

The Axis of the Iranian Islamist Regime and Armenian Nationalism

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This article presents the origins of and the recent developments in the alliance between Iran, on one side, and Armenian diaspora nationalists and the government of Armenia on the other. The use of Armenian nationalism by Iran started with the first Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, but the Islamic Republic of Iran developed and intensified those ties. Building on the success of Azerbaijan in the April conflict of 2016, the liberation of its previously occupied territories in 2020, the full reconstitution of the Türkiye–Azerbaijan–Israel triangle, and the weakening of Russia since 2022, this article explains the reinforcement of the ties between the partners and the unprecedented rise of Iranian aggressiveness against Azerbaijan.

Key words: Armenia, Iran, nationalism, South Caucasus, Armenian Diaspora



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Historical background

The paradox has never been so acute: Armenian nationalists, who have persistently presented themselves as the purest incarnation of Christianity, and even inspired anti-Muslim terrorist Anders Breivik,¹ are also the staunchest allies of the Islamist regime ruling Iran since 1979. This true for the current Armenian government and even more for the nationalist organization of the Armenian diaspora. Nevertheless, this is a paradox in appearance only. The alliance makes sense when considering what Armenian nationalism is primarily about.

The Armenian presence in Iran is as old as the Armenian (Gregorian) church,² and this community is one of the sources of 19th century immigration to today's Armenia.³ The implantation of Armenian nationalism in Iran precedes the First World War, when this country was used by Armenian nationalists as a bulwark against the Ottoman Empire.⁴ However, the situation became much more problematic in 1917–1918, when British and French military attachés tried to create a “Christian Front” (of Armenians and Assyrians, from north-eastern Anatolia to north-western Iran) in order to prevent the Ottoman and German armies from reaching Baku and its oil fields. In February–March 1918, the Armenian and Assyrian volunteers of fighting units in Urmia (north-western Iran) escaped the control of the French officers sent to command them, and even threatened those officers when they protected 2,000 local Muslims (Azerbaijanis, Kurds, and Persians) who fled the violence of the Christian nationalists.⁵ Those who could not take refuge on time often suffered this:

1 Breivik, A., “2083: A Declaration of European Independence”, Oslo, 2011; Lragir, *The Criminal on Armenian Television*, July 27, 2011, available at: <https://www.lragir.am/2011/07/27/22755/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

2 Nahapetian, N., “République islamique et communautarisme: Les Arméniens d'Iran”, *CEMOTI*, No. 24, 1997, p. 294.

3 Karabakh.org, *Massive resettlement of the Armenians to Karabakh and other regions of North Azerbaijan*, available at <https://karabakh.org/karabakh-history/karabakh-during-the-xix-cc/massive-resettlement-of-the-armenians-to-karabakh-and-other-regions-of-north-azerbaijan/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

4 Berberian, H., “The Dashnaksutiun and the Iranian constitutional revolution, 1905–1911,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1/2, Winter/Spring 1996, pp. 7–33; McCarthy, J., Arslan, E., Taşkıran, C. et al., *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006), pp. 41, 43, 49, 55, 188 and 216.

5 Caujole, P. *Les Tribulations d'une ambulance française en Perse* (Paris: Les Gêmeaux, 1922), pp. 73–94 (quotation p. 83).

Girls disembowelled, the intestines unwound on the snow, still alive and holding their entrails in their hands. A child, his eye drawn from the orbit, screaming his pain and handing me his bloody stump for me to pull it out of the smoky rubble where his executioners had thrown it. Shattered skulls, brains whose spit has sprayed on the walls!

The total losses of the bloody events between Muslims on one side, and Armenians and Assyrians on the other, were about 4,000 persons, including some 100 Armenian and Assyrian fighters killed with weapons in hand, the others being Muslims, often unarmed civilians.⁶ These war criminals were totally unable to block the Ottoman advance to Baku through Urmia and abandoned this city in mid-1918. In July of the same year, indiscriminate and bloody reprisals took place in Urmia against the Christian population, perpetrated by Muslims in general, and especially by ethnic Persians. Yet the Armenian nationalists never developed, as a result of this violence, any anti-Persian racism, unlike that which has been developed against the Turks as a result of the mutual massacres of 1915–16. A similar double standard was implemented to the benefit of the Kurds (overrepresented among the perpetrators of bloody reprisals in Anatolia at that time) by the same Armenian nationalists.

The main explanation for this double standard can be found in the foundation of the project of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (the ruling party in Armenia from 1918 to 1920, established in Tbilisi, Georgia, as a transnational network in 1890) at the end of 1920s: this was an “Aryan confederation” (Armenia, “Kurdistan”, and Iran), led by Tehran, against the Republic of Türkiye and the USSR, preferably with the support of fascist Italy.⁷ The cooperation of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) with Iran’s Pahlavi regime continued and was not diminished by the rapprochement of official Tehran with the Nazi regime of Germany after 1935. The ARF was seriously weakened by the arrests of its members by the British and the Soviets from 1941 to 1944 during the joint invasion of Iran.⁸ In Iran, as in other countries (Greece, for example), the ARF was saved by the Cold War.

6 Zavie, E., *D’Archangel au Golfe persique. Aventures de cinquante français en Perse*, (Paris: La Cité des livres, 1927), p. 270, n. 1 (also see pp. 173, 248-250, 258–260 and 266).

