
[386] "Comments on Karabakh Crisis," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 12, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-068).

crisis started in Azerbaijan in June 1993. The country was on the brink of a civil war. While such instability was worrisome for the Iranian side, it could help to topple the anti-Iranian Azerbaijani Popular Front. Some figures in Iran saw it as an opportunity to increase their influence in the country. In this regard, Vice President Hassan Habibi stated that Iran was ready to help Azerbaijan solve its domestic problems if the latter asked.[387] However, shortly after, Foreign Minister Veleyati made a statement that the Islamic Republic did not have any plans to get involved in the internal developments of Azerbaijan.[388]

This contradiction shows that the Iranian government was uncertain about how it needed to react in this situation. Adopting a rather paternalistic attitude could become precedential for increasing Iran's role in the country. However, this approach had the possibility of backfiring and creating an image of an interventionist actor, especially when the Islamic Republic was already being accused of having such tendencies. The dilemma did not allow Iran to behave proactively in this situation, even though there were speculations that the unrest in Azerbaijan started with the help of its meddling.[389] A few months after these events, Majles Deputy Hossien Sobhaninia stated: "due to slow reaction or lack of sufficient attention, all these opportunities were lost, and instead of being able to affect foreign policy, we became vulnerable… We have been passive and have moved more slowly than we should."[390]

Despite having the sense that there were missed opportunities, the Iranian government considered it a positive development that the crisis in Azerbaijan ended with Heydar

[387] "Habibi Notes Readiness to Help Azerbaijan," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, June 16, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-115).
[388] "No Plans to Interfere in Azerbaijan," *Paris AFP*, June 26, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-122).
[389] Nasib Nassibli, "Azerbaijan: Policy Priorities towards the Caspian Sea," in *The Caspian: Politics, Energy and Security* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 140–61.
[390] "Majles Deputy Reviews Foreign Policy," *Abrār*, November 22, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-229).

Aliyev's rise to power. They had substantial experience of cooperation, which could help to improve relations between the two countries. The beginning of his term coincided with Iran's heightened criticism towards Armenia and support for tens of thousands of Azerbaijani refugees. The Iranian government set up refugee camps with the capacity to host around 100 thousand people.[391] In Iran, these steps were presented as major favours to Azerbaijan. Later, it became apparent that these gestures also led to expectations of commitment from Aliyev's administration.

However, Aliyev was cautious about prioritizing relations with the Islamic Republic, especially when it could sabotage ties with the partners in the West. The affairs related to the Contract of the Century showcase this tendency. The cancellation of Iran's five per cent share in the consortium led to a crisis between the two states. A strong sense of betrayal started appearing in Iranian discourses. It was perceived that the commitment to bilateral relations was not reciprocal due to Azerbaijan's policies. On this topic Mahmood Vaezi stated:

> We assisted both the government and the people of Azerbaijan from either political or the economic [*sic.*] point of view. We put a lot of resources at the disposal of the Azeri government in order for it to resolve its problems. Naturally, when we see that the Azeri government cannot defend the pledges it has made to the Islamic Republic of Iran, definitely those relations cannot continue with the same strength in the future.[392]

"Unexpected," "thoughtless," "unfriendly," and "ungrateful" were among the key descriptors used in Iranian media for explaining Azerbaijan's behaviour. It was perceived as a shock and a deviation from the natural path of friendship with the Islamic Republic. Such a reaction was directly linked to the assumption that Iran and Azerbaijan were destined

[391] "Azerbaijan Camp to Hold up to 100,000 Refugees," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 8, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-173).
[392] "Minister Explains Cancellation of Azeri Oil Deal."

to be brotherly countries due to their commonalities. Therefore, the decision of Aliyev's administration was perceived quite negatively.

The summer of 1995 was a tense period for the two countries and showed how frustrated the Iranian side was regarding the above-mentioned developments. For instance, the Iranian chargé d'affaires in Baku had a meeting with the General Prosecutor of Azerbaijan in June 1995, where he expressed dissatisfaction over a number of issues. As IRNA reports, he stated that the lives and properties of Iranian citizens were not properly protected in Azerbaijan. He also expressed concerns over Azerbaijani parties not paying their debts to Iranian merchants that amounted to two million U.S. Dollars. Issues related to robberies and disappearances of Iranian citizens were raised as well.[393] During the same month, Foreign Minister Velayati expressed harsh criticism towards Aliyev's government in an interview with Resālat newspaper. He stated: "[Azerbaijan's decision] is contrary to the principles of friendship and cordiality between countries. Azerbaijan has thus actually harmed the expansion of relations between the two countries."[394]

The Iranian media was also quite critical in this period. IRNA wrote that the Islamic Republic had provided moral and material support to Azerbaijan, but Aliyev's government did not show any sign of goodwill in return. Abrar reported that two factors defined Azerbaijan's foreign policy in that period: "Friendship with the Zionist regime and frigid relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran."[395] The newspaper Salām also made critical

[393] "Envoy Views Security for Nationals in Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 16, 1995, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-116).
[394] "Velayati Interviewed on Foreign Relations," *Resālat*, June 22, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-129).
[395] "Daily Blasts Azerbaijan for Warming Israeli Ties," *Abrār*, August 7, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-156).

remarks, stating: “Aliyev's government has either willingly or unwillingly brought the US and NATO into the Caucasus.”[396]

In short, this was a low point in bilateral relations. There was an impression that investing in ties with Azerbaijan did not create any substantial benefit. However, what followed was not a revision in Iran’s behaviour. Interestingly enough, the Iranian government showed preparedness to make amends. The premise for this tendency was that Iran could not sever its ties with Azerbaijanis because of the above-mentioned commonalities between the two people. Enmity with a neighbouring Shia country with deep historical connections would not have reflected well on the status that the Islamic Republic was trying to build for itself. Be it either a peaceful state or the *Umm al-Qura* of the Muslim world, severed ties with Azerbaijan would have been problematic for both subject positions.

As a result, the Iranian side was ready to settle the existing issues and keep the mentioned special bond intact. In particular, Mahmood Vaezi stated that Iran and Azerbaijan did not have any unresolvable problems while acknowledging there was tension between the two states.[397] He made a four-day trip to Azerbaijan, where it was decided to establish an Iranian-Azerbaijani conciliatory committee. Similar steps were taken in the following months as well. A joint market was opened in Bilasuvar, Azerbaijan, near the Iranian border.[398] In March 1996, Foreign Minister Velayati travelled to Baku for strengthening relations, which were presented to be rooted in common history where Islam played a central role.[399] Two

[396] “Ties to Moscow, Caspian Oil, Legal Status Viewed,” *Salām*, July 29, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-152).
[397] “Iran’s Va’ezi Holds News Conference,” *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 14, 1995, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-241).
[398] “Joint Border Market Opened by Iran, Azerbaijan,” *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, January 21, 1996, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-016).
[399] “Iran: Velayati Trip to Baku Seen as Effort to Safeguard Ties,” *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 2, 1996, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-044).

months later, Aliyev paid a visit to Iran to take part in the inauguration of the Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan railway project. As IRNA reports, he called Iran a brotherly nation.[400]

However, these measures did not necessarily mean that the states were ready to comply with each other's behaviour. The Islamic Republic was still quite dissatisfied with the policies of the Azerbaijani government. For instance, the tension in bilateral relations revealed itself during Velayati's visit in March 1996. At a press conference in Baku, he exchanged heated remarks with his counterpart Hasan Hasanov. Velayati criticized Azerbaijan for its close relations with Israel. Hasanov responded that Armenia managed to escape its economic blockade because of Iran.[401]

During this period, another major problem in bilateral ties emerged related to the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan. This pro-Iran party was shut down by the Azerbaijani government, and its members were prosecuted. It created another wave of criticism in Iran. The Resālat newspaper called it secularist oppression of Muslims in Azerbaijan.[402] IRNA reported about the detention and torture of the party members.[403] Majles deputies also expressed concerns over the government policy towards the Islamic Party.[404] These remarks were not received positively in Azerbaijan, where Iran was accused of interventionist policies in its attempt at increasing the role of religious doctrines in Azerbaijani politics.[405]

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[400] "Iran: Azerbaijan's Aliyev Arrives in Iran, Comments on Railroad," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 12, 1996, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-094).
[401] "Iran: Paper Says Azerbaijan Should Alter Foreign Policies," *Iran News*, March 5, 1996, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-049).
[402] "Iran: Editorial on Failure of Secularists in Azerbaijan," *Resālat*, June 13, 1996, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-120).
[403] "Iran: Azeri Activists Protest Detention, Torture of Leaders," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 19, 1996, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-120).
[404] "Iran: Deputy Warns Azerbaijan of Pressure from U.S. Presence," *Resālat*, July 22, 1996, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-148).
[405] Nassibli, "Azerbaijan-Iran Relations."

As usual, the Iranian side tried to avoid further deterioration in relations and took steps towards settling these problems. Frequent mutual visits with exchanges of reassurances were seen as the primary means in this regard. Mahmoud Vaezi himself emphasized the importance of such visits.[406] They were recognitive practices that validated the articulations of friendly ties. On the one hand, they show that the two sides were committed to keeping bilateral relations intact. On the other hand, it was a sign that there was a constant need for reconciliation, as there were many issues upon which the two governments did not agree.

In a nutshell, Iran's policy towards Azerbaijan was a peculiar combination of commitment to friendship and quarrelling with that very friend regularly. The Islamic Republic invested heavily in ties with this neighbouring state; however, the results were not quite satisfactory. There was constant tension between the two countries that limited cooperation mostly to the commercial sector. Iran's high expectations from Azerbaijan became the source of this frustration, as the Azerbaijani Republic did not share the position of the Islamic Republic on many issues. What they had in common was the mere conviction that bilateral relations were important. This is a principle that both sides emphasized in their official encounters but failed to agree upon a precise vision on how those ties could develop further. This vagueness led to mutual suspicion, resulting in fluctuations in Iran's relations with Azerbaijan.

Difficult Choices in Relations with Armenia

In general, Iran's relations with Armenia were friendly during Rafsanjani's presidency. Having such ties with a country that was at war with Shia Azerbaijanis caught the attention of many experts in the field and was presented as a sign of pragmatism in Iranian foreign policy. However, this section illustrates that Iran's approach was not as clear cut. There were

[406] "Iran: Azeri Official Arranges Foreign Minister's 'Imminent' Visit," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 8, 1996.

varying articulations and contrasting policy options that led to a certain behaviour, which needs detailed discussion for a better understanding of it.

The first time Armenia started regularly appearing in Iranian discourses was in the context of the clashes with Muslims in Soviet Azerbaijan in the late 1980s. Interestingly enough, Iranian dailies criticized the West for allegedly supporting Christian Armenians, but there was not much criticism against Armenians themselves.[407] The reason is that Armenians were considered to be a mere pond in this global anti-Islamic conspiracy. Their subject position was not articulated in the equivalential discourses of fighting the antagonistic Other. As a result, taking measures against Armenians was virtually absent from Iranian foreign policy discourses in that period. Instead, the attention was mainly directed towards the Soviet government, Western actors, and the oppressed Muslims in Azerbaijan.[408]

Antagonism against Armenia did not become dominant during the immediate aftermath of its independence either. While Turkey adopted a rather harsh position towards the newly independent Republic and eventually cut its ties, the Islamic Republic decided to use a different approach.[409] In particular, Armenia's Foreign Minister Raffi Hovhannisian was received as a representative of a friendly country in February 1992. It was the first official encounter between the two states.[410] The sides established diplomatic relations and signed a memorandum of understanding regarding issues such as exporting gas, trade, constructing refineries, and mutual investments.[411] During the meeting with Foreign Minister Hovhannisian, President Rafsanjani stated that Iran considered Armenia a friendly country

[407] "Western Media 'Fueling' Fire."
[408] "IRNA Discusses Western Coverage of Azerbaijan."
[409] Herzig, *The New Caucasus*.
[410] "Armenian Foreign Minister Arrives, Meets Velayati."
[411] "Joint Statement on Ties," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 10, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-027).

and was prepared to have constructive relations with it.[412] In March 1992, there were negotiations on gas sales and building a bridge over the Aras River for facilitating trade.[413]

However, Iran's position towards its northern neighbour became condemnatory after the Armenian forces captured Shushi/Shusha in Nagorno-Karabagh in May 1992. It nullified Iran's mediation efforts. From this point until singing the ceasefire agreement in May 1994, articulations criticizing Armenian military advances in Karabagh became dominant in the Islamic Republic. As argued in the section on security issues, there were even straightforward warnings from the Iranian government to their Armenian counterparts.

In addition, the downing of an Iranian C-130 aeroplane in March 1994 by the Armenian forces became another problem in bilateral relations. The plane was carrying Iranian diplomatic personnel and their family members from Moscow to Tehran. Gagik Harutyunyan, the Vice President of Armenia, had to visit Tehran to provide explanations and halt the tension. He stated that the people responsible for the accident would be punished.[414]

In light of these developments, Iran openly expressed its dissatisfaction with the behaviour of its neighbour. The friendly nature of ties came under question but did not necessarily lead to adopting an adversarial position on Iran's side. Despite the above-mentioned issues, the Iranian government kept the borders open with Armenia during the war and did not create major obstacles for commercial relations. This step was crucial for Yerevan, considering that it was in an economic blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan. Besides, an exclusive

[412] "President on Ties, Azerbaijani Dispute," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 10, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-028).
[413] "Gas Sales to Armenia Discussed," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 5, 1992, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-088).
[414] "Armenian Vice President 'Regrets' Downing of Plane Arrives for 2-Day Talks," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 3, 1994, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-086).

exhibition of Armenian products was organized in Tehran in August 1993 – a period of harsh criticism towards the advances of Armenian forces in Karabagh. Despite the backlash from conservative media outlets, the government gave permission for the event to be held.[415]

It is noteworthy that the Islamic Republic did not take any substantial measures to facilitate commercial ties with Armenia in this period of intense clashes. The issue of supplying gas to Armenia is a vivid example in this regard. In December 1993, the National Iranian Gas Company made a statement that it had no plans to export gas to Armenia.[416] On the other hand, the Iranian government did not limit the existing trade relations either. The commercial ties were primarily maintained based on the groundwork done during the short period of collaboration in the first months of 1992. In all, bilateral ties between Iran and Armenia were in a liminal state of neither friendship nor enmity.

There are several reasons that made such an approach towards Armenia possible. First and foremost, there was the flexibility to have interpretations of Armenia's subject position beyond populist binaries, as in many other issues related to the South Caucasus. The attempts at fixing Armenia's subject position as an enemy that was oppressing a Shia community were challenged by several differential articulations.

Specifically, there were narratives that dismantled equivalential associations between Armenia and the antagonistic Other of the Islamic Republic. They were mostly generated by the Armenian community in Iran. In particular, their statements about Turkey and the Armenian Genocide were often combined with condemnations of American policies. The articulations that put Turkey in the pro-Western camp made it easy to separate the subject

[415] "Paper Objects to Armenian Exhibition in Tehran," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, August 23, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-170).
[416] "Gas Company Denies Plans to Supply Armenia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 30, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-001).

position of Armenia from the antagonistic Other of the Islamic Republic.[417] As IRNA reports, members of the Armenian community often stated that "NATO bases in Western Armenia[418] must be eliminated."[419] Vartan Vartanian, a representative of the Armenian community in the Iranian Majles, also made such a statement.[420] Artavazd Baghumian, another Armenian parliamentary, tried to separate Armenia's agency from the West. For instance, he emphasized that the Armenian Church was independent of the Vatican.[421]

Another narrative that challenged the image of Armenia being an oppressor created a distance between the Armenian government and the events in Nagorno-Karabagh. It aimed to show that the situation was more complicated than it appeared and needed a nuanced approach. This was mainly articulated by government representatives and especially the Iranian Foreign Ministry. In March 1992, Foreign Minister Velayati stated that "armed locals can disrupt the process of ceasefire in defiance of what both countries wish."[422] Even during the period of harsh criticism, there were remarks in Iran that Yerevan did not have full control over the events in Karabagh.[423] Moreover, it was claimed that President Levon Ter-Petrosyan was committed to ending the conflict but there were complications.[424]

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[417] "Alteration in Trade Routes Urged," *Kayhān*, October 30, 1991, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-91-224).
[418] The term "Western Armenia" is used to refer to the eastern part of the Turkish state.
[419] "Armenian Community Commemorates 1915 Massacre," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 24, 1989, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-89-078).
[420] "Surat-e mashruh-e mozākerāt-e Majles-e Showrā-ye Eslāmi: dowreh-ye sevom, ejlāsi-ye chahārom, doshanbeh, haftom-e ordibehesht mah 1371" (Islamic Consultative Assembly, April 27, 1992), https://www.ical.ir//UploadedData/284/Contents/636514334761819264.pdf.
[421] "Surat-e Mashruh-e Mozākerāt-e Majles-e Showrā-Ye Eslāmi: Dowreh-Ye Sevom, Ejlāsi-Ye Dovvom, Yekshanbeh, Dovvom-e Ordibehesht Mah 1369" (Islamic Consultative Assembly, April 22, 1990), https://www.ical.ir//UploadedData/284/Contents/636504155914317785.pdf.
[422] "Further on Azerbaijani Delegation's Visit," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 11, 1992, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-049).
[423] "Envoy to Armenia Returns; Comments on Peace Prospects," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, September 12, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-176).
[424] "Armenian Leader: 'Serious' Bid to End Conflict," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 8, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-173).

However, the narratives that were trying to locate Armenia in the subject position of Muslim oppressors did not disappear. Specifically, various conservative outlets in Iran were presenting Armenia as part of a global conspiracy. For instance, the Kayhān newspaper usually drew comparisons with the events in Karabagh and other conflicts involving Muslims. In August 1993, it reported: "What the Serbs and Armenians are doing now is roughly the same strategy used by the Zionists when they began to occupy Palestine… Promoting aggression against the Muslim people has become part of the so-called "new world order" scenario."[425] Such statements can be seen in the Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi newspaper as well. For example, they reported that "The Armenians are enjoying the overt and covert support of Western circles and Moscow."[426]

In all, different contrasting narratives were present that created a dispersed discursive space. As a result, no precise policy option emerged, and the Iranian government opted for a rather passive position. The equivalential articulation of Armenia's subject position as an enemy oppressing a brotherly Muslim community did not manage to become hegemonic. However, it still created difficulties for developing friendly relations during the war in Nagorno-Karabagh.

The situation changed once the ceasefire agreement was signed. The discourses of "Armenian oppressors" were becoming marginal, and the Iranian government had the opportunity to be more proactive in relations with its northern neighbour. The first major step was the visit of a high-ranking delegation from Armenia to Iran in November 1994.

[425] "New World Order Seen Promoting Aggression Against Muslims," *Kayhān International*, August 16, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-162).
[426] "Armenia Said Enjoying 'Overt' Support of West," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, September 19, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-186).

They also travelled to Kish Island to explore investment opportunities.[427] The following month, Vahan Bayburdyan presented his credentials to President Rafsanjani as the new ambassador of Armenia to Iran. Rafsanjani expressed hope that the ceasefire would revive the trade and cooperation in the region.[428]

Ties with Armenia acquired new importance once it became clear that Iran's five per cent share in the Caspian oil consortium was cancelled. In the search for new options for cooperation, the Iranian government started actively working with Armenia and Turkmenistan. In April 1995, the first foreign ministerial session was held in Tehran to discuss the expansion of economic relations.[429] In this regard, Foreign Minister Veleyati stated:

> Such cooperation helps to ensure security, tranquility, and stability in this sensitive area in the Caucasus… Both the current tripartite cooperation among Iran, Armenia, and Turkmenistan and another upcoming tripartite session among Iran, Ukraine, and Turkmenistan will cement the bilateral relations that started several years ago between the Islamic Republic of Iran and regional countries.[430]

In August of the same year, the sides signed several trade agreements in the fields of energy, transport, commerce, and banking. In addition, a proposal was put forward to establish a

[427] "Armenian Economic Delegation Visits Kish Island," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, November 26, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-229).
[428] "Armenian Envoy Presents Credentials to Rafsanjani," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, December 20, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-245).
[429] "Iranian, Turkmen, Armenian Ministerial Session Held," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, April 8, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-069).
[430] "Benefits of Talks with Armenia, Turkmenistan Seen," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 6, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-070).

joint transportation company.[431] In total, four such tripartite meetings were held to discuss viable options for promoting trade.[432]

Progress was made in other fields as well. When Armenia's Prime Minister Hrant Bagratyan visited Iran, the two sides discussed providing visa waivers to truck drivers in order to expand bilateral trade.[433] There were renewed negotiations on supplying gas to Armenia. The sides also came to an agreement on building a power plant on the Aras River.[434] In addition, remarks on Armenia and Iran being transit routes for each other were becoming more frequent.[435]

In general, relations with Armenia registered modest but steady improvements after the ceasefire agreement. It is also important to note that there was no constant tension hovering in the air, such as in the case of Azerbaijan. The Islamic Republic did not have the same anxiety towards its ties with Armenia, and the latter's behaviour was not interpreted as disappointing or deviating from its "natural" path. In addition, increasing Russian influence in Armenia that was becoming more evident during the last years of Rafsanjani's presidency did not trigger any substantial concerns in Iran.[436]

Such a position was a result of several factors. First of all, the Iranian side did not have the same expectations as in the case of Azerbaijan. There were references to common historical

[431] "Trade Accords Concluded with Turkmenistan, Armenia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 22, 1995, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-164).
[432] "Rafsanjani Receives Turkmen, Armenian Foreign Ministers," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 21, 1996, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-015).
[433] "Visit to Boost Ties," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 2, 1995, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-086).
[434] "Armenian Ambassador Comments on Cooperation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 19, 1995, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-243).
[435] "Rafsanjani Addresses Agreements with Turkmenistan," *Tehran IRIB Television First Program Network*, July 5, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-132).
[436] Stephen Page, "The Creation of a Sphere of Influence: Russia and Central Asia," *International Journal* 49, no. 4 (December 1, 1994): 788–813, https://doi.org/10.1177/002070209404900404.

and cultural heritage being the foundation of friendly relations, but such narratives did not provide interpretations on what interests Armenia should have and what political path it must follow. It can be argued that the absence of religious affinities played a key role here. Armenia was not included in Iran's visions of regional integration, where Islam had a key role. It was not present in other resistance discourses either. There were no articulations about the Islamic Revolution having any importance for Armenians. These are the conditions that made Armenia different from Azerbaijan, where articulations were mostly formulated in the framework of the logic of resistance communities. Hence, having limited influence in Armenia was not perceived to be a loss such as in the case of Azerbaijan.

Secondly, the Iranian side was more comfortable with having Russian rather than Turkish and, consequently, Western influence in the region. Hence, Russia's dominant role in Armenia was not seen as a major issue. During the final years of Rafsanjani's presidency, the Islamic Republic acknowledged Moscow's hegemonic position in the region. As stated above, it was not a comfortable choice for Iran but appeared a viable option for the purpose of counterbalancing western influence.

This narrative was especially popular among policymakers and experts in Iran. Seyyed Rasoul Mousavi, the director of the Centre of the Study of Central Asia and the Caucasus, stated that the opinion in Iran towards Russia had been mostly negative, but it could and should change.[437] He argued that cooperation with Russia was very promising. Firouz Dowlat-Abadi, the Economic Adviser to the Iranian Foreign Minister, argued that both Russia and Iran had been damaged by the West and stated that Russia would not take the path preferred by the West.[438] He advocated for closer ties with Russia considering their

[437] Seyyed Rasoul Mousavi, "Rus-ha dar cheshm-e Irāniyān, āsib shenasi-ye ravābet-e irān va Rusiye," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 4, no. 12 (1996 1995): 15–60.
[438] Firouz Dowlat-Abadi, "Irān-Rusiye: jābejāyi-ye nakhbegān, hamgerāyi-ye rahbarān," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 4, no. 12 (1996 1995): 69–74.

shared interests. Elaheh Koulaei also emphasized the differences between Russia and the West. When talking about Moscow's opposition to NATO's expansion, she argued that there was much ground for Iran and Russia to work together.[439]

In this context, Russia's influence in Armenia was considered acceptable, as it would limit the role of western actors in the country. In their book about politics in Armenia, Jalil Roshandel and Rafik Gholipouri openly accept Moscow's primacy in the country and presents a vision of Iran-Armenia relations that was based on considering Russia's interests in the region as well.[440] In other words, we can witness the same Russo-centrism in Iran's attitude towards Armenia.

Finally, peaceful relations with neighbouring states were a priority for Rafsanjani's government. He emphasized this principle during the meeting with Armenian Foreign Minister Raffi Hovhannisian in February 1992 as one of the preconditions for establishing ties.[441] In the post-war rehabilitation period, Iran was trying to avoid making new enemies. The narratives of building stable and friendly ties with neighbours were dominant. As stated above, it was often presented that Iran was prepared to establish relations with any country other than Israel and the United States.

In conclusion, Iran's relations with Armenia had a slow start primarily due to the conflict with Azerbaijan. However, they evolved into friendly ties in the post-war period. Iran and Armenia had the necessary historical and cultural commonalities that made the sides comfortable to develop relations with each other. Yet, those commonalities were not as substantial as in the case of Azerbaijan to cause problematic dynamics in terms of imposing a certain political identity. Iran had more moderate expectations from Armenia that made it

[439] Elaheh Koulaei, "Rusiye, gharb va Irān," *Motale'ate Āsiā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 4, no. 12 (1996 1995): 75–94.
[440] Jalil Roshandel and Rafik Gholipouri, *Siyāsat va hokumat dar Ārmanestān*, 2nd edition (Tehran: Vezārat-e Omur-e Khārejeh, 1996).
[441] "Armenian Foreign Minister Arrives, Meets Velayati."

possible to accept Russia's dominance in the country and consider its interests when making decisions regarding bilateral ties. As long as Armenia was not perceived to be in the West's orbit, friendly ties were presented as the most preferable option.

Iran-Georgia Encounters: Exploring Options

Iran's policies towards Georgia were mainly exploratory. Economic cooperation and, to some extent, regional stability were the two aspects around which relations between the two states evolved. Among the countries in the South Caucasus, Georgia appeared in Iranian discourses the least. Its subject positions were mainly articulated in the framework of the logic of sovereign states; hence, references to shared identities and resistance politics were minimal.

Iran recognized Georgia's independence on December 25, 1991. The first official contacts were made in early February 1992, when Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Mohammad Besharati met with the representatives of the Georgian government in Tehran. He stated that the Islamic Republic was ready to expand economic, political, and cultural ties with the newly independent Republic.[442] This meeting was followed by the visit of Mahmoud Vaezi's delegation to Tbilisi in May 1992, where the two sides signed a communique on establishing diplomatic relations between the two states.[443]

However, the first major step in bilateral relations was made only in June 1992, when the Georgian Prime Minister visited Tehran. Issues related to trade and transit routes were the main topics of negotiation. The Georgian side wanted to gain access to the Persian Gulf via Iran, and Iranians aimed to use Georgia's territory for connecting with the European

[442] "Envoy to Iran Meets Deputy Foreign Minister," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 4, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-028).
[443] "Relations with Iran Established," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, May 15, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-096).

markets.[444] The two sides signed five agreements and a memorandum of understanding related to transportation and economic cooperation.[445]

The timing of this visit is worthy of note. Only five months after Iran recognized Georgia's independence, tangible measures were taken to start bilateral cooperation. The attempts made prior to that were minimal. As opposed to the cases of Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Iranian government was not as invested in relations with Georgia and did not show the same rush for getting engaged with it.

The next major event in bilateral ties was Eduard Shevardnadze's visit to Iran in January 1993. He was welcomed as a familiar face, who had experience in working with Iranians. The fact that he had met Imam Khomeini was emphasized as a good start for bilateral collaboration. In such a receptive environment, the visit became a landmark event in relations between the two countries. Trade was one of the central topics of the trip. The Georgian side expressed interest in purchasing Iranian gas and oil by-products.[446] The two countries also made an agreement to study their transit facilities for the purpose of upgrading them and developing commercial ties.[447] Other issues that were discussed included banking, tourism, housing construction, and so forth. In total, 15 agreements were signed between the sides.

It is noteworthy that, alongside economic matters, cooperation on keeping regional stability was also discussed during Shevardnadze's trip. This matter was highlighted during his meeting with Khamenei, where the latter warned the Georgian side about external powers

[444] "Delivers Shevardnadze Letter," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, June 14, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-115).
[445] "Officials Sign Accords," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, June 16, 1992, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-92-116).
[446] "Comments on Talks," *IRIB Television First Program Network*, January 20, 1993, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-012).
[447] "Iran, Georgia Plan Gulf, Caspian, Black Sea Link," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 21, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-013).

attempting to undermine their joint initiatives.[448] Also, an agreement was signed between the two sides, where they committed to maintaining peace and stability in the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea region.[449] They also agreed to cooperate on international platforms for this purpose. Moreover, the Iranian side occasionally offered their assistance to settle the conflict in Abkhazia. For instance, during a meeting with the Georgian Foreign Minister, Hasan Rouhani, the Deputy Speaker of the Majles, stated that the Islamic Republic was ready to help the Georgian government to settle its domestic disputes.[450] A similar offer was made by President Rafsanjani during his trip to Georgia in April 1995.[451]

The emphasis on commercial ties and mutual commitment to regional stability remained the key aspects of bilateral relations during the following years as well. However, the progress made in this regard was not substantial. One aspect that shows Iran-Georgia ties had not moved forward substantially was the fact that the same issues were being discussed time and again during mutual visits.[452] There were constant remarks that the two sides were ready to cooperate on various matters, but no practical steps were taken. Iran's offers to help Georgia settle its domestic disputes remained on paper as well.

Consequently, there was an impression that bilateral cooperation was underdeveloped and needed a boost. As in the case of Armenia, the importance of this issue increased due to the cancellation of Iran's five per cent share in the Caspian consortium. Since this event

[448] "Comments on Talks."
[449] "Received by Shevardnadze," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 20, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-012).
[450] "Meets with Majles Official," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 17, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-034).
[451] "Rafsanjani in Georgia; Rafsanjani Ends Visit to Georgia; News Conference with Shevardnadze.," *ITAR-TASS*, April 24, 1995, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3uMHYnx.
[452] "Velayati Returns from Georgia; Communique Released," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 28, 1993, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-93-104); "Officials Discuss Oil, Trade," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 16, 1994, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-034); "Rafsanjani Confers with Visiting Georgian Official," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, September 1, 1994, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-94-170).

triggered the Iranian government to revisit its foreign policy options, relations with Georgia appeared on the horizon. Specifically, it was decided that President Rafsanjani would pay a visit to Georgia. During his trip, a number of agreements were signed concerning transportation, customs, mutual trade, as well as cooperation in the fields of education and science.[453] The issue of supplying gas was raised again. Rafsanjani also stated that Iranians were prepared to make investments in Georgia. Specifically, the Iranian government was ready to provide a short loan for establishing a hydroelectric power plant.

The visit was followed by measures to revitalize the ties. In March 1996, it was announced that Iran was going to invest nine million U.S. Dollars in Georgia's hydroelectric industries.[454] In May 1996, Iran and Georgia signed an agreement to invest in the Sarakhs trade zone. It was estimated that 14 Georgian companies would benefit from this initiative.[455] To facilitate commercial ties, they also signed an agreement on eliminating double taxation and establishing customs cooperation during Iran's Vice President Hassan Habibi's visit to Georgia.[456]

Despite these measures, it was still considered that Iran-Georgia relations were underdeveloped, and there was potential for further expansion. Rafsanjani himself stated about it during a meeting with Georgian Minister of State Niko Lekishvilie.[457] On the other hand, the Iranian side anticipated facing limitations when trying to deepen ties with Tbilisi. These limitations were primarily related to the role of the United States. Rafsanjani

[453] "Elaborates on Visits," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 22, 1995, Supplied by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-078).
[454] "Iran to Invest 9m Dollars in Georgian Electricity Industry Expansion," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 28, 1996, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3dZeMTC.
[455] "Iran-Georgia Joint Investment in Sarakhs Trade Zone," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 9, 1996, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2Qctizg.
[456] "Iran, Georgia Sign Agreements on Taxation, Customs, Industrial Cooperation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 3, 1996, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3tgu8tq.
[457] "Iranian President Calls for Expansion of Iranian-Georgian Relations," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, December 23, 1996, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3wNChYv.

mentioned them right after his visit.[458] It was also acknowledged that Turkey had great importance for Georgia as its biggest trade partner.[459] Hence, if the Georgian government had to make a choice, the ties with Iran would not be prioritized.

In Iran, this situation was accepted without much anxiety, unlike in the Azerbaijani case. The reason is that the stakes regarding the relations with Georgia were not as high. The one issue that was presented as a concern was the possibility of Georgia becoming a NATO member. This is when Russia appeared in the picture as the primary actor that could prevent such a development. Hence, it was argued that Iran should make sure it did not violate Russian interests when advancing its ties with Georgia.[460]

In all, the case of Iran-Georgia relations is illustrative of how Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus can take many shapes. In this particular instance, a rather disengaged and, one might say, reluctant attitude can be observed. Business occupied the central place in Iran's policies towards Georgia alongside occasional references to peace and stability in the region. Expectations from relations with Tbilisi were not very high, and it seemed that the Iranian government acknowledged the limitations of cooperation between the two countries. As a result, other than several commercial initiatives, Rafsanjani's administration did not make substantial investments for establishing comprehensive bilateral cooperation.

Conclusion

The start of Rafsanjani's presidency was symbolic in terms of making a transition to a less confrontational period in Iranian foreign affairs. It was a time when the longevity of the

[458] "Rafsanjani's 'First' Friday Prayers Sermon," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 28, 1995, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-95-084).
[459] "Iran: Shevardnadze's Visit to Turkey, Russia's Approach Viewed," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 3, 1996, Translation by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report. Near East & South Asia (FBIS-NES-96-067).
[460] Dowlat-Abadi, "Irān-Rusiye: jābejāyi-ye nakhbegān, hamgerāyi-ye rahbarān."

Islamic Republic as a political entity became the primary mission. The logic of difference became more dominant in Iranian foreign policy articulations, leading to a complexification of the discursive space and different situational practices that escaped binary articulations.

There was a multiplicity of Iranian subject positions, such as a compliant state, a vanguard for Muslims' rights, a regional power, etc. In this environment, different narratives on Iran's place and interests in the South Caucasus emerged, giving a rather fluid character to its foreign policy dynamics. Specifically, there were both ambitious attempts to increase Iran's influence in the region and cautious and often hesitant behaviour concerning various issues.

On the one hand, Rafsanjani's administration managed to defuse many threats in the newly emerged volatile regional environment and avoided creating liabilities for the Iranian state. Since the South Caucasus appeared on the horizon in a period of transition for the Islamic Republic, there was no strong symbolic attachment to the region articulated through a highly antagonistic discourse. This factor helped to have a variety of credible policy options. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, acting as a mediator and voicing criticism were articulated as sufficient measures for fulfilling Iran's obligation to support oppressed communities. This flexibility also helped to introduce a nuanced understanding of Otherness in the case of Russia and Turkey that escaped friend vs. enemy binaries. It helped to avoid creating outright adversarial relations with them. Instead, the subject positions of a competitor or a collaborator were introduced. Finally, Iran's cautious approach and emphasis on economic cooperation helped to establish working relations with the newly independent states in the South Caucasus.

On the other hand, the Islamic Republic had far-reaching ambitions and high expectations. Rafsanjani's administration planned to be actively engaged in the affairs of this new regional space and simultaneously limit the presence of its antagonistic Others. In particular, the Iranian visions of multipolarity with politically independent regions was extrapolated here.

Islam was a key unifying factor around which a particular understanding of the Economic Cooperation Organization became dominant in the Islamic Republic. In the case of the Caspian Sea, Rafsanjani's administration had a similar vision of having an enclosed regional structure.

Alongside these regional initiatives, Rafsanjani's administration anticipated having a noticeable influence on developments related to peace and stability in the South Caucasus, especially in the case of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. Its efforts of mediation were a recognitive practice that had the objective of validating Iran's primacy in regional affairs and providing a sense of control. In addition, it was argued that Iran should be actively involved in a conflict where the rights of a Muslim community were at stake. Hence, the mediation was to validate the agency of the Islamic Republic as a flagbearer of Islamic principles. After losing this leverage, the Iranian side became a residual actor – a position that triggered constant frustration till the end of the war.

Another expectation was bringing the Republic of Azerbaijan into Iran's orbit with the help of religious and cultural affinities. Azerbaijan was not seen as merely a neighbouring country. In the framework of the logic of resistance communities, there were narratives on Iran having a special bond with it. The Islamic Revolution was considered to have importance for the people of Azerbaijan as well. It often led to articulations on Iranians and Azerbaijanis being part of one community. Such identifications were not specified, but they carried the assumption that the two countries were meant to have deep political affiliations. Since this position was not shared in Azerbaijan, there was often tension between them deriving from the contradictions in their visions.

The presence of the two notions of active engagement and cautious behaviour often created clashing articulations of interests, obligations, and policy options. In certain cases, Rafsanjani's administration tried to do both, leading to oscillations in Iran's foreign policy.

On other occasions, the Iranian side was simply undecided, which created hesitance in its behaviour. There were also situations when it had to make uncomfortable choices, such as the case of band-wagoning with Russia in order to counter western influence in the region.

In all, there was no one particular vision regarding the South Caucasus in Iranian foreign policy discourses. The region was not seen as a homogenous political entity. It becomes evident when looking into discourses depicting Iranian perspectives of regionalism. The bilateral ties with the three states in the South Caucasus were different from one another; hence, there was no overarching approach in this regard either. As a result, we witness a combination of various narratives and policies that show the nuanced character of Iranian foreign policy in the region.

Khatami's Presidency and the South Caucasus: Change or Continuity?

