

Chapter VII

CONTESTED BORDERS IN THE CAUCASUS

Iran's Role as Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

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1. Introduction

For more than three centuries, the main threat to the stability and territorial integrity of Iran has come from its northern neighbour, first Russia and then the Soviet Union. Before and during the whole period of the Cold War, it had to define its foreign policy within the framework of the confrontation between Russia/the Soviet Union and the West.⁽¹⁾ The fall of the Soviet empire had manifold consequences for Iran's security interests. Iran has had to secure stability along its borders, in a situation where the significance of regional and interstate conflicts had increased dramatically. Out of the 15 new, independent states which have been established on the territory of the former Soviet Union, eight have a political or cultural history in common with Iran. Some of them were even integral parts of its territory for long periods. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan share a common border with Iran. Any major event in these countries affects Iran's interests directly.

Iran is a multicultural society consisting of different ethnic groups. As Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan are homelands for some ethnic groups which also live in Iran, the political future of both of these new states - particularly Azerbaijan - is one of the primary concerns of Iran's foreign policy. The Azeris in Iran form the second largest community in the country, and they are especially sensitive to the destiny of their kindred brethren in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The political leadership of Iran has therefore no choice but to take an active stance on any major crisis in Azerbaijan, and especially on the war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The following analysis starts with a description of Iran's attitude towards Nagorno-Karabakh and probes into the motives for and consequences of Tehran's attempts to mediate between the warring parties. As this mediation

policy must be understood in the context of Iran's overall foreign policy concept after the end of the Cold War, a brief description of the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union for Iran's geopolitics, and for its security options and opportunities, will follow. Finally, the policies Iran has adopted up to now to deal with the new situation will be assessed, and the motives for and effects of Iran's role as mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan will be analyzed.

2. Regional Geopolitical Consequences of the Collapse of the Soviet Empire

From a geopolitical standpoint, Iran may be viewed as part of the Middle East - more precisely, it may be called its eastern front door. As a region, the Middle East has the following characteristics:

1. It possesses the largest amount of world energy sources and production (about 50 percent of world oil and gas resources).
2. With the exception of Iran, all the countries there are Arab apart from Turkey, and whether Turkey in fact belongs in the region is a matter of opinion. Arabic is also the region's dominant language.⁽²⁾
3. Iran lies on the margin of the region.
4. The region is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. All its countries have access to the sea. Insofar as none is landlocked, in this regard they are not dependent on one another.
5. Islam is the only major feature shared between Iran and the other countries of the region.

The collapse of the Soviet empire has led to a radical shift in the geopolitical division of the Middle East. New regions have been established, one of them called the "New Middle East"⁽³⁾ by some and "North-West Asia" by others.⁽⁴⁾ This new region stretches right into the heart of Asia. Extending over an area of 7 million sq km and populated by some 320 million people, it includes Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey.

Contrary to the analysis which predicted that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union would lead its geopolitical importance to decline, Iran is now set to take advantage of the opportunities created by its new geopolitical situation. The new region and Iran's position in it may be characterized as follows:

1. The region's economic importance cannot be compared to that of the "Old Middle East", especially in regard to raw materials or strategic goods. From this perspective, it is of less interest to the United States than the former Middle East was.
2. From a linguistic and cultural point of view, the region is very heterogeneous. The only common cultural link between the countries - except Armenia - is Islam.
3. Iran is located at the centre of the new region. It borders on Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey and, for most of the landlocked countries in the region, it constitutes their most viable access to the open sea.
4. Iran shares a common language with some countries and a common

religion with all except Armenia. On the religious level, Iran has greatest affinity with Azerbaijan, as both countries are Shiite. Throughout history, Persia had a major cultural influence on all of these newly independent states.

3. The Collapse of the Soviet Empire and its Geopolitical Consequences for Iran

a. *Security*

For the last three centuries, Iran's foreign policy has constantly been affected by the nearness of Russia/the Soviet Union and by Iran's position in the confrontation between its neighbour and the West.⁽⁵⁾ For Russia/the Soviet Union, Iran constituted the greatest barrier to its obtaining free access to the southern seas. For the West, this enhanced Iran's strategic significance both before and during the Cold War.⁽⁶⁾ Far from lessening the importance of Iran in Western eyes, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan actually increased the complexity of its geostrategic situation. Only in the 1990s did the United States modify its traditional view to consider Iran as a strategic barrier between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf.⁽⁷⁾ From the Iranian point of view, Russia and the Soviet Union have traditionally represented the main threat to that country's territorial integrity and independence. In the last two centuries, Iran lost vast areas of territory to its northern neighbour.⁽⁸⁾ The Bolshevik Revolution did not halt this expansionist policy and later, at the end of World War II, the Soviet leadership used its occupying troops to create two client states in the Azeri and Kurdish-populated regions of Iran.