7 Gorgas, J. T., *Le Mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925–1946)*, (Berne: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 121 and 225–228.

8 Abrahamian, E., *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 388.

The racist (Aryanist⁹) ideology of the ARF has remained intact until today, as proved by the recurrent tributes paid by this party to its leaders who collaborated with the Nazis (recruitment of volunteers, spying, and sabotage), on an ideological (racist) basis, from 1933 to 1945.¹⁰

During the first years of the Islamist regime, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini initially favoured the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), a terrorist organization created in Lebanon in 1971 by dissident Armenian nationalists in opposition to the traditional nationalist parties, over the ARF, because the ARF was closely associated with the Shahs, having been accepted as the main representative of the Armenian community and having seats in the parliament. However, by 1983, the mullahs' repression of the ARF, which had started in 1979, changed its aims. It was no more about taking revenge against former supporters of the Shah, but about forcing this Armenian party to work – at least politically – for the Islamist regime.¹¹ The reconciliation became official in 1989, when the commemorations of 24 April took place in Tehran beneath pictures of Khomeiny. The tensions between Tehran and Ankara (concerning the issue of secularism and of the veil at the university) surely had something to do with this reconciliation,¹² but the

9 Because the Armenian nationalists believe they belong to the “Aryan race” and consider the Persians as “Aryans”, they forgive what they never forgave when Turks behaved in the same way.

10 Berberian, H., “From Nationalist-Socialist to National Socialist? The Shifting Politics of Abraham Giulkhandanian,” in Der Matossian, B. (ed.), *The First Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) on Its Centenary: Politics, Gender, and Diplomacy* (Fresno: California State University, 2020), pp. 53–88; Derounian, A., “John T. Flynn and the Dashnags”, *The Propaganda Battlefield*, 31 May 1944, available at: <http://jfk.hood.edu/Collection/Weisberg%20Subject%20Index%20Files/F%20Disk/Friends%20Of%20Democracy/Item%2006.pdf>; Jaffe-Hoffman, M., “At Auschwitz liberation tribute, Israel should study tale of two monuments”, *The Jerusalem Post*, January 21, 2020, available at: <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/at-auschwitz-liberation-tribute-israel-should-study-tale-of-two-monuments-614769>; Sonentz-Papazian, T. “Sonentz: In Memory of General Dro,” *The Armenian Weekly*, November 16, 2017, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2017/11/16/sonentz-general-dro/>; The Armenian Weekly, *Garegin Nzhdeh's Statue to Be Erected in Bulgaria*, January 26, 2018, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2018/01/26/garegin-nzhdeh-statue-erected-bulgaria/> (all the links accessed: June 23, 2023)

11 Toranian, J-M “Ara”, “L’ayatollah Khomeiny reçoit Hay Baykar”, *Hay Baykar*, February–March 1979, p. 7; Minassian, G., *Guerre et terrorisme arméniens* (Paris: PUF, 2002), p. 80.

12 Le Monde, *Le massacre des Arméniens en 1915 a été commémoré à Erevan et... à Téhéran*, April 26, 1989, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1989/04/26/le-massacre-des-armeniens-en-1915-a-ete-commemore-a-erevan-et-a-teheran_4104977_1819218.html (accessed: June 23, 2023)

Caucasian context, too, is one of the elements necessary to understand it. The ethnic cleansing of the Azerbaijanis from Soviet Armenia, begun in 1987, was almost completed (more than 200,000 persons expelled to Azerbaijan, and probably 217 killed in order to scare the others), making Armenia an almost mono-ethnic country.¹³ Meanwhile, the repression in Georgia, in January 1989, showed how contested Soviet domination was in the region and, as a result, indicated the possibility of independence for the Caucasus' three countries. Until today, the ARF is the only Armenian party allowed and registered in Iran.¹⁴

During the First Karabakh War (1988–1994), Iran officially acted as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but was in practice on the side of Armenia, including providing military assistance.¹⁵ The secular model of Azerbaijan is indeed in absolute contradiction to the Islamist regime of Iran imposed by the mullahs. Correspondingly, Baku developed its alliance with Ankara (another secular power with a Sunni majority) as early as 1992, and started developing its relations with Israel in the same year, the Israeli embassy in Baku having been opened in 1993.¹⁶ All the attempts of Iran to use the disorganization of Azerbaijan in the early 1990s to promote Islamism in this country failed.¹⁷ Until today, the Islamist regime has allowed Armenian schools in Iran, but never allowed any school in the Azerbaijani language.