Introduction

Khatami's presidency was assumed to bring new perspectives to Iran's foreign policy narratives. At the time, his Dialogue among Civilizations approach was seen as a transformative move that could have significant ramifications for regional politics. Yet, the analysis below shows that this new foreign policy paradigm was vague and mostly reproduced the previously existing discourses about many issues.

Dialogue among Civilizations was a reaction to the anxiety caused by incompatibilities at the most sedimented level of Iran's agency. As stated above, the social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities, which defined the common sense of Iranian foreign policy discourses, were an inconvenient fit. The idea of dialogue, which presupposed a more conciliatory tone, was used to show that being a cooperative member of the international system and challenging its key principles at the same time was possible.

However, other than setting a new tone, this framework did not have much to offer. There was significant uncertainty regarding its applicability to different regional affairs, especially the situation in the South Caucasus. Therefore, the tendencies that had emerged during Rafsanjani's period kept their presence. Iran's behaviour was still defined by a fundamental duality between trying to socialize in the pre-existing regional environment and calling for changing it dramatically by limiting the presence of western actors. Oscillating between the two was the norm, creating difficulties for the Islamic Republic to adopt a clear position in many cases.

The other major feature of Iran's policies was the dissonance between its aspirations of being a crucial regional player and the lack of control over developments in the South Caucasus. This situation was generative of anxiety, which often led to recognitive practices, where Iran tried to perform its aspirant identity mostly in a reactive manner. For instance, Iran's attitude towards regional conflict was primarily shaped by dissatisfaction with its residual role.

Finally, there was no significant strategic reflection on policies in the South Caucasus. The region did not receive much attention, as Khatami's administration was preoccupied with other issues, such as mending relations with the West. In this situation, many problems were dealt with through habitual discursive practices. While the latter did not lead to much progress, they provided a sense of certainty in times of crisis. Specifically, routine communication with the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia often helped to deescalate tensions and maintain a cordial environment amidst major changes in the region.

The Broader Context of Foreign Policy Discourses

Mohammed Khatami's ascent to power was a surprising development for many in Iran. A figure, who had mostly been in the shadows of Iranian domestic politics, won a landslide victory during the presidential elections on May 23, 1997, that became known as the Epic of 2nd of Khordad (*Hemāseh-ye dovvom-e khordād*).[461] This surprise was accompanied by expectations for major changes. There was much excitement that the new reformist president could steer the Islamic Republic toward a more democratic future.

As a supporter of *velāyat-e faqih,* Khatami emphasized the role of Islam in politics and the necessity to defend the existing system. On the other hand, he attached great importance to democratic principles. Combining the two raised the widely discussed question about

[461] Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

authority: was it popular or divine? Khatami made an attempt to reconcile the two notions by introducing the concept of "religious democracy" *(mardomsālāri-ye dini)*.[462] As Sadeghi-Borujerdi illustrates, it was the idea of *fallibility* that Khatami tried to apply in his epistemological position to make the combination of guardianship *(velāyat)* and representation *(vekālat)* possible.[463] He argued that people were not infallible: they made mistakes and could not have an absolutist claim about truth. Hence, interpretations of Islam should not be dogmatic, and there should be tolerance towards alternative narratives. In this way, he tried to advocate relative pluralism within the boundaries of the constitution. Stressing the importance of tolerance and pluralism were key in formulating the central role of civil society, where different perspectives were shared in a respectful manner. Accordingly, having a dialogue was considered a crucial factor.

These ideas were in the foundation of the flagship foreign policy approach of Khatami's government, generally known as *Dialogue among Civilizations*. The principles of pluralism, respect, and constructive communication were used to formulate a new attitude towards international affairs. Below, it is shown how these ideas were introduced in particular foreign policy discourses and whether they brought any drastic changes to defining Iran's interests and positions.

Dialogue among Civilizations: A New Policy?

Dialogue among Civilizations was articulated in opposition to Samuel Huntington's theory of "clash of civilizations" to showcase that it was possible to reach a common ground in order to tackle global challenges.[464] In a volume published in 2007 called "Tehran Papers,"

[462] Shabnam Holliday, "Khatami's Islamist-Iranian Discourse of National Identity: A Discourse of Resistance," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (April 1, 2010): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530191003661088.
[463] Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and Its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran* (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[464] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations.

various scholars and key figures in Khatami's administration tried to illustrate the conceptual foundations of this approach in retrospect.[465] The Habermasian communicative action was presented as its ontological basis. In this respect, having differences was not seen as a presupposition for enmity, and it was assumed that an optimal outcome could be reached through dialogue.

Khatami first talked about this approach in his inaugural speech at the Iranian Majles in August 1997. He stated: "The government must emphasize that in our world Dialogue among Civilizations is an absolute imperative. We shall avoid any course of action that may foster tension. We shall have relations with any state that respects our independence."[466] The call for reducing tension with other actors in international relations was repeated multiple times in his consecutive statements. His interview with CNN's Christian Amanpour is noteworthy in this respect. Here, Khatami made a rather unconventional move as the leader of the Islamic Republic by complimenting the American civilization. He stated:

> The American civilization is founded upon the vision, thinking, and manners of the Puritans… the significance of this civilization is in the fact that liberty found religion as a cradle for its growth, and religion found protection of liberty as its divine calling. Therefore, liberty and faith never clashed. And as we see, even today Americans are a religious people. Therefore, the Anglo-American approach to religion relies on the principle that religion and liberty are consistent and compatible… We feel that what we seek is what the founders of the American civilization were also pursuing four centuries ago. This is why we sense an intellectual affinity with the essence of the American civilization.[467]

The interview shows how Khatami tried to illustrate the compatibility of religion and democratic principles by arguing that the same notion was present in the foundations of the American civilization. The similarity was used to emphasize the shared ground for dialogue and change the previously dominant confrontational attitude.

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[465] Mohammed Khatami et al., *Civilizational Dialogue and Political Thought: Tehran Papers*, ed. Fred Dallmayr and Abbas Manoochehri, Updated edition (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).
[466] Khatami, *Islam, Liberty and Development*.
[467] Mohammad Khatami, Transcript of Interview with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, CNN, January 7, 1998, http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html.

This new tendency was welcomed by many international actors. It helped Khatami halt the tension with the European Union that was triggered by the so-called Mykonos case.[468] There was an improvement in the ties with the United Kingdom after Khatami stated that the Iranian government was not going to carry out Khomeini's fatwa on Salman Rushdie.[469] Another indicator of positive tendencies was Madeleine Albright's public apology for the intervention of the United States in toppling Iran's Prime Minister Mosaddegh in 1953.[470] Dialogue among Civilizations was also used to work towards a rapprochement with the Arab states.[471]

So, does this mean that Dialogue among Civilizations brought substantial changes to the way Iran's agency, interests, and policies were articulated in the field of international affairs? A survey of President Khatami's and Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi's statements show otherwise. First of all, it is important to state that Dialogue among Civilizations was not a fully developed theory when it was first introduced. Accompanied by another vaguely defined term "policy of détente," it was mainly articulated in foreign policy speeches in a declarative manner. It was not specified how the endeavours of reconciliation needed to be extrapolated in various foreign policy cases. Besides, Khatami stated that the dialogue was to be carried out primarily among scholars, artists, and writers representing different civilizations. In this regard, the initiative was perceived more in the field of cultural affairs rather than political relations. Another reason for vagueness and difficulty in applicability is the selected subject of reference. It is hard to state how a certain civilization is demarcated

[468] Edward Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami*, 1st edition (I.B. Tauris, 2016).
[469] Barbara Crossette, "Iran Drops Rushdie Death Threat, And Britain Renews Teheran Ties," *The New York Times*, September 25, 1998, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/25/world/iran-drops-rushdie-death-threat-and-britain-renews-teheran-ties.html.
[470] Madeleine Albright, "Remarks before the American-Iranian Council," March 17, 2000, US Department of State Archive, https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/2000/000317.html.
[471] R. K. Ramazani, "The Emerging Arab-Iranian Rapprochement: Towards An Integrated U.S. Policy In The Middle East?," *Middle East Policy* 6, no. 1 (1998): 45–62, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.1998.tb00293.x.

and who speaks on its behalf.[472] As a result, it became rather unclear who should carry out the dialogue and what they represented.

What was specific in the narratives about Dialogue among Civilizations was the same tendency of a status-seeking state illustrated in the previous chapter. The Islamic Republic had not reached its aspirant identity of becoming a major player in global and regional affairs. In an ever-globalizing environment, its engagement in international and regional initiatives was rather limited due to the strained relations with the apparent hegemon of the time. Washington had managed to curtail Iran's economic opportunities by measures such as creating challenges for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and imposing economic sanctions.[473]

Hence, during Khatami's presidency, there was a sense that Iran was isolated, while the world was moving forward at a fast pace. The recognition that the Islamic Republic desired from the international community had not been achieved, perpetuating the anxiety about its status. In this situation, Dialogue among Civilizations became a recognitive practice for performing an aspirant identity. Specifically, Khatami's administration used the prism of dialogue to articulate Iran's "rightful" position in the international system in a more conciliatory and less revisionist way. In other words, the discourses that were dominant during Rafsanjani's administration were reintroduced in a more "acceptable" way.

Much like in the case of the previous administration, Khatami and Foreign Minister Kharrazi were critical of the inequality in the world and called for systemic changes. For instance, during his speech at the UN General Assembly, Khatami stated: "The fantasy of a unipolar world ruled by a single superpower is but an illusion, indicating the failure of its holders to

[472] For more on the topic see: Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralist Perspectives*, 1st edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).
[473] Suzanne Maloney, *Iran's Political Economy since the Revolution* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

keep pace with history."[474] He went on claiming that the UN Security Council needed to be restructured. At the UN Millennium Assembly, he said:

> … the structure of power in our contemporary world must be reformed. In a global society – whose constituents, much like equal individuals within nation-states, are nations of equal right and dignity – diverse cultures and civilizations can and should work collectively to build a moral and humane world with liberty and progress for all. The fundamental question is whether the United Nations is capable of revisiting and reconstructing its foundations on the basis of such vision.[475]

The remarks about multipolarity were accompanied by calls to non-Western entities to stand united and claim their respectful position.[476] During the 12th Summit of the Non-Alignment Movement, Khatami argued that the movement should start playing a more active role in global affairs by rejecting hegemonic tendencies and reaching justice and independence.[477] At a conference on Iran-Arab cooperation, he expressed concerns that the Ummah was dispersed and, consequentially, unable to advocate for its "rightful position in the world."[478] Foreign Minister Kharrazi also raised such points.[479] For instance, he stated that the states in the Persian Gulf should take collective measures to achieve justice and independence. He called for institutionalizing the dialogue. One of the steps in this regard was establishing a

[474] Mohammad Khatami, "Speeches and Viewpoints: Speech Delivered by H.E. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the UN General Assembly," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1,2 (1998): 128.
[475] Mohammad Khatami, "Speeches and Views: Address by Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Millennium Assembly of the United Nations," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 12, no. 3 (2000): 513.
[476] Mohammad Khatami, "Tahlil-hā va gozāresh-hā: payām-e riyāst-e Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān be hamāyesh-e 'hamkāri-hā-ye Irani-Arabi,'" *Siyāsat-e khāreji* 13, no. 4 (1999): 1233–36; Mohammad Khatami, "Payām-e ra'is jomhur-e Eslāmi-ye Irān be hamāyesh-e cheshm-andāz-e tahavvolāt-e Khāvar-e Miyāneh," *Siyāsat-e khāreji* 15, no. 1 (2001): 197–98.
[477] Mohammad Khatami, "Speeches and Viewpoints: Text of Speech Delivered by His Excellency Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the 12th Summit of the Non-Alignment Movement," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1,2 (1998).
[478] Mohammad Khatami, "Speeches and Viewpoints: The Message of the President of I.R. of Iran to the Conference of Irano-Arab Cooperation," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 4 (1999): 658.
[479] Kamal Kharrazi, "Jahān-e eslāmi: zarurat-e hamgerāyi-e talāsh-hā," *Ruydād-hā va tahlil-hā*, no. 177 (2004): 29–32.

security system in the region.[480] Similar remarks were made about the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).[481]

These tendencies can be seen in the narratives about globalization as well. It was argued that Iran should become an active player in international affairs in order to receive the benefits of globalization. In this regard, Foreign Minister Kharrazi stated: "globalization as an economic, cultural, and social reality should not just be allowed to happen; it is a reality that we can and we should collectively control."[482] An active role was considered necessary; otherwise, it was assumed that globalization could lead to Americanization and, hence, assimilation.[483] As Khatami argued: "Globalization should not be utilized to open greater markets for a few to assimilate national cultures into a uniform global one."[484] In their perspectives, the desired path of globalization meant emphasizing national and regional identities. As Kharrazi claimed, regionalism was not against globalization, and the third world nations should use it to change the direction of the respective trends in their favour.[485]

The discourses about multipolarity, respect, and dialogue show that the aim of Khatami's administrations was to have Iran accepted as a full member of the international community without giving up the revisionist causes that challenged the fundamental features of that very community. This means that the Dialogue among Civilizations reproduced the two social

[480] Kamal Kharrazi, "Speeches and Viewpoints: Statement by Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the 8th Persian Gulf Seminar on Regional Approaches in the Persian Gulf," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1,2 (1998); Kamal Kharrazi, "Sokhanrāni-ye vazir-e omur-e khārejeh dar pānzdahomin hamāyesh-e Khalij-e Fārs," *Ruydād-hā va tahlil-hā*, no. 189 (2005): 7–9.
[481] Kamal Kharrazi, "Speeches and Viewpoints: Text of the Remarks by Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Coordinating Ministerial Meeting of the OIC," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2000): 534–38.
[482] Kharrazi.
[483] Akhavan Zanjani et al., "Effects of Globalization on the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2000): 1–30.
[484] Khatami, "At the Millennium Assembly of the United Nations," 514.
[485] "Mosāhebe: goftegu ba doktor Kamāl Kharāzi dar mowred-e siyāsat-e khāreji-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān," *Motāle'āte Khāvar-e Miyāneh*, no. 29 (2002): 5–16; Kamal Kharrazi, "Speeches and Viewpoints: Speech by Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the I.R. Iran at the Conference on Irano-Arab Cooperation," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 4 (1999).

logics of resistance communities and sovereign states while trying to relax their potential contestability.

However, this recognitive practice did not fully solve the ontological anxiety concerning Iran's self-identification. The notion of seeking validation and constructing meanings through social antagonism did not disappear. Hence, the image of the United States and Israel as the antagonistic Others of the Islamic Republic were still prevalent. For instance, Kharrazi heavily criticized Israel's expansionist policies and stated that Palestine belonged to Palestinians when presenting the foreign policy priorities of the Islamic Republic to the heads of the Diplomatic Corps in Tehran.[486] Khatami was also very explicit in his critical remarks about Israel.[487] As regards the United States, its policies, such as economic sanctions and interventions in other countries, were also condemned.[488] Khatami's speech in January 1998 was quite expressive in this regard. He stated:

> Above all, we have received the greatest harm from the unjust policies of America… Whether before the revolution – as you know – or after the revolution and today too, American politicians behave like masters of the world. They impose sanctions on any place which does not conform to their interests and wish to impose their sanctions on the world by force, not only on us. It is this lordly attitude which has created problems in the world.[489]

Khatami's administration could not fully give up the pre-existing adversarial positions in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. These antagonistic articulations were still necessary for constructing a sense of holistic agency and channelling the foundational anxiety of decentredness towards an external obstacle. Even the narratives that called for dialogue were critical towards western policies for being the hindrance in the path to

[486] Kamal Kharrazi, "Speeches and Viewpoints: Speech Delivered by IRI's Foreign Minister Dr. Kamal Kharrazi at the Gathering of the Heads of Diplomatic Corps Residing in Tehran," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 9, no. 3 (1997): 459–66.
[487] Mohammad Khatami, "Covenant with the Nation," in *Islam, Liberty and Development* (Global Academic Publishing, 1998); Khatami, "At the Millennium Assembly of the United Nations."
[488] Khatami, "At the UN General Assembly."
[489] "President Khatami Pledges to Uphold Khomeini's Legacy" (Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1, January 19, 1998), Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3mDgT3D.

reconciliation. Dialogue among Civilizations was used to make these adversarial discourses more cautious and nuanced. Hence, its primary function was to set a new *tone* and convey the message that Iran was ready to be cooperative despite the many challenges and disagreements.

Uncertainty and Criticism

As it was mainly about setting a new tone to the already existing articulations, Dialogue among Civilizations remained ambiguous and malleable. In a way, it was a manifestation of the political logic of difference, as it tried to break down populist narratives and show articulations of identities beyond the enemy vs. ally binary. It opened up space for having more diverse foreign policy discourses; however, Khatami's administration did not fill that lacuna. While Dialogue among Civilizations set the ground for new narratives, in itself, it was not enough.

As a result, the lack of deliberations from the government led to speculations and criticism about the foreign policy of Khatami's administration. First, it can be seen in the positions of technocrats and experts. In general, they were struggling to understand what had changed in Iran's behaviour.[490] Though many of them welcomed the application of Dialogue among Civilizations, they were uncertain about its ramifications.

The lack of clarity was especially apparent in economic matters. Khatami's administration was criticized for not having economic thinking in its foreign policy.[491] The government's calls for integration and facilitation of trade were accompanied by narratives about political independence and economic self-reliance.[492] Some considered such interpretations

[490] Mohsen Aminezadeh et al., "New Regional Geopolitical Developments and the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1999): 5–48.
[491] Hamid Ahmadi et al., "Iran and the Regional Economic System," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2000): 1–22.
[492] Kamal Kharrazi, "Statement by Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran at Nairobi University," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 12, no. 1 (2000): 122–25.

problematic as they were politicizing economic issues. For instance, Hamid Ahmadi, a professor at Tehran University, argued:

> … if your target is economic growth and development, you should certainly put politics and particularly foreign policy at the service of economy…perhaps one of the reasons for us not having a proper position in the world economic system is that economy was at the service of politics.[493]

In this regard, Kazem Sajjadpour, the head of the Institute of Political and International Studies (IPIS), argued that convoluting economic issues with other matters could harm the image the Islamic Republic was trying to build. He stated: "The attitude behind American sanctions is based on the assumption that Iran is an unusual country with unusual behavior and therefore it should be boycotted. Iran should break this attitude in various arenas."[494]

On the other hand, some officials and experts argued that separating economics from the political was difficult because international economic systems were structured in a way that benefited the developed countries.[495] According to them, fair economic affairs required political transformations. When asked about how the Islamic Republic should pursue such a policy without undermining its endeavours of integration, they pointed at Dialogue among Civilizations as a solution. In a way, it became a self-referential dynamic: Dialogue among Civilizations was used to answer the questions stemming from its own ambiguity. As a result, the issue of clarity did not disappear.

There was a much bigger pushback from conservative circles in Iran. They considered the wave of change associated with Khatami's presidency as a threat to the system. Khatami's reassurances about defending the constitution and the principles of the Revolution were not convincing for them primarily due to his epistemological approach to them. At a meeting with the personnel of the Iranian foreign ministry, Khatami stated: "Islamic Republic of

[493] Ahmadi et al., "Iran and the Regional Economic System," 15–16.
[494] Ahmadi et al., 20.
[495] Zanjani et al., "Effects of Globalization."

Iran's reform exists within the Islamic Revolution, because it is a dynamic movement with great expectations that should come true."[496] The very idea of dynamism was what worried many conservative figures and led to putting immense pressure on Khatami's administration. For instance, many of these conservative actors compared Khatami to Gorbachev, implying that his reforms and attempts at dialogue could lead to the demise of the Islamic Republic.[497] Supreme Leader Khamenei himself reflected on Gorbachev's policies and claimed that the Iranian government should not follow the same path.[498]

The tension between Khatami and the conservative circles is especially apparent when observing the narratives in the immediate aftermath of the mentioned CNN interview. Khatami's remarks about the merits of western civilization in this interview seemed to be in diametric contradiction with Khamenei's speech a month before. At the opening of the 8th OIC Summit, the Supreme Leader heavily criticized the materialistic foundation of the western civilization from which neo-colonial policies were derived. Accordingly, he questioned attempts at reconciliation with the West and cautioned against the "campaign of global arrogance led by the United States against the Islamic Ummah."[499]

In this light, Khatami's remarks raised concerns in conservative circles about possible changes in Iran's policies that went against their convictions. Several days after the CNN interview, the *Kayhān* newspaper heavily criticized it, questioned any idea of

[496] Mohammad Khatami, "Exert from President Khatami's Remarks at the Gathering of the Personnel of the Iranian Foreign Ministry," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 12, no. 1 (2000): 115.
[497] For more on the matter see Zhand Shakibi, *Khatami and Gorbachev: Politics of Change in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the USSR* (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2010).
[498] Ali Khamenei, "Bāyānat dar didār-e mas'ulan va kārgozāran-e nezām-e Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Iran" (Khamenei.ir, 19/04/1379 [09/07/2000]), http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3016&fbclid=IwAR0-R7K4Zxh4JECB6yb3MoN0fv1TTloQ5Hmak9G-4WbT1XoilNyJkNXfOwc.
[499] Ali Khamenei, "Bāyānāt dar āghāz-e hashtomin-e ejlās-e sarān-e keshvarhā-ye eslāmi" (Khamenei.ir, 18/09/1376 [09/12/1997), http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2863&fbclid=IwAR3NaxnqTTFJg_q2VIJX9xOHDmbiI49jABTR6khyugEyxS0Vgw_ttwYeCDw.

rapprochement, and emphasized the necessity to confront American policies.[500] Khamenei himself commented on these matters in his first speech after Khatami's interview. While he did not criticize the president directly, he stated that the interview should not be interpreted as if the Islamic Republic was going to negotiate with the United States. He stated that negotiations with Washington would mean surrender.[501] The same day, Majles Speaker Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri defended Khamenei's remarks and stated that the Islamic Republic would not compromise its principles and start a dialogue with the United States.[502]

This is just one of the many cases when Dialogue among Civilizations, with its implied reconciliatory tendencies, was challenged by conservative figures in Iran, who were still holding substantial power in decision-making processes. If the technocrats and experts were primarily concerned about the lack of substance in this approach, the conservative circles were worried that it actually did have the potential to bring substantial changes. In any case, the uncertainty triggered criticism from many sides that in turn exacerbated the issue of clarity in foreign policy discourses.

Khatami's foreign policy perspectives received the biggest hit after the 9/11 terrorist attack and George Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002, where Iran was included in the so-called "axis of evil."[503] After these developments, the relevance of Dialogue among Civilizations was questioned. It was argued that the post-9/11 policies of the United States were a sign of a return to unilateralism. Besides, identity was securitized again, shrinking the space for constructive and equitable conversation between different cultures and

[500] "Iran: Newspaper Kayhān Criticizes Khatami's CNN Interview," *Kayhān*, January 18, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3a4SsXI.
[501] Ali Khamenei, "Eqāme-ye namāz-e jom'e-ye Tehrān be emānat-e rahbar-e mo'zam-e enqelāb" (Khamenei.ir, 26/10/1376 [17/01/1998), http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=805&fbclid=IwAR0UzzH-poRy6toV0zhhScBqeffgYgudKKflBcCkd-L7EJw4wwu-R_Wot3g.
[502] "Iran: Majles Speaker Praises Khamenei for Anti-US Remarks," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, January 17, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3fZVekN.
[503] George Bush, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," January 29, 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.

civilizations.[504] During a roundtable on the ramifications of these events on the Middle East, several Iranian diplomats and Majles MPs argued that the United States would use the war on terror to put more pressure on Iran. They also stated that Israel was using the 9/11 terrorist attack to amplify the anti-Islam sentiments in the West. Islam was being associated with extremism, undermining the attempts at building a conciliatory environment.[505]

Interestingly enough, narratives about pursuing dialogue did not disappear. Khatami's administration remained loyal to the approach even after these developments.[506] In his speeches, Foreign Minister Kharrazi continued emphasizing the necessity of a dialogue, especially for uniting non-western actors and developing regional projects.[507] However, talking about the approach did not resonate much in the Islamic Republic and abroad. The wave of change, with which it was associated, was weak in the post-9/11 narratives, and discussions about a dialogue resembled more of inertia from the early years of Khatami's presidency.

To summarize, there were many questions about Iran's identity and interests as a foreign policy actor. The foundational contradictions in the social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities prevented reaching a conceptual coherence regarding the Self of the Islamic Republic. This ontological lack was projected towards the antagonistic Other, creating an imitation of completeness that was threatened by an external enemy.

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[504] Seyyed Abdolali Ghavam, "Globalization and the September 11 Events," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2001-2002): 444–55; Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour, "Iran and September 11: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Foreign Policy," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2001-2002): 421–43.

[505] Ziba Farzinnia, "Roundtable on Inspection of the Consequences of Recent Developments for the Middle East," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2002 2001): 512–20.

[506] Mohammad Khatami, "Goftogu-ye farhang-hā va tamaddon-hā," *Bokhārā*, no. 42 (2005): 7–17; Mohammad Khatami, "Goftogu-ye tamaddon-hā va farhang-hā, nafi-ye khoshunat-e talabi, terorizm va jang ast," *Nāmeh-ye farhang*, no. 56 (2005): 56–60.

[507] Kamal Kharrazi, "Remarks in the Ninth International Seminar on the Caspian Sea," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2001): 552–55; Kamal Kharrazi, "Statement at the Turnover Ceremony of the Chairmanship of the Group of 77," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2002): 542–52.

Khatami's Dialogue among Civilizations was an attempt to tone down this antagonism and provide a framework for making the two logics compatible with one another. In the light of his surprising victory in the presidential elections, expectations for change were high. However, the vagueness of the concept made it a floating signifier appropriated by the already existing discourses to reproduce their particular interpretations. As a result, narratives about Iran's agency as a foreign policy actor were reinvigorated but remained dispersed. This was the discursive terrain, in which issues related to the South Caucasus were articulated.

Regional Perspectives and Attempts at Multilateralism

During Khatami's presidency, it was argued that Iran needed to be transformed from a buffer state into an intermediary in the post-Cold War times.[508] In this regard, there was a continuity from Rafsanjani's period. The Islamic Republic was meant to connect the landlocked countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Europe with one another. The idea that Iran should play a bigger role was the point where many discourses intersected. Having more control over the events in the region was the ambition around which Iran's aspirant identity was constituted. However, there was significant uncertainty about how exactly that role should be achieved.

Many argued that the Islamic Republic needed to put forward a clear message and avoid ambiguities. However, delivering that message was not easy, as there was no definitive formulation of Iran's interests in the region. Similar to the discourses during Rafsanjani's period, perspectives about regionalism in the South Caucasus and Central Asia oscillated

[508] Aminezadeh et al., "New Regional Geopolitical Developments and the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

from calls for inclusion and prioritizing cooperation to criticizing any engagement with extra-regional actors, especially Iran's antagonistic Other(s).

On the one hand, the necessity of keeping the United States, NATO, and Israel out of the region kept its significance in Iranian discourses despite the reconciliatory tone that the new president had brought with himself.[509] Narratives about shared religious, historical, cultural, and civilizational features were used to articulate a regional identity, where the presence of external actors was limited.[510] As stated above, Dialogue among Civilizations was also appropriated for reproducing these narratives. The concept celebrated the revival of non-western identities and the necessity to unite them against the unipolar world order. This very emphasis on non-western agency reproduced the narratives on building independent regions. As a result, the presence of the United States and its allies was still articulated as a threat.[511]

On the other hand, staying committed to this attitude created difficulties for creating the above-mentioned image of an intermediary. Acquiring such status was difficult, considering the strained relations with one of the primary actors in international affairs, with whom the other countries of the region aimed to cooperate. Occasionally, the Iranian government showed preparedness to be part of regional projects, where western entities were also present. At the same time, it communicated its dissatisfaction to the states in the region concerning their cooperation with external actors. Both narratives continued to be articulated

[509] Mohammad-Reza Maleki, "Ravābet-e Torkiyeh va Esrā'il va āsār-e ān dar Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz.," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 7, no. 24 (1999): 39–56; Abbas Maleki, "Barresi-ye 'avāmel-e afzāyesh-e risk-e siyāsi dar mantaqe-ye Qafqāz," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* Fall, no. 13 (2001): 29–44; Mohammad Nafisi, "Dastiyābi-ye jomhurihā-ye Āsiyā-i be ābha-ye garm va masā'el-e nāshi az ān.," *Motāle 'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 6, no. 16 (1997): 109–36.
[510] Abbas Maleki, "Eslām dar Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz: barresi-ye nagsh-e Irān," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 6, no. 17 (1997): 27–34; Musa Al-Reza Vahidi, "The Eighth International Seminar on Central Asia and the Caucasus: Past Experience and Future Perspectives," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 6 (2000): 297–304.
[511] Kamal Kharrazi, "Role of Regional Powers in Conflict Resolution and Economic Development," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1999): 7–12.

during Khatami's terms, undermining the attempt at formulating a clear message regarding Iran's position.

It is also noteworthy that Khatami's administration, despite facing such a conundrum, did not put much effort into conceptualizing a particular perspective on regionalism in the South Caucasus. The vagueness concerning Dialogue among Civilizations was especially stark in the perspectives on this region. The interest in designing a new framework had decreased substantially compared to Rafsanjani's period. As Kazem Sajjadpour argued, the region did not receive "balanced attention" from the Islamic Republic. He stated:

> It is an Iranian habit to like something for a certain period of time and then will [*sic*] put it aside as being outmoded. Iran paid great attention to Central Asia [and the South Caucasus] following the collapse of the former Soviet Union but now this attention has been turned toward the Arab world and relations with Europe.[512]

It is hard to determine what caused this arbitrary-looking development. It could be that the Islamic Republic had to prioritize certain foreign policy issues over others, considering the limitations in bureaucratic, financial, and other resources. As the West and the Middle East received most of the attention in the framework of Dialogue among Civilizations, the South Caucasus, as well as Central Asia, remained in the margins. In any case, the result was that the contradictions between securitizing western presence and trying to be part of regional initiatives remained a key issue in the Iranian perspectives about the South Caucasus.

Moving beyond Institution-Building

While duality remained the prevalent feature of Iran's foreign policy approach in the South Caucasus, it was expressed in a new context in Khatami's period. Specifically, the institution-building visions that were dominant during Rafsanjani's presidency started losing their ground. The plausibility of creating indigenous regional structures with the

[512] Assadollah Athari et al., "Foreign Policy of Iran toward Central Asia and the Caucasus," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2001): 37.

Islamic Republic at its centre was questioned. It was argued that the Iranian government had to explore other options for realizing its ambitions in the region.[513]

To a great extent, this shift was based on the experience with the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). It was meant to be the primary means for the Islamic Republic to play an active role in regional configurations and limit the footprint of the West and Israel. However, during Khatami's term, it became clear that the organization was not meeting these expectations. Its presence in Iranian discourses about regional politics started decreasing. In general, ECO became more of a platform for raising different questions rather than the primary framework for dealing with regional affairs.[514]

There were multiple remarks about the organization's underperformance. For instance, when commenting on the 5th Summit of the organization in Almaty, IRNA emphasized the striking differences between the member states.[515] They hindered any attempt at institution-building, a process that had remained in its infancy.[516] Several years later, Iran's Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance Tahmasb Mazaheri criticized the low level of trade between the ECO members, considering it a sign of weakness of the organization.[517]

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[513] Fereydoun Barkeshli, "Ravābet-e Irān va hamsāyegān-e shomāli.," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 6, no. 20 (1997): 7–18.
[514] "Iran: Kharrazi Winds up Two-Nation Tour of Central Asia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 13, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=48V1-P9M0-00KJ-D2MV&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Khatami Inaugurates First ECO Environment Ministers Conference," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 15, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=47G2-71P0-00KJ-D498&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; See also: Herzig, "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia."
[515] "Iran: Paper Warns ECO States about Dangers of Playing 'Caspian Sea Roulette,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 12, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W3S-GDR0-00KJ-D051&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[516] "Iran: Economic Cooperation Organization Officials Discuss Members' Problems," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 11, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W3P-3820-00KJ-D3RR&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[517] "Iranian Minister Calls for the Expansion of Trade among ECO Members," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 3, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, Iranian minister calls for expansion of trade among ECO members.

Another reason for moving beyond an institutionalist approach is closely related to the discourses about globalization. As is shown above, the impression of an ever-connected and rapidly evolving world created a fear of being left behind. This fear was extrapolated on the South Caucasus as well. It was argued in the observed discourses that there was a "sense of rush" in the region to become part of the globalized world by joining different initiatives.[518]

There were multiple narratives on how Washington, Ankara, and Tel Aviv were using that opportunity to strengthen their foothold. Specifically, it was argued that Turkey was becoming a gateway for the United States and Israel to the region. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and NATO's cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan in the framework of the Partnership for Peace initiative were presented as examples of this process.[519] For instance, Foreign Minister Kharrazi expressed concerns regarding the cooperation between Israel and Turkey and its possible ramifications in the region.[520] Deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Aminzadeh stated that Turkey, with the United States and Israel, was taking opportunities away from Iran.[521] Yahya Rahim Safavi, Commander in Chief of the IRGC, argued that the United States was trying to expand NATO into the region through Turkey.[522]

In general, there was an impression that various events were happening in the region at a fast pace. Meanwhile, ECO was not living up to the expectations. Considering the situation,

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[518] Jalil Roshandel, "Nezāmigari dar dariyā-ye Khazar, gerāyesh-e barkhāste az feghdān-e rezhim-e hoghughi," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 7, no. 22 (1998): 11–20.
[519] Amir Reza Darabian, "Role of Georgia's Armenians in the Developments of the Caucasus," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 6, no. 13 (2003 2002): 440–57; Davoud Hermidas-Bavand, "Barresi-ye rishehā-ye ekhtelāf beyn-e Federāsiyon-e Rusiye va Jomhuri-ye Gorjestān," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 39 (2002): 77–86; Maleki, "Ravābet-e Torkiyeh va Esrā'il va āsār-e ān dar Āsiyā-Eye Markazi va Qafqāz."; Maleki, "Barresi-ye 'avāmel-e afzāyesh-e risk-e siyāsi dar mantaqe-ye Qafqāz."
[520] "Iranian Foreign Minister: 'Some Differences' in Talks with Turkish Counterparts," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 13, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W37-T6V0-00KJ-D0WM&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[521] "Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Says Policy towards America Has Changed," *Neshat*, August 22, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mgpenh.
[522] "Iran: Unrest, Presence in Region, US Foreign Policy Aim - Guards Commander," *Iranian Students News Agency*, November 26, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44J0-3BR0-00KJ-D1S5&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

putting effort into revitalizing a certain institution or creating new ones seemed a slow process even with the most optimistic calculations. Therefore, Iran's attention diverted from institution-building towards other means for limiting the presence of its adversaries and having more active engagement in regional affairs.

In the discourse about balancing against the policies of its rivals, Iran attached great importance to Russia's role. Articulations of an Iran-Russia axis started becoming dominant because the countries were presented as "natural allies" in the observed narratives. Abbas Araghchi, who was the General Director of IPIS at the time, often argued how the two states rejected the unipolar world order.[523] He also claimed that the United States and Turkey were competing with Russia to increase their influence in the South Caucasus.[524] During a discussion on Iran-Russia relations, Deputy Foreign Minister Seyyid Sadegh Kharrazi stated that relations between the two states were based on "common politico-ideological grounds."[525]

In these narratives, the subject of the Russian Federation was articulated in the framework of the logic of resistance communities. Cooperation with Moscow was considered imperative for resisting the interventions of external powers such as the United States. As the institution-building initiatives did not take Iran very far, it needed a strong ally in the region to minimize the threats associated with its antagonistic Others. Hence, there was a shift to discourses on axis-building with Russia at its centre.

However, the position towards Moscow's policies was not so unequivocal. There was certain ambivalence regarding the compatibilities of the interests and principles the two

[523] "Reports: The Fifth Iran-Russia Roundtable," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1999): 245–52.
[524] "Reports: Seminar on Iran and Armenia," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1999): 115–25.
[525] "Reports: The Sixth Iran-Russia Roundtable," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 5 (2000): 150.

countries had. First, it was questionable whether Russia shared Iran's commitments, as its behaviour was based on tactical calculations, which were not necessarily in line with Iranian discourses on resistance towards western policies.[526] As a result, there were frequent deviations from the assumed solidarity between the two states against "arrogant powers." Besides, Russia's "imperialist tendencies" in the South Caucasus could become a security concern for the Islamic Republic, as it was argued that Moscow aimed to maintain the ethnic tensions in the region in order to use them as leverage.[527] Finally, adding Russia to the resistance discourses created dissonance with the narratives on having an independent region bound by shared historical, religious, and cultural features.

In general, there were various concerns regarding Russia's policies that challenged the idea of a "natural alliance." However, they did not result in a major change in Iran's attitude. Partnership with Russia was considered a necessity despite the presented difficulties. To a great extent, the Islamic Republic continued having an accommodating attitude towards Russia's presence in the South Caucasus. The notion of Russo-centrism that is presented in the previous chapter can be seen here as well.

There were cases when the Iranian side raised its dissatisfaction with Moscow's policies, but they were not followed by calls for diametric changes. Instead, the necessity of strengthening bilateral ties was emphasized. Mahdi Safari's remarks, who was Iran's Ambassador to Moscow, are very telling in this respect. At a discussion on Iran-Russia relations, he expressed concerns over various problems that caused "doubts and suspicion" but went on stating:

> … we believe in the multipolarity of the world order. Threat emanates from the fact that some countries are using "globalization" as a pretext to further their interests,

[526] Hossein Seifzadeh, "Asre-ye siyāsat-e jahāni, jāigāh-e Irān va Rusiye va rābete-ye do keshvar," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 8, no. 25 (1999): 15–28.
[527] Musa Al-Reza Vahidi, "Guām va Siāyes: chālesh-hā va forsathā-ye farāruy-e siyāsat-e khāreji-ye Rusiye," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 33 (2001): 98–108.