With the appearance of the newly independent states in place of the southern republics of the USSR, the strategic situation to the north of Iran's borders has changed considerably. First of all, a buffer zone was installed between Iran and Russia, removing the most immediate threat to Iran's security and territorial integrity. Iran has ended up with five different neighbouring states instead of one superpower. Secondly, Iran and its new neighbours share a similar cultural background and none of them - with the sole exception of Russia - can be considered a major threat.

With new opportunities came new challenges. Iran's security interests were threatened in the first place by political instability in the newly independent states. These lacked experienced political elites capable of managing ethnic and regional conflicts. Their foreign policy was highly uncertain and unpredictable. The good political relations between Iran and Tajikistan cooled down when the old communist elites re-established their power in Dushanbe. Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan likewise deteriorated after the installation of a pan-Turkic government in Baku. The policy of the Elcibey government, threatening Iran's territorial integrity, represented the taking of an adventurist position by an inexperienced political leadership. The fall of this government, as a result of major defeats in the war with Armenia, reversed this process at the expense of Turkey and in favour of Iran. Iran is now facing the danger of a spill-over of ethnic conflicts

from neighbouring countries onto its own territory. Iran's Azeris and Turkmens, who live mainly in border areas, may become the target of the policies of irredentist groups - or even of the governments of Turkmenistan or Azerbaijan, as happened with Elcibey.

Many leaders of the Central Asian and Transcaucasian republics are former communists, with life-long experience of anti-religious policies. The Iranian model of a religious government holds no attractions for them. These leaders, who look to the United States for support, may be tempted to argue that Iran represents a threat to Western interests in the region. This alleged threat was for a long time used by Turkey in order to challenge Iran's influence and obtain more Western support.⁽⁹⁾ Even some scholars argue along these lines, assuming that a deepening of the internal crisis in the newly independent countries, together with a lack of support from the West, could enhance Iran's influence in the region.⁽¹⁰⁾

Relations between Iran's newly independent neighbours are highly unstable and could seriously deteriorate at any time. In a conflict between any of them, Iran may be accused of favouring one side over the other, or even of trying to export its militant and revolutionary ideology.

b. *The Economy*

Thanks to its geostrategic position at the centre of the new region, Iran has been presented with a variety of economic opportunities. The significance of these cannot be overlooked in any analysis of Iranian foreign policy, especially when the existing political barriers to normal trade relations with Western partners are taken into account. First, whereas all the Central Asian republics - along with Armenia and Azerbaijan - are landlocked, Iran possesses the longest shoreline on the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. For most of these newly independent countries, the most feasible route to free seas, and the only overland route to the rich Arab world, pass through Iran. Secondly, Iran now has easier access to China and the Far East via Central Asia - which readily brings to mind the historical "Silk Road". Thirdly, alternative routes from Iran to Europe have appeared on the map, and Europe is still the principal source of Iran's imports. In recent decades, nearly all trade over land had to pass through Turkey, which gave the latter the upper hand in bilateral negotiations with Iran. This was especially important during the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War. The present map of the region shows a completely different situation, with Turkey now dependent on Iran for its access to Central Asia and Azerbaijan.⁽¹¹⁾ Iran regards the newly independent states as important targets for its new export-oriented economy.⁽¹²⁾ Agricultural and industrial goods from these countries have also been acquired by Iran at much cheaper prices than those which its traditional European partners can offer.⁽¹³⁾

4. Iran's Policy on Central Asia and the Caucasus

Iran's policy makers want to preserve the status quo on its northern borders. For the first time in three centuries, several independent states form a buffer

zone between Iran and Russia, and maintaining the status quo implies preserving their economic and political sovereignty.⁽¹⁴⁾ Some initiatives in support of this policy have been launched by the Iranian authorities. The Economic Co-operation Organization (ECO) was expanded on Iran's initiative and with the agreement of both of the other members, Turkey and Pakistan. At the organization's first summit, in Tehran in 1992, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan were officially admitted as members. The setting up of the "Group of Caspian Sea States" was another Iranian initiative to support its foreign policy goals. This group was founded in 1992 by Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan with the aim of establishing powerful regional co-operation in trade and shipping. It also offers the Iranian economy easier access to a large market.