13 Gauin, M., “The Home they Lost: Refugees from Armenia to Azerbaijan”, Analytical Policy Brief, *Institute for Development and Diplomacy of ADA University*, March 10, 2023, available at: https://idd.az/media/2023/03/13/idd_policy_brief_-_gauin_-_10_march.pdf (accessed: June 23, 2023)

14 *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, “Dašnak”, available at: <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/dasnak> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

15 Priego, A., “Armenia-Iran relations and their implications for Nagorno-Karabakh” *Comentarios UNISCI*, No. 1, June 19, 2007, available at: <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-72542/1comentario.pdf> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

16 Murinson, A., *Turkey's Entente with Israel and Azerbaijan. State Identity and Security in the Middle East and Caucasus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010)

17 Le Monde, *L'Azerbaïdjan dans la tourmente — Les revers essuyés au Karabakh exposent Bakou à toutes les aventures*, March 18, 1992, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1992/03/18/l-azerbaïdjan-dans-la-tourmente-les-revers-essuyés-au-karabakh-exposent-bakou-a-toutes-les-aventures_3878482_1819218.html; Le Monde, *L'Iran est écarté de l'exploitation pétrolière en Azerbaïdjan au profit de la société turque TPAO et de la firme américaine Exxon*, April 14, 1995, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1995/04/14/l-iran-est-ecarte-de-l-exploitation-petroliere-en-azerbaïdjan-au-profit-de-la-societe-turque-tpao-et-de-la-firme-americaine-exxon_3867493_1819218.html (all the links accessed: June 23, 2023); Murinson, A., “Le poids de l'histoire — Comment l'Iran pénètre en Azerbaïdjan”, *Outre-terre*, No. 28, 2011, pp. 474–478.

The alliance of Iran and Armenia solidified during the following years. One of the most striking examples was the delivery of weapons by Armenia to Iran in 2007, a part of these weapons being transferred by the Islamist regime to a Shia militia in Iraq for a deadly attack against the U.S. Army. The State Department only expressed “deep concern” and applied no sanction on Yerevan,¹⁸ due to the actions of the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA, controlled by the ARF) and of the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA, controlled by Ramkavar, another Armenian nationalist party).

Barely less relevant for the Armenia–Iran alliance is the joint statement of the Armenian and Iranian governments, in December 2011, on the “right of the nations to a peaceful use of nuclear power”, followed by an agreement for building a gas pipeline connecting the two countries.¹⁹ The alliance was also consolidated in the diaspora, particularly in Lebanon. Indeed, by 1996, the ARF of Lebanon started bringing itself closer to the Tehran-controlled Hezbollah. The ARF as whole (not merely the Lebanese branch) officially stated in 1996: “*Pan-Turkism and racist Zionism are two sides of the same coin, namely of imperialism.*”²⁰ Since 2005, the ARF and Hezbollah have been part of the same electoral bloc for the Lebanese legislative elections.²¹

Correspondingly, since 2011, the ARF and the Iranian regime have been on the same side during the Syrian civil war, that is, on the side of Bashar el-Assad.²² As a result, there is no exaggeration in the official statement made by the ARF in 2021 that the party “has always worked to strengthen Armenia–Iran relations” and “welcome[s] the military–political will of Iran’s leadership” against Azerbaijan and Türkiye.²³

18 Lake, E., “WikiLeaks: Armenia sent Iran arms used to kill U.S. troops”, *The Washington Times*, November 29, 2010, available at: <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/nov/29/wikileaks-armenia-sent-iran-arms-used-to-kill-us-t/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

19 Slate.fr, *L’Arménie joue la carte iranienne*, January 27, 2012, available at: <https://www.slate.fr/lien/49215/armenie-iran-gazoduc> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

20 Minassian, G., *Guerre et terrorisme...*, *op.cit.*, p. 251.

21 Hourany, D. “Ethnic versus secular”, *Now Lebanon*, May 13, 2022, available at: <https://nowlebanon.com/ethnic-versus-secular/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

22 TV5 Monde, *Qui soutient encore Bachar al-Assad?*, June 1, 2014, available at: <https://information.tv5monde.com/international/qui-soutient-encore-bachar-al-assad-1453> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

23 The Armenian Weekly, *ARF Bureau addresses regional developments with Iran*, October 6, 2021, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/10/06/arf-bureau-addresses-regional-developments-with-iran/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

This reference to the current “military–political” actions of Iran lead to the changes made by the Azerbaijani victories of 2016 and 2020.

The reinforcement of the Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Israel triangle after the 2016 and 2020 wars

The reinforcement of the alliance between Tehran and the Armenian nationalists does not date back to 2020, but to 2016, when a four-day war erupted between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan along the former line of contact, precisely in Azerbaijan’s formerly occupied territories. Indeed, the victory of Azerbaijan during the “Four Days War” of April 2016 broke the myth of the invincibility of the Armenian Army and increased the self-confidence of Azerbaijan’s army. It was also proof of the efficiency of Israeli-manufactured drones and confirmed the importance of the turn in Azerbaijan’s weapons’ imports made in 2015. Since this time, the largest part of the military material imported by Azerbaijan (roughly the two thirds) has come from Israel, and no longer from Russia.²⁴

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A few months later, in December 2016, then President of Iran Hassan Rouhani went to Armenia to sign at least two agreements, one to increase the delivery of gas and one on the “joint use” of the border between the two countries.²⁵ Before this visit, in September, the Islamist regime invited to Iran no fewer than 16 “Armenian journalists” from Armenia, the separatist entity established by Armenia in Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region, the Czech Republic, France, Lebanon, Syria, and the United States. Among the American Armenian “journalists” was Harout Sassounian, columnist for the ARF organ *The Armenian Weekly*, editor of *The California Courier* and President of the All-Armenian Fund. Mr Sassounian dared to write: “As this was my first visit to Iran, I quickly discovered that the country was a lot different than

24 Smith, J., Wezeman, P. D. and Kuimova, A., “Arms transfers to conflict zones: The case of Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Sirpi.org*, April 30, 2021, available at: <https://www.sirpi.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

25 The Armenian Weekly, *Iranian, Armenian Leaders Look to Strengthen Ties*, December 21, 2016, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2016/12/21/iranian-armenian-leaders-look-to-strengthen-ties/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

what I had heard and read about in the United States. It is an important country with an ancient civilization that is often misunderstood by outsiders."²⁶ The fact that this "ancient civilization" cuts off the hands of thieves²⁷ and stones women for adultery does not seem to trouble him in any degree. But such open support by an American citizen residing in the US for an Islamist regime he did not support (at least not publicly) before 2016 needs some words of explanation.