> without due regards from [*sic.*] the interests and rights of other nations. One power wishes to rule the world. We have repeatedly declared that we are willing to cooperate on this issue with our Russian partners.[528]

This commitment to the idea of an Iran-Russia axis remained as a defining feature of the articulations on the South Caucasus throughout Khatami's presidency. However, the suspicions concerning Moscow's policies did not vanish. There was a sense of asymmetry in how the two states perceived their relations, leading to occasional critical remarks but no policy revisions.

These discourses on axis-building, which mainly depicted the exclusionary tendencies in Iran's regional perspectives, were not the only substitution for institution-building narratives. As Iran aimed to become an intermediary in the region, articulating its interests solely in the context of balancing the policies of the United States and its allies was not satisfactory. Hence, there were narratives on multilateralism that avoided antagonistic motifs and tried to emphasize the cooperative image of the Islamic Republic.

The peculiarity of these articulations was that there was no dominant theme, such as axis-building against the antagonistic Others. The discourses in this category were rather dispersed. The one aspect that was shared among them was Iran's geographic position. As Foreign Minister Kharrazi stated, it could be utilized for making progress primarily in the following three sectors: energy transit, transportation, and trade.[529] The Iranian government started experimenting with different ideas for actualizing these ambitions.

Being part of a trans-regional transit corridor was one of the popular narratives in this regard. It gained momentum mainly due to the establishment of the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC). Iran, India, and Russia started the initiative in September 2000

[528] "Iran-Russia Cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 6, no. 8 (2001): 148.
[529] "Iran's Security Linked to Stability in South Caucasus," *Mehr News Agency*, December 8, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13gqna8.

to facilitate transportation of goods between the member states and connect the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf with European markets.[530] It became one of the frequently discussed topics during inter-governmental meetings with the representatives of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.[531]

However, the discourses on transit corridors went beyond INSTC. The idea was used in various narratives to show Iran's interest in cooperation in the mentioned three fields. For instance, in a meeting with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Khatami talked about expanding the North-South as well as the East-West corridors, where he tried to show Iran's potential in contributing to the economic developments of the South Caucasus and Central Asia.[532] The signifier "corridor" became a point of reference for articulating a depoliticized image of the Islamic Republic as a state willing to cooperate without ideological preconditions. As is shown below, this was one of the main features in the discourses about pipeline politics in the South Caucasus.

Besides the idea of transit corridors, the Islamic Republic was exploring other options of multilateralism as well. One of the major cases was the trilateral cooperation between Iran, Armenia, and Greece. From 1997 to 2001, the representatives of the three states had several meetings at the level of Foreign Ministers and their deputies. Most of them were concluded by signing memoranda of understanding on various economic matters. In December 1997, the three states signed a memorandum on establishing four committees on cooperation in

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[530] "Statute of the International North-South Transit Corridor Coordination Council" (International North-South Transit Corridor), accessed December 7, 2019, http://instcorridor.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/INSTC-Statute.pdf.

[531] "Iranian, Georgian Speakers Hold Talks in Tehran," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 16, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m112igrd; "Iran, Azerbaijan Discuss Role in North-South Corridor," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 6, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=497P-KM20-00KJ-D30G&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Iran President Khatami Days Armenia Has Had 'Great Impact' on Civilization," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 4, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13do0ve.

[532] "Iranian, Georgian Presidents Discuss Regional Security, Cooperation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 0707 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13a0hko.

the following sectors: transportation and telecommunication, tourism, industrial and technological affairs, and the energy exchange.[533] On this occasion, Kharrazi stated that the endeavour was meant to explore the potentials of the three states.[534]

However, this exploration did not evolve into something more practical. During the following years, the sides signed more memoranda, which indicate that they had not moved much beyond expressing willingness to cooperate. The observed data show that there was no specific roadmap concerning this trilateral cooperation. The vagueness surrounding it also created concerns in Turkey and Azerbaijan, where it was assumed that the initiative was against them. Kharrazi called these accusations unsubstantiated. In an attempt to clarify their goals, he provided even more generic reasons, arguing that the cooperation was meant to deepen political, economic, and cultural cooperation, as well as bring peace to the region.[535]

These discourses about transit corridors and the mentioned trilateral cooperation are indicative of the ad-hoc nature of Iran/s initiatives. Once the institution-building narratives stopped resonating, the Islamic Republic started experimenting with what was available at the moment without designing an overarching strategy. Fred Halliday's description of *siyāsate-e dast-e gol* (policy of bouquet of flowers) is spot on in this case: "whoever turned up at Tehran airport on an official visit would be welcomed."[536]

In a nutshell, the duality of balancing against Iran's antagonistic Others and putting politics aside for economic cooperation was a defining feature in the presented post-institutionalist

[533] "Iran, Armenia, Greece Sign Memorandum on Closer Cooperation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 3, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W37-T5G0-00KJ-D1D3&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[534] "Iran-Greek-Armenian Tripartite Cooperation Meets, Signs Memorandum," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 8, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W37-T680-00KJ-D446&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[535] "Iranian Foreign Minister: 'Some Differences' in Talks with Turkish Counterparts."
[536] Fred Halliday, "Iran's Regional and Strategic Interests," in *Iranian Challenges*, ed. Walter Posch (Institute for Security Studies, 2006), 68.

narratives as well. In this situation, it became difficult to construct a coherent regional perspective. This issue is especially apparent when looking into two closely related issues: the legal regime of the Caspian Sea and the pipeline projects in the South Caucasus. They are discussed in more detail below.

Complications in the Caspian Affairs

Khatami's presidency was a period of major developments concerning the Caspian Sea. Some of the littoral states were in a rush to reap the economic benefits it could offer. However, there were still major differences regarding its status and how its resources should be divided. While these challenges had already become apparent during Rafsanjani's presidency, it was in the late 1990s and early 2000s when there was pressure from many sides to settle the issues or find a way around them. Most of the littoral states were dissatisfied with the protracted and unpromising nature of negotiations and decided to look for alternative options.

This situation raised major concerns in the Islamic Republic, as it could lead to unilateral measures by the other littoral states. There were several reasons why the Iranian side was against unilateralism. First, there were disagreements with Azerbaijan on what share of the seabed belonged to them. In this case, any move by one of the sides could lead to a confrontation and instability that would, in turn, create opportunities for extra-regional actors to intervene. Secondly, upholding the principle of multilateralism and the necessity of reaching a consensus would give Iran leverage over influencing the developments concerning the Caspian Sea. In the case of unilateral moves, the other littoral states could strike deals with western companies on transferring oil and gas from the sea, while Iran would remain uninvolved due to the sanctions imposed by the United States. In other words, not only could the lack of consensus increase the influence of the West in the Caspian area, but it could also make Iran a mere bystander in major regional developments. Taking these

factors into consideration, the Iranian government took measures against the endeavours that bypassed consensus. This became a central aspect of Iran's policies in the Caspian Sea during Khatami's presidency.

It is not surprising that the first steps Khatami's administration took in regard to this issue were criticizing the initiatives of the other littoral states. In November 1997, Iran's Foreign Ministry condemned the Azerbaijani government's collaboration with western entities aimed at exploiting the natural resources of the sea.[537] The Iranian side claimed that no extra-regional actor could be involved in the Caspian based on the 1921 and 1940 Iran-Soviet Union treaties, according to which, third-country vessels were forbidden from entering the sea. Several months later, Kharrazi made critical remarks about the negotiations between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan on determining their national sectors. He called such bilateral endeavours invalid and dangerous.[538]

Alongside condemning these measures, the Iranian government was concerned that their accusatory position could lead to self-isolation and hamper the negotiation process. Therefore, they tried to be more proactive. This can be seen in Kharrazi's regional tour to Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan in August 1998. It was during this tour that Iran's Foreign Minister showed preparedness to negotiate about dividing the seabed and putting aside the option of shared use, which Iran had insisted upon since Rafsanjani's

[537] "Official Criticizes Azerbaijan's 'Unilateral Exploitation' of Caspian Sea Resources," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 11, 1997, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3SP2-67R0-006F-X48Y&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[538] "Iran Rejects Azeri-Turkmen Accord on Caspian Share-Out," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 10, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W4D-G6K0-00KJ-D0SN&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

presidency.[539] In this regard, the Iranian side demanded what they called an "equitable" division, where each side would get 20 per cent of the total share.

However, this proposition did not change much, as it was contradictory to the option of sectoral division preferred by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, where Iran would get not only a mere 13 per cent share but also a sector with limited natural resources.[540] Hence, not insisting on the idea of a condominium was not enough for settling the differences between the littoral states. Reaching a final solution to the legal issue still seemed challenging, as it appeared that the sides were involved in a zero-sum game. Some of them were determined to continue the above-mentioned initiatives, triggering more criticism from the Iranian side and rendering the latter's attempt at shuttle diplomacy ineffective.

As a result, the Islamic Republic found itself in a reactionary position again. Multiple critical remarks were made towards the other littoral states.[541] They were accompanied by anti-American sentiments, where it was argued that Washington was trying to create a rift between the Caspian states and undermine their collective initiatives.[542] Some expressed concerns about western military presence in the sea. During his speech at Tehran Friday Prayers, former President Rafsanjani talked about this issue. He stated:

> I pray to God that Azerbaijan's authorities will come to their senses and abandon this behaviour. Some of their minor officials have announced that they intend to invite the

[539] "Iranian Foreign Minister Visits Baku, Hopes for New Phase in Relations," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 12, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W37-T2G0-00KJ-D0KF&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Iranian Foreign Minister Returns from Central Asian Tour," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 14, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W37-T2V0-00KJ-D1XB&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[540] Davoud Hermidas-Bavand, "Rezhim-e hoquqi-ye dariyā-ye Khazar: negāhi be ab'ād-e zist mohiti va āmniyat," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 6, no. 11 (2002): 7–38.

[541] "Iranian Daily Slams Baku's 'Unjustified Greed' over Caspian Oil," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 12, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3V9N-3HP0-006F-X05R&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[542] "Iran: Former Deputy Minister Comments on Possibility of US Base in Azerbaijan," *Tehran Times*, February 3, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W4R-FNB0-00KJ-D34H&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

> NATO forces, or America, to set up a military base along the coast of the Caspian Sea. This is truly a very dangerous idea. The Caspian Sea is our region of peace. It is our backyard. It is one of our major economic centres. All its states, that is, five countries have coastlines around this sea. How dare Azerbaijan perpetrate such an ugly deed to drag America and NATO to the shores of the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus?[543]

This tension increased when Azerbaijan's President Heydar Aliyev paid a working visit to Washington in April 1999, where three contracts were signed between State Azerbaijani Oil Company (SOCAR) and western companies ExxonMobil, ConocoPhilips, and Moncrief. The Iranian government called these agreements illegitimate.[544] Specifically, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hamid-Reza Assefi stated that some of the oilfields mentioned in those contracts would belong to the Islamic Republic if the seabed were divided.[545]

Suspecting that such developments could leave the Islamic Republic without the desired share of natural resources, the Iranian government also started considering unilateral measures despite condemning others for such behaviour. For example, the Khazar Exploration and Production Company (KEPCO), which is a subsidiary of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), started seismic tests in cooperation with Lasmo, Shell, and Veba Oil in what they considered the Iranian sector of the Caspian.[546] It created major discontent in Azerbaijan, as they also had a claim of ownership over that area.[547] Iran's Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh made several remarks on these measures, stating that they were

[543] "Iran: US Base Could Stop Azeri Oil Exploration, Rafsanjani in Friday Sermons," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 2, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W4R-FPN0-00KJ-D44C&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[544] "Iranian Newspaper Attacks Signing of Azeri-US Oil Deal," *Tehran Times*, May 2, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0md5evl.
[545] "Iran Says US-Azeri Agreement Illegal," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 30, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0md4cks.
[546] "Seismic Tests in Iran Sector," Khazar Exploration and Production Company, accessed December 27, 2019, http://en.kepco.ir/index.aspx?siteid=2&fkeyid=&siteid=2&pageid=248.
[547] "Iran Can Forget Role in Oil Projects - Azeri Official," *Turan News Agency*, December 16, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3VFJ-7F60-006F-X0WN&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

ready to take unilateral steps if establishing the sea's legal regime was not plausible. In an interview with Iranian TV, he said:

> As far as the issue of developing the fields in the Caspian is concerned, I must say that our exploration programmes have progressed well within the area which we have defined for ourselves, that is 20 per cent. That is because if everybody wants to divide [the sea], then we will have to determine our own share on that basis. We will not wait for the establishment of a legal regime for the Caspian [Sea] before we carry out our exploration and development operations… If we do not reach agreement, then, we will begin to take action on the basis of a regime which we have defined for ourselves. We will protect a certain area and we will organize our activities in that area.[548]

In March 2001, the Iranian government signed a contract with a Swedish company to start explorations of the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Sea.[549] Oil Minister Zanganeh stated that they were going to start certain operations within the boundaries they had defined for themselves. He said: "We are operating in an area which covers 20 per cent of the Caspian. We believe that that is the Islamic Republic's minimum entitlement in the Caspian."[550] Two months later, Supreme Leader Khamenei stated that Iran needed to protect its national interests in the sea and called for enhancing its defensive capabilities in the area.[551]

In general, the Iranian side tried to leave the impression that it was ready to move on as well if the other sides were not willing to put an effort into reaching a consensus. However, these steps should not be interpreted as a radical change in Iran's policies. They were mostly precautionary measures aimed at protecting Iran's claim over the mentioned 20 per cent share. Khatami's administration did not take any further steps beyond the above-mentioned tests and announcements. It showed restraint, as such unilateral measures could lead to

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[548] "Oil Minister Says Iran May Determine Its Share of Caspian Resources Unilaterally," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, July 8, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mwapzv.
[549] "Iran: Commentary Warns Caspian Littoral States of Big Powers' Conspiracies," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 10, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0n5o3nv.
[550] "Iran: Oil Minister Comments on Caspian Sea Legal Regime," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 9, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring.
[551] "Iran: Supreme Leader Opposed to Militarization of Caspian Sea," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 3, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m121fiza.

volatility in the region if followed through. Besides, the prospects of these commercial initiatives with western companies were still unclear due to the sanctions imposed by the United States on the Islamic Republic.[552]

Therefore, it is not surprising that discourses about multilateralism had not fallen silent. The Iranian government was still heavily critical of measures that were not based on regional consensus. For instance, such remarks were made in June 2001, when the Deputy Foreign Ministers of the Caspian states met in Baku to discuss issues related to the legal regime. Here, Iran's representative Ali Ahani stated that any unilateral exploitation of the sea's natural resources was "illegitimate." He also added that Iran was ready to have the seabed divided, considering that it would receive the 20 per cent equitable share.[553]

Iran's determination to confront other states' unilateral steps became especially evident when yet another round of negotiations ended without any tangible result. With this outcome, some of the sides started directing their attention towards other measures again. In July 2001, The Azerbaijani government initiated exploration in the Alborz oilfield, over which the Islamic Republic had a claim of ownership. The Iranian navy stopped the British ships commissioned to conduct the research. The incident increased the tension around the Caspian Sea and triggered criticism toward the Islamic Republic from Azerbaijan and the West. In response, there was a wave of inflammatory remarks from the Iranian side. Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hamid-Reza Assefi stated:

> We are deeply astonished with [*sic*] Azeri hue and cry against measures taken by the Islamic Republic to defend its legitimate rights… The Azeri Republic is expected to

[552] Gawdat Bahgat, "US-Iranian Relations: Sanctions and the Caspian Sea - GAWDAT BAHGAT, 2001," *Security Dialogue*, June 29, 2016, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0967010601032002008.
[553] "Iranian Official Says Unilateral Exploitation of Caspian Sea 'Illegitimate,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 15, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1238ztj.

> understand sympathetic pieces of advice given by the Islamic Republic and keep away from any action which may intensify misunderstandings.[554]

Hassan Rouhani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, also commented on the matter, saying: "We will not allow any foreign company to work in the Caspian Sea without Iran's permission."[555] Iran's Oil Ministry also issued a statement condemning the operation in the Alborz oil field.[556]

Though the sides took measures to deescalate the tension, there was no substantial progress in the negotiations process due to the unwillingness of the littoral states (including Iran) to compromise. There was still a deadlock, which made some of the littoral states go back to their bilateral moves, and, consequentially, trigger more criticism from Iran. In this situation, tension around Caspian affairs became a reoccurring phenomenon.

The Islamic Republic remained unequivocal about rejecting unilateralism. As can be seen in the presented narratives, this position was, to a great extent, articulated through the prism of excluding its antagonistic Other. Therefore, the notion of the Iran-Russia axis was prevalent here. Iranian officials often stressed that the two states had a shared position on the matter: they opposed involvement by outside powers.[557] Besides, the two sides considered having common use of the Caspian resources a preferable option. Siding with

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[554] "Iran: Official Urges Azerbaijan to Stop Propaganda over Caspian Oil," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 24, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m124r0i7.
[555] "Iran: Paper Questions Britain's Stance on Caspian Sea Oil Exploration," *Tehran Times*, July 21, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m124qtnd.
[556] "Iran Warns Foreign Companies Not to Prospect for Oil in Its Caspian Sector," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 21, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m124nyhf.
[557] "Iran Calls for High-Level Talks to Settle Status of Caspian," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 22, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W49-6C70-00KJ-D4D9&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Iran Opposes Plan for Pipeline along Bed of Caspian Sea," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 22, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W49-C670-00KJ-D55W&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

Russia was seen as a viable strategy for making the other littoral states resist the temptation to hastily exploit the resources of the sea without deciding its legal regime.[558]

However, this strategy was based on a questionable assumption, as Moscow was often deviating from the mentioned position. The July 1998 agreement between Russia and Kazakhstan on delimiting the northern part of the seabed was the first move.[559] Then Russia's President Vladimir Putin visited Azerbaijan in January 2001 and made an official statement with his counterpart Heydar Aliyev on the Caspian Sea. In August of the same year, Putin was negotiating with his counterparts from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan on the sidelines of the CIS Heads of States Summit in Sochi about deciding how the Caspian seabed needed to be divided.[560]

Many in Iran were concerned about these steps.[561] It appeared that Russia could consider bilateral arrangements substitutable for having a consensus. Therefore, the Iranian side tried to receive reassurances from Moscow regarding their shared position. Particularly, Mohammad Khatami stressed the necessity of committing to a joint solution with all the littoral states during his visit to Moscow in March 2001.[562] In the sidelines of the June 2001 session of Deputy Foreign Ministers, the Iranian envoy had a meeting with his Russian counterpart Viktor Kalyuzhny, where he stressed the necessity of reaching an agreement between the five littoral states and limiting the influence of other actors.[563] Kamal Kharrazi

[558] Roshandel, "Nezāmigari dar dariyā-ye Khazar, gerāyesh-e barkhāste az feghdān-e rezhim-e hoghughi."
[559] The Associated Press, "World News Briefs; Russia and Kazakhstan Sign Pact on Caspian Oil," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1998, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/07/world/world-news-briefs-russia-and-kazakhstan-sign-pact-on-caspian-oil.html.
[560] "Iranian Radio Comments on Russian, Azeri, Kazakh Caspian Sea 'Negotiations,'" *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, August 5, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1256pu5.
[561] "Newspaper Says Iran-Russia Ties in Determining Caspian Sea Legal Regime," *Afarinesh Daily*, January 16, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0n46sm8.
[562] "Iran: State-Run Radio Comments on Dividing Caspian Sea Resources," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 17, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1119eqx.
[563] "Iran and Russia Condemn Foreign Interference in Caspian Sea Affairs," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 15, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m12390dh.

also stated about Iran's position against unilateralism in a phone call with his Russian counterpart right after the above-mentioned CIS Summit.[564] When meeting Russia's Envoy on Caspian Affairs, Kharrazi also stated:

> Iran expects Russia to adopt explicit stance towards the Caspian Sea to encourage cooperation among the littoral states in order to keep the Caspian Sea as the sea of peace and friendship and not allow any third countries to interfere with the Caspian Sea issues.[565]

These statements, especially the last one, show that the sense of anxiety towards the policies of Iran's supposed partner was increasing. It was expressed more explicitly in Iranian media, where some even questioned the alliance between the two states. Reformist *Hayāt-e No* newspaper argued that Iran's and Russia's interests were in contradiction in the Caspian Sea.[566] *Entekhab*, another reformist outlet, blamed Russia for stalling the negotiation process and seeking problematic alternatives.[567] These remarks were accompanied by calls to the Iranian government to stand its ground regarding getting the mentioned 20 per cent share.[568]

In other words, there were explicit signs that Moscow was no longer standing by the Islamic Republic regarding the principle of keeping extra-regional powers out and prioritizing consensus. These signals were also noticed in Iran. However, they did not lead to any substantial changes in the initial strategy. The Iran-Russia axis remained the dominant framework through which this particular regional issue was articulated. The above-mentioned efforts made for validating this notion show that Khatami's administration was not exploring other options. This strategic inertia contributed to reproducing Iran's

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[564] "Iranian, Russian Ministers Discuss Caspian, Palestine on Phone," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 7, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m12592m2.
[565] "Iran: Foreign Minister Kharrazi Reviews Caspian Sea Issues with Russian Envoy," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 29, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1267hns.
[566] "Who Holds the Keys to the Caspian Sea?," *Hayāt-e No*, July 7, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m125tms4.
[567] "Iran: Authorities Urged to Confront Russia's 'Contradictory' Caspian Stance," *Entekhab*, September 9, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m127a1tv.
[568] "Iran: Paper Urges Foreign Ministry to Tackle Caspian, Azerbaijan with Vigilance," *Kar va Kargar*, July 31, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m125pzbg.

reactionary and even self-isolating position about which Khatami's administration had concerns.

Alongside the government's reluctance to readjust in the changing environment, domestically, interest in the fate of the Caspian Sea was increasing significantly. The effectiveness of the policies carried out by Khatami's administration was actively discussed. In a way, this issue was becoming a litmus test for the regional policies of the Islamic Republic. In this regard, the Caspian Heads of States Summit on 23-24 April 2002 in Ashgabat was considered a crucial event. It was the first meeting at such a high level, and the results could be detrimental to the future of the sea.

Unsurprisingly, the Summit did not end with signing a deal and reaffirmed the divergences between the littoral states. The agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan several months before the event was indicative of their uncompromising positions.[569] Hence, Khatami's insistence on having shared sovereignty or dividing the seabed equitably did not resonate among them. His calls for "unanimity, coexistence, dialogue and flexibility" fell on deaf ears.[570] The alternative offered by the Russian side to divide a section of the seabed and have a regime of a shared use on the remaining part was considered unacceptable for the Islamic Republic.[571] The representatives of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan sided with Russia. While Turkmenistan had certain concerns over the proposed principles, it did not necessarily share Iran's position on the matter. Ironically, the Islamic Republic, the party

[569] "Iran Protests to UN over Kazakh-Azeri Accord on the Caspian," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 7, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=4598-BJG0-00KJ-D30W&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[570] "Caspian Summit in Asgabat Winds up without a Resolution," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 24, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45NH-SS30-00KJ-D3GH&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[571] "Iranian Radio Commentary on the Outcomes of the Asgabat Summit," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 24, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45NH-SS30-00KJ-D3HD&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

that insisted on and invested in multilateral solutions, ended up alone with no other littoral state backing its position.

Besides, there was an impression that the other littoral states were using the adversity of the Islamic Republic with the United States to put pressure on the former and sideline its demands. Khatami expressed his frustration about it. Reportedly, he made a statement during the Ashgabat Summit that the tension with Washington was not eternal, and improvement in their relations was not so far-fetched.[572] Shortly after, Majles Speaker Mehdi Karroubi stated that it was up to the Supreme Leader to decide Iran's position towards the United States and considered the media reports on possible reconciliation baseless.[573] He also emphasized the close relations with Russia despite the existing tension.

This hectic situation amplified concerns about the effectiveness of Iran's policies. Some argued that Khatami's administration had no defined national interests, and that the lack of clarity and flexibility led to the absence of any tangible results.[574] The criticism increased, especially after the Russian side decided to start military manoeuvres in the Caspian and signed an agreement with Azerbaijan on dividing the seabed.[575] It was becoming evident that not only were Iran's demands being ignored but also there was a high risk of militarization in the sea that could open a pathway for the United States.

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[572] "Reformist Daily Says Indecisive Caspian Summit Serves," *Bonyan Newspaper*, April 27, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45PB-5KG0-00KJ-D13J&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[573] "Iranian Speaker Says Only Khamenei Can Decide on Ties with USA," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 28, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45PC-N810-00KJ-D19H&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[574] "Iran: Political Figures Express Views on President's Visit to Central Asia," *Norooz*, April 22, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45NG-FWF0-00KJ-D1MK&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[575] "Iranian Paper Urges to Be Wary of USA in Caspian Sea Chess Game," *Tehran Times*, April 28, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45PC-N810-00KJ-D1B2&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Iran: Press Commentary Says Dividing Caspain Unfairly Would Divide Neighbors," *Tehran Times*, October 1, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=46WN-5DN0-00KJ-D55K&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

The dissatisfaction with Iran's policies was vividly expressed when a group of Majles MPs decided to hold Foreign Minister Kharrazi accountable for the failures of Iranian diplomacy. In early October 2002, they announced about starting an impeachment process against Kharrazi, considering how "inactive, incompetent and ineffective" Iranian foreign policy had been in Caspian affairs.[576] On December 29, Kharrazi was summoned to the Majles, where he had to provide justifications for the existing state of affairs.[577] Kharrazi acknowledged that there were difficulties, but he claimed that Iran did not have a passive approach and was on the right track in pursuing its interests.[578]

The Summit and its aftermath created a shockwave in Iran, and Khatami's administration could no longer ignore the downsides of its strategy. The dominant narrative that informed the government's attitude toward this regional issue was dislocated, and concerns about Iran's interests not being properly defined followed. The Iranian government was accused of not putting effort into designing an adequate approach toward the Caspian Sea and the region in general. As Abbas Maleki stated: "The Foreign Ministry has been concentrating on improving ties and bridging the walls of mistrust with Europe, Muslim-Arab states, Japan, etc., consequently, its state of disarray and daze in dealing with the Caspian Sea issue."[579] The fact that Dialogue among Civilizations did not help to bring clarity illustrates the issues of its applicability discussed above.

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[576] "Iranian Foreign Minister Faces Impeachment Threat, Says MP," *Iran News*, October 2, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=46X1-KNP0-00KJ-D16K&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[577] "Surat-e mashruh-e mozākerāt-e Majles-e Showrā-ye Eslāmi: dowreh-ye sheshom - ejlāsi-ye sevvom" (Islamic Consultative Assembly Library, February 29, 2002).

[578] "Foreign Minister Says Iran Not Relying on Russia in Caspian Talks," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 30, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=47JV-GJ10-00KJ-D504&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[579] "Iran: Specialist Criticizes Foreign Minister's Approach to Caspian Issue," *Iran News*, 0119 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=47R3-37J0-00KJ-D3WH&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

It was only after this major backlash that Khatami's administration made an attempt to settle the issue through bilateral negotiations. During his visit to Baku in April 2003, Iran's Foreign Minister expressed hope that an agreement could be signed between Iran and Azerbaijan during President Khatami's upcoming visit.[580] This hope was invigorated after an environmental convention was struck between the coastal countries in November 2003.[581] It was the first successful multilateral endeavour that ended with a legally binding treaty. However, Khatami's visit to Azerbaijan in August 2004 did not have any tangible outcomes other than expressing a shared commitment to halting the tension.[582] The Iranian side still insisted on having 20 per cent of the seabed reproducing the zero-sum situation in the negotiation process.

While there was no breakthrough, this attitude helped to maintain peace in the Caspian Sea, avoiding militarization. The Iranian side started initiating active communication with the other littoral states to re-establish a conciliatory environment. The messages of peace and demilitarization were frequently articulated by Iranian officials. They became the dominant themes of the government narratives during the final two years of Khatami's presidency.[583]

In summary, Khatami's presidency started being interpreted as a period of lost opportunities in the Caspian Sea.[584] The attempts aimed at deciding the legal regime of the sea through consensus were not successful. Though the Iranian side was very clear about what outcome

[580] "Iran's Stance on Caspian Unchanged, Says Kharrazi," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 29, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=48GF-7RG0-00KJ-D200&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[581] "Iran: Caspian Sea Littoral States Reach Agreement on Environment," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 4, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=49XP-P2V0-00KJ-D117&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[582] "Iranian Envoy Says Caspian Sea Will Be under Joint Ownership," *Fars News Agency*, October 13, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13ft0w7.
[583] "Militarization of Caspian Sea Would Fuel Rivalry," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, January 30, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/50063417; "Iran Opposed to Militarization of Caspian Sea - Official," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 16, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13ts9of.
[584] "Iran Has Lost Opportunities in Caspian Region, MP Says," *Āftāb-e Yazd*, May 6, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m136i0l4.

they wanted to have, their strategy towards reaching it was underdeveloped. While it became apparent that considering Russia an ally in these matters was questionable, Khatami's administration did not reflect upon this situation appropriately. They continued insisting on solving the issues through reaching a unanimous decision and excluding external actors from these affairs. As a result, Khatami's administration left a legacy of stalled negotiations concerning the Caspian Sea.

Transnational Pipeline Projects

The discourses about pipelines in the South Caucasus were different in their tone from those regarding the Caspian Sea. While issues related to the latter were mainly articulated in exclusionary manners, there was an attempt to show a more depoliticized stance regarding the former. It was one of the main areas where the Islamic Republic tried to emphasize its image as an intermediary, and its geographical position was presented as an asset for the states in the region for transporting their natural resources in an efficient way.

Iran showed preparedness to cooperate with different western enterprises, putting antagonistic proclivities aside. There seemed to be a window of opportunity for such commercial initiatives, mainly due to the changing attitude in Washington towards sanctions against Iran. As stated above, the latter had been a major hindrance for the Islamic Republic to become part of international initiatives on exploiting and transporting oil and gas resources. In 1996, the Clinton administration introduced the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), which assumed financial retaliation against American, as well as non-US, companies that would invest more than USD 20 million in Iran's natural resources sector.[585] The decision created major discontent in the American business community and among

[585] Benjamin A. Gilman, "Text - H.R.3107 - 104th Congress (1995-1996): Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996," webpage, August 5, 1996, https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/house-bill/3107/text.

partners in the European Union.[586] As a result, many in Washington started revising their approach that created an impression that ILSA would not be renewed after its expiration in 2001.

In this situation, pipeline projects started appearing rather frequently in Iranian narratives about the South Caucasus. The argument that Iran was the most economical option in the region became dominant. Former President Rafsanjani's statement on this matter is very indicative. During the Tehran Friday prayers sermons, he stated:

> Earlier, in the case of [finding] a route for a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan and the Central Asian countries to the West, Iran was boycotted. They have been trying for five or six years, up and down, to find a way. Once they thought of [a route through] northern Russia, then they thought of Georgia, then of Azerbaijan and Armenia, yet again they thought of going to the east and using Chinese territory, then through Afghanistan and Pakistan. They carried on marching on the spot and now their people have realized that the natural, short, cheap, certain and secure route through Iran has been forgotten and they are looking in deserts to find a route... All this has resulted in America demonstrating a reactive move today. It has shown the green light, saying that you can go through Iran.[587]

The discourses about pipelines were also critical of other actors, such as the U.S. government, for ignoring economic factors and politicizing the matter. Foreign Minister Kharrazi made such remarks in an interview with Iranian television. He stated that the best route for transporting oil and gas from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan went through Iran's territory. He stated:

> My interpretation is that, finally, the companies - which after all are pursuing their own economic interests - will opt for the most economical route. Of course, unfortunately the political stances and interests of some countries and powers interfere with this issue. That is why it has remained unresolved and there [*sic*] a definite decision has yet to be made. In particular, America has put a great deal of pressure on these countries not to use the Iranian territory. However, this goes against the realities. I believe that in the long run, the Americans will also have to come to their senses in

[586] Patrick Clawson et al., *Iran under Khatami: A Political, Economic, and Military Assessment* (Washington, D.C: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998).
[587] "Rafsanjani Says Iran Tested Long-Range Missiles, Calls US Policy 'Confused,'" *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, October 10, 1997, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3SP2-6NG0-006F-X2HJ&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

> respect of this reality and accept that the most economical and the best route is the one through Iran...[588]

Here, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project was also criticized as being political. Iranian government officials and policy experts were stressing how costly the initiative was.[589] Instead, they started offering more efficient alternatives. For instance, the Iranian side often argued that having a Baku-Tabriz-Ceyhan pipeline was a better option.[590]

However, their main proposal was signing an oil swap deal. At a seminar on Central Asia and the South Caucasus, Deputy Oil Minister Ali Majedi introduced a three-phase plan for transporting oil from the Caspian basin to Iranian refineries and, in exchange, providing Iranian oil to international consumers from the Persian Gulf. The plan assumed increasing the capacity of several refineries, so 810 thousand barrels per day could be transferred from the Caspian Sea. The final phase included building pipelines to pump oil from the sea directly to the terminals in the South.[591] The plan was marketed as the most affordable option for transporting natural resources.[592] In May 1998, it was announced that the Iranian government was going to issue an international tender for financing the project.[593]

In general, the ambivalence in Washington regarding their sanctions policy created high hopes in the Islamic Republic, resulting in the mentioned discourses, where the subject of the West was not articulated as the antagonistic Other. In January 2001, *Āftāb-e Yazd*

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[588] "Iran's Kharrazi Foresees Closer Relations with Europe, Russia, Saudi," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 5, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W49-6C70-00KJ-D4D9&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[589] Dorreh Mirheydar and Seffatollah Taheri Shemirani, "Geopolitics of the Caspian Sea," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 6, no. 11 (2002): 41–88.
[590] Maleki, "Barresi-ye 'avāmel-e afzāyesh-e risk-e siyāsi dar mantaqe-ye Qafqāz."
[591] Ali Majedi, "Energy Resources and Transportation from the Caspian Basin," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1999): 20–26.
[592] Nasri Ghorban, "Khotut-e luleh-ye naft va gāz az tariq-e dariyā-ye Khazar," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 6, no. 21 (1998): 65–74.
[593] "Iran to Issue International Tender for Caspian Pipeline Project," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 27, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W3S-GCV0-00KJ-D1BV&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

newspaper published an article, where it was argued that key members in Bush's cabinet questioned the relevance of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline and were considering more economical options, which included Iran. It was stated that the Iranian government welcomed reopening economic relations between the two countries.[594]

However, these discourses were challenged when the US renewed the sanctions act in August 2001.[595] The prospects of improvement started vanishing after the Bush administration added Iran to the axis of evil. Due to these changes, the Islamic Republic started looking for other options. Transferring gas to Europe via Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine was introduced as a plausible alternative.[596] The issue was discussed during Khatami's visit to Ukraine in October 2002. The Iranian side expressed hope that the planned Iran-Armenia gas pipeline (more on it in the section on bilateral relations) could be extended to connect Central Asia to Europe via Iran, the South Caucasus, and Ukraine.[597] However, there was no practical follow up to this plan.

Considering that these narratives about pipelines were closely related to the aforementioned issues in the Caspian Sea, it is striking how different their tone was. In a way, they contradicted the perspectives on regional affairs illustrated above. The calls for not giving in to the forces of globalization, excluding extra-regional actors, axis-building were articulations that tried to paint a picture, where an indigenous political identity of the region was introduced in the framework of the logic of resistance communities. The image of the

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[594] "Newspaper Views Iran-US Relations, Benefits of Changing Baku-Ceyhan Oil Route," *Āftāb-e Yazd*, January 22, 2001, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0n3zo4z.
[595] Bahgat, "US-Iranian Relations."
[596] "International Agency Forecasts Iran Will Become Major EU Gas Supplier," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 3, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=46X7-JFN0-00KJ-D2CB&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[597] "Iran, Ukraine Could Work to Settle Regional Crises, Says Khatami," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 16, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=470V-P7C0-00KJ-D2G4&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

West and the United States, in particular, was instrumental in articulating the threats Iran faced in the North. Their involvement in the initiatives aimed at utilizing the resources of the sea was interpreted as expansionist moves that could undermine Iran's interests in the region. At the same time, the expressed positions about transporting natural resources show a willingness from the Iranian side to be engaged in those very initiatives. As stated above, putting the issues of the Caspian regime and pipeline projects side by side shows the inconsistency of Iran's regional engagement.

In general, Iranian discourses about regionalism in the South Caucasus were scattered. The interest in designing a vision of regional developments during Rafsanjani's administration started decreasing when Khatami came to power. As is shown above, Dialogue among Civilizations did not have much to contribute to developing a new approach. Instead, there were various initiatives that revealed a fundamental duality in Iran's policies that created the oscillation between narratives of excluding the antagonistic Other and adopting a cooperative position for economic benefits.

It could be argued that both of the notions, despite seeming diametrical opposites, were just two sides of the same coin. Both could be interpreted as derivatives of the desire for control over regional developments. For instance, the frustration related to western projects in the Caspian was mitigated in cases where there was an opportunity for the Islamic Republic to be involved. In a way, the two perspectives were influenced by the fear of being left behind, which also challenged the aspirant identity of being a major regional power. It is due to the dispersed nature of the Iranian discursive space that this fear was expressed in different ways leading to the situation of not having a clear message and precisely defined national interests. As for Dialogue among Civilizations, it did not close this conceptual gap in the discursive space of Iran's foreign policy. Instead, it created an illusion that there was a vision; hence, the lack of reflection on the perspectives of regionalism.

Iran's Stance on Regional Conflicts

Instability in the South Caucasus remained concerning for the Islamic Republic during Khatami's presidency. While the end of the Karabagh war was interpreted as a positive development, the tension between the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides did not disappear. The situation in the region was still prone to volatility, which was seen as a major source of threat.