Iran has to counterbalance the influence of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Russia, considered to be its main rivals in the region, while its rivals on the global scene are the US and Israel.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the view of Iranian officials, these interests must be furthered by peaceful means, and with the aim of increasing stability in the region.⁽¹⁶⁾ Iran may take advantage of some new opportunities, in addition to those mentioned, which are open to the whole of North-West Asia in general: 1) Support for the independence of Armenia, as the Armenians are traditionally hostile to Turkey but, in modern history, have never had any serious problems with Iranians. 2) Re-establishing good relations with a region which has many historical and cultural ties with Iran. Until the independence of Azerbaijan, Iran was the only state representing Shiite Muslims. Now, Azerbaijan's absolute majority of Shiite Muslims could strengthen Iran's position in the Islamic World. It is against this general background of Iranian policies in the region that Iran's role as mediator for a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis should be considered.

5. Iran and the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

The Qajar dynasty ruled Iran from the last decade of the 18th century until 1920. The Iranian public remembers this dynasty with hatred, holding it responsible for major defeats at the hands of the Russian army in 1813 and 1828, which led to the loss of vast areas of Iran's territory in the northwest of the country. These areas included the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia and Georgia.⁽¹⁷⁾ The loss of these territories did nothing to lessen concern for the fate of their populations, especially the Azeris from the Republic of Azerbaijan.

From its beginning in 1988, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh became a major challenge for Iran's foreign and domestic policies. It took on even more importance after the independence of Azerbaijan in 1991. The Iranian government had to face pressure from the population as a whole, but especially from its Azeri community. Public opinion (as may be seen from the announcements of different political factions, newspaper articles and speeches in Parliament) demanded that Iran should take the side of its kindred Shiite Muslims against the Armenian infidels. This pressure has been decreasing over the years, but it resurfaces whenever the Azerbaijani army is defeated by the Armenians.⁽¹⁸⁾ Iranian nationalist groups also exert pressure on the government. They claim that most of the Caucasian region once belonged to Iran and that the loss of this territory was due to Russian imperialistic expansion. They therefore urge the government to show as much

concern for the Azeris as for its own citizens. The following quotation illustrates the nationalists' ideas in this regard: "When the Armenians of the Caucasus, Georgians, and also Arranis and Azeris and other Muslims of that region understand correctly that their separation [from Iran] is the result of enemy deeds, they will undoubtedly find out (as many of their scholars have already found out) that no cultural or (internal) political, economic or religious factor or feature has led to their separation from Iran. This separation can only be explained by the imperialist nature of Czarist Russia, which has occupied the northern parts of Iran after constant wars. Russia managed to maintain her power by the imposition of a series of treaties".(19),

The Iranian Azeris exert stronger pressure on government policies on the war over Nagorno-Karabakh than do the Iranian nationalists. Some Azeri youth groups have even crossed the Azeri border illegally in order to help their brethren in the conflict.(20)

6. Motives for Mediation in the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

Iran's role as mediator in the crisis of Nagorno-Karabakh should be seen as part of its North-West Asia strategy. Iran emphasizes the inviolability of recognized international borders. It does not accept territorial claims based on historical arguments as legitimate:(21) such claims and arguments would lead to endless conflicts in the region.(22)

Iran's involvement in the conflict since the demise of the Soviet Union can also be explained by other factors (besides those analysed above), such as Iran's attempts to prevent any kind of "spillover" of the conflict across its borders - this would pose a potential threat to the security of the northern part of the country(23) - or its effort to prove its ability, as a regional power, to pursue a foreign policy dealing successfully with the new threats and challenges.(24)

Iranian diplomats consider that their country's mediating role in the conflict is the obvious response to a "natural" request from the belligerents to a neighbouring state. Even the political opposition in both republics demonstrate confidence in Iran's policies in the region.(25) Additional motives for mediating in the conflict may be found in Iranian Realpolitik:

1. Iran is aiming at a rapid solution to the conflict, for obvious security reasons. The military operations along its borders represent an immediate danger to Iran's security. A prolongation would lead to a strengthening of the role of Russia, which might be tempted to settle the conflict on its own terms and contrary to Iran's security interests. This fear does not appear to be without foundation, as Russia's new military doctrine states unequivocally that it considers its strategic borders in Central Asia to be contiguous to Iran and Afghanistan(26) and, in the Caucasus, to Iran and Turkey. (27)
2. A prolongation of the conflict would lead to an even greater flight of refugees from the war-torn neighbouring areas. At present, Iran is already hosting about 4 million refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq.(28) The Iranian authorities made major efforts to prevent the flight of Azeri refugees onto its territory in September 1993, when fighting broke out in Nakhichevan and about 200,000(29) people were approaching Iran's

borders.(30) After his return from a visit to Central Asia and the Caucasus region, President Rafsanjani made the following declaration in an interview with the Iranian press: "We regard the refugees [from the Republic of Azerbaijan] in the same way as our own refugees [who were displaced as a result of the Iraqi invasion], but we prefer them to remain on the territory of Azerbaijan so that they can achieve their aims sooner."(31)

3. A balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan is the second goal of Iran's mediating policy. Iran is in favour of neither a powerful Christian Armenia(32) nor a powerful Azerbaijan which might cherish territorial claims on Iranian Azeri regions. Both countries have to be kept in balance by means of pressure on the stronger side. This explains why Iran has always welcomed any initiative aiming at a settlement of the conflict without any changes in recognized international borders. Ali Akbar Velayati, Iran's Foreign Minister, has announced that Iran "will defend the territorial integrity of (its) ... neighbours".(33)
4. The Azeri-Armenian conflict is preventing Iran from making full use of its newly acquired access to Europe.
5. Iran needs to contain Turkish influence in the region. The rivalry between Iran and Turkey goes back to ancient history and has never been reconciled. Turkey has been considered by the US administration as a "model" with a "leading role in the region's politics", which all the newly independent states in the region were encouraged to follow.(34) With the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Iranian leadership had the opportunity to take advantage of Turkey's "Achilles' heel". The enmity between the Turks and the Armenians may indeed give Iran an opportunity to oppose Turkish and US policies in the region. In taking advantage of this enmity, and of the inconsistencies in Russian policies, Iran is the only regional player which has both incentives and the opportunity to play a mediating role by taking a visibly impartial stand in the conflict. Even the short-lived pro-Turkish government in Azerbaijan - which did serious damage to Irano-Azeri relations and increased the difficulties for Iran's mediation policies - had the advantage of strengthening the impartiality of Iran's position in Armenian eyes.(35)

7. Iran's Mediation

Iran started its mediation initiatives in March 1992, when it invited high-ranking delegations from Armenia and Azerbaijan to Tehran for negotiations. (36) A temporary cease-fire, a lifting of the blockade of Armenia by the Azeri side, the deployment of observer forces and an exchange of prisoners of war and bodies were discussed. A declaration on the resolution of the conflict was signed by the delegations in Tehran on 15 March. A seven-day cease-fire was announced as a first step in the peace process. On 19 March, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali sent a message to the Iranian Foreign Minister expressing the UN's appreciation of Iran's efforts at mediation and its support for Iran's attempts to reach a peaceful settlement.(37)

The breach of the cease-fire did not halt Iran's mediating initiatives. On 10 May, President Rafsanjani met the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Tehran. The Russian ambassador to Iran took part in the meeting. Despite the signing of a common declaration on restoring stability in the region, based on

international law and the principles of the UN Charter,⁽³⁸⁾ the war continued and even intensified. With the capture of Shusha, the Armenian forces took over the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh. This victory was followed by the capture of Lachin, which opened a corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Iran's Foreign Ministry voiced its concern at the events in Shusha, denounced the occupation of new territories - without referring to any particular side - and invited both sides to act in accordance with the Tehran Declaration. The Foreign Ministry added that "Iran demands that its neighbours, Armenia and Azerbaijan... should refrain from any military action which could aggravate the crisis".⁽³⁹⁾

Armenian military conquests hampered Iran's mediation efforts. The government had to take into account public opinion at home, which was calling for a firmer stand on Armenia. The fact that the Armenian aggression occurred simultaneously with the cease-fire agreement was severely criticized in Iran. The Iranian daily Salam wrote: "The Armenians have proved that they do not keep any promises and that they took advantage of the opportunities (prepared for them by our diplomacy) for rearmament". It sharply criticized the Foreign Ministry for considering rapprochement with Armenia and international bodies to be more important than the massacres of Azerbaijan's Shiite population.⁽⁴⁰⁾