While changes in Iran–Armenia Relations were significant, even bigger changes came during the and after Azerbaijan's victory of 2020. During the months preceding the war and during the war itself, all the weapons and ammunitions from Russia passed through Iran (via flights over the Caspian Sea) to Armenia, as Georgia refused any transit through its territory for warring countries. From Iran's point of view, the victory of Azerbaijani was a disaster, as the previously occupied territories of the latter had been used to bypass Western sanctions against the Islamic regime, acting as a gateway for exports and imports.²⁸ For the Armenian nationalists, it was also a financial loss (the clearest example being the Swiss-Armenian company Franck Müller, involved in the illegal exploitation of gold mines in Karabakh region until 2020),²⁹ but was also the materialization of a political nightmare.³⁰ It was the cancelation of Armenia's only territorial conquest since the attribution of the Zangezur region (now known as the "Syunik" region of Armenia) to Soviet Armenia by the USSR government in 1921 (after the ethnic cleansing of the Azerbaijanis living in the region by ARF official Garegin Nzhdeh

26 Sassounian, H., "Sassounian: A Unique, Eye-Opening Visit to Iran," *The Armenian Weekly*, September 20, 2016, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2016/09/20/sassounian-a-unique-eye-opening-visit-to-iran/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

27 France24, *L'Iran dévoile une machine pour amputer les voleurs*, January 25, 2013, available at: <https://observers.france24.com/fr/20130125-iran-devoile-machine-amputer-voleurs-chiraz-charia-doigt> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

28 Gafarli, T., "Unscrupulous profiteers of Armenia's Nagorno Karabakh occupation", *Anadolu Ajansi*, November 12, 2020, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-unscrupulous-profiteers-of-armenia-s-nagorno-karabakh-occupation-/2041427> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

29 Azernews, "Franck Muller founder engaged in illegal gold exploration in occupied territories of Azerbaijan – top official", October 31, 2020, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/171828.html>; Karimli, I., "Azerbaijan Reveals Names of Foreign Mining Companies Illegally Operating in Karabakh Region", *Caspian News*, January 18, 2023, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-reveals-names-of-foreign-mining-companies-illegally-operating-in-karabakh-region-2023-1-18-0/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

30 *France-Arménie*, January 2021, pp. 8–23.

and his men during the short-lived Armenian “Mountain Republic” of Zangezur, which escaped Soviet control from January to July 1921).

The hostility of the ANCA to the US sanctions against Iran existed before 2020, in accordance with the alliance of its holding group (the ARF) with Tehran, but the tone clearly became harsher after the victory of Azerbaijan in Second Karabakh War (2020). Indeed, in 2018, one of the ANCA’s programme directors, Alex Galitsky, tweeted:

*Sanctions provided a scapegoat for failing economy, pushed #Iran towards #Russia and #China & reduced reputational costs of regional intervention. The international sanctions regime did not just fail to curb Iran’s hegemonic ambitions – it accelerated them.*³¹

In 2021, he wrote, also on Twitter: “‘Maximum pressure’ on Iran has seen the US empower warmongering dictatorships from Saudi Arabia & its war on Yemen to Turkey & Azerbaijan amidst their assault on Armenia, one of the region’s only democracies. This failed strategy has done nothing but deepen regional instability.”³²

The ANCA itself went so far in 2022 as to tweet: “*The @ANCA_DC thanks our sisters and brothers at the National Iranian American Council [NIAC] - for their solidarity. Persians & Armenians: Ancient civilizations w/ shared history, common values.*”³³ The NIAC is the lobby group established in 2002 in the United States to support the Iranian Islamist regime.³⁴

Meanwhile, the Turkish and Israeli governments have found the way for a full reconciliation, largely through Azerbaijani mediation.³⁵ This has

31 Galitsky, A., “Sanctions provided a scapegoat for failing economy, pushed #Iran towards #Russia and #China& reduced reputational costs of regional intervention...”, Twitter, March 19, 2018, 7:38 pm, available at: <https://twitter.com/algalsky/status/975879233187733504> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

32 Galitsky, A., “‘Maximum pressure’ on Iran has seen the US empower warmongering dictatorships from Saudi Arabia & its war on Yemen to Turkey...”, Twitter, November 29, 2021, 8:50 pm, available at: <https://twitter.com/algalsky/status/1465498423189143560> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

33 ANCA, “The @ANCA_DC thanks our sisters and brothers at the National Iranian American Council - for their solidarity...” Twitter, September 13, 2022, 3:11 pm, https://twitter.com/ANCA_DC/status/1569765672170790922 (accessed: May 31, 2023)

34 Lake, E., “Exclusive: Iran advocacy group said to skirt lobby rules”, *The Washington Times*, November 13, 2009, available at: <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/nov/13/exclusive-did-iranian-advocacy-group-violate-laws/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