There were several reasons why the Islamic Republic had distress in regard to the conflicts in the South Caucasus. First, they were perceived as potential sources of threat to Iran's territorial integrity. As they were primarily driven by ethnic tensions, there were concerns in the Islamic Republic that such developments could be precedential for fuelling separatist tendencies inside the country. Therefore, Iranian officials continuously emphasized the principle of sovereignty in the interactions with their counterparts in the South Caucasus.

Secondly, it was challenging for the Islamic Republic to adopt a particular position concerning some of these issues. As is stated above, discourses based on the social logic of resistance communities kept their dominance in Khatami's period. To a great extent, Iran's self-identification was reproduced as a central figure in the Muslim world. Dialogue among Civilizations did not change these narratives but reintroduced them in a new light. Assuming such a role axiomatically put the Iranian government in a position where it was obligated to react when there was a conflictual situation involving Muslims. Such cases create dilemmas for the Islamic Republic, as the necessity of supporting Muslims was not always in line with other interests of the state. Below it is shown how the Iranian government tried to navigate in such circumstances.

Finally, similar to the perspectives in Rafsanjani's period, articulations about regional conflicts were tied to the image of the antagonistic Other(s), such as the United States, Israel,

and NATO. Introducing Dialogue among Civilizations and the policy of détente did not decrease the anxiety about western actors using the tumultuous situation in the South Caucasus to increase their influence and pose a threat to Iran's interests. Such concerns can be seen in the remarks of high-ranking officials. For instance, Supreme Leader Khamenei called for excluding extra-regional powers from the conflict resolution initiatives in the region during his meeting with Armenia's President Robert Kocharyan.[598] He argued that those issues could be settled only by the states in the region without any outside interference. Hassan Rouhani also presented such an offer to Georgia's President Eduard Shevardnadze during his visit to Georgia in July 2001.[599]

The emphasis on excluding western actors from the security affairs of the region became stronger once the prospects of a U.S.-Iran rapprochement started disappearing. During the last years of Khatami's presidency, the Iranian government introduced a new framework for dealing with the conflicts in the region and limiting the role of Iran's antagonistic Others. During his April 2003 trip to the South Caucasus, Foreign Minister Kharrazi talked about the necessity of establishing a new regional security system using the so-called "3+3" formula. The framework would include the three primary stakeholders (Armenian, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) and three regional powers (Iran, Russia, Turkey).[600] Iran did not find allies in promoting this approach, and the initiative remained on paper. Anyhow, the

[598] Ali Khamenei, "Didār-e āqā-ye Kochāryān ra'is-e jomhur-e Ārmanestān bā rahbar-e enqelāb" (Khamenei.ir, December 26, 2001), http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=11690.
[599] "Iran's Security Official Denounces Presence of 'Expansionists' in Caucasus," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 20, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m124l2na.
[600] "Iranian Foreign Minister Urges Six-Member Caucasus Security System," *Mediamax News Agency*, April 30, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=48GT-FH10-00KJ-D3D7&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Foreign Minister Says Security of Caucasus 'of Great Importance' to Iran," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 28, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=48GD-6800-00KJ-D18V&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Iranian, Georgian Foreign Ministers Discuss Regional Security," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 29, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=48GK-GBJ0-00KJ-D295&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

proposal is illustrative of the anxieties the Islamic Republic had regarding the security issues in the South Caucasus.

These notions can be seen in the following cases of regional conflicts that were dominant in the discourses about the South Caucasus. They were often intertwined, creating complicated situations for the Iranian government. Observing Iran's behaviour in relation to them gives a nuanced insight into how foreign policy was carried out in this particular context.

Ongoing Frustrations: Iran and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) issue still caused distress for the Islamic Republic even after the conflicting sides signed a ceasefire agreement and decided to sit around the bargaining table. Prospects for a final resolution were low, and there was much uncertainty about how the situation would develop. Due to this very uncertainty, the dispute was seen as a threat to regional stability.

The remaining high tension between the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides often put Khatami's administration in a difficult situation. One of their major concerns was that the conflict could create problems in Iran's bilateral relations with its two neighbours in the North. It was a challenge to adopt a position that would satisfy both sides. The Iranian government faced such a situation during the OIC Tehran Summit in December 1997.

The Summit had recogntive value for the Islamic Republic in terms of positioning itself as a central figure in the Muslim world. Dialogue among Civilizations was used to reinforce that role. The Iranian side tried to present an image of a proactive stakeholder in issues concerning Muslims around the world. In this context, having a passive attitude towards the NK conflict, where Shia Azerbaijanis were fighting Christian Armenians, was not an acceptable option. Hence, there was a reference to the conflict in the so-called Tehran Declaration, which was signed during the Summit. In particular, the OIC heads of states

expressed their "rejection of the aggression of the Republic of Armenia against the Republic of Azerbaijan…"[601] Ironically, such a result triggered dissatisfaction in Azerbaijan, while the Armenian side did not express much discontent.

It appears that the Armenian government expected Iran to defend the Azerbaijani position and did not consider it a major hindrance in their bilateral ties. Vartan Oskanian, who became Armenia's Foreign Minister shortly after the Tehran Summit, discusses this issue in his memoir. He states that the Armenian government understood that the Islamic Republic had to stand by Azerbaijan on international platforms. Though it triggered criticism inside Armenia, the government was less interested in how Iran cast a declarative vote as a member of a certain organization. Oskanian states that what mattered to the Armenian side, were the negotiations behind the curtains.[602]

As regards reactions from Azerbaijan, the outcome was not satisfactory to them. They had called for adopting a special decree on the conflict, but their request was not met.[603] The issue was discussed in Azerbaijani media, where most of the critical remarks were directed towards Khatami's government. It was argued that the Iranian side was undermining its own efforts to build confidence in relations with Muslim countries with its lack of commitment to supporting their struggles.[604] Their main frustration was that Iran tried to avoid compromising relations with Armenia by not supporting Azerbaijan in a more explicit way.

This event shows that the NK conflict was still an uneasy case for the Islamic Republic, as it exposed a fundamental duality in Iran's foreign policy. Should its interests be defined by

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[601] "Islamic Summit Conference: Tehran Declaration," *International Legal Materials* 37, no. 4 (1998): 939.
[602] Vartan Oskanian, *Ankakhut'yan twanaparhov: P'oqr erkri mec' martahravernery'* (Yerevan: Antares Publishing House, 2013).
[603] "Relations between Azerbaijan and the Organization of Islamic Conference," Heydar Aliyev Heritage International Online Library, accessed January 27, 2020, http://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/en/6958380.html.
[604] "No Hope for Better Relations with Iran in Sight, Azerbaijani Agency Says," *Shargh News Agency*, December 13, 1997, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3RJ1-T040-006F-X3JD&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

the principles of Islamic resistance or the concerns of the Iranian state? Khatami's government tried to perform both identities by expressing its solidarity towards the struggle of Azerbaijanis and, at the same time, exchanging reassurances with the Armenian side. Maintaining this duality was only possible by keeping a level of vagueness in Iran's position towards the conflict. It can be seen from Khatam's answer to an Azerbaijani reporter's question on whether Karabakh's case could be compared to Israel's occupation of Palestine. Khatami stated:

> Of course, there is a difference. I believe Israel has occupied the [*sic*] entire Palestine and has established illegitimate existence, but Armenia is a country itself and at the same time occupation and seizure of an inch of the other's territory is condemned and the international community should help end the occupation.[605]

Alongside the attempt at avoiding a straightforward answer, this statement also shows how Iranian officials challenged equivalential articulations of the NK conflict. They put forward interpretations that were formulated through the political logic of difference, where Armenia's and Israel's actions were considered different. In this way, Khatami's administration questioned probably the most intuitive interpretation of the issue. However, it did not offer an alternative in return. Uncertainty remained a key component of Iran's position towards this matter.

This situation often created problems in times of crisis. Whenever there was tension in Iran's relations with Azerbaijan, Baku expressed complaints about the "balanced" approach of the Islamic Republic towards the conflict, stating that the Iranian side did not stand by a neighbouring Shia country and, hence, abandoned its foundational values. Iranian officials responded with defensive remarks.[606] At the same time, newspapers in Iran started

[605] "Iran Condemns Occupation, Use of Force by Any Country - President," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 24, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13lw4nr.
[606] Alireza Bigdeli, "Negāhi be ravābet-e Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān va Jomhuri-ye Āzerbāijān," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 7, no. 24 (1999): 161–68.

recirculating statements on how the Islamic Republic had provided support to many Azerbaijani refugees during the war, implying that they were still committed to the principles of Islamic resistance.[607] These were uneasy situations, which the Iranian side was trying to avoid. In their perspective, such issues would keep reappearing, as long as the conflict remained unresolved. Therefore, they were continuously calling for a commitment to its solution.

While the mentioned uncertainty created challenges for Iran, its primary concern was that the NK conflict had made both Azerbaijan and Armenia vulnerable to foreign interference. Specifically, it was argued that Moscow was using it as leverage over Armenia. Consequentially, Azerbaijan was siding with NATO and the United States, allowing them to increase their influence in the South Caucasus.[608] The latter case was especially troubling for the Iranian government, and various officials expressed their concerns about it. For instance, one of the discussed scenarios was that the United States could use the conflict to establish a military base in Azerbaijan. Foreign Minister Kharrazi touched upon this issue during a meeting with his Azerbaijani counterpart Tofig Zulfugarov.[609] There were more references to such a development after the 9/11 terrorist attack.[610]

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic was sidelined from any affairs related to the NK issue. After its mediation attempt in 1992, there had been no effective engagement and, hence, no

[607] Peyman Aref, "Iran: Daily Comments on Disputes between Iran, Azerbaijan," *Azad Newspaper*, May 20, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45YK-66C0-00KJ-D207&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[608] Elaheh Koulaei, "Irān, Ārmanestān va Rusiye: 'avāmel-e towse'e-ye ravābet," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 8, no. 26 (1999): 11–18; Bahram Amir-Ahmadian, "Ravand-e tahavolāt dar bohrān-e Qarebāgh," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 28 (2000): 27–50; Maleki, "Barresi-ye 'avāmel-e afzāyesh-e risk-e siyāsi dar mantaqe-ye Qafqāz."
[609] "Iran: Foreign Minister Warns Azeri Counterparts of Dangers of Karabakh Conflict," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 13, 1999, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W61-4NW0-00KJ-D15J&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[610] "Iran: Paper Reports US Quest for Military Foothold in Central Asia," *Norooz*, November 6, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44FD-HGM0-00KJ-D3ND&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

control over its possible developments. Not having a say in such a major regional problem became a source of anxiety, especially when other great powers were actively involved in it.

Khatami's government made attempts at changing the circumstances by seeking an active role in the settlement processes. They started arguing that the existing mechanisms were ineffective. When discussing regional affairs with the representatives of the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments, Iranian officials often claimed that the resolution of the NK conflict was jeopardized due to the involvement of external powers.[611] They were also critical of the OSCE Minsk Group, which has been the main framework for negotiations between the clashing parties since 1995.[612] The Iranian side especially stressed the fact that the Group included non-regional actors such as the United States.[613] They considered OSCE a western institution with vested interests.[614] In an interview with an Azerbaijani newspaper, Alireza Bigdeli, Iran's Ambassador to Baku, criticized the efforts of the organization and stated that the Islamic Republic could do "more than the Minsk Group."[615]

As an alternative, the Iranian government started offering their services to the conflicting sides. In early 2001, President Khatami stated the Islamic Republic could restart its mediation efforts.[616] Initially, the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan responded

[611] "Iran: Foreign Minister Kharrazi Confers with Armenian President," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 9, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mgbpn4; "Armenian Defence Minister in Iran for Talks on Bilateral, Regional Issues," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 8, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0n16fuf.
[612] "Minsk Group: Who We Are," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, accessed January 28, 2020, https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/108306.
[613] Reza Nazar Ahari, "Sāzmān-e āmniyat va hamkāri dar Orupā va monāqesheh-ye Nāgorno Qarebāgh," *Motāle'ate Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 36 (2002): 39–52.
[614] "Iran/USA: Radio Liberty 'Sowing Seeds of Discord', Paper Says," *Tehran Times*, November 29, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mjy2rj.
[615] "Iran Not Satisfied with State of Relations with Azerbaijan, Envoy Says," *525 Gazet*, April 1, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W6F-JRX0-00KJ-D49G&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[616] "Iranian President Meets Armenian Foreign Minister," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, February 4, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0n49ctu.

positively, stating their willingness to look into Iran's proposal.[617] When it came to practical steps, the Iranian side put aside the rejectionist narratives towards the Minsk Group and tried to get involved in its endeavours. Khatami's administration decided to appoint Mohammad Farhad Koleini, Iran's Ambassador to Armenia, as their contact person with the Group. While the Armenian side agreed with the proposal, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Vilayat Guliyev stated that Iran's participation in the negotiation process was not possible.[618] In Iran, they interpreted this move as a result of pressure from the United States.[619]

It became clear that Iran's antagonistic Other was casting a long shadow and limiting the attempts of Khatami's government aimed at playing a bigger role in resolving the conflict. Nonetheless, Iranian officials continued stating their willingness to partake in the respective processes. Specifically, SNSC Secretary Hassan Rouhani raised this point multiple times during his meetings with Armenian and Azerbaijani government representatives. His proposals were accompanied by criticism towards the existing security structures and calls for establishing new frameworks, such as the 3+3 format.[620] In other words, Iran's offers were often articulated with frustrations about its limited engagement in the security matters in the South Caucasus, despite considering itself a major regional actor. There was not much the Islamic Republic was able to do other than expressing willingness to be involved. In a

[617] "Azerbaijan Welcomes Iran's Proposal for Mediation on Karabakh," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 10, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0n4j48l; "Armenia Welcomes Iran's Mediation Role in Karabakh Issue," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 9, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0n4j5fx.
[618] "Radio Commentary Says Iran Could Help Settle Karabakh Conflict," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, June 19, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m123dosj.
[619] "Iran: Paper Criticizes Remarks by US Envoy on Caspian Sea," *Resālat*, June 26, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m124875n.
[620] "Iran's Security Council Chief, Armenian Minister Discuss Bilateral Relations," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 13, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m134k1gj; "Iran: Rowhani, Armenian Defence Minister, Discuss Karabakh, Transit Corridor," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 8, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13mvwwd.

way, this situation challenged Iran's aspirant identity, and the narratives about a different regional security system were a reaction to it.

In sum, there were no paradigmatic changes in Iran's position towards the conflict. There was much ambivalence in this regard due to the mentioned duality. Hence, Iranian officials often had to talk about the issue in generic terms. They mainly stated about the commitment to the principle of territorial integrity but did not define what exactly that meant to the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. No significant changes occurred in Iran's level of engagement either. The endeavours of Khatami's administration were not successful, and the Islamic Republic remained in an unfavourable position. It had a frozen conflict near its borders and could not exercise any control over its possible developments.

Iran and Georgia's Territorial Integrity

Georgia has been facing territorial challenges since the early 1990s. They did not appear much in Iranian discourses during Rafsanjani's period, as the Karabakh War overshadowed all the other security concerns in the South Caucasus. While these issues were still in the margins of Iranian foreign policy narratives when Khatami came to power, there were certain developments that showcase important factors of Iran's behaviour towards territorial disputes in the South Caucasus.

First, it is noteworthy that Iran did not face the same challenges, as in the case of the Karabakh conflict. Khatami's administration was able to adopt a fixed position towards the disputes in Georgia. Iranian officials consistently expressed their support to Tbilisi and were critical of the existing separatist tendencies.[621] For instance, when new clashes started in

[621] "Iran: Foreign Minister Holds Talks with Georgian, Armenian Counterparts," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, June 11, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0meh5ds; "Iranian, Georgian Foreign Ministers Discuss Regional Security."

Abkhazia in May 1998, Foreign Minister Kharrazi stated that it was essential to seek a peaceful resolution and respect the territorial integrity of the Georgian state.[622]

In this case, the situation was less complicated from the Iranian perspective, as there were no major religious factors in these disputes. The latter were exclusively articulated as ethnic clashes. The Iranian side was not put in a straitjacket, unlike in the NK case, where they had to show a supportive position towards Shia Azerbaijanis.

Moreover, the shared concern over separatist issues contributed to the confidence-building initiatives between the two states. The Iranian side saw Georgia as a potential partner in addressing the security concerns in the South Caucasus. Therefore, the proposals for changing the security infrastructure in the region were often discussed with the counterparts in Tbilisi.[623] Iran also offered to assist with the settlement of the Abkhazian conflict on several occasions.[624] Though practical steps did not follow these propositions, Tbilisi welcomed Iran's interest in maintaining stability in the region. The Georgian government saw Iran as an ally in these matters. For example, the Speaker of their Parliament Nino Burjanadze requested Iran's mediation to improve relations with Russia in 2002.[625] Tensions were rising between the two countries due to the war in Chechnya. Russian military planes

[622] "Iran: Cooperation Agreement Signed at End of Georgian Minister's Visit," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, June 15, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W3N-33T0-00KJ-D058&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[623] "Iran: National Security Chief Comments on Visit to Caucasus Region," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, July 21, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m124ml8p.
[624] "Iran Prepared to Assist in Abkhazia's Dispute, Official Says," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 26, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=48PD-7D10-00KJ-D430&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[625] "Georgia Calls for Iran's Mediation to Improve Relations with Russia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 24, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=47HR-56D0-00KJ-D1G0&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

were crossing the border into Georgia, looking for Chechen fighters.[626] Tbilisi considered Iran's assistance, taking into account its position on defending Georgia's territorial integrity.

The Islamic Republic maintained this approach after the Rose Revolution in November 2003. The shake-up in the country triggered secessionist tendencies, starting a new wave of clashes in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and even Adjara. The Iranian government called for re-establishing stability in the country and excluding foreign interference.[627] It was supportive of the newly elected President Mikheil Saakashvili's attempts at settling these conflicts and reinstating Georgia's sovereignty over the disputed areas. Therefore, the Iranian Foreign Ministry expressed satisfaction when the Georgian government managed to solve the crisis in Adjara and oust its long-time leader Aslan Abashidze, who had turned the region into a "de facto fiefdom."[628]

On the whole, Khatami's government was rather unambiguous regarding its position toward the territorial disputes in Georgia. This clarity was essential for building mutual trust between the two sides. However, claiming that their shared commitment to a principle defined Iran's policies in the field would be an overstatement. There were other factors that led to cautious and limited engagement on Iran's side.

The first reason had to do with Georgia relations with Russia and the United States. There was significant tension between Moscow and Tbilisi that was connected to the discussed territorial disputes.[629] Hence, the Islamic Republic was careful not to undermine its ties with

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[626] Steven Lee Myers, "Georgia Hearing Heavy Footsteps from Russia's War in Chechnya," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2002, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/15/world/georgia-hearing-heavy-footsteps-from-russia-s-war-in-chechnya.html.
[627] "Iran Supports Democracy in Georgia, Says FM Spokesman," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 24, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=4B30-4G40-00KJ-D2GC&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[628] "Iran Satisfied with Peaceful Resolution of Adjara Crisis," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 16, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m136nn6n.
[629] Hojatollah Faghani, "Gostaresh-e Nāto be sharq: barresi-ye mowze'-ye Gorjestān," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 8, no. 26 (1999): 19–30; Hermidas-Bavand, "Barresi-ye rishehā-ye ekhtelāf beyn-e Federāsiyon-e Rusiye va Jomhuri-ye Gorjestān."

Russia by advocating Georgia's interests. Iranian officials often did not go any further other than expressing support for maintaining territorial integrity. As for Washington's place, it had developed close ties with Tbilisi. In Iran, many argued that Georgia had a western orientation.[630] Therefore, it was hard to see how far partnering with the Islamic Republic could go on such a sensitive matter as territorial disputes.

Second, Iran was not ready to put significant efforts into these matters, as it had other priorities. During Khatami's presidency, the territorial clashes in Georgia were small in scale and short-lived in comparison to the other crises Iran was facing near its borders. For instance, in October 2001, new clashes started in Kodori Valley, Abkhazia.[631] At the same time, the US war in Afghanistan began. There was virtually no reaction to the skirmishes in Georgia from the Iranian side, as their attention was mainly drawn to the situation in Afghanistan.

In sum, the visible difference between this case and the situation around the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict shows how religion was a decisive factor in the articulations of regional conflicts. Discourses about Islam and the principles of resistance were absent in the case of Georgia's territorial issues. Here, Khatami's government prioritized stability and sovereignty. This position was frequently communicated to the Georgian side with proposals that the two states could work together to improve the security environment in the South Caucasus. However, there were challenges for such cooperation. The Islamic Republic was not prepared to invest heavily in settling these issues. Besides, the positions of Russia and the United States provided limited opportunities. As a result, Iran's policies on these matters

[630] Al-Reza Vahidi, "Guām va Siāyes: chālesh-hā va forsathā-ye farāruy-e siyāsat-e khāreji-ye Rusiye."
[631] "Caucasus Report: October 22, 2001," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 22, 2001, https://www.rferl.org/a/1341916.html.

were bound by merely expressing a favourable stance and building ground for cooperation in general.

In general, conflicts in the South Caucasus often caused frustration in Iran. There were concerns that territorial contestations in the region could have a spillover effect. Besides, the Islamic Republic had little leverage over these matters, which could create instabilities near its borders. Playing a marginal role also posed a challenge to Iran's struggle for recognition as an influential regional player. Considering this situation, Khatami's government tried to have a more active engagement and exercise control over managing the mentioned conflicts. However, these attempts were not successful due to a number of limitations mainly posed by the United States. Finally, the Iranian government often struggled to adopt a clear position towards some of the regional disputes, even if it was eager to have a bigger say in deciding their fate.

The State of Bilateral Ties

The spirit of change associated with Khatami's presidency was mostly absent from bilateral relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. There was a reluctance to develop a strategic vision in this regard. In such a situation, the practices that had emerged during Rafsanjani's period were repeated and became habitual over time. Specifically, the tendency to maintain intensive communication even without a specific agenda was commonplace.

Due to not having an overarching approach, bilateral ties with these three states were quite different from each other, similar to what has been observed in the previous chapter. Relations with Azerbaijan were still unstable. The Iranian side saw great potential for collaboration with its Shia neighbour. However, mutual distrust and Azerbaijan's position on certain issues created obstacles for it. The result was relations defined by constant fluctuations. Meanwhile, bilateral ties with Armenia were steady. Both sides considered

each other allies in the region and showed preparedness to enhance their cooperation in different fields. The problem here was the slow pace of progress despite the favourable circumstances. Finally, relations with Georgia were still exploratory. In general, there was a friendly environment. Joint regional initiatives were discussed between the sides, but they were vague and raised questions about feasibility.

Continuous Volatility in Relations with Azerbaijan

Iran's relations with Azerbaijan were nothing short of complicated. The country occupied a central role in the discourses about the South Caucasus. Most of the high priority issues in the region were closely related to the ties with Baku. While these shared areas of interest could be utilized to strengthen cooperation between what many in Iran considered two fraternal nations, they often brought tension and volatility due to pre-existing mistrust between the two sides. Usually, reconciliation attempts followed such situations, as both countries remained committed to improving their ties despite the difficulties. In this respect, the unsteady nature of Iran-Azerbaijan relations had not changed since the latter's independence.

During Khatami's presidency, articulations of Azerbaijan's agency alternated between two perspectives. On the one hand, a perception of the neighbouring country was formed in traditional geopolitical terms, where shared identity was put aside, and Azerbaijan's close ties with the United States, Israel, and Turkey were emphasized. These narratives, which were especially popular among technocratic circles, argued that Baku had great-power dependency issues due to its economic constraints and security problems.[632] It was considered that this situation led to establishing close ties with the United States, giving the latter strong leverages over Aliyev's government.

[632] Koulaei, "Irān, Ārmanestān va Rusiye: 'avāmel-e towse'e-ye ravābet"; Maleki, "Barresi-ye 'avāmel-e afzāyesh-e risk-e siyāsi dar mantaqe-ye Qafqāz."

Besides, developments in Baku's relations with NATO and membership in GUUAM, a newly established organization that was perceived to have an anti-Russian orientation, were used to articulate Azerbaijan's position through the prism of the above-mentioned axis-building discourses.[633] Specifically, Azerbaijan was seen as part of the East-West axis that was comprised of Turkey, the United States, as well as Israel, against whom Russia and Iran were struggling.[634] In other words, there was an equivalential articulation that presented associations between Azerbaijan and Iran's antagonistic Other, leading to a confrontational attitude.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan's subject position was also articulated as a country with deep historical, cultural, and religious ties with the Islamic Republic in the framework of the social logic of resistance communities. Anything other than friendly relations was considered problematic. In the words of Iran's Ambassador to Baku, the two states had an impressive shared heritage that could not be ignored.[635] In this respect, it was argued they should develop their relations around these commonalities and not let third parties sabotage their cooperation.[636] As the Iranian side often called for revitalizing non-western identity and building cooperation around it, having strained relations with a country such as Azerbaijan could become a challenge for the very status the Islamic Republic was trying to build through this mandate. Therefore, the hostility between these two countries was considered unacceptable.

[633] Hermidas-Bavand, "Barresi-ye rishehā-ye ekhtelāf beyn-e Federāsiyon-e Rusiye va Jomhuri-ye Gorjestān"; Al-Reza Vahidi, "Guām va Siāyes: chālesh-hā va forsathā-ye farāruy-e siyāsat-e khāreji-ye Rusiye."
[634] Ali Akbar Rezaei, "Esrā'il va Āsiyā-ye Markazi," *Motāle'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 7, no. 23 (1998): 65–78; Al-Reza Vahidi, "Rusiye va bohrān dar Qafqāz-e Shomāli"; Darabian, "Role of Georgia's Armenians in the Developments of the Caucasus."
[635] Bigdeli, "Negāhi be ravābet-e Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān va Jomhuri-ye Āzerbāijān."
[636] "Reports: The First Roundtable of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan," *Amu Darya: the Iranian Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1999): 253–67.

These two perspectives are reflected in the developments described below. Often, they were intertwined, leading to a sense of frustration that a country, with whom the Islamic Republic had so many affinities, carried out policies that were seen contradictory to their interests. This discontent was expressed on a regular basis, and the Azerbaijani side reciprocated. The result was an atmosphere of distrust.

Khatami's administration started its encounters with the Azerbaijani government by showing dissatisfaction with their bilateral ties. In a meeting with the Deputy Speaker of Azerbaijani National Assembly in September 1997, President Khatami stated that the two countries should restore the cooperative environment and move forward with advancing their ties. He also added that Israel and the United States would try to undermine those attempts.[637] Two months later, an official Iranian delegation visited Baku, where the necessity of expanding relations was discussed.[638] During the same period, Allahshukur Pashazadeh, the Grand Mufti of the Caucasus, visited Iran, where he talked about strengthening the "bonds of fraternity and friendship" between the two countries.[639]

These moves were meant to set a new tone in bilateral relations. However, they were not effective, as what followed were a series of incidents, which raised questions about the intention of having friendly ties. For instance, in December 1997, Azerbaijan's ambassador was summoned to the Iranian Foreign Ministry to communicate complaints about arresting the head of the Union of Iranian Merchants in Azerbaijan. A few months later, the

[637] "Visiting Azerbaijani Official Discusses Relations with President Khatami," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, September 20, 1997, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3SP2-6YM0-006F-X0K3&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[638] "Iranian Delegation in Talks with Azeri Prime Minister," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 20, 1997, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3SP2-6130-006F-X0HH&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[639] "Azeri Religious Leader Describes Iran as Republic's 'Closest Friend,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 19, 1997, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3SP2-6210-006F-X0T0&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

Azerbaijani side accused Iranians of mistreating their ambassador at the Astara border control, when he and his delegation were travelling back to Azerbaijan. The Iranian embassy in Baku denied the report and condemned the accusations on Azerbaijani TV that Iranians burnt the Azeri flag and damaged the ambassador's car.[640] In July 1998, the Iranian embassy in Baku made another statement about "baseless" rumours that their customs officials had burnt Azeri books.[641]

There were also allegations about espionage and interventionist policies. For instance, in May 1998, Azerbaijani television reported about Iranian espionage activities.[642] A few months later, a member of the Azerbaijani parliament argued that Iran had been supporting opposition forces in the country.[643] In November 1999, Namiq Abbasov, the National Security Minister of Azerbaijan, made a similar statement.[644] In September 2001, 60 people were arrested in Azerbaijan based on suspicions that they were working for the Iranian intelligence services.[645] The Iranian side denied these accusations, often stating that there were forces in and outside of Azerbaijan working on sabotaging relations with Iran.[646]

[640] "Iranian Embassy Denies"Baseless" Azeri TV Report of Ambassador's Mistreatment," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 24, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3S9J-YHR0-006F-X31N&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[641] "Iranian Embassy Denies Allegations of Burning Azeri Books," *Yeni Musavat*, July 1, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3T2P-2PC0-006F-X334&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[642] "Iran Denies Espionage Activities in Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 16, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W3S-GF50-00KJ-D24R&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[643] "Iranian Embassy Protests at Azeri MP's Charge of Aiding Opposition," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 14, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3V3P-2RJ0-006F-X4Y3&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[644] "Iran: Radio Commentary Rejects 'Allegations' of Azerbaijan's Security Minister," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 30, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W61-4SK0-00KJ-D27T&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[645] "Baku Arrests 60 Suspects of Spying for Iran," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 5, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m126ipum.
[646] "Iran: Radio Comments on Anti-Iranian Propaganda in Baku," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, May 1, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1224ekh.

Specifically, Baku's close ties with Israel and the United States were blamed for the incidents.

This situation was indicative of mutual suspicion and tension. Here, the perception of Azerbaijan as part of an anti-Iranian axis provided the framework for these narratives and was reproduced by them, strengthening its position in Iranian foreign policy discourses. The above-presented contradictions on the Caspian affairs amplified these challenges. In this environment, it was hard to settle disagreements between the two states in a constructive manner. Instead, the sides opted for inflammatory remarks that started a regressive spiral. For instance, Mohsen Rezaee, the Secretary of the Expediency Council, made the following statement when commenting about Azerbaijan's oil explorations in the Caspian:

> Azerbaijan was an Iranian province. Some 150 years ago this Iranian territory was occupied by Russia and it was subsequently ceded because the central government failed to support the people and combatants of the province. Now that the dear people of Azerbaijan have been freed from the communist yoke, the rulers of Baku should manage it in a way that the Iranian people do not call for the return of Azerbaijan to the motherland. Similarly if the Iranian government decides to continue with its previous policies it may be possible that the great people of Iran will one day call for the return of their lost territories.[647]

Though it would be a stretch to call such a hostile statement representative of Iran's official position, it is very illustrative of the bitterness between the two governments and how they reacted to each other's policies.

The statement also reveals another important feature of the discourses on shared cultural and historical heritage. There was an implied power dynamic in these narratives. Specifically, such transgressive statements show that Azerbaijan was perceived to be within the Iranian cultural space as a residual subject and not of equal standing with the Islamic Republic. In a way, discourses about common heritage had a hierarchical pretext, which led to the

[647] "Iran: Senior Official Says Iran May Want Azerbaijan Returned to Motherland," *Quds Website*, July 29, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m124xlcu.

expectation of compliance with Iranian interests from the Azerbaijani side. This is the reason why Iranian officials often reacted to Baku's policies in a hostile fashion. The commonalities, which were supposed to promote friendly ties, sometimes amplified the existing friction.

Despite the multi-layered nature of this tension, both Iran and Azerbaijan had a common position on avoiding any escalation in such a situation. Hence, bilateral relations often entered a mode of damage control. The primary means for the latter was the routinized practice of maintaining high-level communication that had emerged during Rafsanjani's period and was solidified later. During these interactions, Iranian officials emphasized their willingness to improve relations and concentrate on economic matters.

During his visit to Baku in August 1998, Foreign Minister Kharrazi stated that there were ups and downs in their relations, but the crucial factor was the friendly attitude, which would guide them through those challenges.[648] President Khatami made similar remarks when hosting the Speaker of the National Assembly of Azerbaijan Murtuz Alasgarov.[649] Rafsanjani also had a meeting with Alasgarov, where they discussed the low level of trade that stood at USD 240 million and called for expansion of cooperation and initiation of new projects, such as constructing the Astara-Baku road.[650] The Supreme Leader talked about these issues as well during a meeting with Azerbaijan's President Heydar Aliyev, who was

[648] "Iran: Foreign Minister Returns from the Central Asia Tour," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 14, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W37-T2V0-00KJ-D1XB&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[649] "Iran: President Khatami, Azeri Speaker Discuss Caspian Sea Status," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, December 28, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W4V-9TN0-00KJ-D0V5&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[650] "Iran: Azeri Official Calls for Increased Trade," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 27, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W4V-9TM0-00KJ-D0HP&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

in Iran for the ECO Summit. Khamenei stated that the two countries should not be misled by external forces and needed to strengthen their cooperation.[651]

These frequent meetings were important for expressing reassurances. Though they did not manage to bring much improvement in bilateral ties, they were helpful for preventing exacerbations. It is due to these endeavours that there were incremental improvements in commercial affairs. For example, an agreement was signed in October 1999 on establishing a trade centre in Baku for Iranian products. The agreement also had a provision on improving the facilities of Astara and Bilasuvar border posts.[652] In March 2001, an electricity line was commissioned between the two countries.[653] In this period, the sides also discussed projects, such as supplying gas to the Azerbaijani region Nakhchivan, building the Khoda Afarin Dam, and linking the railway networks of the two states.[654] However, there was no progress in these matters — such long-term initiatives required commitment and stability in their ties that was still missing.

The turning point came in May 2002, when Heydar Aliyev paid an official visit to Tehran. After a series of hardships mainly related to the Caspian legal regime, the two sides started seeing how unsustainable their policies were in regard to each other. In an interview with *Entekhab* newspaper, Bagher Emami, a member of the Iran-Azerbaijan Parliamentary Friendship Group, stated that the unsuccessful Ashgabat Summit showed the need for

[651] "Iran: Khamenei Meets Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Azeri, Pakistani, Afghan Leaders," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 10, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mv2xef.
[652] "Iran Signs Agreement to Expand Cooperation with Azerbaijan," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, October 9, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mi8e7p.
[653] "Iran-Azeri Electricity Supply Line Commissioned," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 27, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m111p53v.
[654] "Iran: Rafsanjani Unhappy with Failure to Implement Azerbaijan Projects," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, October 4, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mi4trp.

Aliyev's visit.[655] In other words, the failures in the Caspian affairs were a sobering moment for the Islamic Republic, also concerning relations with Azerbaijan. Khatami's administration decided to put more effort into improving the situation, and Aliyev's visit showed that there were signs of progress.

During his visit, Aliyev had a meeting with Khamenei, where the latter talked about the "deep-rooted historical and ideological bonds" between the two countries.[656] These words were indicative of the restorative nature of the trip. The result was signing ten letters of understanding on political, economic, and cultural affairs.[657] The sides also issued a joint communique, where they mentioned the necessity of regular visits.[658]

More practical steps followed. At the fifth session of the Iran-Azerbaijan Joint Economic Commission in October 2002, Iran pledged to accredit USD 40 million to Azerbaijan for constructing the Astara-Baku highway.[659] It was also decided that Iran would start exporting gas to Nakhchivan.[660] The following month, an agreement was signed to double the electricity exchange between the two states.[661] In April 2003, it was announced that trade

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[655] "Iran: MP Says Iran, Azerbaijan Working on Agreement over Caspian Issues," *Entekhab*, May 20, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45W7-HXF0-00KJ-D31X&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[656] Khamenei.ir, "Didār-e āqā-ye Heydar Aliyev ra'is jomhur-e Āzerbāijān ba rahbar-e enqelāb," May 9, 2002, http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=11701.
[657] "Azeri President Aliyev Winds up Tehran Visit," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 20, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45W3-1DG0-00KJ-D2NF&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[658] "Iran, Azerbaijan Issue Joint Communique at End of Azeri President's Visit," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 20, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45W3-1DP0-00KJ-D2TT&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[659] "Iranian Cooperatives Minister Arrives in Baku," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 28, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=473K-GY20-00KJ-D1T1&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Iran to Allocate 40m Dollars for Road Reconstruction in Azerbaijan," *Turan News Agency*, October 30, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=4741-G6C0-00KJ-D4WW&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[660] "Iran and Azerbaijan Sign Economic Cooperation Agreement," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 30, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=4741-G6C0-00KJ-D4WF&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[661] "Iran, Azerbaijan Discuss Boosting Energy Cooperation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 30, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring,

through the Astara border point had increased several times.[662] The Iranian side started putting forward more ambitious plans, such as investing around USD 130 million in major infrastructure projects in Azerbaijan.[663]

Khatami's visit to Azerbaijan in August 2004 and President Ilham Aliyev's return visit in January 2005 solidified this progress.[664] During the former, ten agreements were signed covering various economic, cultural, and security related issues.[665] Also, Iran's president made a statement that Muslims in Azerbaijan should support their government. It was a crucial confidence-building step for discrediting suspicions that Iran was triggering anti-government sentiments in Azerbaijan.[666] When Aliyev visited Iran, they signed nine memoranda of understanding on issues such as power plants, aviation, and railroads.[667] During this trip, the two presidents issued a joint statement calling for the sides of the Karabakh conflict to follow the UN and OIC resolutions on respecting territorial sovereignty.[668] This was yet another move towards making reassurances to the Azerbaijani side about Iran's intentions.

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https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=47BM-H470-00KJ-D3KV&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[662] "Iran: Eight-Fold Increase in Astara Border Market Activities Reported," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 27, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=48G1-8PX0-00KJ-D03V&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[663] "Iran to Invest in 10 Projects in Republic of Azerbaijan, Says Envoy," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 30, 2003, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=48YT-NSW0-00KJ-D424&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

[664] Ilham Aliyev was elected Azerbaijan's President in October 2003, after his late father stood down due to severe health conditions.

[665] "Iran's Khatami Leaves Azerbaijan for Home," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 7, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13bqyn5.

