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The Azerbaijani Factor in the Clash of the Iranian and Turkish ‘Crescents’: A ‘Geopolitical New Moon’ in the South Caucasus

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Abstract. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Türkiye, two historical rivals in the South Caucasus and the Middle East, pay special attention to relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan. This is primarily due to ethnolinguistic, religious-ideological, and geopolitical factors. The aim of the paper is to identify the distinctive characteristics of the Iranian and Turkish crescents, as well as Azerbaijan’s place in the clash of these two foreign policy strategies. The Iranian crescent refers to Iran’s influence and/or presence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Yemen. The author introduces the term ‘Turkish crescent’ as Türkiye’s foreign policy strategy, the main aim of which is to strengthen the country’s position in the South Caucasus and the Middle East by building up military forces and expanding trade and economic ties, as well as to contain Iranian influence in the region. The Turkish crescent means Türkiye’s influence and/or presence in Libya, Cyprus, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Qatar, and Somalia. The term ‘geopolitical new moon’ refers to the new geopolitical realities that emerged after the Second Karabakh War in the South Caucasus and have an impact on the regional security architecture, including the policies of Iran and Türkiye in this region. The article analyzes the peculiarities of the Iranian and Turkish crescents and the use of the Azerbaijani factor by Iran and Türkiye in implementing their strategies against each other. This paper is based on constructive realism, as religious, ideological, and ethnic factors play a special role in the rivalry between Iran and Türkiye in the South Caucasus and the Middle East, along with military, political, and economic factors. The author employs a descriptive-analytical approach, gathering necessary information from documents, scientific papers, media materials, and comparative analysis to assess the impact of the rivalry between Türkiye and Iran on Azerbaijan’s foreign policy orientation. It can be concluded that Iran lost to Türkiye in the Azerbaijani segment of the clash of two ‘crescents.’

Key words: Iranian crescent, Turkish crescent, Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Türkiye, religious factor, Shi‘ism, Sunnism

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Азербайджанский фактор в столкновении иранского и турецкого «полумесяцев»: «геополитическое новолуние» на Южном Кавказе

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Аннотация. Исламская Республика Иран и Турецкая Республика, два исторических соперника на Южном Кавказе и Ближнем Востоке, уделяют особое внимание отношениям с Азербайджанской Республикой. Это обусловлено прежде всего этнолингвистическим, религиозно-идеологическим и геополитическим факторами. Цель исследования — выявить особенности иранского и турецкого «полумесяцев», а также место Азербайджана в столкновении этих двух геополитических проектов. Под «иранским полумесяцем» подразумевается влияние и/или присутствие Ирана в Ливане, Сирии, Ираке, Азербайджане, Бахрейне и Йемене. Автор вводит термин «турецкий полумесяц» как внешнеполитическую стратегию Турции, основной целью которой является укрепление позиции страны на Южном Кавказе и Ближнем Востоке путем наращивания военных сил и расширения торгово-экономических связей, а также сдерживание иранского влияния в этих регионах. Иными словами, «турецкий полумесяц» подразумевает влияние и/или присутствие Турции в Ливии, на Кипре, в Сирии, Ираке, Азербайджане, Катаре и Сомали. Под термином «геополитическое новолуние» понимаются новые геополитические реалии, сложившиеся после Второй карабахской войны на Южном Кавказе и оказывающие влияние на архитектуру региональной безопасности, в том числе политику Тегерана и Анкары в данном регионе. Анализируются особенности иранского и турецкого «полумесяцев», использование властями Исламской Республики Иран и Турецкой Республики азербайджанского фактора в реализации их стратегий друг против друга. В основе данного исследования лежит конструктивный реализм, поскольку в соперничестве Ирана и Турции на Южном Кавказе и Ближнем Востоке наряду с военно-политическими и экономическими факторами особую роль играют религиозный, идеологический и этнический факторы. Автор также использует описательно-аналитический подход, опирающийся на изучение документов, научных работ, материалов СМИ, и метод сравнительного анализа для определения степени влияния соперничества между Турцией и Ираном на внешнеполитическую ориентацию Азербайджана. В заключении сделан вывод, что Исламская Республика Иран проиграла Турецкой Республике в азербайджанском сегменте столкновения двух «полумесяцев».

Ключевые слова: иранский полумесяц, турецкий полумесяц, Азербайджанская Республика, Исламская Республика Иран, Турецкая Республика, религиозный фактор, шиизм, суннизм

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Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Türkiye, two neighboring large states in Southwest Asia, share political, cultural, and ethno-confessional ties that go back deep into history. On the one hand, this long and rich historical experience has created a pattern of sometimes amicable and sometimes

tense bilateral relations, and on the other hand, it has led to fierce geopolitical competition between the two countries. The mutual rivalry and mistrust between Iran and Türkiye intensified, especially after the end of the Cold War in 1991, as the emergence of new independent states in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as the ‘geopolitical

vacuum' in the Middle East caused by the collapse of the USSR, were perceived by Tehran and Ankara as a new chance to realize their regional ambitions.