35 The speech of President Ilham Aliyev at the “International conference “South Caucasus: Development and Cooperation”, CBC TV Azerbaijan, YouTube video, April 29, 2022, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNTCQw2qadE> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

resulted into the complete reconstitution of the Türkiye–Azerbaijan–Israel triangle, but with a much stronger Azerbaijani component than was the case around 2005, that is, during the previous high point of this trilateral alliance. Such a scenario is perceived as catastrophic by both the Iranian Islamist regime and the Armenian nationalists. This triangle reinforces Azerbaijan, which is the ideological antithesis of the Islamic Republic of Iran. For instance, in 2013, a survey by the Pew Research showed that only 8% of interviewed Azerbaijanis want sharia to be the state law, the lowest share of share of all the studied countries. The second lowest share is that of Türkiye, at 12%.³⁶ In both cases, the share is probably even lower today.

The current situation

The Armenian nationalists are now mostly concerned with the failure of Armenian forces to concentrate heavy weapons near the internationally recognized border (as seen in the clashes of September 2022, when the Azerbaijani side again won)³⁷ and with Azerbaijani actions concerning the Lachin road. Indeed, these actions prevent the supply of weapons and ammunition to the separatist forces in the area where Russian “peacekeepers” are temporarily deployed. Yet, all the demands by the Armenian nationalists and their Western friends for “sanctions” against Azerbaijan, as a result of its control of the Lachin road, have failed. On the contrary, the West consolidated its partnership with Azerbaijan in 2022 by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on doubling gas supply from Azerbaijan for both EU and non-EU states, and this MoU was followed by an agreement on electricity supply to Europe.³⁸ The unhidden desire of the Armenian nationalists, that is, the “overthrow” of Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan,³⁹ has

36 Pew Research Center, *The world’s muslims: Religion, politics and society: Chapter 1: Beliefs about Sharia*, April 30, 2013, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-beliefs-about-sharia/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

37 Oryx, *War Once More: Documenting Equipment Losses During The September 2022 Armenia-Azerbaijan Border War*, September 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/09/war-once-more-documenting-equipment.html> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

38 Von der Leyen, U., “The two shores of the Black Sea have never been closer...”, Twitter, December 17, 2022, 3:17 am, available at: <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1604028008183889920> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

39 Mardikian, V., “Négociations arméno-azéries: ça coince”, *France-Arménie*, June 2022, p. 13.

also not been fulfilled, but nor has a peace treaty has been signed with Azerbaijan for the moment.

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the main domestic problem is caused by the unprecedented public demonstrations against this regime that started in 2022. This is even more concerning for the mullahs as Iran has a strong minority ethnic component, not only ethnic Azerbaijanis but also the Baluchis (Pakistan-oriented). These have been overrepresented among demonstrators and the victims of repression.⁴⁰ Such events only increase the fear of the mullahs for the very existence of their government. Faced with these demonstrations, the regime is increasingly militarist and, according to some observers, close to becoming a racist one.⁴¹

The war in Ukraine is a source of both hopes and concerns for the two partners. The Islamist regime of Iran is one of the few countries providing weapons (drones, short-range missiles and tanks) to Russia, expects fighter jets in exchange, and seems to have already received cyber weapons.⁴² Although the arrival of the Biden administration in 2021 had been seen with relief in Tehran, official Washington has now again increased the level of sanctions as a response to the deepening Iranian–Russian alliance amid the war in Ukraine.⁴³ The EU is taking similar measures, sanctioning Iranian companies for their contributions to the Russian war effort.⁴⁴

Armenia is largely integrated into the Russia–Iran military alliance, as proved by Armenia’s participation in the drone competition in

40 Shaffer, B., “How Iran’s Ethnic Divisions Are Fueling the Revolt”, *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/19/iran-protests-persians-minorities-ethnic-language-discrimination-regime-separatism/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

41 Le Monde, *En Iran, le pouvoir des gardiens de la révolution transforme progressivement le pays en une dictature militaire*, October 27, 2022, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/10/27/en-iran-le-pouvoir-des-gardiens-de-la-revolution-transforme-progressivement-le-pays-en-une-dictature-militaire_6147558_3210.html (accessed: May 31, 2023)

42 Lieber, D. and Faucon, B., “Moscow Supplies Iran With Advanced Cyber Weapons,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2023, p. A6

43 Macias, A., “U.S. slaps Iran with another round of sanctions over drones used in Russia’s war on Ukraine,” *CNBC.com*, January 6, 2023, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/06/us-sanctions-iran-over-drones-used-in-russias-war-on-ukraine.html> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

44 Kijewski, L., “EU set to sanction Iranian companies over Russia’s war in Ukraine,” *Politico EU*, February 15, 2023, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-set-to-sanction-iranian-companies-over-russias-war-in-ukraine/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

In the context of the reinforcement of Azerbaijan, as well as the weakening of Armenia and Russia, the authorities in Iran have chosen an aggressive posture.