[666] "Iran's Khatami Says Muslims Must Be Volunteers to Fight Terrorism," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 7, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13bqw0i.

[667] "Iran, Azerbaijan Sign 9 Memoranda of Understanding," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 26, 2005, 9, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13lzwmj.

[668] "Iran, Azerbaijan Issue Joint Press Statement," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 26, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13lzvbi.

In general, improvements in Iran-Azerbaijan relations were significant during the last few years of Khatami's presidency. There was a shift in Iranian discourses from expressing dissatisfaction to talking about promising trends and expansion of cooperation. A few months after Heydar Aliyev's visit in 2002, Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, the Cabinet Secretary of Khatami's administration, stated that there had already been noticeable progress, in which continuous negotiations had an important role. He called that process "marathon talks," a necessity for avoiding tension and building trust.[669] The Iranian Minister of Cooperatives Ali Soufi also talked about these improvements at a meeting with Heydar Aliyev in Baku.[670]

However, these changes do not mean that problems in Iran-Azerbaijan relations simply disappeared. Baku's close ties with the United States and Israel remained problematic, and incidents in bilateral ties were often articulated in relation to the image of the antagonistic Other. The most striking case was Elmar Mammadyarov's statement that Iranian Azeris were "guests" in their country. Many in the Islamic Republic considered this a violation of their territorial integrity. Two Majles deputies from the Azeri speaking Ardebil region refused to join Khatami during his trip to Azerbaijan as a sign of protest. One of them even stated: "The officials of the Republic of Azerbaijan must not forget under which shameful agreement and with the signature of which weak and lascivious person their country had been separated from Iran."[671] They emphasized Baku's western orientation as the main reason for making such statements. In other words, the statement was put in a context, where the image of Iran's antagonistic Other was linked to the sensitive separatist issues in the

[669] "Iran: Cabinet Spokesman Pleased with Ties with Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 30, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=46N0-HW60-00KJ-D38T&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[670] "Azeri President Lauds 'Fresh Environment' in Ties with Iran," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 1, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=4748-BGP0-00KJ-D09P&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[671] "Iranian Azeri Deputies Cancel Visit to Azerbaijan in Protest," *Kayhān*, August 5, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13bonmv.

country. As a result, incidents like this reproduced the suspicious tendencies in bilateral ties despite the mentioned achievements.

In conclusion, Iran's relations with Azerbaijan required constant effort in order to keep them on track. The geopolitical positioning of the two states, as perceived in Iran, was a major hindrance that often created tension and sometimes even a hostile environment. It was the continuous preparedness to start a dialogue that helped the sides find areas of cooperation despite the existing disagreements in many respects. While these efforts often led to tangible improvements, the mentioned challenges remained and made the Iran-Azerbaijan relations vulnerable to deterioration.

Relations with Armenia: Friendly Atmosphere but Slow Progress

The volatility discussed above was not present in Iran's relations with Armenia. The two neighbours managed to establish a cordial environment and routinize their cooperation. Predictability was a crucial factor in these ties. Specifically, Armenia's position and behaviour were considered clear and acceptable in Iranian discourses about the South Caucasus. Due to the relative tranquillity in the Karabakh conflict, the discourses about Iran cooperating with a state that had a dispute with Shia Azerbaijanis did not have much potency. Instead, the narratives on a long history of coexistence and shared interests started becoming the hegemonic interpretations. As a result, Iran saw a trustworthy partner in Armenia and was willing to expand its cooperation in different sectors. However, the willingness to enhance ties was not always matched with specific and plausible plans or necessary resources.

Seeing Armenia as part of the North-South axis was an important precondition for friendly ties. The absence of diplomatic relations with Turkey, the conflict with Azerbaijan, and the close partnership with Russia were among the primary factors that led to having such an

image of their northern neighbour.[672] In this context, having close relations was considered a necessity for strengthening the North-South axis as a counterweight to the policies of Iran's antagonistic Others.[673]

Armenia's dependence on Russia was an especially interesting point in these narratives. As stated in the section on regionalism, there was certain ambivalence regarding Moscow's role in the region. There were traces of it in Armenia's case as well, as it created limitations for Yerevan to conduct its foreign policy independently.[674] Such over-reliance on a great power was generally considered a problem for the Islamic Republic. However, in this particular case, Armenia's dependence on Russia could also be seen as a guarantee that the former would not tilt towards the West. For instance, there were no major concerns in Iran that Yerevan would advance its relations with NATO. While such scenarios were entertained in the cases of Azerbaijan and Georgia, the possibility that Armenia would follow the same path was not discussed mainly due to Moscow's role.[675] The Armenian government confirmed this perception by clarifying that they had no intention of joining the organization. Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanyan stressed this point during his visit to Iran in February 2001.[676]

In addition to these geopolitical configurations, narratives about historical and cultural ties also fostered the confidence-building initiatives between the two countries. It was often stated that Iranians and Armenians lived side by side for millennia, where cultural exchange

[672] Al-Reza Vahidi, "Guām va Siāyes: chālesh-hā va forsathā-ye farāruy-e siyāsat-e khāreji-ye Rusiye"; Maleki, "Ravābet-e Torkiyeh va Esrā'il va āsār-e ān dar Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz."; Amir-Ahmadian, "Ravand-e tahavolāt dar bohrān-e Qarebāgh."
[673] Koulaei, "Irān, Ārmanestān va Rusiye: 'avāmel-e towse'e-ye ravābet."
[674] Maleki, "Barresi-ye 'avāmel-e afzāyesh-e risk-e siyāsi dar mantaqe-ye Qafqāz."
[675] Darabian, "Role of Georgia's Armenians in the Developments of the Caucasus"; Faghani, "Gostaresh-e Nāto be sharq: barresi-ye mowze'-ye Gorjestān"; Hermidas-Bavand, "Rezhim-e hoquqi-ye dariyā-ye Khazar: negāhi be ab'ād-e zist mohiti va āmniyat."
[676] "Visiting Armenian Foreign Minister Holds Talks with Iranian Official," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 4, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0n4922a.

has been an integral factor in their relations. This legacy was considered a valuable precondition for friendly ties. Iranian officials often pointed out this aspect in the encounters with their Armenian counterparts. President Khatami, in particular, often made references to it as a common ground on which bilateral cooperation could be built.[677] The observed data shows that it became somewhat of a ritual to talk about these commonalities in official meetings as a sign of trust between the sides and then move on to more practical issues.

In a word, narratives about favourable geopolitical conditions in the South Caucasus and shared legacy created an image of Armenia that not only did not pose a threat to Iran's interests but also had the potential to become an ally in the region. Khatami's administration tried to utilize these favourable conditions and register progress in the following three areas: economic development, regional stability, and status validation.

Boosting commercial ties had a high priority in Iran-Armenia relations. Both sides considered investing in infrastructure development the primary means for increasing the volume of trade and having a more advanced economic partnership. Therefore, joint projects such as building a gas pipeline and upgrading transportation systems were the main topics of discussions on economic affairs. For instance, during his visit to Iran in July 1998, the Head of the Government Staff of Armenia Shahen Karamanukyan discussed these matters with President Khatami and Minister of Economy and Finance Hossein Namazi. Their main observation was the underutilized commercial potential in bilateral relations. Reportedly, Iran's share in Armenia's total trade dropped from 18 to 9.5 per cent in the period of 1996-

[677] "Iran: President Khatami Receives Visiting Armenian Foreign Minister," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, August 25, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W37-T430-00KJ-D1CS&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true; "Iran's President Says Cooperation with Armenia 'Not Harmful to Anyone,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 27, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44SK-GF80-00KJ-D3DY&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

1998.[678] Hossein Namazi argued that it was necessary to implement projects similar to constructing the bridge over the Aras River in order to reverse this unfavourable trend. Therefore, Karamanukyan's delegation concluded the visit by signing a memorandum of understanding, where joint investments in hard and soft infrastructure projects were emphasized.[679]

The following month, Armenia's Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanyan visited Iran, where the aforementioned infrastructure projects were discussed.[680] In October 1998, the two sides signed an agreement on improving transportation facilities. Specifically, it was planned to build a highway, which was meant to connect Iran to Georgia and Europe via Armenia.[681] It appears that the sides were determined to carry out these initiatives. More meetings were held, where the following projects were in the agenda: constructing a pipeline for transferring Iranian gas to Armenia and later to Europe, building a railroad, a highway, and a tunnel for boosting trade through the North-South corridor, and setting up a hydroelectric power plant on the Aras River.[682]

However, close observation of these official encounters shows that their content did not change over time. For instance, the agreements on infrastructure development signed in

[678] "Minister Disappointed at Falling Trade with Iran," July 18, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3T6J-8T60-006F-X050&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[679] "Accord Signed with Armenia on Closer Economic Cooperation," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1*, July 20, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3T6S-DJ70-006F-X0K8&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[680] "Iran, Armenia Discuss Strengthening Economic Cooperation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 24, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3THG-8BF0-006F-X2YK&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[681] "Iran, Armenia to Cooperate in Surface Transportation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 29, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W4M-5ST0-00KJ-D2M6&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[682] "Iran's Foreign Minister Describes Yerevan Visit as 'Constructive,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 9, 1999, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mgcgwz; "Iran: President Khatami Hails Iran-Armenia Ties as Important," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 11, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m112bn2o.

2004 and 2005 were not very different in essence from those made in the late 1990s.[683] Khatami's visit to Armenia in September 2004 is very telling about the slow pace of these developments. The sides signed seven agreements on energy cooperation and infrastructure development, most of which were as generic as the preceding ones.[684] Similar to the case of Iran-Armenia-Greece trilateral cooperation, the sides did not do much regarding most of these endeavours other than expressing their willingness to implement them. The primary reason for this stagnant situation was the limited capabilities of both sides for carrying out such costly initiatives. As a result, most of these projects remained in the air.

The only exception was the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline, which became the highlight of bilateral economic cooperation during Khatami's presidency. Armenia's President Robert Kocharyan's visit to Iran in December 2001 brought clarity in this regard. During the trip, the sides signed ten agreements covering a wide range of issues, but it was the one on transporting gas from Iran that stood out. There was more specificity on this matter: It was decided to build a 140km long pipeline with the capacity to transport 1.1bcm gas per year.[685]

Initially, the two sides planned to start the construction in 2002, but there were complications. First, the early anticipations for external investments were misplaced. Not only were international stakeholders reluctant to be part of the initiative, but there were also attempts at sabotaging the project. As stated above, the hopes that Washington would revise its sanctions policies and give the green light to transnational pipeline projects involving Iran disappeared. Bush's administration opted for a confrontational stance, which was

[683] "Iran, Armenia to Establish Two Power Stations on Aras River," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 14, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13toxsr.
[684] "Iran, Armenia Sign Seven Cooperation Agreements," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 8, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13dny9g.
[685] "Armenian President Leaves Tehran after Signing Several Agreements," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 27, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44SK-GF80-00KJ-D3F6&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

extrapolated on Iran-Armenian relations as well. In particular, the U.S. government was against the pipeline and communicated its position to the Armenian side.[686] Due to this external pressure and lack of financial assistance, finishing the project within the initial timeframe was not possible.

It was only in May 2004 that the sides managed to finalize the agreement when Iran's Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zanganeh paid a visit to Yerevan.[687] According to the deal, Iran was going to provide gas to Armenia for 20 years, and the transfer was planned to start in 2007. The estimated cost of the pipeline was around USD 120 million. The protracted negotiations on transferring gas, which started during Rafsanjani's administration, finally led to tangible results, and the construction started in July 2004.[688] In all, Armenia and Iran managed to complete a major infrastructure project. While it showed the possibility of reaching tangible results, the process described above also indicated the significant hardships and limitations the two countries had to face in case of implementing the initiatives they so often discussed.

The other area where the Islamic Republic valued Armenia's partnership was regional security. It is worth noting that the discourses about the latter were interlinked with the illustrated economic projects. Specifically, Khatami's administration saw economic interdependence as a guarantee for regional stability. When Armenia's Minister of Defence Serzh Sargsyan visited the Islamic Republic in November 2000, this point was raised by the

[686] "Iran: Daily Says 'US Interventionist Policies Face Failure in Caucasus,'" *Tehran Times*, March 17, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=45CD-2HS0-00KJ-D077&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[687] "Armenian Foreign Minister Terms Iran 'Major Partner' in Region," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 14, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m136jhkv.
[688] "Iran Begins Building 140 Km Gas Pipeline to Armenia: Report," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 22, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13ax82m.

Iranian side. Foreign Minister Kharrazi stressed how crucial infrastructure projects were for establishing stability in the region.[689]

The Iranian side often used the aforementioned negotiations to posit its stance on maintaining peace in the South Caucasus.[690] Alongside the commercial benefits, major projects such as constructing a gas pipeline reduced uncertainty in regional affairs. Even if very few of these initiatives got implemented, the mere act of negotiating about them was already a positive step in terms of reproducing a shared vision of the future and validating trust between the neighbouring states. Therefore, Iranian officials continued discussing those infrastructure projects with their Armenian counterparts, even if no practical measures followed them.

Finally, cooperation with Yerevan was a means for the Islamic Republic to dismantle the perceptions of a revisionist state and present a cooperative image. The Iranian government tried to use friendly ties with a neighbouring Christian country as a model for Dialogue among Civilizations. This was the theme of Khatami's statements when he visited Armenia in September 2004. In his speech at the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, he said:

> One of the very interesting facts about our common past is that even the differences in religious creeds, that usually cause serious cleavage among the people of the same regions, have not been able to break the bonds of friendship between the peoples of ancient Iran and Armenia… We should have no doubt whatsoever that this expansion of relations will lead to the establishment of a deeper mutual understanding and to the safeguarding of the historical assets which the two civilizations have inherited.[691]

In a meeting with the Armenian Catholicos Karekin II, he claimed that the two religions should work together to revive spirituality in the world.[692] In this regard, the friendly ties

[689] "Armenian Defence Minister in Iran for Talks on Bilateral, Regional Issues."
[690] Khamenei, "Didār-e āqā-ye Kochāryān ra'is-e jomhur-e Ārmanestān bā rahbar-e enqelāb."
[691] "Iranian, Armenian Cultures, Civilizations Enjoy Strong Bonds: Khatami," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 9, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13dosd3.
[692] "Iran's Khatami Reiterates Needs to Revive Spirituality," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 10, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13drr58.

between Iran and Armenia served as a recognitive practice and were seen as a successful example of how Christians and Muslims managed to collaborate based on shared commitments.

Overall, Iran's relations with Armenia were based on mutual trust. Yerevan's policies were compatible with Iran's interests, and the sides tried to use this shared ground for advancing their collaboration on a wide range of issues. However, the pace of progress was slow. The two countries managed to kickstart only one of their planned major projects, which itself had been delayed multiple times. On the other hand, frequent visits, negotiations on joint initiatives, and statements of reassurances were important for maintaining a high level of friendly ties, even if they did not always lead to practical results.

Relations with Georgia: Still Exploring

Among the states in the South Caucasus, references to Georgia in Iranian foreign policy were comparably limited. Occasionally, the country appeared in articulations about regional initiatives, considering its favourable geographic position. Georgia was a gateway to European markets and was located on the North-South corridor. On the other hand, it was widely acknowledged that Tbilisi had an explicit western orientation, which raised questions about the extent to which it was prepared to work with Iran on regional initiatives.

Articulations about Georgia's position had similarities to those about Azerbaijan. There were remarks about close ties with Washington, willingness to cooperate with NATO, membership in GUUAM, and involvement in the so-called East-West axis against Russia and Iran.[693] However, these narratives did not lead to the same frustration observed in the case of Azerbaijan. Tbilisi's position was considered as a given, and there was no

[693] Faghani, "Gostaresh-e Nāto be sharq: barresi-ye mowze'-ye Gorjestān"; Maleki, "Barresi-ye 'avāmel-e afzāyesh-e risk-e siyāsi dar mantaqe-ye Qafqāz"; Hermidas-Bavand, "Barresi-ye rishehā-ye ekhtelāf beyn-e Federāsiyon-e Rusiye va Jomhuri-ye Gorjestān."

expectation of compliance with Iran's interests. This attitude was primarily due to the same sense of distance from Georgia that can be seen during Rafsanjani's presidency, unlike in Azerbaijan's case, where there was perceived to be a dissonance between the strong cultural and religious affinities and the contradictory policies. Hence, the Iranian side saw room for cooperation with Georgia despite the mentioned geopolitical proclivities.

The shared position on territorial integrity, as illustrated above, became a means for confidence-building between the two countries. Official encounters often started with expressing commitment to the principle. Georgia's Foreign Minister Irakli Menagarishvili's visit to Iran in June 1998 is a vivid example of it.[694] He had a meeting with Khatami, where they discussed developing bilateral ties, having in mind the common objective of defending the sovereignty of the states in the region. Then they went on to sign a memorandum of understanding on economic, political, and cultural cooperation.[695]

The official meetings that followed this deal were not very different in their content. A year after, Foreign Minister Kharrazi visited Tbilisi, where he talked about the necessity of advancing cooperation regarding various issues.[696] His counterpart Irakli Menagarishvili made a return visit in August 2000. He had a meeting with Khatami and Majles Speaker Mehdi Karroubi.[697] The agenda was mainly comprised of issues on keeping stability in the region and boosting bilateral economic cooperation.

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[694] "Iran: President Khatami, Georgian Foreign Minister Discuss Regional Security," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, June 14, 1998, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=3W3N-33J0-00KJ-D4R7&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[695] "Iran: Cooperation Agreement Signed at End of Georgian Minister's Visit."
[696] "Iran: Foreign Minister Holds Talks with Georgian, Armenian Counterparts."
[697] "Iran: Khatami, Visiting Georgian Minister Discuss Relations, Caucasus," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 5, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mxacr0; "Iranian Parliament Speaker Receives Visiting Georgian Foreign Minister," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 6, 2000, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m0mxbmqq.

The key point here is that these negotiations were not becoming more precise over time. Beyond expressing readiness to work together, neither the Iranian side nor their Georgian counterparts followed through with a particular plan. One of the main issues was that Tbilisi's geopolitical standing did not receive due consideration. While sidelining its western orientation allowed to open space for cooperation, it also prevented any proper reflection on how far that cooperation could go.

The talks about transferring Iranian gas to Europe is a good example here. Khatami's administration planned to extend the Iran-Armenia pipeline by including Georgia in the project as well. However, as it was reported by Armenian media outlets, the plan was based on questionable assumptions. The Georgian side had not presented an explicit position on the matter. Moreover, there was little likelihood that Tbilisi would go against Washington's policies in the region.[698] These conditions were not factored in the observed narratives, and the pipeline is just one of the many cases. Iran's attitude towards relations with Georgia was still in an exploratory mode. Therefore, it is not surprising that a few years after these meetings, Iran's Ambassador to Georgia Hossein Aminian Tousi called the level of progress in relations between the two countries "unacceptable."[699]

Despite these issues, one should not rush to consider the presented efforts ineffective due to their limited material utility. Similar to the cases of Azerbaijan, the regular practice of holding talks and discussing mutual initiatives were helpful in terms of reinforcing confidence in times of dramatic changes. There was a possibility of a rift between the two

[698] "Fate of Iran-Armenia Gas Pipeline up in the Air - Armenian Agency," *Mediamax News Agency*, November 16, 2001, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44GG-J890-00KJ-D4RY&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[699] "Iranian, Georgian Officials Discuss Expansion of Ties," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 23, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=47HB-P830-00KJ-D0CX&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.

countries after the 9/11 terrorist attack, as Tbilisi started getting involved in U.S.-led military campaigns. The Iranian side was especially concerned about American troops being stationed in Georgia for the operations in Afghanistan.[700] In this situation, official encounters were vital for maintaining the friendly atmosphere.

Several months after these concerns were raised, Iran's ambassador to Georgia had a meeting with Foreign Minister Menagarishvili. Alongside discussion on trade cooperation, they agreed to hold regular "consultations" on regional issues for the sake of keeping the cordial environment and avoiding diplomatic issues.[701] In April 2003, Foreign Minister Kharrazi's visit followed, which was devoted to the security issues in the South Caucasus.[702] It was during this trip that Iran's 3+3 formula was introduced. Though the proposal remained in the air, the visit was crucial for restating the commitment of both sides to peace and stability. It is also important to add that these visits took place in a tumultuous period for Tbilisi. There was a spike in territorial tensions, and relations with Russia were tense. In this situation, Iran's support for Georgia's territorial integrity was valued greatly and helped to reinforce the amiable mood in bilateral ties.

These continuous measures helped to formulate a balanced position towards the Rose Revolution in Georgia. Khatami's administration showed preparedness to work with the newly elected Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili the same way they did with his predecessor. His visit to Iran in July 2004 is indicative of this approach. In a meeting with him, President Khatami stated that the Islamic Republic was ready to collaborate with the

[700] "Iran: Rafsanjani Condemns Israeli Attacks against Palestinian Refugee Camps," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 8, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=459H-4Y90-00KJ-D47Y&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[701] "Iran, Georgia Set to Improve Trade Cooperation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 31, 2002, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=46DG-C6W0-00KJ-D108&csi=153447&oc=00240&perma=true.
[702] "Iranian, Georgian Foreign Ministers Discuss Regional Security."

Georgian government on matters related to regional stability.[703] He called Georgia's position "sensitive and strategic," which created prospects for partnership.[704] Saakashvili also met the Chairman of Expediency Council Hashemi Rafsanjani. The latter called bilateral relations promising but underutilized and argued for deeper trade relations.[705]

In general, these developments show that Iran's relations with Georgia remained stable even when they were major changes in the region that could pose challenges. Cooperation in the economic sector remained limited, as the remarks made during Saakashvili's visit showed. However, regular statements on the necessity to advance their partnership in different areas were beneficial for showcasing the willingness of both sides to keep the existing friendly environment.

To sum up, progress in Iran's relations with the states in the South Caucasus was modest during Khatami's presidency. Attempts at cooperation were not systematic and often remained unrealized. Negotiations on bilateral and regional projects were repetitive: the same issue was addressed multiple times usually without a step forward as if the sides were stuck in a loop. The gas pipeline with Armenia was the only major exception.

However, the routinized practice of holding continuous talks with the representatives of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia had certain benefits. First, it helped to contain the crises with Baku. Through frequent contacts, the sides managed to establish a conciliatory atmosphere. Secondly, these efforts helped to maintain the friendly nature of ties with Yerevan and Tbilisi. They brought certainty and a sense of stability to dynamics in the South Caucasus that were prone to volatility.

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[703] "Iranian, Georgian Presidents Discuss Regional Security, Cooperation."
[704] "Georgian President Wraps up Iran Visit," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 8, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13a2jdx.
[705] "Georgian President Meets Head of Expediency Council," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 7, 2004, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13a21a5.

Conclusion

Khatami's government inherited several complications regarding the situation in the South Caucasus. The region had many conflicts, which created concerns about instability. Iran's influence over them was limited. Meanwhile, the United States, its antagonistic Other, had active institutional involvement in the settlement processes. Engagement in regional economic initiatives was also suboptimal. There were many limitations to advancing ties with the states in the region and being part of transnational initiatives.

The Islamic Republic dealt with this challenging situation mostly with reactive policies. In the absence of a particular strategic framework, they were often contradictions in its behaviour. Oscillations between revisionist tendencies and conciliatory narratives were commonplace, and Iran's interests in the region were not defined appropriately. Khatami's Dialogue among Civilizations did not solve these issues and reproduced the discussed conceptual dilemmas.

On the other hand, the Iranian government managed to capitalize on certain successful practices, which started during Rafsanjani's period. Specifically, the habit of maintaining intensive communication was useful for solving various problems and establishing a cooperative atmosphere. This practice was especially helpful for reducing tension and keeping prospects of partnership with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia open.

Ahmadinejad's Presidency and A Confrontational Turn in Iran's Policies in the South Caucasus

Introduction

Like his predecessors, Mahmud Ahmadinejad assumed the post of the presidency as a figure that aimed to bring substantial changes to Iran's foreign policy. He came to power intending to revive the ideals of the 1979 Revolution articulated around the nodal point of "justice." An equivalential discourse of dividing the world into domineering and counter-domineering camps became hegemonic and gave shape to Iran's behaviour, where performing its antagonistic attitude towards "arrogant powers" was a primary feature.

In this period, resisting against the "unjust global order" and succeeding in it became the primary recognitive practice of the Islamic Republic. Ahmadinejad's administration tried to show that Iran did not give in to the pressure of "arrogant powers" and managed to challenge their dominant role in international affairs. This overarching discourse often became the prism through which various foreign policy issues were rearticulated.

This chapter shows how Iran's behaviour in the South Caucasus went through certain changes due to the above-mentioned broader shift. In the case of regional initiatives, oscillations between cooperation without preconditions and excluding others from the region gave way to the latter. Limiting the influence of the antagonistic Other became the

primary discourse in this regard. Below it is shown that the dominance of this approach limited Iran's options for regional engagement and led to overreliance on Russia.

Struggling against the antagonistic Other also became the main narrative concerning security issues in the South Caucasus. The cases of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict illustrate how an overall confrontational turn in Iranian foreign affairs was extrapolated in the context of regional security. While certain routinized aspects remained unchanged in Iran's policies, there were a few noticeable deviations caused by situating security issues in the context of Iran's justice-seeking struggle.

As regards bilateral ties, two different situations can be observed here. In the case of Azerbaijan, the latter became a battleground between Iran and its antagonistic Others, increasing Iran's sensitivity towards Baku's relations with Israel and the West. In contrast, relations with Armenia and Georgia were less tumultuous and were mostly left out of the hegemonic articulation of struggling for justice. As is shown below, the Iranian government paid significantly less attention to these ties, and the latter were sustained based on the already-established practices during Rafsanjani's and Khatami's presidencies.

The Prevalence of Populism in Iranian Foreign Policy Discourses

Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013) is often seen as a manifestation of a diametric shift in Iran's attitude in international affairs. Its foreign policy narratives were shaped against the backdrop of the unsuccessful attempts of Khatami's administration at reconciliation within the framework of the Dialogue among Civilizations approach. Abroad, Ahmadinejad was seen as a radical who did not shy away from making confrontational

statements that many Iranian senior officials tended to avoid.[706] His conspiratorial comments about the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Holocaust caused outrage among many in the international community.[707] With his eccentric personality, Ahmadinejad was seen as a leader whose attitude was reminiscent of the early years of the Islamic Republic – a period of highly antagonistic foreign policy narratives.

However, there is more to the foreign policy discourses in this period than labels, such as radical and unreasonable, manage to grasp. The populist turn in Iran's position in international affairs had a number of peculiarities, which need to be illustrated before situating the case of the South Caucasus in this wider context. They showcase how key subject positions, interests, and policies were articulated through the logic of equivalence, shrinking the space for nuances.

Justice is Inevitable

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, there was a sense that the move toward a more accommodating position internationally was not reciprocated; hence, the Islamic Republic stood on the dangerous path of surrendering to its antagonistic Other.[708] He came to power with the objective to revive the revolutionary sentiments and put the Islamic Republic back on its authentic path.[709] Fred Halliday calls it a "revolutionary spasm," when a sense of deviation leads to the urge to return to the purity of revolutionary ideals.[710] Unsurprisingly,

[706] Nazila Fathi, "Wipe Israel 'off the Map' Iranian Says (Published 2005)," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2005, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/27/world/africa/wipe-israel-off-the-map-iranian-says.html.
[707] Mark Egan, "Outrage Turns to Laughter at Ahmadinejad NY Speech," *Reuters*, September 25, 2007, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-ahmadinejad-scene-idUSN2428553420070925.
[708] Hamid Molana and Manouchehr Mohammadi, *Siyāsat-e khāreji-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān dar dowlat-e Āhmadinezhād* (Tehran: Dādgostar, 2008); "Mottaki Dar Esfahān; Siyāsat-e khāreji-ye dovlat-e nahom be tanāsob-e barokhord-e keshvar-hā-ye gharbi tadbir shod," *Mehr News Agency*, August 28, 2009, shorturl.at/asGL3.
[709] Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader*, First edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
[710] Fred Halliday, "Iran's Revolutionary Spasm," *OpenDemocracy*, June 30, 2005, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/iran_2642jsp/.

Ahmadinejad considered his presidency the "Third Islamic Revolution," the second one being the takeover of the US embassy as proclaimed by Khomeini.[711]

The populist discourses during Ahmadinejad's presidency were brought together under the discursive nodal point "justice." The latter became a reference point for articulating a messianic identity of the Islamic Republic. Specifically, Ahmadinejad, as well as many other Iranian officials, made frequent statements that they had a special role in the quest for justice in the world.[712] While seeking a "just global order" is an all-encompassing objective that lacks conceptual specificity, it received ideological substance through the struggle against the enemy. In this fight for justice, the discursive space of Iranian foreign affairs was simplified, where the so-called "domineering" and "counter-domineering" forces were in a confrontation against each other, as presented by Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki.[713]

These narratives had a striking difference from the Dialogue among Civilizations approach introduced by Ahmadinejad's predecessor. As mentioned before, with the call for a dialogue Khatami tried to convey the message that there was enough space under the sun for multiple value systems, and the Islamic Republic should be accepted by the international community. In contrast, Ahmadinejad's government argued that their values were the ones that should become universal. His speeches at the UN General Assembly show this tendency, where he argued that the injustices facing the world were caused by moving away from monotheism and spirituality.[714] The secular principles that had been established in many states and

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[711] Ali M. Ansari, *Iran under Ahmadinejad: The Politics of Confrontation*, 1st edition (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008).

[712] "General Assembly, Sixtieth Session, 4th Plenary Meeting: Addresses on the Occasion of High-Level Plenary Meeting" (United Nations, September 14, 2005), https://undocs.org/en/A/60/PV.4; "Roundtable: Iran's Foreign Policy under President Ahmadinejad," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (2009): 1–16; Seyed Jalāl Dehghāni, "Goftemān-e osul-gerāyi-ye edālat: mehvar dar siyāsat-e khāreji-ye dowlat-e Ahmadinezhād," *Dānesh-e Siyāsi* 5, no. 3 (2007): 67–98.

[713] Manouchehr Mohammadi, "Clash of Civilizations or Clash against Domination: New Paradigm in International Relations," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 21, no. 3 (2009): 1–35.

[714] "General Assembly, Sixty-First Session, 11th Plenary Meeting, Address by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (United Nations, September 19, 2006), https://undocs.org/en/A/61/PV.11; "General Assembly, Sixty-Second Session, 5th Plenary Meeting: Address

international structures were associated with moral depravity, and the political order in the Islamic Republic was presented as the more righteous alternative.

Another important feature of these narratives was their strong messianic notion. While Khatami's government argued that the international system should go through changes, Ahmadinejad claimed that change was inevitable. This determination was based on the religious motifs in his articulations about the fate of the world. For example, during the 63rd Session of the General Assembly, Ahmadinejad made reference to the coming of the Mahdi as prophesied in Shia Islam. He said:

> A golden and brilliant future is awaiting humankind. A global community filled with justice, friendship, brotherhood and welfare is at hand, as I have elaborated — a community that will tread the path of beauty and love under the rule of the righteous and perfect human being, the one promised by all divine prophets and the one who is the true lover of humankind; a community that will be devoid of all fear, despair and privation. Such a community will soon be ours. The community promised by the great divine prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ and Muhammad is about to materialize.
>
> Let us, hand in hand, expand the thought of resistance to evil and the minority of those who are ill-wishers. Let us support goodness and the majority of people who are good and the embodiment of absolute good that is the Imam of Time, the Promised One who will come accompanied by Jesus Christ, and accordingly design and implement just and humanistic mechanisms for regulating the constructive relationships between nations and Governments.[715]

The regional and international developments during Ahmadinejad's presidency contributed to this perception of global change and were presented through the discourse of the inevitable victory over the existing global injustice. It was a period when the liberal international order started showing cracks.[716] Washington's questionable policies in Iraq and Afghanistan posited a challenge to the legitimacy of the liberal hegemon. Iranian officials often stated that the resentment towards the US interventions in these countries was

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by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (United Nations, September 25, 2007), https://undocs.org/en/A/62/PV.5.

[715] "General Assembly, Sixty-Third Session, 6th Plenary Meeting: Address by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (United Nations, September 23, 2008), 12, https://undocs.org/en/A/63/PV.6.

[716] Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at Its Centenary* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

indicative of shifting tides.[717] The 2006 Lebanon War was also presented in the same light, where it was argued that Hezbollah came out of it as a hero in the eyes of the Arab world.[718]

The challenges the West and its allies were facing were put in a teleological narrative, where Iran was not a mere passive observer. In retrospect, the relative decline of the West was articulated as a result of a global movement, some of the first steps of which were taken in Iran. For instance, Deputy Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mohammadi stated:

> Among the most influential developments in changing the current world system ignored by western scholars was the movement of Imam Khomeini in the early 1960s in Iran which finally culminated in the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and establishment of a religious political system which survived despite the belligerence of hegemonic [powers] and is in an increasing trend of strength…
>
> Furthermore, through Islamic vigilance and growing awakening of subjugated nations under domination of colonial and imperial powers, Islamic Republic of Iran has undertaken the leadership of a new camp of "Counter Domineering" countries and is set to shape the future of international relations by opposing the hegemonic Western system.[719]

Accordingly, the decline of western influence was associated with the rise of the Islamic Republic as a pivotal actor in the mentioned global change.[720] For instance, it was argued that Washington had to abandon its ambitions for regime change, as such a scenario was becoming implausible due to Iran's strengthening position.[721] Commentary made in the western press about growing Iranian influence was used as a sign of recognition of the mentioned changes in the global power dynamics.[722]

Having such a perception of Iran's agency in international affairs, Ahmadinejad's government took a rather bold and definitive stand in questioning the legitimacy of the

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[717] Mohsen Rezaee, "Irān mehvar-e hezhemonik va qodrat-e bartar-e mantaqeh-ye Āsiyā-ye Jonub-e Gharbi," *Zhiyopolitik* Spring, no. 1 (2005): 22–41; Mohammad Taghi Hosseini, "Tahavvol-e naqsh-e Irān va chāleh-hā-ye pishrow," *Faslnāmeh-ye Siyāsi-ye Khāreji* 22, no. 4 (2007): 859–82.
[718] Mohammad Taghi Hosseini, "Iran's Preeminent Role and Facing Challenges," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 22, no. 1–2 (2009 2008): 43–71.
[719] Mohammadi, "Clash of Civilizations or Clash against Domination: New Paradigm in International Relations," 2–3.
[720] Ali Larijani and Mahmoud Sariolghalam, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Challenges and Solutions," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 7, no. 2–3 (2006 2005): 1–10.
[721] Mohsen Rezaee, "Iran's National Security Strategy in the Coming Decade," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (2009): 17–32.
[722] Taghi Hosseini, "Iran's Preeminent Role and Facing Challenges."

international order in the name of justice. In their binary narratives, they called for redesigning the order, which was claimed to be dominated by Iran's antagonistic Others. Specifically, calls for reshaping the UN Security Council were made on a regular basis. For the Islamic Republic, the institution was an embodiment of injustice, where the "arrogant powers" were abusing their excessive authority. Ahmadinejad's following remarks illustrate this position:

> … if the Governments of the United States or the United Kingdom, countries which are permanent members of the Security Council, commit aggression, occupation and violation of international law, which of the United Nations organs can call them to account? Can a Council in which they are privileged members address their violations? Has that ever happened? In fact, we have repeatedly seen the reverse. If they have a difference with a nation or State, they bring the matter to the Security Council as claimants, then simultaneously arrogate to themselves the roles of prosecutor, judge and executioner. Is that a just order? Can there be a more vivid case of discrimination and more clear evidence of injustice?[723]

The Iranian side often stated that other actors should receive a seat at the table as well. For instance, they argued that the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of Islamic Conference need to have permanent representation there. The Islamic Republic positioned itself as the voice of the Third World, which no longer agreed with its subordinate status in the international system.[724] Ahmadinejad emphasized this point in his 2005 speech at the General Assembly, where he stated:

> I wish to underline our deep dismay over the fact that not one of the more than 50 Islamic countries, encompassing more than 1.2 billion people, has a permanent seat in the Security Council; nor does Africa, with its huge capabilities and potentials, while the vast continent of Asia with its ancient civilizations has only one permanent seat.[725]

Interestingly enough, the criticism by Iranian officials often took the shape of conspiracy theories. As stated above, Ahmadinejad made regular comments about possible sinister plots

[723] "General Assembly, Sixty-First Session, 11th Plenary Meeting, Address by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran," 39.
[724] "Roundtable: Iran's Foreign Policy under President Ahmadinejad."
[725] "General Assembly, Sixtieth Session, 4th Plenary Meeting: Addresses on the Occasion of High-Level Plenary Meeting," 4.

behind the Holocaust and the 9/11 terrorist attack.[726] Subscribing to such conspiratorial narratives, which were widely rejected in the international community, were meant to show how Iran was ready to take a very confrontational position and question even the most sensitive aspects of the liberal international order.

For instance, Ahmadinejad's remarks about the Holocaust had the intention of questioning one of the main traumas around which the post-WWII world order was established. It was meant to show that the existing international structures were built around a sinister lie, giving more weight to the feeling of injustice and making it legitimate to question their most fundamental features. Similar remarks were made about 9/11 and the war on terror that followed the same rationale.[727]

To some extent, Ahmadinejad's conspiracy theories were a performance of non-compliance to the dominant narratives in the West. Negative reactions to these remarks were seen as attempts by "the arrogant powers" to suppress the inevitable awakening of nations worldwide.[728] Hence, Ahmadinejad remained unwavering in his positions despite them being unpopular abroad. This tendency shows that confrontation itself became a recognitive practice. If Khatami's government was seeking recognition from other significant players in international affairs, Ahmadinejad often treated misrecognition of Iran's aspirant identity in a different way. In particular, the desire for recognition was expressed in an inverted way: not being recognized by significant others, such as the United States, was seen as a validation

[726] "General Assembly, Sixty-Sixth Session, 15th Plenary Meeting; Address by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (United Nations, September 22, 2011), https://undocs.org/en/A/66/PV.15.
[727] "General Assembly, Sixtieth Session, 10th Plenary Meeting: Address by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (United Nations, September 17, 2005), https://undocs.org/en/A/60/PV.10.
[728] "General Assembly, Sixty-Sixth Session, 15th Plenary Meeting; Address by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

that Iran was on the righteous path. The fact that Iran was seen as a threat in the eyes of the enemy was considered a positive sign.