After the victory of the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) in the presidential elections of June 1992, Iran's conciliatory role was effectively suspended, as the new president, Elcibey, rejected any mediation or other political initiatives coming from Iran. Following internal political pressures, the Iranian government apparently did take a firmer stand against Armenia, denouncing its attack on Nakhichevan. Despite this official criticism, a further deterioration in Iran's relations with Azerbaijan led to a rapprochement with Armenia. The Armenian authorities acknowledged Iran's concern at the widening of the conflict. They announced that they appreciated Iran's peacemaking efforts, and that they would even accept the deployment of Iranian observers on their border with Nakhichevan - an option which never materialized, however.⁽⁴¹⁾

In spite of the deterioration in its relations with Azerbaijan, Iran established a good relationship with Geidar Aliyev, then leader of Nakhichevan. Despite his communist past and his closeness to Russia, Iran supported his efforts to preserve peace in the autonomous region by giving financial aid to Nakhichevan and by pressurizing Armenia. Visiting Tehran, Aliyev said (referring to the APF leadership) that "no Satan can damage our relations with Iran". Between July 1992 and June 1993, Iran concentrated its efforts on containing the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and on preventing it from spilling over into Nakhichevan. It attributed all the defeats suffered by the Azeri troops to poor leadership on the part of the APF and to the role of Turkey. An Iranian semi-official daily even accused the APF leadership of surrendering Shusha in order to prevent Iran from mediating in the conflict.⁽⁴²⁾ In June 1993, the APF was ousted from power in Baku. Elcibey was replaced by Aliyev, who had become increasingly popular thanks to his ability to keep the peace in Nakhichevan. Aliyev was considered to be clever and experienced enough to understand Iran's concerns in the region and not to challenge its interests.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, visited Tabriz - the largest and

most important Iranian Azeri city - at the end of July 1993. In order to demonstrate Iran's clear support for the new Azeri leadership, he declared that Iran would not remain indifferent in the face of any further encroachments on Azeri territories, and he attacked Armenian policies: "The government of Armenia and the Armenians of Karabakh are oppressing the Muslims of the region, and we denounce the recent actions by the Armenians of Karabakh who acted with the support of the government of Armenia. We also expect the Armenians in our country to denounce these actions."[\(43\)](#)

Iran made it clear that it would not accept any significant changes in the balance of power in the region. In September 1993, the Armenians launched a new attack on Nakhichevan. At this point, Iranian troops crossed the border with the aim of securing the "jointly managed" dams over the Aras river and establishing several camps for Azeri refugees.[\(44\)](#) Russia immediately responded to this military action. It warned Iran not to intervene in the conflict. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Grigori Karasin, affirmed in an interview with the press that "special actions by Iran, no matter what the grounds given for them, would not be tolerated by Russia".[\(45\)](#) The Iranian intervention was followed by an expansion of Russia's presence in the Caucasus. Armenia, meanwhile, had to take the Iranian stand into account: the Armenian Foreign Minister wrote to his Iranian counterpart that there would be no more Armenian military operations in Nakhichevan.[\(46\)](#)

Iran, confronted with the problem of having to deal with 200,000 Azeri refugees, continued its mediation efforts. During a visit by the Iranian President to Azerbaijan, a new cease-fire between the parties was announced on 31 October 1993. Armenia and the Armenians of Karabakh, however, affirmed that they had only agreed to this at Iran's insistence[\(47\)](#) and the cease-fire lasted only a few days.

8. Consequences

Although Iran's mediation attempts did not bring about a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, they did nevertheless lead to the first cease-fire between the belligerents, in March 1992. At that time, the CSCE was not yet directly involved in the mediation process. The UN, for its part, sent a fact-finding mission only when this was facilitated by the first Iranian-sponsored cease-fire.[\(48\)](#) Iran's mediation initiatives may be regarded as a foreign policy success. They contributed to international efforts to stabilize the region. Despite the attempts by the US and its regional allies to isolate Tehran,[\(49\)](#) Iran's positive role was recognized by the UN Secretary-General and by regional and international bodies.[\(50\)](#)

The difficulties encountered by Iran in its mediation efforts, and its failure to achieve a settlement of the conflict, may be explained by various factors: In the first place, Iran was accused - by both regional and non-regional countries - of having strategic ambitions of its own in the region.[\(51\)](#)

Secondly, it did not receive the necessary support from other countries or institutions. Despite Iran's success in brokering the first cease-fire, the CSCE did not think it appropriate either to consult Tehran or to support its efforts. This attitude may have resulted from an apprehension that any support for Iran's initiatives would weaken Turkey's position in the region.