August 2022 in Iran.⁴⁵ Certainly, hopes for Russian intervention against Azerbaijan and Türkiye⁴⁶ have never materialized, and the atmosphere was particularly cold in September 2022, when Russia was unable to provide the military support requested by Yerevan, but this has in no way changed the fact that Armenia remains one of the main ways for Russia to bypass international sanctions, by importing and re-exporting to Russia targeted products such as microprocessors.⁴⁷ In fact, Armenian companies have been sanctioned by the US government for their support for the Russian war effort. For example, Tac LLC has been sanctioned for its participation in Russian imports of electronic materials.⁴⁸ Consequently, the Armenian nationalists who claim to be disappointed by the Kremlin are now advocating the reinforcement of the “partnership” with Iran as an alternative, from an explicitly anti-Western and anti-Israeli perspective.⁴⁹

In the context of the reinforcement of Azerbaijan, as well as the weakening of Armenia and Russia, the authorities in Iran have chosen an aggressive posture. Military exercises have been conducted along the state borders with Azerbaijan in 2021 and then in 2022, and others are scheduled to take place in 2023; yet nothing of this kind happened between 1991 and 2020, when Azerbaijan’s territories bordering Iran were under Armenian

45 Joffre, T., “Iran, Russia, Belarus and Armenia hold joint drone competition,” *The Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2022, available at: <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-714873> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

46 ANHA Hawar News Agency, “Harut Sassounian: an anti-Turkey coalition should be formed”, June 5, 2022, available at: <https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/harut-sassounian-an-anti-turkey-coalition-should-be-formed-h31138.html>; Amirzayan, K., “Pourquoi mourir pour l’Artsakh”, *Nouvelles d’Arménie Magazine*, August 6, 2022, available at: https://www.armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=94881; Abrahamian, M., “Arménie: le salut viendra de la Russie”, *Europe Orient*, May 25, 2022, available at: <https://europeorient.blogspot.com/2022/05/armenic-le-salut-viendra-de-la-russie.html> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

47 Marchenko, N., “Profiting from the war: Kremlin bypasses EU and US embargo via Armenia”, *The Sofia Globe*, March 27, 2023, available at: <https://sofiaglobe.com/2023/03/27/profitting-from-the-war-kremlin-bypasses-eu-and-us-embargo-via-armenia/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

48 U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Imposes Swift and Severe Costs on Russia for Putin’s Purported Annexation of Regions of Ukraine”, September 30, 2022, available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0981> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

49 Tilbian, S., “Quel avenir pour l’Arménie?”, *Nouvelles d’Arménie Magazine*, October 28, 2022, available at: https://armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=97543 (accessed: May 31, 2023)

occupation. More concrete was the arrest, in November 2022, of a spy network affiliated to Iran by the State Security Service of Azerbaijan.⁵⁰ Another subject of concern for Azerbaijan has been the illegal traffic of Iran's trucks to the former's Karabakh region. This started well before the war of 2020, but continued even afterwards.⁵¹

The crisis reached a new peak as a result of the murderous attack perpetrated on 27 January 2023 (Holocaust Remembrance Day) by an Iranian citizen at the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Tehran. The passivity of the police at the entrance of the embassy when the terrorist entered the building can only nurture the scepticism of Baku about the denial of responsibility by the government of Iran.⁵² After this attack, the diplomatic personnel of the Embassy were repatriated to Baku. In this context, Armenia, as a sign of solidarity with Iran, blocked the adoption of a declaration by the Organization for the Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) condemning this terrorist attack.⁵³

Even more concerning is a recent assassination attempt against Fazil Mustafa, a deputy of Azerbaijan's Parliament known for his vocal criticism of Iran, on 28 March 2023. The crime took place the day before the official opening ceremony of the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Tel Aviv, Israel,⁵⁴ and only some minutes after the shots, Reza Abbasi,

50 Karimli, I., "Azerbaijan Exposes Secret Spy Network Set Up by Iran's Special Services", *Caspian News*, November 15, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-exposes-secret-spy-network-set-up-by-irans-special-services-2022-11-14-0/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

51 Anadolu Ajansi, *Iranian trucks have illegally entered Karabakh during Armenian occupation: President Aliyev*, September 27, 2021, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/iranian-trucks-have-illegally-entered-karabakh-during-armenian-occupation-president-aliyev/2375984>; Bayramli, N., "Azerbaijan-Iran Relations at Its Lowest Level, Says President Aliyev", *Caspian News*, May 5, 2023, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-iran-relations-at-its-lowest-level-says-president-aliyev-2023-5-5-0/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

52 Faucon, B., "Gunman Kills One at Azerbaijani Embassy in Iran", *The Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2023, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/gunman-kills-one-at-azerbaijani-embassy-in-iran-11674833029>; Goble, P., "Attack on Azerbaijani Embassy in Iran Further Divides the World", *Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation*, January 31, 2023, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/attack-on-azerbaijani-embassy-in-iran-further-divides-the-world/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

53 AzerNews, *Armenia obstructs OSCE declaration condemning terrorist attack on Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran*, March 18, 2023, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/207671.html> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

54 Gov.il, "Azerbaijan to open embassy in Israel today", March 29, 2023, available at: <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/azerbaijan-to-open-embassy-in-israel-today-29-mar-2023> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

an Iranian journalist closely linked to his government, tweeted, “Good night, Baku.”⁵⁵ The State Security Service of Azerbaijan arrested suspects less than one week later; all are linked to Iran and all confessed both their participation and the fact that the order came from Tehran.⁵⁶