It is also noteworthy that the use of conspiracy theories illustrates that there was a sense of omnipresence of Iran's antagonistic Others, making fighting the enemy a pervasive feature in Iranian foreign policy discourses. For instance, blaming the so-called Zionist regime became an integral part of the narratives on multiple issues ranging from the Palestinian question to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.[729] The equivalential articulation of struggling against Iran's antagonistic Others became an overarching theme in the decision-making processes regarding various foreign policy issues. Below it is shown how this populist turn oriented Iran's behaviour in particular cases and how they reproduced its agency in certain ways.

Resistance in Practice

The quest for justice, which was articulated mainly through fighting the antagonistic Other, led to certain reconfigurations in Iran's behaviour abroad. Having a politician like Ahmadinejad as a president, who called for bringing back revolutionary authenticity, raised questions about whether the new Iranian government was planning to emulate the policies of the early revolutionary era. When asked about having such an idealist attitude, Foreign Minister Mottaki stated:

> Well, I am a realist idealist. And [in] my point of view, idealism is "Look to God." And when a person is in office, in my point of view, that person should reach the peak with a realistic approach. Indeed, he always looks to God but he has to go through the straights and back alleys of reality. So if we are fair, I believe that we can reconcile two different concepts of idealism and realism. We can make them to [*sic*.] meet each other.[730]

Here, being realistic meant not abandoning the logic of sovereign states. While showing preparedness to continue the global movement pioneered by figures such as Imam

[729] "General Assembly, Sixty-Third Session, 6th Plenary Meeting: Address by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran."
[730] "Roundtable: Iran's Foreign Policy under President Ahmadinejad," 11.

Khomeini, there was a stronger sense of acknowledgement that Iran had to navigate in a pre-existing social environment of nation-states. As was stated by an Iranian Foreign Ministry official, the Islamic Republic had transformed from a movement into a state. Its struggle for justice was devoid of recklessness.[731] It was also argued that being both realistic and idealist was in line with Imam Khomeini's thinking. At a conference on Khomeini's approaches to foreign policy issues, it was stated:

> Imam believed that neither idealism nor realism could be the ultimate answer. He went for a combination of the two. He believed in a factual and realistic worldview equipped with ethics that it would make [it] possible to see the realities.[732]

However, the strategy of pursuing ideals through realistic means is too abstract to provide clarity to the justice-seeking endeavours of Ahmadinejad's administration. What could be considered realistic and pragmatic is open to interpretation; hence, such statements do not provide much conceptual clarity. Instead, they show how there was still a certain open-endedness to the agency of the Islamic Republic despite the fact that equivalential articulations of justice-seeking became hegemonic.

This approach has many similarities with the concepts of *Umm al-Qura, maslahat-e nezām,* and Khatami's Dialogue among Civilizations. As shown before, these frameworks try to bring a solution to the issue of duality in Iranian subjectivity. They try to normalize the existing foundational uncertainty and open up space for situational judgments in foreign affairs. However, these concepts, as well as the statements about being realistic and idealist, do not manage to bring closure to Iran's agency, making it necessary to validate Iran's Self through a set of recognitive practices. In this sense, the paradigmatic challenges during Rafsanjani's and Khatami's presidencies did not disappear: the duality of questioning the international system and at the same time socializing in it was prevalent here as well.

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[731] Taghi Hosseini, "Iran's Preeminent Role and Facing Challenges."
[732] "International Conference on Imam Khomeini and Foreign Policy," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2008): 157.

This observation shows that Ahmadinejad's government was facing a difficult issue. On the one hand, it tried to show that Iran was redefining itself in international affairs and making a departure from the behaviour during his predecessors' periods. On the other hand, the justice-seeking posture of the Islamic Republic still left many questions open similar to the approaches adopted by Rafsanjani's and Khatami's governments.

Ahmadinejad's administration compensated the conceptual vagueness with highly symbolic and prestige-oriented behaviour, which was meant to bring validity to Iran's aspirant identity. One way of doing so was making significant symbolic investments in particular issues, around which the agency of the Islamic Republic was articulated. Iran's nuclear enrichment program became one of the primary sites, where it was performing its aspirant identity of an independent and rising power that was at the forefront of a global movement.

It was in this period that the nuclear issue became a defining feature of Iran's foreign policy. It represented a visible shift – an impression Ahmadinejad's administration tried to create. The Iranian government presented its enrichment program as a matter of national pride, an embodiment of its independence from the pressure of "arrogant powers." From 2006 onwards, advancements in this field were openly declared in defiance of the warnings posed by many international actors.[733] Shortly after, international sanctions were imposed. A series of resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council introduced major difficulties for the commercial sector in Iran, especially having a significant impact on foreign direct investments. The effect on Iran's economy was visible, even if there was record revenue from its oil industry.[734]

[733] Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[734] Pesaran, *Iran's Struggle for Economic Independence*; Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Oil as a Blessing and a Curse," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2008): 47–61.

Despite these difficulties, the Iranian government remained committed to the position that Iran was not going to be denied its "right" to peaceful nuclear enrichment. There was widespread criticism in western countries about this approach, and reservations were expressed even in Moscow and Beijing. Nevertheless, the Iranian side was not planning to back down, as its nuclear program had already become a central aspect of self-identification.[735] Iran's Self was tied to its "steadfastness" regarding this issue.[736] Ahmadinejad's administration tried to demonstrate the strength of the Islamic Republic to resist international pressure and not deviate from the path of pursuing justice and independence.

This struggle gave a sense of wholeness to Iran's agency, as it brought together the social logics of resistance communities and sovereign states. On the one hand, Iran's position was articulated as an example of resistance against the existing order. Stating that the Security Council was a fraudulent structure and incapable of making a judgment about the policies of the Islamic Republic show this perspective rather clearly.[737] On the other hand, it was often stated that Iran was acting in compliance with the existing international normative standards by pursuing its sovereign right to develop nuclear energy.[738] Being a signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was often presented as proof.[739] The potential differences in these articulations were ignored, and a sense of unified narrative emerged due to a process of othering. The notion of concentrating on fighting Iran's

[735] Duncombe, *Representation, Recognition and Respect in World Politics*.
[736] David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).
[737] "General Assembly, Sixty-Fifth Session, 12th Plenary Meeting; Address by Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (United Nations, September 23, 2010), https://undocs.org/en/A/65/PV.12.
[738] "Interview: Dr. Salehi on Iran's Nuclear Program," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 9, no. 1–2 (2010 2009): 1–24; Larijani and Sariolghalam, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Challenges and Solutions."
[739] "Roundtable: Iran's Foreign Policy under President Ahmadinejad."

antagonistic Other helped to escape the foundational duality, allowing Iran to reproduce both of the above-mentioned social logics.

In other words, the nuclear enrichment program had great symbolic significance for the Islamic Republic, becoming one of the defining factors of how Iran was seen in international affairs. Being the primary performance of defiance of the pressure by Iran's antagonistic Others, it was how the struggle for justice manifested itself. This significance had a spillover effect on other foreign policy issues.

The second way the struggle for justice manifested itself was Ahmadinejad's so-called "activist" foreign policy, especially in the Middle East.[740] The Iranian government tried to capitalize on rising anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments in the region by strengthening its connections in Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq, as well as improve relations with Syria.[741] The populist articulations of Iran's position on the issues in the region also created sympathy on the Arab streets.[742] However, this grandstanding was treated with caution by other actors in the region. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, as well as the Gulf states, were hesitant to subscribe to the outright antagonism of the Iranian side. While the criticism towards the West was growing in the region, showing explicit anti-American sentiments was not a position many regional actors were willing to take. Moreover, Ahmadinejad's activism often caused frustration in a number of Arab capitals, as the latter were not emulating Iran's behaviour that enjoyed the sympathy of their citizens.[743]

The other area where Iran's activism took shape was building relations with developing countries. Ahmadinejad's visits to Latin America and Africa had the purpose of showing

[740] Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad*.
[741] Olivier Roy, *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East*, 1st edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
[742] Mahjoob Zweiri, "Arab-Iranian Relations: New Realities?," in *Iran's Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, ed. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri (Reading, Berkshire, U.K: Ithaca Press, 2008), 115–28.
[743] Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad*.

that Iran was elevating the political identity of the Third World and working towards consolidating the efforts of the "counter-domineering" camp.[744] These efforts were particularly successful for cooperating with countries that had shared anti-American sentiments, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Cuba.[745] Iran tried to demonstrate this cooperation as a sign of Washington's failure to isolate it. Illustrating that other states shared Iran's position on global injustices was meant to show that the resistance had allies and was gaining momentum.

Ahmadinejad's government also tried to cooperate with Russia and China in the fight for justice. However, its position was not necessarily shared by these powers. While having shared sentiments about the liberal international order, there was an asymmetry in the commitment to the global struggle popularized by the Iranian side.[746] As Moscow and Beijing also showed caution towards Iran's nuclear enrichment program and were willing to cooperate with the West on this matter, acting as a unified front with them against the "arrogant powers" became complicated, limiting the success of Ahmadinejad's activist foreign policy in relations with these states.

In all, a populist turn in Iranian foreign policy discourses led to symbolizing a particular set of issues, which became sites of performance for Iran's refound authentic agency. Outside of these areas of priority, it was rather unclear how justice-seeking would be implemented in spheres such as Iran's foreign affairs in the South Caucasus. Much like in the case of the Dialogue among Civilizations, the new foreign policy paradigm did not become a useful guideline for decision-making in this particular region. The one way it had an impact was

[744] "Mellat-e Irān va Melal-e Āmrikā-ye Lātin: Farhang va Matālebāt-e Tārikhi Besiyār Nazdiki Ba Yekdigar Dārand," *Sāyt-e Dowlat*, January 8, 2012, http://dolat.ir/detail/210341; "Ghāreh-Ye Āfriqā Az Owlaviyat-e Siyāsat-e Khāreji-Ye Jomhuri-Ye Eslāmi-Ye Irān Ast," *Sāyt-e Dowlat*, January 7, 2013, http://dolat.ir/detail/223496.
[745] Molana and Mohammadi, *Siyāsat-e khāreji-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān dar dowlat-e Āhmadinezhād*.
[746] Tabatabai and Esfandiary, *Triple-Axis*.

by creating a more confrontational image of the Islamic Republic and filtering regional issues through the populist prism of fighting the enemy. The following sections discuss how this veil of confrontation had an impact on Iran's policies in the targeted region.

A Shrinking Space for Iranian Ideas of Regionalism

As is shown below, the place of the South Caucasus in Iranian foreign policy discourses under Ahmadinejad was residual, just as it had been under his predecessor Khatami. Strategic uncertainty and decision-making based on routinized practices were integral features of Iran's behaviour. The new Iranian government did not make attempts at revisiting its role in the region. While Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki stated that regionalism was of high priority for the government, it was the Middle East that occupied their attention, making strategic reconfigurations in the South Caucasus a secondary matter.[747]

Reluctance to develop a particular perspective led to reproducing some of the pre-existing discourses. Specifically, making statements about Iran's cultural and civilizational presence in the region was still commonplace.[748] Ahmadinejad's administration continued emphasizing the deep historical connections Iran had with the region as a ground for advancing relations. In August 2006, the President paid a visit to the northern province of Ardabil, where he talked about the wider Iranian cultural space that went beyond official borders. For instance, he stated: "Here is Ardabil's cultural penetration zone, here is the direct impact zone. The barbed wire was put up later; barbed wire cannot prevent the transfer of culture."[749]

[747] "Roundtable: Iran's Foreign Policy under President Ahmadinejad."
[748] Manouchehr Mottaki, "Shānzdahomin hemāyesh-e beynolmellali-ye Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz: ruyāru-ye Qafqāz: rishe-hā, ab'ād va peyāmad-hā," *Siyāsat-e Khāreji* 22, no. 3 (2008): 819–30; Rezaee, "Iran's National Security Strategy in the Coming Decade."
[749] "Iranian President Dismisses Azeri Claims to Ardabil," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ardabil Provincial TV*, August 17, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3g1FPAv.

Under Rafsanjani and Khatami, embracing this heritage was usually equated with siding with the Islamic Republic in the endeavours of challenging the existing liberal international order, which had silenced non-western voices.[750] This factor received more emphasis when Ahmadinejad came to power. Fighting Iran's antagonistic Other became the main theme through which the pre-existing discourses on regionalism were filtered. Hence, the South Caucasus became yet another platform for Iran to perform its resistance against "global arrogance."

Ahmadinejad's government tried to utilize its standing in the region for having its aspirant identity recognized. For instance, encounters with Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian officials and exchanges of sympathetic remarks were used to show that Iran's position on justice was acknowledged in the South Caucasus, especially in regard to its nuclear program.[751] The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the framework of negotiations around the legal regime of the Caspian Sea were also used for validating Iran's position on this issue. The 2006 Baku Declaration of the Ninth ECO Summit and the 2007 Tehran Declaration by the Heads of Caspian States mentioned the right of states to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.[752] The Iranian side treated these declarations as a recognition of its self-identification in this particular regional space.[753]

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[750] Ali Ahani, "Cheshmandāz-e hamgerāyi-ye Āsiyā," *Siyāsat-e Khāreji* 22, no. 3 (2007): 661–80; Taghi Hosseini, "Tahavvol-e naqsh-e Irān va chāleh-ha-ye pishrow."
[751] "Azeri Envoy Terms Iran's Nuclear Program as Peaceful," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 17, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2OEzn76; "Europe's 'Threatening' Approach Will Not Help Nuclear Talks - Iranian Minister," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, January 22, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3d7Nf38; "Armenian Foreign Minister Says Iran's Nuclear Issue to Be Solved Politically," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 14, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3fY3VvY.
[752] "The 9th Summit: Baku Declaration 2006" (ECO Secretariat, May 5, 2006), http://www.eco.int//parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3431/1496648778250615hr1o721eirlf8bf28f3i8d3.pdf; "Presidents of Caspian Sea Countries Issue 25-Point Declaration in Tehran," *Fars News Agency*, October 16, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3mCjBX4.
[753] "States Have Interlocking Interests - Iranian President," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 6, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/327zPy4.

In this situation, oscillating between accommodating and confrontational notions of region-building, which had been a defining feature previously, gave way to a dominant articulatory practice, where the Iranian government was no longer cautious about appearing too revisionist. Being seen as primarily anti-American and anti-Israeli was a role that Ahmadinejad's government was prepared to embrace. Hence, Iranian views on regionalism did not have the same malleability as previously.

It is noteworthy that there was not much room for initiative-taking in regional affairs based on this approach. Despite the occasional generic gestures of sympathy towards Iran, the states in the South Caucasus were hesitant to join its justice-seeking mission. The geopolitical landscape of the region was taking a different shape, where the Iranian narratives of regional identity were pushed to the sidelines. Georgia was oriented more towards the West, seeking further integration with the EU and closer cooperation with NATO and the United States.[754] Armenia, while proclaiming about a policy of complementarity, was getting deeper into Moscow's orbit.[755] As for Azerbaijan, it had close ties with Turkey and showed preparedness for active cooperation with Israel.[756]

Ahmadinejad's government did not design a new foreign policy approach based on these developments. Merely extrapolating its confrontational attitude to the already existing ideas of regionalism put the Islamic Republic in a position where it was taking reactive measures to limit the influence of its antagonistic Others. Having limited options, Iran tried to contain its adversaries by capitalizing on anti-American tendencies of other regional players, such

[754] Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Frederik Coene, "Go West: Georgia's European Identity and Its Role in Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Objectives," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 6 (November 2, 2014): 923–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.953466; Kornely Kakachia and Salome Minesashvili, "Identity Politics: Exploring Georgian Foreign Policy Behavior," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 1, 2015): 171–80, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.04.002.
[755] Aram Terzyan, "The Anatomy of Russia's Grip on Armenia: Bound to Persist?," *CES Working Papers* 10(2) (2018): 234–50.
[756] Alexander Murinson, *Turkey's Entente with Israel and Azerbaijan: State Identity and Security in the Middle East and Caucasus*, 1st edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).

as Russia. However, as is shown below, such steps often meant coming to terms with the policies of these actors, which were not always in line with the Iranian ideas about regional developments. In addition, a strong confrontational position towards the United States limited the possibility for the Islamic Republic to be involved in economic projects on a regional scale. Hence, it is not surprising that Ahmadinejad's government was often criticized for having no adequate strategy of regional engagement, making its role in the affairs of the South Caucasus even more residual.[757]

Russia's Increasing but Ambiguous Role in Iranian Calculations

The chapter covering Khatami's presidency shows that the Islamic Republic was alternating between building an axis with Russia to counter the influence of its adversaries and showing preparedness to cooperate on economic matters despite political differences. Ahmadinejad's government, having elevated the confrontational side of Iran's foreign policy in relation to the West and the global order, started relying on the former more. The conviction that resentment towards the United States was increasing led to considering that regional actors would be more willing to side with Iran in its struggle for justice.

Cooperation with regional players put Russia and Turkey in the spotlight. In the latter's case, however, the options were limited. Ankara did not necessarily share Tehran's overt resentment towards American and Israeli policies. While it was argued that the Turkish authorities were showing a tendency of becoming more independent from western influence, it was still not a substantial enough transition for considering it a partner in regional affairs.[758] Seeing it as a competitor and a gateway for western influence were still dominant features of Iranian narratives about its neighbour. Former Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas

[757] "Estrātezhi-hā-ye Irān dar Qafqāz bāyad boruz shavad," *Khabar Online*, June 25, 2011, https://bit.ly/3593ok1.
[758] Kayhān Barzegar et al., "The Iran-Turkey Relations in Post-Arab Revolutions' Middle East," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 10, no. 3–4 (2012): 1–28.

Maleki's comments are very representative of this perception. When discussing regional developments in the South Caucasus, he stated:

> At the moment, the country that poses the biggest and the most important challenge to Iran in the Caspian Sea is Turkey. The two pipelines from Baku to Tbilisi and then to Ceyhan and from Baku to Tbilisi to Erzurum prove this point.[759]

As a result, working with Turkey in the above-mentioned context of regional cooperation did not have a strong presence in the observed narratives.

In contrast, partnering with Russia became one of the main themes. Iranian political elites and policy experts often argued that Tehran and Moscow had shared interests in limiting the presence of extra-regional actors.[760] Reaching convergence on each other's visions of regionalism was seen as a necessity for moving forward.[761] The Iranian side considered the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) a precedent, where Moscow and Beijing were cooperating on Central Asian affairs.[762] Having a similar initiative for the South Caucasus was seen as an effective way for working together, showing that the Islamic Republic was prepared to establish a long-term partnership with another regional player.[763]

Expectations from Russia were high. It was during Ahmadinejad's presidency that Vladimir Putin's government started showing an overt adversarial attitude towards the United

[759] "Former Iranian Official Criticizes Iranian Diplomacy in Caspian Sea," *E'temād*, September 14, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/326nryb.
[760] Sekhāvat Rezāzādeh, "Risheh-hā-ye hamgerāyi va vāgerāyi dar monāsebāt-e Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān va Rusiye," *Motāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 52 (2006): 61–90; Mehrdad Cheshmeh E'lāyi, "Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān va tahavvolāt-e howze-ye Qafqāz," *Motāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 52 (2006): 147–76; "Siyāsathā-ye nafti-ye Rusiye va Āmrikā dar Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz," *Motale'āte Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 50 (2005): 209–14.
[761] Tishehyar, "The New Regionalism between Iran and Russia in Eurasia"; Jahangir Karami, "Iran-Russia Relations: Expectations and Realities," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, no. 3–4 (2011 2010): 7–36.
[762] Mahmoud Vaezi, Iran, Eurasian Axis and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Iran and Eurasia Research Center (IRAS), June 12, 2012, http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Iran_Eurasian_Axis_and_Shanghai_Cooperation_Organization.htm.
[763] Manouchehr Mottaki, "Sokhanrāni-ye jenāb āqā-ye Mottaki vazir-e mohtaram-e omur-e khārejeh-ye fEslāmi-ye Irān," *Motāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 55 (2007): 7–12.

States.[764] Hence, a partnership between the two countries was seen as a natural choice.[765] Iranian policy-making circles claimed that deeper collaboration between the two countries was necessary for an effective engagement in regional affairs in an era of a power shift from the West to the East.[766] Reportedly, Supreme Leader Khamenei's office put forward a proposal for a long-term strategic alliance with Russia in early 2007. It shows how central Moscow's place was in Iranian visions.[767]

Vladimir Putin's 2007 visit to Tehran to attend the second Caspian Summit appeared to be a pivotal event for opening a new page of partnership with Russia. In an interview about this trip, Ahmadinejad stated: "Iran seeks lasting, effective and maximum relations with Russia, and believes that Russia's power is our power and vice versa."[768] The Summit was considered a relative success (discussed in detail in the next section).[769] Besides, it was followed by Russia delivering nuclear fuel for the Bushehr power plant.[770] Iranian officials and media outlets considered these developments indicative of close cooperation in defiance of the policies of the United States. They could lay the foundation for working together in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.[771]

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[764] Thom Shanker and Mark Landler, "Putin Says U.S. Is Undermining Global Stability," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2007, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/world/europe/11munich.html.
[765] "Didār-e rayis jomhur-e Rusiye bā rahbar-e enqelāb" (Khamenei.ir, October 16, 2007), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=1561.
[766] "Report: Iran-Russia Roundtable," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 19, no. 4 (2007): 144–48.
[767] Mark Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era," *Middle East Journal* 62, no. 2 (2008): 202–16.
[768] "President Says Iran Seeks Lasting, Effective Relations with Russia," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1*, October 11, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3dbmmLP.
[769] "Presidents of Caspian Sea Countries Issue 25-Point Declaration in Tehran."
[770] "Fifth Fuel Shipment from Russia Arrives," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 22, 2008, https://en.irna.ir/news/8894756/Iran-Russia-Fuel-POL.
[771] "Independent Iran and Powerful Russia Benefits Both Countries - Leader," *Mehr News Agency*, October 17, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3a6eUj5; "Better Ties with Russia an Opportunity for Iran against US Plots - Iran Paper," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, October 17, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3a3flL7; "Iran Paper Says Putin's Visit a Turning Point in Russia-Iran Relations," *Hemāyat*, October 17, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3mIi2Hc; "US Policy to Isolate Iran Backfires - Agency," *Mehr News Agency*, October 27, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3eaUarV.

While Putin's and Ahmadinejad's shared antagonism towards the West was an opportunity for a transformative partnership, reaching convergence in bilateral relations was a challenging endeavour. As stated above, having anti-American sentiments did not necessarily mean joining Iran in its mission of justice-seeking. The asymmetric commitment to such a cause had already been an issue in Iran-Russia relations during Khatami's presidency. When Ahmadinejad came to power, this incoherence in the perspectives of the two states became more challenging in the light of more ambitious attempts at cooperation.

Differences between the sides were multiple. One of the major issues was related to Iran's nuclear enrichment program. While Russia often did not align with the approach taken by the United States, it did not show unequivocal support to the Islamic Republic either. It became evident when Moscow decided to sanction Iran in the framework of the UNSC Resolution 1696 in July 2006.[772] This decision triggered criticism in the Islamic Republic, questioning the premise that Russia was ready to stand by them in the struggle for global justice. Iranian outlets argued that Putin's government decided to prioritize their ties with Washington.[773] Such concerns grew when Russia continued supporting the consecutive UN Resolutions to sanction Iran for its nuclear enrichment program. Moreover, in 2010, Moscow suspended sales of arms to Iran in accordance with UNSC Resolution 1929 that imposed an arms embargo.[774] This decision led to even harsher criticism from the Iranian side.[775]

[772] Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era."
[773] "Iran Press: Commentary Says Russia, China Used UN Vote to Maintain US Ties," *Kārgozarān*, August 1, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3uMhEdc.
[774] Elaheh Koolaee, Hamed Mousavi, and Afifeh Abedi, "Fluctuations in Iran-Russia Relations During the Past Four Decades," *Iran and the Caucasus* 24, no. 2 (June 23, 2020): 216–32, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573384X-20200206.
[775] "Ahmadinejad Slams Russia for Selling out to 'Satan,'" *RT International*, November 3, 2010, sec. Russia & Former Soviet Union, https://www.rt.com/russia/ahmadinejad-russia-weapons-satan/.

The two sides also had disagreements in the South Caucasus concerning the legal status of the Caspian Sea and the developments around the Gabala Radar Station, which are discussed in more detail below. Put together, these differences show that Iran's role in Russia's calculations did not necessarily correspond with the aspirant identity articulated by Ahmadinejad's administration. It is not surprising that the proposal made by Khamenei's office on establishing an alliance did not receive much support in Moscow.[776] As a result, friction between the two sides was commonplace. The regular fluctuations in these relations made it challenging to register substantial progress in areas such as regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. The next section illustrates how this dynamic is played out in cases of multilateral engagements.

The Caspian Issue, Energy Politics, and Transnational Corridors: A Stagnant Situation

Iran's self-perception as a key player in its northern neighbourhood has been continuously challenged by its limited control over developments in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, especially concerning the Caspian Sea and transnational commercial projects. Khatami's administration did not manage to register any noticeable success in this regard. Despite having this legacy, there were no major changes in Iran's policies in this area. Specifically, the Iranian government continued to insist on the principles of unanimity in deciding the legal status of the Caspian Sea, long-term multilateral economic cooperation, an exclusionary approach towards extra-regional players, and, less contentiously, stability and peace in the region. Iranian government officials and media outlets emphasized these

[776] Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era."

principles on a regular basis.[777] The one factor that had changed was that Iran had to pursue these objectives under the conditions of stronger pressure from its antagonistic Others.

This is when Ahmadinejad's government considered cooperation with Russia a crucial factor. In the context of an antagonistic turn in Iran's foreign policy, limiting the presence of extra-regional actors from the Caspian Sea had primacy, and Russia could be the key partner in this regard. Working with Moscow was also seen as an opportunity for more active engagement in regional projects, countering Washington's attempt at isolating the Islamic Republic. In an interview to Iranian TV, Foreign Minister Mottaki elaborated on this approach, stating:

> Iran and Russia are two countries which may play a more important role in the region and in the international scene than other states. The two countries as well as Kazakhstan are energy providers for Europe. Therefore the EU is somehow dependent and linked to these countries. Increasing the level of talks between Iran and Russia started from the Shanghai meeting last year and the meeting between the presidents of the two countries Dr Ahmadinezhad and Mr Putin. They had another meeting on the sidelines of Shanghai meeting in Uzbekistan. I believe that the two countries can definitely play an important role in maintaining regional and international peace and security.[778]

The second Caspian Summit in October 2007 followed this interview shortly. The Iranian side considered it a major diplomatic achievement, where cooperation between the two regional powers played a central role. The 25-point declaration that was signed at the end of the Summit registered the agreement of the littoral states on a number of principles.[779] Provisions about not allowing each other's territory to be used for attacking any of the littoral states, as well as giving access to the Sea only to the vessels of the signatory countries, were

[777] "Caspian Sea Working Group Hold 18th Meet in Baku," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 9, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3e1ACpQ; "Iran Press: Interior Minister Warns Powers Not to 'Interfere' in Caspian," *Kayhān*, November 1, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3sf4TGy; "Iran Stresses Peaceful Settlement of Caspian Sea Issues," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 20, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3wYEZKW; "Need for Five-Way Accord and Definition of Interests in Caspian - Iran TV," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, June 20, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3mCAhh9.
[778] "Iran's Foreign Minister Talks about Importance of Caspian Sea Summit," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, October 14, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3mDkajn.
[779] "Caspian Sea Leaders Sign Declaration," *Tehran Times*, October 16, 2007, sec. Politics, https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/155078/Caspian-Sea-leaders-sign-declaration.

among the tangible outcomes. There were also points that resonated with Iranian narratives on regional and international affairs, such as showing preparedness for institutionalizing multilateral economic cooperation, considering Caspian affairs as the exclusive domain of the littoral states, and stressing the sovereignty of the regional states from outside powers.[780]

The Summit had a significant recognitive value for Ahmadinejad's government. It was presented as evidence that the attempts of the United States at isolating the Islamic Republic were failing.[781] In his opening speech, President Ahmadinejad emphasized how the regional players managed to work together without external intervention.[782] He stated that the success of the Summit could become a precondition for long-term economic cooperation, especially for revitalizing the North-South transit corridor. It was seen as an opening for Iran to have a stronger presence in regional affairs despite the pressure from Washington.

Here, the importance of having a shared position with Russia was stressed again. Immediately after the Summit, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan started talks on supplying gas to the EU.[783] In these negotiations, where Turkey and western states were often involved, there were discussions about constructing the Nabucco pipeline, which would serve as an alternative to Russia's supply of natural gas to the EU.[784] Like Moscow, Tehran had reservations about the initiative. The pipeline was to go through the Caspian Sea and bypass Iran's territory, excluding it from a major regional project.[785] For the Islamic Republic, the fact that it and Russia shared opposition to the project indicated that the two regional powers

[780] "Presidents of Caspian Sea Countries Issue 25-Point Declaration in Tehran."
[781] Seyyed Rasoul Mousavi, "The Future of the Caspian Sea after the Tehran Summit," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 21, no. 1–2 (2008 2008): 27–42.
[782] "Iranian President Delivers Opening Speech at Caspian Sea Summit," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 16, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3df9SmB.
[783] "Iran Disapproves Turkmen-Azeri Talks on Caspian," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, November 19, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2PX0fzN.
[784] "Turkmenistan Agrees to Supply Gas to EU via Nabucco - Iranian Radio," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, April 11, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3dahRBh.
[785] "Turkmenbasy Summit Fails to Reach Agreement - Iranian Radio," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, November 30, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3uCBEz0.

could cooperate against such initiatives.[786] It reproduced the sense of shared antagonism against the "arrogant powers," solidifying Moscow's position in Iranian discourses on regional projects.

However, Ahmadinejad's government soon stumbled upon difficulties concerning the Caspian issue that put the idea of partnership with Russia under question. The fluctuating nature of Iran-Russia relations was also seen in this regional context. This problem became apparent in September 2009 when leaders of Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan had a meeting in Aktau, Kazakhstan to discuss Caspian affairs without inviting the Islamic Republic. While the Tehran Summit was considered a breakthrough, the littoral states did not manage to determine the legal status of the Sea, leaving the issue of dividing its resources open.[787] Accordingly, further negotiations were necessary. The Aktau meeting was the next step, and the Iranian side was left out.

The event raised concerns in the Islamic Republic. Foreign Minister Mottaki said: "We consider the recent meeting of four Caspian Sea littoral states against our interests."[788] Later, the FM Spokesman stated that excluding one of the littoral states from such meetings was unacceptable, and any event concerning the Caspian Sea should include all five sides.[789] In Iranian narratives, the Aktau meeting represented a diametric departure from the shared understanding reached at the 2007 Tehran Summit. Yet again, the Islamic Republic found itself in a rather passive role, for which Ahmadinejad's administration received heavy criticism. Their approach appeared to be based on questionable premises. For instance,

[786] "Iran Paper Analyzes Georgia, Energy Factors in Russia-EU Relations," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, April 8, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3a3l5EO.
[787] "Caspian Summit Fails to Resolve Key Question," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 16, 2007, https://www.rferl.org/a/1078963.html.
[788] "Tehran Unhappy with Kazakhstan's Caspian Sea Meeting without Iran," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 8, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3uKdZNi.
[789] "Spokesman Says Iran Should Be Involved in All Talks on Caspian Status," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 14, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3uIq45p.

former Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Maleki stated: "Iran has not been able to reach [an] agreement with any of the other four countries about its borders in the Caspian Sea."[790] He claimed that Ahmadinejad's administration did not consider the interests and positions of the other littoral states properly and did not take any initiatives to avoid this situation.

The criticism of misinterpreting the intentions of other states was accompanied by claims that Russia did not share Iran's interests in the region. Various newspapers and experts argued that Moscow was behind the Aktau meeting, trying to isolate the Islamic Republic and negotiate with the latter from a unified position.[791] Some also stated that Moscow aimed to strengthen its position in the region at Iran's expense.[792] These narratives show that there was widespread suspicion among Iranian elites towards Russia's behaviour because disagreements and frustration in bilateral relations started appearing as a regularity. As a result, overreliance on Russia was becoming a hindrance in the eyes of many, creating uncertainty around the perspectives of Ahmadinejad's government on regional engagement.

The Aktau meeting, while challenging the effectiveness of Iran's policies, did not result in significant reevaluations. Alongside expressing concerns, Ahmadinejad's government tried to downgrade the importance of what was dubbed an "informal summit." They claimed that the four littoral states merely aimed to discuss a few economic projects, leaving the status of the Caspian Sea aside.[793] Shortly after the meeting, the Iranian side started doing damage control. Government officials were making regular statements that Iran was on the same

[790] "Former Iranian Official Criticizes Iranian Diplomacy in Caspian Sea."
[791] "Experts Say Russia behind Iran's Non-Participation in Caspian Summit," *Siyasat-e Ruz*, September 12, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3a4kwuf.
[792] "Daily Cautions Iran against Losing Power to Russia in Caspian Sea Region," *Mardom-Sālāri*, September 12, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3d8gMK0.
[793] "Caspian Sea Meeting Not to Discuss Legal Regime without Iran - FM," *E'temad*, September 10, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2OMiDeo.

page with the other littoral states on key issues.[794] They tried to show that there was progress and room for optimism.[795]

However, the third official Summit in Baku, which was held on 18 November 2010, showed that the disagreements between the littoral states persisted, postponing the determination of the status based on consensus.[796] While the Iranian side reiterated that they had a shared stance with Russia on crucial matters, such as energy transportation, it was not clear how this condition would be translated into practical steps.[797] During the Summit, the representatives of the littoral states repeated many of the remarks made in Tehran in 2007, illustrating that there were no noticeable achievements in three years.

In this situation, Ahmadinejad's administration claimed that recommitting to the principles declared in Tehran was crucial and considered the Baku Summit "satisfactory."[798] By trying to put a positive spin on these developments the Iranian government did not change its policies, despite their very limited success. In June 2011, Mohammad Mehdi Akhonzadeh, Iran's special envoy on Caspian affairs, stated that the regime of the Sea would be determined within a year.[799] However, it became clear in the following years that the stagnant situation would not change. During the subsequent meetings of the special working group on the Caspian Sea, a draft Convention of the legal regime was discussed, but no

[794] "Iran Foreign Minister Sees 'Major Agreements' by Caspian States," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 9, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3g2yQqU; "Seventy per cent of Convention on Caspian Sea Legal Status Agreed On," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 7, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3wX0o7l.
[795] "Iran Envoy Said Optimistic over Caspian Sea Talks," *Mehr News Agency*, March 13, 2010, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3d8harW.
[796] "Caspian Summit Fails To Clarify Status, Resource Issues," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 19, 2010,
https://www.rferl.org/a/Caspian_Summit_Fails_To_Clarify_Status_Resource_Issues/2225159.html.
[797] "Caspian Sea Littoral States Unanimous to Finalize Legal Regime - Iran Advisor," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 23, 2010, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring,
https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m199jx1z.
[798] "Iran Official Highlights Consensus Vital for Caspian Sea Legal Regime," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 3, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring,
https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19hokvi.
[799] "Caspian Sea Legal Regime Can Be Finalized This Year - Iran Official," *Mehr News Agency*, June 20, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19qttf3.

agreement was made. The Iranian side continued insisting on the principle of unanimity and stressed the need for accelerating the settlement process.[800] These narratives indicate that by the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency, the five states were not much closer to a solution than when he assumed office.

The insistence on regional multilateralism and close partnership with Moscow did not result in the dynamic process of engagement Ahmadinejad's administration hoped to have. Iran faced a stalled situation not only regarding the status of the Caspian Sea but also the commercial regional projects. The above-mentioned statements on having a shared position with Russia on this matter were made against the backdrop of fluctuating bilateral ties. Hence, they did not lead to any long-term partnership in the field. As Abbas Maleki stated: "American sanctions are casting their shadow upon Iranian activities and foreign companies. In this connection, every country is trying to achieve its own interests."[801] His words show how the other states in the region were not prepared to join Iran in implementing its vision of a closed but integrated region. While certain declarative moves, such as joint statements by the representatives of the littoral states, had a recognitive value for the Iranian side in the context of its struggle for justice, building cooperation based on them would be an over-optimistic step.

As a result, Iran was left with limited room for exploration in regional affairs. Its engagement in transnational energy transactions did not grow either. In July 2007, the managing director of National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC) spoke about working with Russia for transferring oil from the Caspian to Armenia.[802] However, no

[800] "Caspian States Envoys Describe Summit 'Positive,'" *Mehr News Agency*, July 22, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19ta058; "Iran Says Decisions on Caspian's Legal Status Require All States' Agreement," *Fars News Agency*, December 17, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3da3hK1.
[801] "Former Iranian Official Criticizes Iranian Diplomacy in Caspian Sea."
[802] "Iran: Oil Exports to Iraq, Armenia to Start This Year, New Pipeline Soon," *Farhang-e Ashti*, July 17, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3d8j0Jy.

follow-up steps were made. The Iranian side also made occasional statements about joining the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, but the sanctions and the strained relations with Washington did not make it possible.[803]

The other area where Iran tried to make progress was the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). During the 2007 Caspian Summit, Ahmadinejad stated that the Sea was located on the Corridor, and it could serve as a ground for economic cooperation between the littoral states.[804] The declaration of the Summit included a provision on the INSTC.[805] Here as well, working with Russia played a key role. Iranian officials were exploring various projects about new highways and railways and had discussions on them with their Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Georgian counterparts.[806] Among them, it was the prospects of trilateral cooperation between Tehran, Baku, and Moscow that stood out as a plausible option.