While the Iranian authorities focused mainly on the religious component of their foreign policy, emphasizing the “export of the Islamic revolution,” the Turkish authorities began to promote an ideology within the framework of a common Turkic identity. In other words, the “export of Turkicness” has become the main ideological direction in Türkiye's foreign policy towards the new Turkic-speaking states that had long been part of the Russian Empire and the USSR and “had forgotten their roots.” In particular, the Republic of Azerbaijan, which shares common historical, ethnocultural, and religious ties with Iran and Türkiye, has become a field of ideological struggle between them.

It is noteworthy that scholars have paid great attention to the foreign policy of *Türkiye* (Avatkov & Sbitneva, 2023; Shlykov, 2023; Devecioğlu, 2024; Duran, 2022; Kınık, 2022; Şahin, 2022) and *Iran* (Akhmedov, 2022; Filin, Koklikov & Khodunov, 2021). In addition, the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have been the subject of considerable academic attention (Aghazada, 2023; Avatkov, 2022; Belov & Savicheva, 2021; Guzaerov, 2023; Sazhin, 2019; Valiyev, 2021). Separate mention should be made of works on the “*Iranian crescent*” (Avcı, 2023; Barzegar, 2008; Chikrizova & Ivkina, 2023; Khazanov & Gasratyan, 2021; Paunic, 2016; Sarabiev, 2019) and the *rivalry between Tehran and Ankara* (Golmohammadi & Markedonov, 2024; Komleva, 2022).

Along with the military, political, and economic factors that contribute to the competition between Iran and Türkiye, the religious, ideological, and ethnic factors also play a significant role. In this regard, this paper is based on constructive realism, taking all of the above factors together (Barkin, 2010; Lobell, 2017). In addition, the author used a

descriptive-analytical approach, as the necessary information was collected by studying scientific papers, documents, and media materials. The method of comparative analysis was also used to determine the extent to which the rivalry between Iran and Türkiye influences Azerbaijan's foreign policy orientation.

Iranian Crescent

The difference between Shi'ism and Sunnism, the two main directions in Islam, is largely based on who was to become the caliph after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. While the Shi'ites consider Ali ibn Abu Talib and his descendants as the true successors of the prophet, the Sunnis believe that Abubakr, Umar, and Uthman became caliphs legitimately. The assassination of Ali in 661 and his son Hussein in 680, and the oppression of Shi'ites during the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) reigns created the image of the “oppressed Shi'ites.” Despite the emergence in different periods of such strong states as the Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171), the Qara Qoyunlu state (1410–1468), and the Safavid Empire (1501–1736), whose main religious ideology was Shi'ism, this image was preserved, simultaneously turning the Shi'ites into an “opposition force” within Islam, capable of resistance for the sake of self-preservation.

In this context, the 1979 revolution in Iran¹ not only had a major impact on the Muslim world but also became the cause of the emergence of ‘hope’ in the hearts of the Shi'ites. This, in turn, has caused concern in countries with Shi'a populations due to the possible growth of separatist sentiments among them (Komleva, 2022, p. 123). Thus, after 1979,

¹ The Iranian revolution differed from other revolutions in that while other revolutions aimed to overthrow the old order and establish a new one, the Iranian revolution aimed to restore the old order, in which the religious aristocracy occupied an important place in the political life of the country.

the Shi'a lever became one of the main instruments for Iran to implement its foreign policy goals, passing through four stages of evolution: 1) 1979–1989; 2) 1990–2002; 3) 2003–2010; and 4) 2011–2024.

The first stage was remembered for the Iranian authorities' active attempts to export an "Islamic revolution," the Iran-Iraq war, and the creation of the first religious pro-Iranian forces in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah. Although the Iranian authorities repeatedly tried to take advantage of Iraq's Shi'a population during the 1980–1988 war with Iraq, their attempts failed due to their limited influence over it.

In the second stage, particularly in the first half of the 1990s, the Iranian authorities were actively involved in establishing Islamic parties in the newly independent states after the collapse of the USSR. For example, Tehran did not hide its financial support for the Islamic Party, founded in 1991 in Azerbaijan, through which it planned to influence public opinion in the Republic of Azerbaijan. This, in turn, was perceived by the Azerbaijani authorities as a serious threat; as a result, in 1995 the party's activities were banned and its leaders were arrested (Aghazada, 2021, p. 807). This period also saw Iranian attempts to take advantage of the division in the Arab world following Iraq's attack on Kuwait.