As a result, it appears that Iranian leaders are firmly committed to using terrorist groups against Azerbaijan. An obvious question is whether Armenian networks are likely to be used. If this happens, a reactivation of the ARF terrorist network is not impossible, considering the previous terrorist tradition of this party alongside the assault on Azerbaijanis by ARF members in 2020.⁵⁷ However, the VOMA and POGA paramilitary groups, supposedly banned by Armenia as a result of a decision of the International Court of Justice (7 December 2021), provide a more obvious tool for terrorist violence from an Iranian perspective.⁵⁸ In the diaspora, the organization most ready for an attack on Azerbaijan at the request of Iran is the Nubar-Ozanyan brigade, a paramilitary group operating in Syria. The group has publicly expressed its support for the Iranian-dominated Palestinian Islamic Jihad.⁵⁹ Nubar Ozanyan (killed in 2017) was a member of the far-left terrorist organization TĪKKO who fought in the Armenian army during the first Karabakh war (1992–

55 Azeri Times, “Minutes after #Iran critic Azerbaijani MP Fazil Mustafa was shot in front of his house in Baku, Iranian journalist with close ties to IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) tweeted: “Good Night #Baku””, Twitter, March 29, 2023, 10:13 am, available at: <https://twitter.com/AzeriTimes/status/1641081034493108227> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

56 Turan, *Iran’s involvement in attempted murder of MP Fazil Mustafa has been confirmed*, April 3, 2023, available at: https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2023/4/free/politics_news/en/3104.htm; The speech of President Ilham Aliyev at the International conference on “on “Shaping the Geopolitics of the Greater Eurasia: from Past to Present to Future” dedicated to the 100th anniversary of National Leader Heydar Aliyevin Shusha, May 4, 2023, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXmN6G11hbE> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

57 Mynews1a.com, *Police Investigate Hate Crimes at Armenian Demonstration in Brentwood*, July 23, 2020, available at: <https://mynews1a.com/crime/2020/07/23/police-investigate-hate-crimes-at-armenian-demonstration-in-brentwood/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

58 International Court of Justice, “Reports of Judgments, Advisory Opinions and Orders Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Azerbaijan v. Armenia), Request for the Indication of Provisional Measures”, Order of December 7, 2021, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/181/181-20211207-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

59 Armenia-Rojava, “Solidarity message with the Palestinian people and revolutionary forces resisting against Israel attacks on Gaza, from fighters of the Ş. Nubar Ozanyan Brigade.”, Twitter, August 6, 2022, 7:48 am, available at: <https://twitter.com/ArmeniaRojava/status/1555883403496628228> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

1994). Eventually, he moved to Syria to fight on the side of the Kurdish nationalist terrorists (PKK), also linked to Tehran.⁶⁰

No matter what the Islamist regime will decide in this regard, its general views on the South Caucasus are clear. In February 2022, a conference was organized by the Iranian Studies Department of the Oriental Studies faculty of the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, together with the Iranian Cultural Center of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran at Yerevan, and Yerevan State University. The account by the ARF organ *Armenian Weekly* is devoid of any ambiguity:

*Iranian scholars pointed out that the 2020 war [...] was not just a war against Armenia, but also Iran. They hinted that by establishing a 'Zangezur Corridor,' Turkey–Azerbaijan–Israel are trying to cut Iran's alternative routes to Europe and Russia. They stressed the importance of the North-South Corridor for both countries, the increase of trade turnover to more than \$1 billion and negotiations regarding the free economic zone in Meghri.*⁶¹

On a more official level, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran stated, at the opening ceremony of the Iranian consulate in Zangezur (city of Kapan) in October 2022, that “*Iran considers the security of Armenia and the region as its own security.*” Then, in February 2023, he stated, “as a fundamental policy we are against any geopolitical changes in the region.”⁶²

These concerns have rational and irrational aspects. It is perfectly rational, from the perspective of Tehran, to fear potential Turkish and Azerbaijani investments in Armenia in case of a peace treaty, because such investments would surely take place to secure a sustainable peace and would mitigate the Russian and Iranian domination of the

60 Gutman, R., “Have the Syrian Kurds Committed War Crimes?”, *The Nation*, February 7, 2017, available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/have-the-syrian-kurds-committed-war-crimes/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

61 Tashjian, Y., “Reflection on the ‘Armenia-Iran: Historical Past and Present’ International Conference,” *The Armenian Weekly*, February 28, 2022, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/02/28/reflection-on-the-armenia-iran-historical-past-and-present-international-conference/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

62 Armenpress, *Iran considers security of Armenia and region to be its own security – Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian*, October 21, 2022, available at: <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1095416.html>; Asbarez, *Iran Again Voices Opposition to Regional ‘Geopolitical’ Changes*, February 27, 2023, available at: <https://asbarez.com/iran-again-voices-opposition-to-regional-geopolitical-changes/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

economy of Armenia. What is, however, totally irrational is to present Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Israel as one, as if they had merged against Iran, and to affirm that the opening of the Zangezur corridor would “cut Iran’s alternative roads to Europe and Russia.” An alliance does not represent the merging of the partners, and the very fact of opening a corridor is far from being sufficient to sever another road.