In October 2008, the three states signed a memorandum of understanding on building the Astara-Rasht-Qazvin railway as part of the North-South Corridor.[807] In February 2011, the sides signed an agreement of cooperation for constructing the railway.[808] However, financial

[803] "Iran May Join Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline - Official," *Fars News Agency*, June 7, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m14qm6bd; "OFAC Industry Guidance: Shah Deniz Consortium" (United States Department of the Treasury, November 28, 2012), https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/shah_deniz_guidance.pdf.
[804] "Caspian Sea Enjoys High Potentials for Expansion of Ties - Iran President," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 16, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m15pad5k.
[805] "Presidents of Caspian Sea Countries Issue 25-Point Declaration in Tehran."
[806] "Azeri, Iranian Media Must Avoid Issues Sowing Seed of Discord - Envoy," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 18, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m14cpix0; "Tehran Willing to Activate North-South Corridor via Georgia - Foreign Minister," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 21, 2008, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m15xv5x6; "Iran, Armenia Sign Economic Cooperation Pact," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 31, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19p5nuo.
[807] "Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan Sign North-South Corridor Railways," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 12, 2008, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m16m6spf.
[808] "Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia Ink North-South Rail Link Agreement," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 8, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19fm5j2.

constraints and fluctuations in the relations with both Russia and Azerbaijan did not allow the sides to register substantial progress in the following few years after signing the agreement. In October 2012, Iranian officials held discussions with their Russian counterparts on the necessity of accelerating the construction of the railway.[809] By the end of Ahmadinejad's second term, the project was still in its infancy, and the objective of using the North-South Transportation Corridor as a means for more effective regional engagement on Iran's side remained largely unrealized.

In all, the oscillation between different notions of regional engagement was less predominant during Ahmadinejad's presidency. His administration put the emphasis on building antagonistic frontiers against its primary adversaries and looking for allies in this endeavour. As a result, Russia's role became a crucial factor in Iranian narratives on regional developments. In a way, it was an example of pursuing idealistic goals through realistic means. Considering the limited capabilities and weak leverages of the Islamic Republic, partnering with Russia could help to register progress in implementing Iran's visions regarding regional developments.

However, diverging perspectives of the sides raised questions regarding the effectiveness of this approach. Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad's administration did not make any significant reconsiderations. The Islamic Republic continued insisting on the principle of regional multilateralism with minimal outside interference in the context of struggling against global injustice. The dominance of this narrative left little space for experimentation with alternative policies – a tendency that was present during Rafsanjani's and Khatami's periods in office. Ahmadinejad's government was more unequivocal in its position, which was not

[809] "Iran, Russia to Discuss Cooperation in Railway Construction," *Fars News Agency*, October 9, 2012, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1aqgoms.

necessarily shared by other regional players. As a result, Iran often found itself raising complaints about regional developments that did not go in line with its objectives.

The Omnipresent Enemy and Iran's Security Concerns in the Region

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the security issues in the South Caucasus were mainly articulated in the context of the adversity with Iran's antagonistic Others. The volatile situation in the region and Iran's lack of control over developments in this area had been a major irritant for the preceding administrations. However, it was during this period of high tension with the United States and Israel, that the adversity with these actors became the overarching theme through which the pre-existing and newly emerged conflicts and security concerns were observed. The image of the antagonistic Others had a central position in most of the narratives on regional security.

The strained situation created by Iran's fixed policies, especially regarding the nuclear enrichment program, raised the question of a possible military attack by its enemies. Considering the proximity of the South Caucasus, there were speculations in the Islamic Republic about whether the United States and Israel could use their foothold in the region for such operations.[810] Therefore, the Iranian side considered it necessary that the 2007 Caspian Summit declaration had a provision that prohibited using the territories of the littoral states to launch an attack on any of them.[811] This highly sensitive attitude is also visible when looking into Iranian reactions to Moscow offering Washington to use the Gabala Radar Station in Azerbaijan to detect possible tests of nuclear weapons.[812] The

[810] "Iranian Minister Says Defence Ties with Baku to Guarantee Regional Security," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 19, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/39ZjKyH; "Iranian Agency Suspicious of Meeting between US, Georgian Leaders," *Fars News Agency*, January 31, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1a7yskq.
[811] "Presidents of Caspian Sea Countries Issue 25-Point Declaration in Tehran."
[812] Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era."

Russian side had to give reassurances that such an offer would not compromise Iran's security in any way.[813]

Seeing a threat from the antagonistic Others in different occasions shaped Iranian discourses on the military conflicts in the South Caucasus in new ways. Below it is elaborated how the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, as well as the ongoing Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, appeared in this context. This notion brought changes to the already-existing discourses about the territorial disputes in the region: fighting against the involvement of extra-regional actors became the main issue and overshadowed other matters.

Iran and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War

In August 2008, a war erupted between Georgia on one side and Russia and the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the other. The military conflict, which lasted only a few days, created more instability in an already turbulent security environment in the South Caucasus.[814] From the Iranian perspective, the war was seen mainly in the framework of the geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West.[815] Georgia's increasing westward orientation and talks about its possible accession to NATO triggered a response on Russia's side, which was trying to maintain its influence in the near abroad. Hence, the war was associated with the policies of the "arrogant powers" that tried to perpetuate the unjust international system. This perspective brought certain changes to Iran's approach.

Conventionally, the Islamic Republic had been cautious when presenting its position on the Abkhazian and South Ossetian disputes. As the previous chapter shows, the Iranian

[813] "Iran Misinformed by Western Propaganda over Azeri Base - Russian Official," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, June 20, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2Rvrzpp.
[814] "Russia vs Georgia: The Fallout," Europe and Central Asia (International Crisis Group, August 22, 2008), https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/georgia/russia-vs-georgia-fallout.
[815] Zahrā No'parast, "Bohrān-e Gorjestān fasl-e novin-e dar ravābet-e Rusiye va gharb," *Motāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 14, no. 63 (2009): 29–46; Amir-Ahmadian, Bahram, "Jang-e Qafqāz: yāzdah-e septambr-e Rusiye," *Motāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz* 14, no. 63 (2009): 15–27.

government expressed its support for upholding the principle of territorial integrity, considering its own sensitivity towards separatist movements. However, it had also kept a certain level of vagueness when expressing its stance in order to avoid anti-Russian associations.

When the 2008 war started, the reaction of the Islamic Republic deviated from the above-mentioned position to a certain extent. The issue of territorial integrity became a marginal factor in Iranian narratives, and the conflict was mainly articulated as yet another attempt by the West aimed at increasing its influence. For example, Foreign Minister Mottaki blamed Washington and Zionists for starting the conflict.[816] He claimed that they manipulated the Georgian side to launch an attack, which had the objective to "humiliate" Russia.[817] The war was a manifestation of a global standoff between Russia and the United States, and its regional context became secondary.

First, the prevalence of this tendency can be seen when having a closer look into how the subject position of the Georgian state was articulated. The dominant narratives reduced its agency to a mere instrument for expanding western influence. Such remarks were commonplace in the Iranian media coverage of the conflict. They argued that the United States and NATO were using Saakashvili's government to establish a stronger foothold in the South Caucasus.[818] Interestingly enough, Georgia was also seen as a victim in these

[816] "Iranian Foreign Minister Urges Boosting of Relations with Caucasus Countries," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 29, 2008, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3tadhbO.
[817] "USA Sought to Humiliate Russia in Caucasus Standoff - Iran Minister," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 2, 2008, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3dSRnTX.
[818] "Iran Daily Urges End to Georgian Issue to Avoid 'Nuclear War,'" *Hemāyat*, September 3, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2QhLdEy; "Iranian Provincial Cleric Condemns US, Israeli Stance on Ossetia Events," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 15, 2008, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3t6gx7X; "Iran Commentary Says Georgia's Attack against South Ossetia 'Strategic Mistake,'" *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, September 7, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3g79mIW.

discourses, as its supposed allies did not plan to provide much support other than inciting the war.[819]

Secondly, the Iranian side used the conflict as a means to validate the overarching discourse that justice would prevail. President Ahmadinejad made such a statement when expressing his position on the crisis in the region. He said: "The unipolar world system has now fallen through, and the effects of this will be felt around the world."[820] In Iranian narratives, Russia's assertive stance and eventual military victory became an indication that the unjust American-dominated global order was being challenged.[821] Hence, it is not surprising that some politicians and media outlets saw a benefit in the conflict.[822] There were discussions about whether Moscow's defiant position would help Iran's own struggle for justice, such as in the case of the nuclear enrichment program.[823] The very notion of speculating the positive side of the conflict shows how the conventional concerns about regional security had a weaker presence, as the overarching justice-seeking discourses became the main prism through which these narratives were articulated. Simultaneously, they served as a means for validating the hegemonic discourse during Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Previously, in times of crises in the South Caucasus, the Islamic Republic had made attempts to have some level of regional engagement. First, such a step was a recognitive practice of

[819] "Iran Commander Says Georgian War a US 'Electoral Ploy,'" *Farhang-e Ashti*, August 25, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3g3Y34j; "Iran Paper Says US Uses Tbilisi as 'Tool' to Negotiate with Moscow," *Resālat*, December 30, 2010, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f19cqwic.
[820] "Iran President Dismisses NATO Role in Caucasus Crisis," *Fars News Agency*, September 16, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3dRpTOu.
[821] "Iranian TV Correspondent Reports on Russia-Georgia War from Ossetia," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, August 13, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3tocCmU; "Iran Paper Analyses US-Russian 'Power Struggle', End of "bipolar World," *Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi*, August 19, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3g1K0MH.
[822] "Commentary on US-Russia Conflict over Georgia, Consequences for Iran," *E'temad-e Melli*, August 24, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3s4VAZO; "Iran May Benefit from Caucasus Issue in Nuclear Case - Official," *Hemāyat*, September 9, 8AD, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2OEFsAq.
[823] "Russia Does Not Have 'Enough Motivation' to Support Iran - Analyst," *E'temad-e Melli*, August 31, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3mDMmT8.

a regional player. Second, it was a means to have some leverage over such developments to make sure they do not result in unfavourable conditions for Iran. In the case of the 2008 war, these attempts were minimal: they were limited to Iran's Foreign Minister consulting a few of his regional counterparts.[824] The principles of regional stability and respecting territorial integrity, which used to be Iran's points of engagement in regional security affairs, did not have a strong presence in this particular case. As a result, there were no substantial efforts from Iran's side to have a say in this matter as a major regional player.

Change and Continuity in the Narratives on the Nagorno-Karabagh Conflict

The Nagorno-Karabagh dispute remained unresolved during Ahmadinejad's presidency. In his eight years in office, the conflicting sides and the mediators went through several rounds of negotiations.[825] The OSCE Minsk Group presented the so-called Madrid Principles, which became the cornerstone of the settlement process.[826] However, no agreement was reached between the sides, and by the end of Ahmadinejad's second term, tensions were rising.[827]

In this period, several key components of Iran's cautious approach towards the conflict remained intact. Iranian officials continued emphasizing the importance of territorial integrity and resolution through negotiations.[828] For example, during his visit to Baku in

[824] "Iran, Turkey Call for End of Russia-Georgia Dispute through Dialogue," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 13, 2008, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2RxBefj; "Iran Says Launched 'Initiative' to Resolve Caucasus Crisis," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, September 16, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3toG38N.
[825] Ohannes Geukjian, *Negotiating Armenian-Azerbaijani Peace: Opportunities, Obstacles, Prospects*, 1st edition (Ashgate, 2014).
[826] Tatul Hakobyan, "Madrid Principles - Full Text," *Aniarc* (blog), April 11, 2016, http://www.aniarc.am/2016/04/11/madrid-principles-full-text/.
[827] "Nagorno Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds," Europe and Central Asia (International Crisis Group, June 1, 2017).
[828] "Iran in Favour of Enduring Peace in Karabakh - Spokesman," *Fars News Agency*, December 14, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3sgt47I.

August 2007, President Ahmadinejad stated: "The stance of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been announced explicitly and we think all issues can be resolved on the basis of justice and law, and through negotiations."[829] Occasionally, the remarks of Iranian officials had pro-Azerbaijani elements, such as their critical statements about holding elections in Nagorno-Karabagh.[830] However, they did not become dominant features of Iran's perspective. As before, the latter was kept generic enough so it could be considered acceptable by both conflicting sides. It can be seen during the encounters with the Armenian side: Iranian officials stressed the importance of peace, and their counterparts expressed satisfaction for having a "balanced" approach.[831]

Ahmadinejad's government also made claims about keeping extra-regional actors out of the settlement process. The unresolved military conflict remained a matter of concern for the Islamic Republic, considering that it could be used to exercise influence over the states in the South Caucasus.[832] Specifically, the deepening cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan that the latter used to upgrade its military capabilities was an alarming development for the Iranian side.[833] In this situation, the Islamic Republic stressed the

[829] "Iran-Azerbaijan Amity Rooted in History - President Ahmadinezhad," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 22, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3wNacjY.
[830] "Iran Terms Karabakh Vote Illegitimate," *Press TV*, May 26, 2010, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90009535; "Polls in Azeri Breakaway Region Not to Yield Acceptable Results - Iran Official," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 24, 2012, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90037614.
[831] "Iranian Foreign Minister, Armenian President Praise Ties," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 13, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3dZqNsg; "'Bullying Powers Have No Influence on Iran' - Speaker," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 29, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3wRZA3t; "Armenian President Praises Iran's Role in Region," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 24, 2010, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3tlqu1i; "President Calls for More Cooperation between Iran, Armenia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 18, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19xob41.
[832] "Iran Refutes Recent Allegations Made by Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 17, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2OLLoYq.
[833] "Baku Would Not Allow Use of Territory against Iran - Paper," *Javān*, August 9, 2010, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f191lna2.

regional nature of the conflict and argued that the settlement process should include only regional actors.[834]

While limiting the influence of outsiders had been a key feature of Iranian narratives, the increasing presence of the Israeli side brought certain changes to how the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was articulated. As stated in the preceding chapters, showing outright support to a neighbouring Shia country and remaining committed to the above-mentioned balanced approach were an inconvenient fit. The Iranian side often found itself in a defensive position, trying to justify its policies and refuting claims that they were going against their own values. With Israel in the picture, the narratives shifted to an accusatory tone, claiming that it was the Azerbaijani side that compromising Islamic principles.

This change can be seen in the statements of political and religious figures in the Islamic Republic. They argued that Azerbaijan was making a mistake by relying on the support of the "arrogant powers" to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.[835] According to them, the dispute remained unresolved because Aliyev's government did not resort to the help of the Muslim world.[836] Instead, they decided to align with Israel, contributing to "the creeping influence of the Zionists and foreigners in the South Caucasus region."[837] Such an articulation positioned the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in a different light in the framework of the social logic of resistance communities. In a way, the benevolent struggle for the rights

[834] "Iran Supports Azerbaijan's Territorial Integrity - Majlis Speaker Larijani," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 1, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19rqbl4.
[835] "Iranian Provincial Cleric Critical of Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy," *Fars News Agency*, September 5, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3mT4R63; "Iran: Roundup of Ardabil Friday Prayers Sermons 5 Jun 09," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ardabil Provincial TV*, June 6, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/32lh4XO; "Iran: Roundup of Ardabil Province Friday Prayer Sermons 23 Oct 09," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ardabil Provincial TV*, October 26, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3gd4kdV.
[836] "Baku Would Not Allow Use of Territory against Iran - Paper."
[837] "Iranian Envoy Warns against 'Creeping Zionist Influence' in South Caucasus," *Fars News Agency*, February 28, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90031893.

of Shia Azerbaijanis was contaminated by the Israel-Azerbaijan cooperation. This narrative on the role of the "Zionist regime" was useful for dealing with the dilemma of helping a Shia community vs. keeping a balanced approach. The tables were turned, and it was the Azerbaijani side that had to justify its policies.

While Israel's presence helped Iran circumvent the illustrated inconvenient situation, it was also seen as a distressing development that triggered certain measures especially during the second term of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Different Iranian officials started offering to mediate between the conflicting sides in the discussions with their Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts.[838] In April 2010, Foreign Minister Mottaki proposed to hold a trilateral meeting with Armenia and Azerbaijan to make a step forward towards reconciliation.

However, the posture of the Islamic Republic concerning regional affairs did not provide much space for engagement as a mediator. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the OSCE Minsk Group remained the primary institutional framework for the settlement process.[839] Khatami's administration, while being critical of the framework, made attempts to become part of the initiative. When Ahmadinejad came to power, the shift to a more confrontational position eliminated the prospect for such engagement. Articulating the dispute in the framework of its struggle against global injustice was not a perspective shared by any of the conflicting sides or the key mediators. In such a situation, having any influence in the settlement process was challenging, and the steps of the Iranian side remained limited to expressing concern and making proposals that remained in the air.

[838] "Iran Ready to Help Settle Azeri-Armenian Dispute - Spokesman," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 14, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f19zvc5l.
[839] Geukjian, *Negotiating Armenian-Azerbaijani Peace*.

In sum, while the South Caucasus was not the primary site of performance for Iran's refound "authentic" Self, the changes in Iranian narratives of the international order and its place in it had a ripple effect on the perspectives on security affairs in the region. The existing issues were articulated in new ways, where they were often extracted from the respective regional context and presented in the framework of the broader discourse of fighting the antagonistic Others. Seeing security matters from this perspective, the Islamic Republic adopted positions that were not shared by any of the subjects involved in the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Such a divergence limited Iran's means of engagement, and Ahmadinejad's administration was often in the position of a bystander that expressed concerns. Occasionally, it tried to formulate the security-related developments in ways that validated its primary discourses on international affairs.

Bilateral Relations

Iran's bilateral ties with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia are discussed in two sections, each of them painting a strikingly different picture from the other. In the case of Azerbaijan, there were recurring issues that created constant tension. Baku's close ties with the adversaries of Iran triggered a rather ideologically driven response, where Azerbaijan was seen as a site of struggle against Iran's enemies. Iran was comparably active in this regard, attempting to keep bilateral ties strong and not let those enemies subvert them.

This tumultuous atmosphere was missing in ties with Armenia and Georgia. Over the period of Rafsanjani's and Khatami's presidencies, Iran's bilateral relations with these two states started acquiring certain consistent features that became sedimented through repetition. Fluctuations were a rarity. When Ahmadinejad came to power, the Iranian government paid relatively little attention to them. The above-mentioned initiative-taking attitude was missing here. As a result, ties were performed through routinized practices, where there was little room for changes, be it positive or negative.

Azerbaijan as a Battleground for Fighting the Antagonistic Others

Iran's relations with Azerbaijan faced major challenges during Ahmadinejad's presidency.[840] There was substantial frustration with Baku, as it was perceived that the latter was becoming politically and culturally distant from Tehran due to the efforts of the "arrogant powers." Azerbaijan's close cooperation with Israel, its policies on religious issues, and the fact that it was harbouring various ethnonationalist groups were seen as anti-Iranian steps. At the same time, the Iranian government continuously tried to demonstrate how friendly and strong their bilateral ties were, countering the claims that there was a crisis between the two neighbourly countries.[841]

The combination of these two narratives is rather unusual. In a period of an antagonistic turn in Iranian foreign affairs, maintaining a friendly attitude in light of such developments stood out from other policies of Ahmadinejad's administration. In the literature, it is explained as an effect of shifting power dynamics, where a weaker Iran had to deal with a stronger Azerbaijan.[842] Such an interpretation is based on the assumption that changes in relative power led to a more accommodating position on Iran's side. However, seeing these developments through such a prism raises the question of why the Iranian government did not have the same attitude in other cases as well and often opted for a steadfast position in defiance of significant international pressure.

Looking into how the subject position of Azerbaijan was situated in the broader foreign policy discourses of the Islamic Republic helps to understand the combination of the above-mentioned two notions. Here, the presence of Iran's antagonistic Others played a key role

[840] "'Badtarin Dowrān-e Monāsebāt-e Irān va Āzarbāyjān' Dar Zamān-e Āhmadinezhād," *Deutsche Welle Farsi*, June 3, 2013, https://bit.ly/3biCdHh.
[841] "Āhmadinezhād: mardom va dowlat-e Jomhuri-ye Āzarbāyjān dar qalb-e mā jāʾi dārand," *Mehr News Agency*, May 19, 2013, https://bit.ly/33cP1dx.
[842] Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus: Relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia*, 1st edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2019).

in shaping the perceptions about the neighbouring country. Specifically, relations with Baku were put in the context of the justice-seeking discourse discussed above. Ahmadinejad's government was struggling against the influence of the "arrogant powers," and Azerbaijan was one of the sites of that struggle.

The problems that often occurred in bilateral relations with Azerbaijan were presented as agitations orchestrated by Iran's adversaries.[843] In this light, issues concerning ethnic identity and religious affairs became sensitive matters for the Islamic Republic, as they were seen in the context of growing cooperation between its enemies and Azerbaijan. Israel, the United States, and the West, in general, had a central presence in these articulations, and different events inside Azerbaijan were seen as attempts at infiltration into the zone of resistance communities.

Specifically, It was argued that Azerbaijan became a safe haven for anti-Iranian groups, such as separatists that threatened Iran's territorial integrity.[844] For instance, such was the reaction towards the so-called Congress of World Azerbaijanis held in Baku in March 2006, where anti-Iranian remarks were made.[845] In October 2007, Seyed Hassan Ameli, a member of the Assembly of Experts from the Ardabil region, stated that anti-Iranian nationalism was growing in Azerbaijan.[846] In the following years, such remarks became more accusatory – Iranian politicians and newspapers blamed Baku for giving ground to Iran's enemies, such as "Zionist" agents, to conduct their operations.[847]

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[843] "Envoy Rejects Anti-Iran Remarks Voiced at Azeris Conference," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 18, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m14cvvu6.
[844] "Baku Provides Safe Haven for Iranian Secessionists - Agency," *Baztab*, September 27, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f14zhggr.
[845] "Envoy Rejects Anti-Iran Remarks Voiced at Azeris Conference."
[846] "Iranian Friday Imam Alerts Ethnic Groups to 'American Demagogy,'" *Fars News Agency*, October 26, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m15qmtpa.
[847] "(Corr) Website Says US Planning to Send Opposition Forces to Iran," *Javān*, October 12, 2010, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1963iun; "Senior Cleric Says 'Enemies' Spreading Pan-Turkism in Iranian Region," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran East Azarbayjan Provincial TV*, January 24, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, Senior cleric says "enemies" spreading pan-Turkism in Iranian region; "Azerbaijan Plotting with US, Israel to 'Disintegrate'

Discontent and suspicions were also commonplace in the reactions concerning religious issues. For instance, in November 2006, many in the Islamic Republic considered it unacceptable when the Azerbaijani paper *Sanat Gazeti* published an article criticizing Islam. There were protests in Tabriz, and a number of Iranian parliamentarians and religious figures condemned it as an attempt at mocking what was sacred for their society.[848] A few years later, Baku's policies of banning hijabs in schools and shutting down mosques were criticized inside Iran.[849] The frustration towards such measures increased during the second half of Ahmadinejad's presidency. In February 2011, there was a demonstration in front of the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran over the hijab issue.[850] A number of Iranian officials blamed Baku for alienating Islam.[851] Azerbaijan's willingness to host the Eurovision song contest in 2012 was also articulated as an anti-Islamic move.[852] A clear indication of this

Iran - Website," *Tabnāk News*, August 13, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f19ux9e5; "Iranian Website Links Azerbaijan to Killing of Nuclear Scientists," *Fars News Agency*, February 22, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90031626; "Senior Iranian MP Urges Azeri Government to Expel Foreign Agents," *Fars News Agency*, February 22, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90031631.

[848] "Iran: Tabriz Students Condemn Baku's Weekly for Insulting Prophet," *Fars News Agency*, November 15, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1527igf; "Iran: US, Israel behind Baku's Weekly Disparaging Remarks about Prophet," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 17, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f152bu9o; "Iranian MPs Condemn Sacrilege of Islamic Sanctities in Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 22, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m14dhpol.

[849] "Azeri Teachers Banned from Wearing Hijab - Iranian TV," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Sahar TV*, September 21, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10082098; "Mosque Closed in Azeri Capital - Iran TV," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Sahar TV*, July 11, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10098296.

[850] "Website Reports Protest Rally Outside Azerbaijan's Embassy in Tehran," *Tabnāk News*, February 22, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19gtaqm.

[851] "Awakening Movement in Azerbaijan Could Not Be Put down - Iran General," *Mehr News Agency*, August 9, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m19ulw0i; "Iranian Official Condemns Azerbaijan for 'Alienating' Islam," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 10, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90028702.

[852] "Iran Commentary Criticizes 'Anti-Islamic' Azerbaijani Policies," *Mardom-Sālāri*, April 2, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1ac0omx; "Iranian Muslims Protest against Azerbaijan's 'Anti-Islamic Policies,'" *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Sahar TV*, May 9, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90034639.

discontent is the departure of Iran's ambassador from Baku in May 2012 as a protest of the latter's attitude towards Islamic values.[853]

It is noteworthy that expressing such positions often prompted a negative response from Azerbaijan. The critical remarks about religion and identity often appeared interventionist from their perspective. For instance, a leaked US diplomatic cable shows how Ilham Aliyev was complaining about Tehran standing behind radical Islamist groups inside Azerbaijan.[854] Consequentially, Baku matched Iran's attitude of frustration and distrust, and both sides spiralled into a confrontational position on a regular basis.[855]

Nevertheless, the Iranian government often tried to show that these problems were ephemeral and incapable of damaging bilateral relations. They were juxtaposed against the reassurances of Iranian officials about the high level of ties with its neighbour.[856] This narrative was disseminated especially by high-ranking government representatives. While acknowledging that the adversaries were trying to damage Baku-Tehran relations, they tried to show that those attempts were unsuccessful. For instance, when commenting on the 2006 Congress of World Azerbaijanis, Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman stated: "Certain domestic and foreign elements inside and outside Azerbaijan are making attempts to create obstacles in the way of expansion of Tehran-Baku relations." He also emphasized that they did not represent Azerbaijan's official position.[857] The last point was meant to show that such events were not indicative that the Azerbaijani state was becoming more anti-Iranian.

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[853] "Iranian Ambassador Leaves Azerbaijan in Protest at Baku's Policies," *Fars News Agency*, May 22, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1af97eu.
[854] "US Embassy Cables: Azerbaijan Leader in the Soup" (The Guardian, November 28, 2010), http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/250649.
[855] Bahram Amir-Ahmadian, "Bā jomhur-ye Āzarbāyjān che konim?," *Iranian Diplomacy*, February 24, 2012, https://bit.ly/3cETtHp.
[856] "Safir-e Irān dar Jomhuri-ye Āzerbāyjān: ravābet-e Tehrān-Bāku estrātezhik ast," *Fars News Agency*, June 15, 2013, https://bit.ly/3ewsVJm.
[857] "Iran Spokesman Regrets Anti-Iran Remarks in Baku Seminar," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 28, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m14cwrat.

This notion was especially present in President Ahmadinejad's statements. He was vocal about the measures taken by "Zionists" aimed at undermining Iran's relations with Azerbaijan. When attending the 2006 ECO Summit in Baku, he spoke about enemy conspiracies that tried to undermine their ties.[858] During an official visit to Azerbaijan in August 2007, President Ahmadinejad stated: "Today, many, such as Zionists and groups attached to big powers, are striving to sow discord among nations."[859] At a meeting with the Azerbaijani Defense Minister, he noted: "One should be watchful about the enemies of the two countries and demons. The enemies do not want Iran-Baku ties to develop."[860]

These remarks were followed by claims that such attempts would not be successful. Ahmadinejad tried to emphasize that Iran was winning in this battle against its antagonistic Others. Therefore, he often stressed that no obstacle could stand in the way of Iran-Azerbaijan relations and called for deeper cooperation in economic, cultural, security, and other sectors.[861] When attending the Caspian Summit in Baku in 2010, the President of the Islamic Republic declared that the ties were on a trajectory of growth, adding that "Despite efforts by ill-wishers, Iran and Azerbaijan have a common understanding of international issues and even bilateral matters."[862]

Alongside making such statements, the Iranian government took measures against the possible political and cultural alienation of the Azerbaijani Republic. Emphasis was put on

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[858] "Iranian, Azeri Presidents Confers on Bilateral Issues," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 4, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m14d0ghr.
[859] "Iran-Azerbaijan Amity Rooted in History - President Ahmadinezhad."
[860] "President Says 'Enemies' Do Not Want Iran-Azerbaijan Ties to Develop," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, March 12, 2012, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1aa8x01.
[861] "Gostāresh-e ravābet-e Irān va jomhuriye Āzarbāyjān be naf'-e do mellat va mantaqeh ast," *Dolat.ir*, December 14, 2009, https://dolat.ir/detail/184644; "Āhmadinezhād: Irān va jomhuri-ye Āzarbāyjān pol-e dust-e keshvarha-ye mantaqeh," *Dolat.ir*, December 21, 2009, https://dolat.ir/detail/184915. CHECK THIS TITLE is it: Iran and Azerbaijan: A Bridge of Friendship for the Countries of the Region? If so, it should probably be "dusti-ye."
[862] "Iran's President Says Tehran, Baku Share Common Positions," *Press TV*, November 18, 2010, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90015462; "Āhmadinezhād be jomhuriye Āzarbāyjān safar kard/ tashrih-e joz'iyat-e safar," *Mehr News Agency*, November 17, 2010, https://bit.ly/2SNVMk3.

developing commercial ties and facilitating cultural exchange. Marathon talks, which had helped to iron out differences previously, were encouraged by the Iranian government. During Ahmadinejad's two terms, the President himself and several ministers paid frequent visits to Baku with the intention of not allowing a major rift between the two countries.

In the area of economic affairs, the Iranian side prioritized interconnectedness and put effort into improving transportation infrastructure and initiating energy transfer projects. One of the first such initiatives was building the Poldasht-Shah Takhti bridge that connected the western regions of Iran with the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan.[863] The construction of the above-mentioned Astara-Rasht-Qazvin railway, as well the Baku-Astara highway, was often brought up by the Iranian side as major infrastructure projects that could increase the economic connectedness between the Islamic Republic and Azerbaijan exponentially as part of the INSTC initiative.[864] The Iranian side was vocal about the negotiations with Baku regarding such initiatives, showcasing that the two countries were willing to work together for regional economic integration. However, no noticeable progress was made in this regard during Ahmadinejad's presidency. The fluctuations in bilateral ties, as shown below, made it difficult to follow through in the case of such long-term projects.

As regards energy transfers, Iran and Azerbaijan managed to increase gas swaps and made arrangements for transferring electricity. In December 2005, Ahmadinejad attended the inauguration of a gas swap project in Nakhichevan. According to a 25-year contract, Azerbaijan was going to provide 80.5 million cubic meters of natural gas to the northern parts of Iran annually. In exchange, the Islamic Republic was to meet the energy needs of

[863] "Bridge on Iranian-Azeri Border Ready to Operate," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran West Azarbayjan Provincial TV*, September 2, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10062744.
[864] "Azeri President Says Trade with Iran to Double Soon," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, February 20, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10090078.

the bordering Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic.[865] In the following years, the two states held negotiations for increasing the volume of gas imported from Azerbaijan.[866] In 2010, the State Azerbaijani Oil Company (SOCAR) announced the construction of a new gas pipeline to Iran.[867] The two sides also had talks on increasing the transfer of electricity and joining power grids.[868]

The Islamic Republic took other steps as well for deepening economic ties with Azerbaijan. Increasing the volume of bilateral trade was often declared a high-priority issue. Opening border markets and waiving visa regimes were some of those measures.[869] The Iranian side also tried to facilitate cooperation in the banking sector. However, no major success was achieved in the area due to international sanctions.[870] The Islamic republic also joined efforts with Turkey to establish trilateral cooperation between Ankara, Tehran, and Baku. Several meetings were held at the level of Foreign Ministers for this purpose during Ahmadinejad's presidency.[871]

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[865] "Iranian President in Naxcivan to Inaugurate Gas Swap Project," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 20, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m14cmxpj.
[866] "Afzāyesh-e 2 barābari vāredāt-e gāz az Āzarbāyjān/ joz'yāt-e tavāfoq-e jadid," *Mehr News Agency*, January 14, 2011, https://bit.ly/3v1P3RX.
[867] "Azerbaijan to Construct New Gas Pipeline to Iran - Official," *Press TV*, February 13, 2010, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90006164.
[868] "Iran Planning to Connect Power Grid to Russia - Official," *Press TV*, November 1, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1a1c27c.
[869] "Iran's Ardabil Builds New Market on Border with Azerbaijan," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ardabil Provincial TV*, April 22, 2007, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m15cf3kn; "Iran to Abolish Visas for Azeri Citizens from 1 February," *Fars News Agency*, January 22, 2010, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90005426.
[870] "Iran Businessmen Discuss Economic Ties with Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 30, 2010, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90009624.
[871] "Iran Foreign Minister Says Developing Ties with Neighbours 'Top Priority,'" *Press TV*, April 16, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90020467; "Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan to Sign Economic Agreement," *Fars News Agency*, November 30, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1a3q21i; "Azerbaijan Has Special Position in Iran's Foreign Policy - Envoy," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 22, 2012, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1adb47t.

The Iranian government also considered it imperative to increase the exposure of Islamic culture and education for the people in Azerbaijan.[872] As their ambassador to Baku stated, the Azerbaijani side needed to create a welcoming environment for teaching Islamic principles.[873] Canceling the visa regime also had the purpose of facilitating this process.[874] In July 2010, Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance paid a visit to Baku, where he signed a memorandum of understanding for boosting cultural cooperation.[875] It was followed by holding "cultural weeks" in both countries. In 2009, the Iranian satellite channel Sahar TV started broadcasting a religious show, the target group of which were Azerbaijani children.[876] Finally, facilitating exchange between the universities of the two countries was also another way the Iranian side tried to fight against the observed trend of cultural alienation.[877]

In all, Ahmadinejad's government tried to match the rhetoric of strong ties with practical progress. These steps had a recognitive value, as they were meant to show how Iran's enemies were failing in their attempts at making Azerbaijan's geopolitical orientation anti-Iranian. They correspond with one of the key notions of foreign policy discourses during Ahmadinejad's presidency: the influence of the "global arrogance" was in decline, and justice was destined to prevail. Therefore, the Iranian government often avoided acknowledging that relations with Azerbaijan were strained. Doing so could be construed as

[872] "Āhmadinezhād: monāsebāt-e Irān va jomhuri-ye Āzarbāyjān taqviyat shod," *IRIB News*, October 16, 2012, https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/amp/news/18528.
[873] "Iranian Envoy to Baku Criticizes Azerbaijan for Its Cultural Distance," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 2, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10084187.
[874] "Iran Governor, Azeri Ambassador Vow Boost Mutual Ties," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, April 22, 2010, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90008485.
[875] "Iran's Culture Minister Arrives in Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 5, 2010, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90010740.
[876] "Iran's Sahar TV Producing New Series of Religious Programme for Azeri Children," *Mehr News Agency*, January 31, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m16vsavq.
[877] "Iran Education Minster Terms Visit to Azerbaijan 'Positive,'" *Islamic Republic News Agency*, July 14, 2012, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1ajkp3j.

an act of recognition of failure in Iran's struggle against the antagonistic powers and indicate that the Islamic Republic was losing to Israel in the fight for Azerbaijan's soul.

However, adopting such a position was not always easy for the Iranian side, especially since attempts at ironing out differences and strengthening ties were often unsuccessful. The above-mentioned measures did not lead to any changes in Baku's behaviour, and it continued pursuing closer cooperation with Israel. As a result, the presence of the latter remained dominant in Iranian discourses about relations with Azerbaijan, causing regular friction between the two states.

One of the illustrative cases in this regard was Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Tehran in March 2009 and the developments that followed it. This visit was considered an opportunity for opening a "new chapter" in Iran-Azerbaijan relations.[878] Aliyev had meetings with the Supreme Leader, the President, and other high-ranking officials, where commitments were made about deepening "brotherly" relations.[879] There were also remarks about the two countries cooperating on dealing with common threats and not allowing outside powers to create problems in their relations.

Three months later, Israel's President Shimon Peres paid a visit to Azerbaijan that was seen as a sign of growing cooperation between the two countries.[880] It created a wave of criticism in the Islamic Republic. Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman even commented that the visit could affect their relations with Azerbaijan negatively.[881] On the day of the visit,

[878] "Paper Terms Azeri President Trip to Iran as 'Beginning of a New Chapter,'" *Hemāyat*, March 11, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f17z6x79.
[879] "Didār-e raʾis-e jomhur-e Āzarbāyjān bā rahbar-e enqelāb" (Khamenei.ir, March 10, 2009), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=5983; "Azeri Leader Hails Ties with Iran," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 11, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10091129.
[880] Shahin Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: Peres Baku Visit Highlights Possibilities of Israeli-Azerbaijani Cooperation | Eurasianet," *Eurasianet*, June 29, 2009, https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-peres-baku-visit-highlights-possibilities-of-israeli-azerbaijani-cooperation.
[881] "Israeli President's Visit May Affect Azeri-Iranian Ties - Spokesman," *Press TV*, June 22, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10097123.