The third factor which added to Iran's difficulties in mediating was Azerbaijan's policy during the tenure of the APF government. It accused Iran of delivering arms to the Armenian side⁽⁵²⁾ and made an overt appeal to Iranian Azerbaijan to secede from Iran and unite with Azerbaijan.⁽⁵³⁾

The fourth factor was the inability of the belligerents to reach a compromise on the issues at the root of the conflict. The Armenians remained confident of their military strength, and demanded either the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia or a recognition of the independence of the unilaterally proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR).⁽⁵⁴⁾ The Azeri side refused even to consider these options. Although, under Aliyev, they may have shown some willingness to compromise,⁽⁵⁵⁾ any departure from the principle of territorial integrity leads inevitably to a severe loss of prestige and legitimacy by any Azeri government.

Finally, Iran lacked the necessary means or leverage to force the belligerents to make a compromise. Even though both countries understood Iran's concerns and accepted its role as mediator, they never felt compelled to accept its negotiation proposals.

9. Conclusions

Nagorno-Karabakh has no common borders with Armenia, the homeland. This geographical specificity, making it an enclave within Azerbaijan, exacerbates the internationalization of the conflict, as it forces the Armenian side to secure a corridor between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Such a violation of international borders is resisted by the international community and especially by powers which are involved in the region.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Ethnic conflicts are based on opposing definitions of interests and identities. Compromises are difficult in a situation where the parties involved define their identity through violent conflict. Mediators must obtain the confidence of both parties, which means adopting a position of strict neutrality in the conflict. Most states have direct interests in the conflict, which makes it difficult for them to take such an impartial stand. Only states whose neutral position is dictated by their own interests may have sufficient incentive to play the role of mediator effectively. Most of the players who expected to mediate in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis had serious handicaps which prevented them from doing so: Russia did not demonstrate a clear policy towards the region until mid-1993, and was not accepted by other states as being impartial. The US did not pursue a policy of its own in Transcaucasia, implicitly accepting that the region was in Russia's sphere of influence and interests.⁽⁵⁷⁾ The CSCE failed to play an effective role, and the UN, following the policies of the major Western powers and Russia, did not become seriously involved. Armenia rejected Turkey's mediation for obvious reasons. This left Iran as the only mediator which had at the same time sufficient incentive to take an impartial stand and opportunities for gaining the confidence of both sides. To the Iranian government, the conflict offered a chance to strengthen its role on the international scene. Gaining recognition as a regional power has been its major concern. Iran has not only extended its influence in the region, displaying its ability to perform as a powerful player, but it has also prevented the conflict from spilling over across its own borders. By giving considerable assistance to Azeri refugees, Iranian policymakers have increased their legitimacy among their own Azeri community.

10. Prospects for the Future

Russia's re-emergence as an arbiter of the conflicts in what it terms its "near abroad" may not be enough to put an end to the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh. A solution to conflicts involving identity cannot be imposed by force. The deployment of peace-keeping forces serves only to make ethnic conflicts latent - they always remain on the verge of new and violent eruptions. A lasting settlement of an ethnic conflict requires not only an international process of negotiation between the warring parties, but also thoroughgoing political changes internally.

The Iranian government seems to be aware of the limits on its ability to deal with the conflict. It is therefore seeking to co-ordinate its efforts with other regional or non-regional players. The first priority seems to be co-operation with Russia (58) in order to prevent the spread of Turkey's influence to the region (and, indirectly, NATO's). But Iran may also choose another alternative: it may try to co-ordinate its efforts with Turkey. This policy alternative does indeed have some advocates among the ruling elite in Iran, but it would be difficult to implement. Any co-ordination of Iranian-Turkish policies in the region would certainly depend to a large extent on the attitude of the US, and on Turkey's dependence on the American government. Iran is also striving for closer co-operation with the European Union on the issues of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Caucasus has always been the scene of rivalry between Russia, Turkey and Iran. Co-ordination between these three states would facilitate a long-term solution for Nagorno-Karabakh. The exclusion of any one of these regional powers from the mediation process, on the other hand, could delay the settlement of the conflict or could even make any peace impossible. No warring party should overlook this fact.(59)