As far as evidence goes, the Iranian government, unlike Russia, does not use threaten to replace Nikol Pashinyan. Rather, the whole Iranian policy is now about providing encouragement, weapons, and gas to Armenia in order to give to its government the feeling that Iran is supportive and present in the region.⁶³ Clear evidence on the negative effects of this Iranian policy for the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan can be found in a statement made in January 2023 by Vahan Kostanyan, Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister: “*We had intelligence that larger attacks were being prepared by Azerbaijan when it attacked Armenia [sic] last September. Iranian actions and statements helped to stop a further deterioration of that situation.*”⁶⁴ As long as Armenia thinks that external support against Azerbaijan can be provided to restore its military capacity, devastated by the 2020 war, for new clashes (by Iranian military drones, for instance), the possibility of signing a peace treaty will be a distant prospect.⁶⁵

Remarkably, despite the conflict between Nikol Pashinyan and the nationalists of the Armenian diaspora (who oppose the very idea of signing a peace treaty and call him a “traitor”⁶⁶), these nationalists see

63 Mejlumyan, A., “Iran and Armenia agree to double gas trade,” *Eurasianet*, November 2, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/iran-and-armenia-agree-to-double-gas-trade>; Shahbazov, F., “Iran’s Drone Exports to Armenia Could Undermine Peace Process in Karabakh”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation*, December 16, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-drone-exports-to-armenia-could-undermine-peace-process-in-karabakh/>; Boussois, S., “L’Arménie prise au piège de la toile iranienne: un jeu dangereux”, *L-Post*, January 11, 2023, available at: <https://lpost.be/2023/01/11/opinion-larmenie-prise-au-piege-strategique-de-la-toile-iranienne-un-jeu-dangereux/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

64 Zaman, A., “Turkey rises, Russia fades as Iran and Azerbaijan clash over Armenia”, *Al-Monitor*, January 31, 2023, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/turkey-rises-russia-fades-iran-and-azerbaijan-clash-over-armenia> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

65 Shahbazov, F., “Iran’s Drone Exports to Armenia Could Undermine Peace Process in Karabakh”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation*, December 16, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-drone-exports-to-armenia-could-undermine-peace-process-in-karabakh/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

66 Nouvelles d’Arménie Magazine, *Déclaration du comité central de la FRA*, November

no problem in supporting this Iranian policy. Harut Sassounian wrote a column titled: “Israeli TV spews repulsive Azeri propaganda against Armenia and Iran”. The original text was reproduced and translated into French by the blog of the fiercely pro-Putin (and mullah-friendly) review *Europe et Orient*, edited by former Ramkavar leader Jean Varoujan Sirapian.⁶⁷

Using a barely implicit style, the Ramkavar organ *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator* in the US blamed Azerbaijani authorities, arguing as if they claim Armenia’s and Iran’s territory.⁶⁸ This convergence of the Ramkavar party’s (US branch) approach with Iran is particularly noteworthy, as the Lebanese branch of the Ramkavar party is an ally of the parliamentarian block opposed to Hezbollah. It is true that the world leadership of Ramkavar has practically ceased to exist, however, contradictions are more likely to emerge in such a situation.

What next?

It is not clear what the outcome of the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or between Iran and Israel, will be. It is safe to observe that the disappointment of Armenian nationalists concerning Russia has no counterpart concerning Iran: This political dimension is the strongest, the biggest asset of the Iranian government. However, the economic importance of Iran does not match yet the importance of Russia. On the opposite side, the Azerbaijani army has proved to be robust and modern.⁶⁹ Azerbaijan has an exceptionally strong alliance with Türkiye.

14, 2020, available at: http://armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=71968; Lavrina, A. “In New York, #Armenian radicals from among the #Dashnaks detained Nikol #Pashinyan’s motorcade, calling him a “traitor””, September 24, 2022, 9:57 am, available at: <https://twitter.com/ALavrina/status/1573673057327144961> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

67 Sassounian, H., “Israeli TV spews repulsive Azeri propaganda against Armenia and Iran,” *The Armenian Weekly*, January 30, 2023, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/01/30/israeli-tv-spews-repulsive-azeri-propaganda-against-armenia-and-iran/>; Sassounian, H., “La télévision israélienne propage une propagande azérie répugnante contre l’Arménie et l’Iran”, *Europe Orient*, February 3, 2023, available at: <https://europeetorient.blogspot.com/2023/02/la-television-israelienne-propage-une.html> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

68 Azadian, E., “New Threat to Armenia’s Sovereignty, In Addition to Azerbaijan,” *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, February 23, 2023, available at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2023/02/23/new-threat-to-armenias-sovereignty-in-addition-to-azerbaijan/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

69 Erickson, E. J., “The 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh Turkish Drone Success or

Its Israeli and Pakistani alliances are currently reinforced. All that is dissuasive, at least to a certain extent, for Tehran. And, last but not least, the Iranian Islamist regime is aware of the numerical importance of the Azerbaijanis and Baluchis in Iran. What can be said, in any case, is that knowledge on the alliance of the Armenian nationalists has to be spread, and especially made known to Western public opinion. For Azerbaijan, in addition to the information field, its Israeli and Turkish alliances provide it with a first-class opportunity to manage the terrorist risk, considering the experience of these two countries.

Operational Art?”, *Military Review Online*, August 2021, available at: <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/img/Online-Exclusive/2021/erickson/Erickson-the-44-day-war.pdf> (accessed: May 31, 2023)