Ahmadinejad's government recalled their ambassador in Baku as a sign of protest.[882] In addition, there were protests in Tehran and Tabriz condemning Azerbaijan's cooperation with Israel.[883]

Another such situation occurred in February-March 2012, when the second trilateral meeting between Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan corresponded with the latter signing a USD 1.6 billion worth of weapons deal with Israel. It was a period when the Islamic Republic was speaking with two voices. On the one hand, Iranian officials, such as President Ahmadinejad and Foreign Minister Salehi, were making remarks on boosting cooperation with Azerbaijan.[884] On the other hand, the contract with Israel created renewed discontent in the Islamic Republic that amplified the criticism towards Azerbaijan's policies by Iranian officials. Accusations about conspiring with Iran's enemies, espionage, and accelerating religious alienation became commonplace.[885] Despite the formally cordial atmosphere, the tension between the two states was rising, making it the lowest point in bilateral ties during Ahmadinejad's presidency.[886]

These striking fluctuations were representative of the general dynamic in bilateral relations. Frustration kept reappearing, challenging the narrative that the observed problems were situational and transitory. From the Iranian perspective, their friendly attitude was not reciprocated, as their efforts at improving ties were often followed by unfavourable policies on Azerbaijan's side. It is not surprising that critics often targeted Iran's reaction to

[882] "Iran Recalls Envoy from Azerbaijan after Israeli Visit - Website," *Press TV*, June 29, 2009, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10097576.
[883] "Anti-Israel Rally Outside Azeri Consulate in Iran's Tabriz," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran East Azarbayjan Provincial TV*, June 24, 2009, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/10097315.
[884] "Iran Foreign Minister Calls for Boosting Ties with Azerbaijan," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 13 March 2012, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/34Sgnqt; "President Says 'Enemies' Do Not Want Iran-Azerbaijan Ties to Develop."
[885] "Iran Has Evidence on Israeli Spies in Azerbaijan - Envoy," *Fars News Agency*, April 21, 2012, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3g69Ddo; "Iran Commentary Criticizes 'Anti-Islamic' Azerbaijani Policies."
[886] "'Badtarin dowrān-e monāsebāt-e Irān va Āzarbāyjān' dar zamān-e Ahmadinezhād."

Azerbaijan's behaviour.[887] Specifically, the attitude of the Islamic Republic was considered misplaced and received the label of "one-sided respect" *(ehterām-e yek jānebeh)*.[888] While Baku was violating the principle of cordial ties on a regular basis, Tehran remained committed to the position of stressing cooperation and deepening relations on different levels.

It was not easy for Ahmadinejad's administration to find an alternative approach. Positioning relations with Baku in the context of the justice-seeking mission locked the Iranian side in this situation. Azerbaijan became yet another battleground for struggling against the antagonistic Others. The latter's active presence pushed Iran to pursue closer cooperation with its neighbour in the North. Paradoxically, the same factor created constant tension in Iran-Azerbaijan relations, hindering the attempts at partnerships in different areas. Since Baku did not change the policies concerning its cooperation with Iran's adversaries, confidence-building measures between the two states were constantly undermined. The bilateral projects that were often discussed by the sides remained unrealized during Ahmadinejad's presidency.

In all, the Iranian government was facing significant challenges in relations with Azerbaijan. Formally, it did not acknowledge that their ties were deteriorating. The government maintained the narrative that its enemies were unable to damage the bond with Baku.[889] At the same time, it remained suspicious and concerned about Azerbaijan's policies. These concerns were often extrapolated in various ways, such as complaints about religious issues,

[887] Ali Bigdeli, "Safarha-ye bi javāb va kāhesh-e prestizh-e melli," *Iranian Diplomacy*, October 19, 2012, https://bit.ly/3pocrHc; "Website Criticizes Iranian Ambassador's 'Weak' Performance in Azerbaijan," *Tabnāk News*, August 16, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f19v54n0.
[888] Ahmad Nasab, "Omid be pāyān-e model-e ehterām-e yekjānebeh," *Iranian Diplomacy*, June 22, 2013, https://bit.ly/3nN84o8; "Vajh-e ghāleb dar ravābet-e Bāku bā Tehrān; ehterām-e moteqābel yā yekjānebeh?," *Rāh-e Dānā*, March 4, 2017, https://bit.ly/3h1qPmr.
[889] "Gozashtan az khiyānat-e Āzarbāyjān bā niyyat-e fetneh-zodāyi," *Iranian Diplomacy*, March 13, 2012, https://bit.ly/3z5uuXc.

accusations of espionage, and harbouring anti-Iranian circles. As a result, mutual distrust was commonplace despite the declarative statements on close ties.

Unaffected by Broader Changes: Continuity in Relations with Armenia and Georgia

The diametric turn in Iran's foreign policy orientation did not have any major impact on bilateral ties with Armenia and Georgia. The features observed in the previous chapters were dominant in the period of Ahmadinejad's presidency as well. In the case of relations with Armenia, routine and predictability remained the primary characteristics. As regards ties with Georgia, Iran's engagement with it was still limited and risk averse.

Conventionally, Azerbaijan had more presence in Iranian foreign policy discourses compared to the other two states in the South Caucasus. However, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, this disparity in attention was becoming even more striking. Merely looking into the intensity of communication with Baku on one side and Yerevan and Tbilisi on the other shows how the Iranian government was more passive in the latter cases.[890] Initiative-taking on the side of the Islamic Republic was not as common as in the case of the policies towards Azerbaijan. Such an attitude made inertia a defining factor in relations with Armenia and Georgia.

In a period when those two states were involved in various geopolitical affairs, Iran's role was limited to being an observer at a distance. One of the factors that determined the detached attitude of Ahmadinejad's administration was how the role of Iran's antagonistic Other was presented in the narratives on Armenian and Georgia. As stated above, the Islamic Republic primarily articulated its agency as a key actor in the struggle against global

[890] "Safar-e Āngelā Merkel be Qafqāz-e Jonubi; zarurat-e ruykard-e motevāzen-e Irān dar 'arseh-ye diplomāsi," *Iranian Diplomacy*, August 27, 2018, https://bit.ly/3g28Uvg.

injustice that was performed in several priority areas. This overarching theme of Iran's foreign policy pushed issues that were not part of this fight against the "arrogant powers" to the sidelines. Relations with Armenia and Georgia fall in this category.

Iran's resistance against its antagonistic Others had minimal presence in the narratives on its relations with Armenia. It was limited to Iranian officials making statements about not allowing extra-regional powers to meddle in the affairs of the South Caucasus in meetings with their Armenian counterparts.[891] The policies of this neighbouring country did not trigger any noticeable concerns in the Islamic Republic even though Yerevan was making steps towards closer relations with the European Union.[892] In addition, there was an attempt by Yerevan to mend ties with Turkey, although it was not successful.[893] Despite these developments, for the Iranian side, Armenia remained a country with limited options due to the geopolitical configurations in the region that were keeping it under Russia's influence.[894]

Such a configuration was convenient for the Iranian side, as observed in the previous chapters. For instance, shortly after assuming office, Foreign Minister Mottaki stated in a meeting with Armenia's ambassador to Tehran that "Cordial relations between Iran and Armenia have always been based on mutual respect and the growing trend of ties have never faced any difficulties in the course of history."[895] Ahmadinejad received a legacy of stable

[891] "Armenia Seeks Security Cooperation with Iran," *Mehr News Agency*, November 23, 2008, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2TTrEUV; "Didār-e raʾis jomhur-e Armanestān bā rahbar-e enqelāb" (Khamenei.ir, Aril 2009), https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=6273.
[892] Syuzanna Vasilyan, *"Moral Power" of the European Union in the South Caucasus*, 1st edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
[893] "Turkey, Armenia Sign Historic Accord," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 11, 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/Turkey_Armenia_To_Sign_Landmark_Agreement_To_Normalize_Ties/1848293.html; "Turkey Learnt Nothing: Ankara's First Response on Zurich Protocols Is Again with Language of Preconditions," *Armenpress*, March 16, 2018, https://armenpress.am/eng/news/926416/turkey-learnt-nothing-ankara%E2%80%99s-first-response-on-zurich-protocols-is-again-with-language-of-preconditions.html.
[894] Farhad Atai, "Irān va keshvarha-ye Qafqāz-e Janubi," *Motāle'āt-e Evrāsiyā-ye Markazi* 5, no. 10 (2012): 119–32.
[895] "Iran's Foreign Minister Calls for Stronger Ties with Armenia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 13, 2005, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3gcjaRG.

and friendly ties that were considered satisfactory, and no substantial effort was put into upgrading them.

The role of Iran's enemies was more emphasized in the narratives about Georgia, especially due to the August 2008 war. Its westward orientation was often presented as an effect of Washington's attempts at spreading its influence in the region.[896] The section on security issues illustrates how the war was seen in the framework of the global struggle against the "arrogant powers." As stated above, Iranian officials often sided with the Russian narrative of the dispute, labelling it an agitation by western powers. Calls for respecting the principle of territorial integrity, which had often served as a means for confidence building with Tbilisi, were mostly absent in the remarks made by Ahmadinejad's administration.

However, these issues did not lead to articulations of Georgia's agency as an adversary. Just as during Khatami's presidency, expectations from Tbilisi were low, and its pro-western position was seen as a given. Among the states in the South Caucasus, Georgia had been the most detached, being the only one of the three with which Iran did not have a land border. Unlike in the case of Azerbaijan, there was no significant push to make it yet another battleground for Ahmadinejad's fight against the "arrogant powers."[897] While expressing (often indirectly) certain reservations about Tbilisi's policies, Iranian officials did not go as far as making an issue out of them. Talks about bilateral relations were mostly kept separate from the two parties' differences in geopolitical orientation.[898]

Since Iran's justice-seeking efforts were mostly absent in bilateral ties with Armenia and Georgia, there were no strong triggers that could invite special attention to them. In such

[896] Vali Kaleji, "Peyāmadha-ye bohrān-e Gorjestān bar nezām-e beynolmelal," *Motāle'āt-e Āsiyā-ye Markazi va Qafqāz*, no. 65 (2009): 113–32.
[897] In addition, struggling against the influence of western powers was seen to be Russia's domain in this particular case. The section on the August 2008 war illustrates the dominance of this notion in Iranian discourses.
[898] "Iran's Ahmadinezhad Warns against NATO's Eastward Expansion," *Press TV*, January 19, 2010, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3xfk8lM.

circumstances, precedence became the primary factor, and these relations followed the path of limited sectoral cooperation on which they had been put. Cooperation in the energy sector and increasing trade became the main topics of negotiations with Yerevan and Tbilisi, as certain groundwork had been laid before Ahmadinejad assumed office. Such as during Khatami's presidency, there were plans for bilateral projects in these areas that were often partially implemented due to various obstacles. As stated below, Iran did not take any significant measures to address these challenges, showcasing the relatively residual role of these affairs.

In relations with Armenia, it was the projects of building a gas pipeline and a hydroelectric power plant that occupied a central place. In the case of the gas pipeline, the construction process had started during Khatami's presidency. After multiple delays, it was inaugurated in March 2007 with an official ceremony attended by Ahmadinejad and Armenia's President Robert Kocharyan.[899] Initially, the pipeline was to deliver 400 million cubic meters of gas to Armenia. Then it was scheduled to increase the figure up to 2.5 billion cubic meters.[900] The Iranian government also planned to build on the project and extend the supply of Iranian gas to Europe via Armenia.[901]

However, two years after the inauguration, disagreements started appearing regarding this project that undermined the plans for further expansion of cooperation in the field. While the pipeline was operational in 2007, Armenia only started purchasing Iranian gas in May 2009, following Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan's visit to Tehran.[902] Moreover, several

[899] "Dowlat-e Armanestān rasman tā'yid kard: fā'elat-e khatt-e luleh-ye gāz-e Irān-Armanestān tā avākher-e esfand be ta'viq oftad," *Iranian Students' News Agency*, December 22, 2006, https://bit.ly/3ggo3sX; "Eftetāh-e rasmi-ye khatt-e luleh-ye gāz-e Irān-Armanestān," *Hamshahri*, March 19, 2007, https://bit.ly/3viGqSl.
[900] "Iran-Armenia-Gas Pipeline /ECO/," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 18, 2007, sec. News, https://en.irna.ir/news/8919903/Iran-Armenia-Gas-pipeline-ECO.
[901] "Ahmadinezhād: enteqāl-e gāz-e Irān be Armanestān tā Orupā gozineh-ye besyār khubi barāye mā ast," *Aran News*, October 26, 2007, https://bit.ly/2RQgakB.
[902] "Sāderāt-e Gāz Be Armanestān Avāsset-e Ordibehesht-e Emsāl Āghāz Mishavad," *Shana News Agency*, April 13, 2009, www.shana.ir/news/140297/.

months later, Rasul Salmani, a senior expert of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC), stated that Armenia was not following the provisions of the 2004 bilateral contract on purchasing gas. In particular, it was planned to sell three million cubic meters of gas daily, but only one-third of it was being transferred through the pipeline.[903] The Armenian side responded that they were compliant with the terms of the agreement and refuted that there were any obstacles in the area of energy cooperation.[904]

Soon it became evident to the Iranian side that there were major limitations to expanding the supply of gas to Armenia and beyond due to Russia's policies. In 2013, it was revealed that the Russian state-owned company Gazprom was taking over the operation of the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline. In the Islamic Republic, this move was considered "controversial" and a result of Moscow's pressure on Yerevan.[905] Their competitor in the market was in control of Iran's gas supply to Armenia and used that leverage to keep the volume of energy transactions at a low level.[906]

This issue illustrates the other side of Russia's influence on Armenia. While it was a convenient set-up for restricting the presence of Iran's adversaries in its neighbouring country, it also posed certain limitations for deeper cooperation between Iran and Armenia. Yet again, the positions of the Islamic Republic and its partner in the fight against "global arrogance" were in collision. Other than expressing their dissatisfaction with such developments, Iranian officials adopted an accommodating attitude. The above-mentioned

[903] "Da'vā-ye gāz-e dovvom: in bār bā Armanestān," *Donyā-ye Eqtesād*, October 18, 2009, https://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/fa/tiny/news-583176.
[904] "Armenia 'Honoring' Gas Deal with Iran," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 15, 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/Armenia_Honoring_Gas_Deal_With_Iran/1878868.html.
[905] "Rusiye kontrol-e sāderāt gāz-e Irān be Armanestān rā dar dast gereft," *Tasnim News Agency*, May 31, 2013, https://tn.ai/61578.
[906] "Russia Pressured Armenia Over Iran Gas, Says Official," *Asbarez.Com* (blog), May 21, 2013, https://asbarez.com/110189/russia-pressured-armenia-over-iran-gas-says-official/.

statement by Rasul Salmani was a rare case, and the Iranian government chose to settle with the moderate achievements in the sector.

As regards the construction of a hydroelectric power plant, it was on the agenda of Iran-Armenia talks even before Ahmadinejad came to power. His government continued the negotiations about the project shortly after assuming office.[907] At the inauguration of the gas pipeline in March 2007, the presidents of Iran and Armenia signed an agreement on constructing the power plant.[908] The sides continued discussing the issue during official encounters, but no progress was made for around four years.[909] It was only in June 2011, when the specifics of the initiative were laid out in the framework of a comprehensive economic agreement signed between Iran and Armenia. The two states were to construct a 180-megawatt power plant on the Aras River with an estimated cost of USD 450-500 million.[910] In 2012, it was announced that the construction of the powerplant was going to start in November of that year after being delayed repeatedly.[911]

However, the project remained unrealized during Ahmadinejad's presidency. In this case, the shortage of the necessary financial resources was the main obstacle. The Armenian side was expecting investment from Iran. In January 2012, the European Union imposed an embargo on Iranian oil that led to economic hardships for the country.[912] In such a situation, making commercial investments became even more difficult, and the construction of the

[907] "Iran Speaker Stresses Expansion of Ties with Armenia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 12, 2006, https://bit.ly/3xaiVMC.
[908] "Iran, Armenia Sign Agreement on Establishment of Power Plants," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, March 19, 2007, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3zm3ov5.
[909] "Iranian Foreign Minister, Armenian President Praise Ties."
[910] "Sālehi va vazir-e enerzhi-ye Armanestān sanad-e hamkāri-ye eqtesādi-ye do keshvar-rā emzā kardand," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 30, 2011, www.irna.ir/news/4046476/.
[911] Tigran Avetisian, "Armenian-Iranian Power Plant Construction 'Set To Start,'" *Azatutyun Radiokayan*, October 25, 2012, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/24751163.html.
[912] "EU Iran Sanctions: Ministers Adopt Iran Oil Imports Ban," *BBC News*, January 23, 2012, sec. Europe, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16674660.

Iran-Armenia power plant was among the initiatives that took the hit.[913] Despite receiving relatively more attention, the construction of the power plant became yet another Iran-Armenia commercial project that remained on paper.

Energy cooperation was also a topical issue in Iran-Georgia relations. Nevertheless, progress was limited here as well. In 2006, the two countries signed an agreement for purchasing Iranian gas via Azerbaijan amidst a disruption in the supply from Russia. According to this agreement, Iran was to provide 30 million cubic meters of gas to help Georgia deal with its energy shortage.[914] The Islamic Republic saw the deal as a precedent for making a more permanent arrangement in this area since Tbilisi's relations with Moscow were deteriorating, and the former was trying to find alternative sources for importing natural gas.[915] However, cooperation remained limited to that one instance. Georgia was hesitant to strike a long-term deal with Iran, considering the latter's strained relations with its allies in the West. Besides, the plan to extend the Iran-Armenia pipeline to Georgia was not realized due to the pressure exercised by Moscow.

The other area where the two sides explored possible cooperation was supplying electricity. In October 2006, the two states signed a swap agreement, according to which Georgia was to receive 50 megawatts of electricity from Iran via Armenia. It was planned to increase the capacity to 300 megawatts later.[916] The Iranian government then aimed to substitute this swap deal with exporting electricity to Georgia through a new power transmission line that

[913] "Hay-iranakan amenaxoshor nakhagic'y': eˆrb koghery' d'er'namowx klinen shinararowt'yany' Meghriowm," *Sputnik Armenian*, March 3, 2019, https://armeniasputnik.am/economy/20190303/17574115/hay-iranakan-amenaxoshor-naxagicy.html.
[914] "Iran to Export 30m Cubic Meters of Gas to Georgia," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, January 30, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3cDuEvm.
[915] "Ruygard-e Gorjestān va Āzarbāyjān be kharid-e gāz az Irān," *Donyā-ye Eqtesād*, November 5, 2006, https://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/fa/tiny/news-686916.
[916] "Iran, Georgia Sign Agreement on Electricity Swap," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, October 23, 2006, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/2Svw4Bc.

would go through Armenia.[917] However, the project was not completed as of 2020.[918] Constant delays were regular in this case as well, creating difficulties for expansion of cooperation and perpetuating the limited and exploratory nature of these initiatives even after years of negotiations.

Finally, the Iranian government took steps to boost bilateral trade with Armenia and Georgia. The previous administrations had often raised the necessity of such steps, as the level of cooperation in this area had been considered unsatisfactory. Ahmadinejad's administration made such remarks as well. Facilitating cooperation between the business sectors of Iran and these countries was among the often-raised topics during official encounters.[919]

The Iranian side saw potential especially in the trade relations with Armenia. Officials from Tehran often stated that the volume was increasing and called for accelerating that process.[920] In 2011, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi argued that trade with Armenia could reach the level of USD one billion annually.[921] For this purpose, several steps were taken. In June 2010, the two states signed an agreement on opening a trade centre in Yerevan.[922] Two years later, another agreement was signed for establishing a free trade zone in the southern province of Armenia that could be used for joint investments.[923] These steps

[917] "Iran Hopes to Export Electricity to Georgia, Russia via Armenia - Official," *Mehr News Agency*, December 9, 2011, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/90028684.
[918] "Armenia Hopes to Complete Energy Project With Iran In 2020," *Azatutyun Radiokayan*, May 7, 2020, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30599554.html.
[919] "Iran's Foreign Minister Calls for Stronger Ties with Armenia"; "Iran, Georgia Keen to Expand Cooperation," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 21, 2006, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://bit.ly/3gpIuUx.
[920] "Sālehi va vazir-e enerzhi-ye Armanestān sanad-e hamkāri-ye eqtesādi-ye do keshvar-rā emzā kardand."
[921] "Foreign Minister: Iran-Armenia Trade Exchanges to Hit 1b Dollars per Year," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 25, 2011, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1a5i5hq.
[922] "Iran to Open Trade Centre in Armenia," *Mehr News Agency*, June 19, 2010, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m18x8ing.
[923] "Iran, Armenia Sign Trade Agreement - Agency," *Mehr News Agency*, July 14, 2012, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f1ajluwr.

validated the willingness of the sides to expand cooperation in this area. However, they were not enough to achieve the ambitious objective stated above. By the end of Ahmadinejad's second term, Iran's trade with Armenia reached a volume of USD 293 million from USD 105 million in 2005.[924] The global financial crisis of 2008 and the ever-tightening sanctions on Iran curbed the potential meteoric rise that was often mentioned by Iranian officials.

A similar approach was used in Georgia's case. The necessity of boosting trade was among the issues on which Tehran and Tbilisi agreed.[925] In November 2010, the sides came to an agreement on lifting visa restrictions for each other's citizens.[926] The step created an opportunity for the Iranian business sector for exploring their options abroad in times of tightening economic pressure.[927] The volume of bilateral trade reached USD 176.8 million in 2013 from USD 30.3 million in 2005.[928]

However, the visa-free regime did not last long. The dramatic increase in the flow of Iranian citizens to Georgia attracted Washington's attention. The United States was concerned that the agreement with the Islamic Republic could be used to circumvent the sanctions. These concerns were communicated to Tbilisi, and in July 2012, The Georgian government cancelled the visa waiver for Iranian citizens.[929] This change shows the limitations to the

[924] Siranush Ghazaryan, "Iran-Armenia Trade Volume Hit $293 Mln in 2013," *Public Radio of Armenia*, May 9, 2014, https://en.armradio.am/2014/05/09/iran-armenia-trade-volume-hit-293-mln-in-2013/; Emil Danielyan, "Armenia Deepens Ties with Embattled Iran | Eurasianet," *Eurasianet*, July 28, 2006, https://eurasianet.org/armenia-deepens-ties-with-embattled-iran.
[925] "Iran, Georgia Keen to Expand Cooperation."
[926] "Iran, Georgia Lift Bilateral Visa Restrictions, Discuss Ties," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 4, 2010, Translation by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m197zsdv.
[927] Benoît Faucon, Jay Solomon, and Farnaz Fassihi, "As Sanctions Bite, Iranians Invest Big in Georgia," *Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2013, sec. World, https://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323864304578320754133982778.html.
[928] Andrea Weiss and Yana Zabanova, "The South Caucasus and Iran in the Post-Sanctions Era" (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, October 7, 2017), https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication; "Georgia Product Exports and Imports to Iran, Islamic Rep. 2005 | WITS Data," World Integrated Trade Solutions, accessed August 29, 2021, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/GEO/Year/2005/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/IRN/Product/all-groups.
[929] "Georgia Unilaterally Cancels Visa-Free Travel With Iran," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 3, 2013, https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-iran-visa-travel/25035168.html.

capacity of developing Iran-Georgia ties due to the geopolitical orientations of the two states. As in the period of Ahmadinejad's predecessors, cooperation in the commercial sector was constrained by such issues.

In all, ties with Armenia and Georgia were stable and devoid of crises. At the same time, they faced various limitations and were not sufficiently prioritized by Ahmadinejad's administration to overcome those limitations. As a result, these ties remained in their limited scope and mainly continued through the routinized practices between Iranian officials and their counterparts from these states. As stated above, such a situation stands in striking contrast to Iran-Azerbaijan relations, where Ahmadinejad's administration was both more concerned and highly engaged. Unlike in the cases of Armenia and Georgia, ties with Azerbaijan were put in the context of fighting the antagonistic Other that led to the differences in the observed policies.

Conclusion

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the discourse of resistance against the unjust global order became hegemonic and led to rearticulations of Iran's interests and positions in different foreign policy areas. This equivalential narrative became the broader context in which various issues were situated. It also served as a recognitive practice that was meant to show Iran's commitment to the values of the Revolution. Having a mission-driven Self became the primary feature of Iran's behaviour in foreign affairs.

This symbolic return to the "righteous path" was performed in several key foreign policy areas, such as Iran's nuclear enrichment program. These matters became the primary concerns of Ahmadinejad's administration, where the efforts and attention of the Iranian state were mostly concentrated. As regards other issues, some aspects of them were either

rearticulated within the dominant equivalential chain of signification or simply remained in the margins of Iranian foreign policy discourses.

This dynamic can be observed in the South Caucasus. There was no precise strategy concerning the region. Due to the pervasiveness of the discourse of justice-seeking, certain issues were seen in the context of fighting the antagonistic Others. Iran's engagement in regional affairs, its position towards security issues, and relations with Azerbaijan were especially impacted by this process. Here, flexibility and oscillations between different approaches gave way to consistent insistence on limiting the influence of the mentioned Others. As Ahmadinejad's government did not manage to find partners in this regard, its behaviour mainly took the shape of reactionary policies.

In other cases, such as relations with Armenia and Georgia, Iran remained rather passive. The presence of the justice-seeking discourse, which had become the central feature of Iran's foreign policy, was not strong here, and these ties became residual matters in Iranian discourses. They mainly continued based on the pre-existing practices that had been routinized during Rafsanjani's and Khatami's presidencies.

Conclusion

This study covers multiple eventualities related to the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic in the South Caucasus over a period of 25 years. They are brought together to paint a different picture of Iran's behaviour in this region. As the title of the research suggests, the analysis moves away from the popular argument on pragmatism. It is noteworthy that Iran's policies are not necessarily called anti-pragmatic here. Moving "beyond pragmatism" means questioning the usefulness of that categorization. There is more to Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus than this label manages to capture, and this research tries to show that.

While the study challenges the dominant interpretations in the literature, it agrees with the observation that Iran's behaviour in this region differs by its relatively weak ideological attachment. Here, it is argued that the period in which the South Caucasus appeared in Iranian horizons plays a key role in this regard. There was no fixed understanding of the region in the early revolutionary times that could have acquired a strong symbolic significance for Iran, making a certain articulation of interests and positions the only acceptable options. The emergence of the South Caucasus as a new political space in Iran's North in a period of significant transformations means that there was no issue of continuity, and the Islamic Republic had a certain level of flexibility in its actions. However, this flexibility does not necessarily mean substituting an ideological attitude with a specific non-ideological strategy. Instead, a variety of positions and policy options appeared concerning the South Caucasus that were not always a convenient fit with each other.

This situation stems from the tension in Iran's foreign policy at its most fundamental level. It is captured by looking into the social logics of sovereign states and resistance communities. These two logics represent the groups of sedimented practices in the Iranian discursive space that provide the conditions for foreign policy to happen. They have

potential incompatibilities. While Iran challenges the international order as an unjust hierarchical system, it also tries to act as a compliant actor of that system that reproduces its key norms and procedures. In addition, Iran's Self is often defined as a nation-state with conventional interests; however, its agency is also tied to having duties beyond borders.

In general, the two social logics represent the fragmented and contested nature of Iran's foreign policy, making it possible to have different articulations of identities, interests, and corresponding policy options. This foundational decentredness is concealed by the political logic of equivalence, which provides a sense of holistic Self through a process of othering. In particular, this logic brings different components of Iran's identity together by positioning them in opposition to an antagonistic Other. An overarching us vs. them context emerges that simplifies the discursive space, where fighting the Other becomes the main foreign policy option.

While this process is crucial for validating Iran's Self, it can have a destabilizing effect if stretched too far. Seeing every foreign policy issue through the prism of fighting the enemy can distort the social logics and, as a result, dislocate the identity of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, equivalential narratives are often challenged by the logic of difference, which complexifies the discursive space by introducing articulations beyond us vs. them binaries. It creates room for variations, exceptions from the rule, and different types of Otherness. However, this logic cannot be overstretched either, as it will create amalgamations of specificities, leading to further fragmentation of identity. Hence, Iran's foreign policy is performed in the context of a struggle between these two political logics, where one can be relatively dominant in a certain case but never manages to fully overtake the other.

These processes show that Iran's behaviour in a particular situation is not a priori given. There is an element of uncertainty, which Rafsanjani's, Khatami's, and Ahmadinejad's governments tried to tackle in different ways. With an attempt to depart from Iran's highly

antagonistic behaviour in the early revolutionary years, Rafsanjani's administration tried to show that it was possible to be a compliant actor in international affairs and at the same time pursue the causes of the Revolution. The concepts of *maslahat-e nezām* and *Umm Al-Qura* are illustrative of these attempts. In his turn, Khatami tried to reconcile the contradictory features of Iran's foreign policy with the help of the Dialogue among Civilizations. Ahmadinejad's administration presented the mission of justice-seeking as the overarching goal of the Islamic Republic that provided a sense of holistic Self. It was an "idealist" pursuit with "realist" means. These articulations were meant to construct a coherent agency. They also had a recognitive dimension, where Iran tried to perform its aspirant Self through a set of practices.

However, this study shows that neither of the approaches managed to provide a clear vision that could be applied in different regions, and the fragmented nature of Iran's foreign policy was extrapolated in the South Caucasus. This is a key feature of the way identities and interests were articulated in relation to this region. The three empirical chapters illustrate how there were varying discursive practices that were not always compatible with one another. Put together, they present a complicated image of Iran's behaviour in the South Caucasus.

The chapter on Rafsanjani's presidency demonstrates how the first attempts at engaging with the South Caucasus already had contrasting components. The Self of the Islamic Republic was articulated in the context of religious, cultural, and socio-economic affinities with the newly emerged region, where these features were presented as preconditions for subscribing to the Iranian resistance against the existing hierarchical international order. The Islamic Republic was seen as the locus of a new regional identity, where its vision of multipolarity and independence from "arrogant powers" (i.e., the antagonistic Others) would be implemented. Certain policies concerning the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)

and the Caspian Sea were meant to serve that purpose. In addition to these regional initiatives, expectations of political integration were present in relations with Azerbaijan as well, where religious and cultural commonalities were meant to create deep ties between the two states and have the newly independent republic share Iran's orientation in foreign affairs.

This aspirant Self was constituted in the framework of the logic of resistance communities and performed through a set of recognitive practices. Rafsanjani's administration tried to demonstrate that Iran had a pivotal role in shaping the fate of the region based on the core principles of its struggle against "global arrogance." Such a self-identification also elevated Iran's sense of obligation towards the oppressed in the context of regional affairs. Specifically, as the vanguard of the values of the 1979 Revolution, the agency of the Islamic Republic was linked to standing by Azerbaijan, a Shia Muslim country, in times of need.

However, these articulations of Iran's identity, as well as corresponding interests and policies, were reminiscent of a revisionist and interventionist behaviour, which Rafsanjani's administration tried to avoid in times when Iran was seeking stability and economic reconstruction. Therefore, the above-mentioned discourses were accompanied by others, where Iran's agency was constructed as that of a compliant actor that was prepared to put aside ideological proclivities for economic partnerships in the newly emerged regional space. Here, threats and opportunities were defined in the context of conventional interests, such as securing the borders of the Iranian state, seeking involvement in commercial projects, and avoiding liabilities. Having cautious behaviour was a key feature of these narratives, where Rafsanjani's administration tried to abstain from embarking on costly missions driven by resistance causes.

As a result, Iran's engagement in the developments in the South Caucasus had another side. It becomes visible when looking into the policies concerning regional initiatives. Alongside

putting efforts into ECO as an inward-looking regional structure with resistance motifs, Rafsanjani's administration often toned down such narratives and claimed that the organization primarily served economic objectives. In the case of the Caspian Sea, the Iranian side criticized initiatives involving extra-regional actors, such as western companies, and, at the same time, showed a willingness to be part of those projects. The same oscillation can be observed in the case of relations with Azerbaijan. The war in Nagorno-Karabagh shows that Iran tried to avoid additional liabilities while claiming to fight for the rights of Shia Muslims. After a failed mediation attempt, Rafsanjani's government was in an uneasy situation – maintaining neutrality and simultaneously trying to act in support of a neighbouring Shia country.

This contrariety in Iran's behaviour did not change when Khatami came to power. His Dialogue among Civilizations approach did not offer a new policy framework that could be used in the South Caucasus. The Iranian side continued speaking with two voices. The same oscillations can be seen in the case of regional initiatives. Here, limiting the influence of Iran's antagonistic Others still had primacy, while the Islamic Republic simultaneously tried to show a conciliatory attitude for the sake of being involved in regional initiatives. This situation can be observed when looking into Iran's position concerning the Caspian Sea and the pipeline projects in the region. On the one hand, there were attempts at axis-building with Russia against the policies of Iran's adversaries. In the case of the Caspian Sea, the Iranian side had an exclusionary attitude that was against the presence of any extra-regional actors. On the other hand, Khatami's government advocated for becoming part of regional pipeline projects as an intermediary state where the very actors it criticized were actively involved.

The same situation can be observed in security-related developments. The Islamic Republic was critical of any institutional framework of conflict resolution that included extra-regional

players. Khatami's administration offered the alternative of the 3+3 formula (the three states in the South Caucasus with Russia, Turkey, and Iran) as a means for dealing with such issues in the region. In this regard, the Iranian government often expressed its dissatisfaction with the OSCE Minsk Group, which had been the main settlement framework of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. At the same time, the official Tehran showed preparedness to become part of that mediation initiative and took measures in that direction.

There was another issue concerning the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict: the dilemma of showing support to the struggle of Shia Azerbaijanis and maintaining neutrality persisted during Khatami's terms. It was in this period that the Islamic Republic assumed the presidency at the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and tried to use that position to validate its aspirant identity as the flagbearer of Islamic resistance against oppression. Having such a position presupposed showing support to Azerbaijan – an expectation often raised by the official Baku. However, the Iranian side was hesitant to change its position of neutrality at the expense of other state interests. Khatami's administration tried to do both and, as a result, did not manage to construct a particular approach other than expressing generic statements that could be interpreted in different ways. Paradoxically, the Iranian government was trying to have a larger footprint in the settlement process of a conflict towards which it was struggling to adopt a specific position.

This behaviour went through certain changes when Ahmadinejad came to power. The observed oscillations were less prevalent during his presidency due to an overall confrontational turn in Iranian foreign affairs. The overarching discourse of justice-seeking increased the presence of the antagonistic Other in multiple foreign policy articulations, including those concerning the South Caucasus. In the case of regional initiatives, excluding outsiders and seeking partnership in this endeavour became the main feature of Iran's

policies. The discourses on being a cooperative actor and showing a willingness to be part of commercial projects where Iran's adversaries were involved became marginal.

Iran's attitude towards regional conflicts took a different form as well. It was predominantly rearticulated in the framework of limiting the influence of the antagonistic Others. For instance, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war was uprooted from its regional context and presented in the broader narrative of fighting against "global arrogance." This theme became stronger in the case of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict as well. Here, Iran's main concern was that the dispute could be used by its adversaries for increasing their influence in its northern neighbourhood. For instance, Azerbaijan's deepening relations with Israel were articulated in this context. In this situation, the dilemma of showing support to Azerbaijan and remaining neutral was overshadowed by the narrative of defusing the possible threats posed by Iran's antagonistic Others. Here, it was Baku that was accused of abandoning the principles of Islamic resistance by cooperating with "arrogant powers."

In general, the drastic shift from Khatami's Dialogue among Civilizations to a more confrontational attitude pushed the narratives of a compliant actor that was willing to be part of different initiatives to the margins of Iranian discourses. While this change led to excluding some policy options, it did not contribute to developing the remaining ones. The South Caucasus was not a primary site for the justice-seeking struggle of the Islamic Republic, and the fight against the antagonistic Others mainly took the shape of expressing discontent towards their policies in the region. The Iranian side tried finding allies in this regard but did not go further after not registering any tangible success. In a period of a populist turn in Iran's behaviour, the South Caucasus did not receive significant attention from Ahmadinejad's administration due to the absence of a symbolic significance. In turn, this attitude validated the limitations of Iran's influence in the region, despite the latter's self-identification as a key actor.

In all, the complicatedness in Iran's foreign policy had two sides. On the one hand, the multiplicity of articulations of identities, interests, and credible policies helped Iran avoid rigidity in its behaviour. In particular, the study shows that it provided certain flexibility, which was useful for defusing threats, as well as crisis aversion and management. Besides, there was room for experimentation that allowed the Iranian side to test different options of engagement with the South Caucasus. As is demonstrated in the chapter on Ahmadinejad's presidency, the absence of such a variety shrinks Iran's opportunities in this regard.

On the other hand, the complicatedness was a hindrance to designing a clear strategy for the newly emerged region. Alternating between varying narratives created inconsistency and hesitance. While such a situation was helpful for avoiding problems and escalations, it made Iran's efforts at proactive engagement more challenging. While the Islamic Republic tried to have a central presence in the South Caucasus, it was often unsure what shape that presence was supposed to take. As a result, there were high and yet underdefined expectations from Iran's side that were not met, leading to constant dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in Iran's relations with the South Caucasus.

These dynamics show the contested nature of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus and the absence of a comprehensive strategy of engagement with the region. The one area where the Islamic Republic managed to have relative clarity and consistency was the state of bilateral relations, especially ties with Armenia and Georgia. Here, a set of discursive practices became routine through repetition and provided stability. The study shows how it is such repetitions that give a sense of foundation in the absence of fixed ideational structures. These practices were recognitive, as they continuously validated the nature of friendly relations between Iran and the States in the South Caucasus. While the Islamic Republic often failed to make substantial progress in these ties, it did manage to avoid major deteriorations despite there being multiple challenges.

By providing such observations, this study shows how Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus escapes parsimonious explanation, and a comprehensive understanding of it requires an appreciation of its complexity and contextual nature. Having a non-foundationalist conceptual perspective, it demonstrates how there are fluctuations but also tentative stability in the ways Iran's identities, interests, and policies take shape in this regional context. Various discursive and recogntive practices are at play here, and illustrating them helps to see the nuances of Iran's behaviour concerning the South Caucasus.

The research also serves as an example of moving beyond the ideology vs. pragmatism dichotomy in the academic and policy literature on Iranian foreign affairs. In this way, it tries to show how an alternative to such categorizations can help to see how the Islamic Republic can be both contradictory and persistent in its behaviour. Further research on these matters can help to unravel new aspects of Iran's foreign policy and make more generalizable claims beyond the limited scope of this study.

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