Notes

1. See Shahram Chubin, Sepehr Zabih, and Paul Seabury, *The Foreign Relations of Iran: A Developing State in a Zone of Great-Power Conflict*, Berkeley, 1974.
2. Israel is also a non-Arab country in the Middle East, but it has no cultural or linguistic similarities with any Middle-Eastern country and, so far, has not been culturally integrated into the region.
3. See for example Caryle Murphy, *Shifting Sand: Rethinking the Changed Middle East*, *Washington Post*, 6 September 1992; George Mireski, *The End of History and The Third World: the Role of Ideology*, paper presented at the conference on *The Transformation of the Former Soviet Union: Implications for the Third World*, Tehran, 10-12 March 1992 and Henry J. Barkey, *Turkey's Kurdish Dilemma*, *Survival*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Winter 93/94, pp. 51-70.
4. R.K. Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South*, *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 393-412.
5. S. Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, *Negareshhaye maujoud dar Gharb dar Bareye Raftare Iran ba Jomhourihaye shouraveye Sabegh*, *Motaleaat Asiaye Markazi wa Ghafghaz*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn 1992, pp. 97-116.
6. Some scholars affirm that the earliest concern of the US at the start of the Cold War was the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran's territory. See for example: Bernard Lewis, *Rethinking the Middle East*, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 4, Autumn 1992, pp. 99-119.
7. Houshang Amir Ahmadi, *Iran's Regional Foreign Policy - Part II, Ettela'at Siasi-Eghtesadi*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1-2, Ser. 73-74, Oct. - Nov. 1993, pp. 4-8.
8. Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864-1914: A Study in Imperialism*, New Haven, 1968 and A. Lenezowski, *Russia and the West in Iran*, Ithaca, 1945.
9. Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson, *Ambitious Iran, Troubled Neighbors*, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.

- 72, No. 1, Winter 1993, pp. 124-141.
10. See for instance: Elizabeth Walknir, *The Consequences of the Demise of the Soviet Union and the Demise of the Socialist Model*, paper presented at the conference on *The Transformation of the Former Soviet Union: Implications for the Third World*, Tehran, 10-12 March 1992.
 11. For more details on the obstacles confronting Turkey in this regard see: Philip Robins, *Between Sentiment And Self-Interest: Turkey's Policy toward Azerbaijan and the Central Asian States*, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Autumn 1993, pp. 593-610.
 12. According to the former Iranian Minister for Economy and Finance, Iran views the region as a potential market for \$8-10 billion of Iranian exports, *Middle East Economic Digest*, 15 November 1990.
 13. In 1992, Iran signed a series of bilateral agreements with Armenia, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan for building oil refineries and supplying these countries with oil. There are other important bilateral economic agreements between Iran and these states on transport, infrastructure, shipping in the Caspian Sea, education, the banking system, the gas pipeline and other areas of mutual interest.
 14. Abbas Maleki, *rawabete iran wa jomhourihaye asiaye markazi*, *Motaleaat Asiaye Markazi wa Ghafghaz*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 1992, pp. 5-10. Abbas Maleki is Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister.
 15. France International Radio, 11 May 1992, quoted in the *Bulletin of the Summary of Important News from the International Broadcasting Agencies*, No. 29, Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 May 1992, p. 2.
 16. Opening speech by Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian Foreign Minister, at the Conference on *The Transformation of the Former Soviet Union: Implications for the Third World*, Tehran, 10-12 March 1992.
 17. Muriel Atkin, *Russia and Iran, 1780-1820*, Minneapolis, 1980 and Naser Takmil Homayun, *Negahi be Gharabagh Dar Masire Tarikhe Iran*, *Motaleaat Asiaye Markazi wa Ghafghaz*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 1993, pp. 59-98.
 18. After the occupation of Kelbajar by Armenian troops in April 1993, students from the different universities in Tehran participated in a demonstration outside the Armenian embassy, denouncing the Armenian aggression and demanding an immediate withdrawal of Armenian troops from the territory of Azerbaijan. They also called for a change of policy by Iran and military support for the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Resalat*, 14 April 1993.
 19. Takmil Homayun, op. cit., p. 94. "Aran" or "Albania" was the old name of the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan. See Enayatullah Reza, *Azerbaijan wa Aran*, *Ettelaat Siasi, Eghtesadi*, Vol. 6, No. 55-56, 1982, pp. 6-13.
 20. After the occupation of Lachin by Armenian troops, pamphlets were distributed clandestinely in Tabriz, the biggest city in Iranian Azerbaijan, inviting people to support their brothers from the Republic of Azerbaijan. During the same period, police were protecting the Iranian Armenians living in Iranian Azerbaijan from possible attack.
 21. Paul A. Goble, *Coping with the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis*, *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Summer 1992, pp. 14-28 and Alieh Arfaei, *Ghazieye Nagorno gharabagh*, *Motaleaat Asiaye Markazi wa Ghafghaz*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn 1992, pp. 153-206.
 22. Interview with M. Vaezi, the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for European and American Affairs and Iran's special envoy for mediating in the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, *Keyhan*, 21 May 1992.
 23. Even before the demise of the Soviet Union, Iran was faced with a serious crisis when thousands of Soviet Azeris rioted near the Iranian borders in 1990 and illegally entered Iran with the aim of "visiting their relatives" there, *Washington Post*, 3 January 1990.
 24. Iran's foreign policy in modern times has always been characterized by "the quest for status not territory". See Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Domestic Politics and Territorial Disputes in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula*, *Survival*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Winter 93/94, pp. 3-27.
 25. Ali Akbar Velayati in his speech at the conference on "The Transformation of the Former Soviet Union: Implications for the Third World", Tehran, 10-12 March 1992.
 26. *Push for Peace: Neighbours Gear Up to Broker a Tajik Settlement*, in: *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 February 1994.
 27. *Russia wants to keep Bases in Caucasus*, *The International Herald Tribune*, 3 February 1994.
 28. According to UNHCR data, Iran was hosting 4,150,700 refugees at the end of 1992: UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees. 1993: The Challenge for Protection*, New York, 1993.
 29. The UNHCR estimated that the total number of displaced people was about 900,000: *Keyhan Hawaii*, 31 October 1993.
 30. *Keyhan Hawaii*, 15 September 1993.
 31. *Ettela'at*, 31 October 1993.
 32. In its editorial on 16 September 1993, the Iranian newspaper *Jahane Islam*, which expresses the ideas of a hardline group, posed the question of the difference between the expansionist policies of Armenia and Israel and proposed breaking off diplomatic relations with Armenia.

33. Keyhan, 8 December 1993.
34. The Times, 17 February 1992.
35. Even Iran's denunciation of the Armenian invasion of Nakhichevan in May 1992 was interpreted by the Armenian Foreign Minister as merely the result of internal pressures. He declared that Iran's goodwill was not in question and that Armenia would always be grateful for Iran's mediation, Resalat, 25 May 1992
36. Resalat, 17 March 1992.
37. Ramazani, op. cit.
38. Arfaei, op. cit.
39. Ettela'at, 12 May 1992.
40. Salam, 21 May 1992.
41. Abrar, 25 May 1992.
42. Ettela'at, 6 June 1992.
43. Resalat, 29 July 1993.
44. Keyhan Havaii, 15 September 1993.
45. Ibid.
46. Keyhan, 16 September 1993.
47. Ettela'at, 31 October 1993.
48. Ramazani, op. cit.
49. Robins, op. cit.
50. The participants at the ECO meeting in Ashkhabad on 11 May 1992 demanded the withdrawal of military forces to the positions they had occupied before the Tehran Declaration. The Secretary-General of the Islamic Conference Organization sent a message of congratulation to Tehran for its success in hosting and mediating the summit between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Tehran (Resalat, 12 May 1992).
51. Robins, op. cit.; Ramazani, op. cit. and Pipes and Clawson, op. cit.
52. Interview with the Interior Minister of Azerbaijan, Ettelaat, 15 June 1992.
53. Interview with Abulfaz Elcibey, Turkish Times, March 1992, quoted in Arfaei, op. cit.
54. Interview with Avanesian, Armenian Foreign Minister, Abrar, 25 May 1992.
55. Salam, 22 January 1994.
56. On the causes and consequences of the internationalization of ethnic conflicts see Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, *Ethnic Conflict: Internal and International Dimensions*, Centrum Voor Vredesonderzoek, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1993.
57. Russia wants to keep Bases in Caucasus, International Herald Tribune, 3 February 1994.
58. Tehran Times, 13 February 1994.
59. The Russian government is apparently prepared to involve Iran in its attempts to bring about a peaceful settlement in the region. Iran has been invited to co-sponsor peace negotiations on Tajikistan together with Russia, despite the fact that Iran has no common border with Tajikistan.

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