While Iran could not use "Shi'a force" in Iraq during the rule of Saddam Hussein, this restriction was completely lifted after the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and its allies in 2003, leading to a sharp increase in Iranian influence in the country. In this regard, one of the issues that have come to the fore in Iran's foreign policy in the Iraqi direction has been its efforts to support Shi'a groups and integrate them into the political system for the restructuring of Iraq (Avci, 2023, p. 109). In 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah II ibn Hussein told the Washington Post that a Shi'ite crescent could emerge, stretching from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, if pro-Iranian parties dominated the

Iraqi government.² Since then, following his statement, discussion of Iran's plans to create a Shi'ite crescent or Shi'a arc in the Middle East has become a controversial topic among scholars studying the region's geopolitical processes.

In the fourth stage, which began after the outbreak of the Arab Spring and continues to this day, Iran managed to expand its influence in the Middle East. For example, the Iranian authorities not only provided political support to the then President of Syria B. Assad but also supplied his government with finances and military advisers, including fighters brought to Syria from Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan (Akhmedov, 2022, p. 248). Iran has also been active in Yemen since the start of the country's civil war, even though the Houthis were not originally an Iranian proxy force. However, with significant Iranian support, including military aid, the Houthis have transformed from a local guerrilla group into a more sophisticated armed force and have become pro-Iranian. Although Yemeni Shi'ites profess the Zaydi doctrine, which differs from the Ja'fari doctrine (it is the official state religious ideology of Iran), that distinction does not prevent Iran from helping them (Khazanov & Gasratyan, 2021, p. 115).

At each of the above-mentioned stages, the Iranian authorities acted on the basis of the 11th article of the constitution of the country, which, referring to the 92nd ayat of Surah *Al-Anbiya* (Prophets) of the Qur'an, states that all Muslims are one community, and the political ideology of Iran is based on this foundation.³ Iran has therefore proclaimed itself

² Wright R., Baker P. Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election from Iran: Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State // Washington Post. December 8, 2004. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/12/08/iraq-jordan-see-threat-to-election-from-iran/7e0cc1bc-aeb3-447a-bc9e-cfa5499699bc/> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

³ Full text of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran with amendments [Matne kamile qanune esasi cumhuriye eslamiye Iran hemrah ba eslahat] // Lorestan University. (In Persian). URL: https://www.lu.ac.ir/uploads/123456_20436.pdf (accessed: 24.03.2024).

the defender of the Muslim world in the face of anti-Islamic regimes (Paunic, 2016, p. 74) and claims to be the new leader of the Muslim world (Yurtaev, 2010, p. 105). It is also worth noting that the Iranian authorities have never abandoned the export of the “Islamic revolution” and continue to pursue such a policy to this day. Only depending on the presidents of the country, this policy was either clearly expressed in foreign policy or relegated to the background, but it was never abandoned. For example, if during the presidencies of M. Khatami (1997–2005) and H. Rouhani (2013–2021), a ‘moderate foreign policy’ was pursued, then M. Ahmedinejad (2005–2013) pursued a tough foreign policy course, advocating a return to revolutionary values in foreign policy (Sinkaya, 2022, p. 400). Thus, Iranian foreign policy became radicalized during the presidency of M. Ahmadinejad, and the country’s president, E. Raisi (2021–2024), who died in a plane crash, also followed this course.

It should be emphasized that there are various discussions in academic circles as to whether the Shi’a/Iranian crescent exists at all or whether it was invented after all. For example, B. Sinkaya (2007, p. 57) believes that the formation of the Shi’ite crescent has no real basis. According to K. Barzegar (2008, p. 87), a well-known Iranian scholar, given the existing cultural, social, and historical differences between the Persian and Arab peoples, the implementation of a Shi’ite crescent is almost impossible, and the Iranian authorities’ attempt to create a coalition of Shi’ite-friendly governments is based on a strategic rationale and is pragmatic rather than ideological. B. Zarkami, S. Shoshtari, and S. Ansari Zadeh, other Iranian researchers, believe that there is a stable Shi’a geopolitics in the region, but the Shi’ite crescent is not only an ideological issue and an invention of the West and its regional allies in the Middle East, but it is also unrealistic and utopian (Zarqami, Shoshtari & Ansari Zadeh, 2014, p. 212).

Having analyzed the economic and security factors in the Middle East, O.S. Chikrizova and N.V. Ivkina are convinced that there is no Shi’ite crescent (Chikrizova & Ivkina, 2023, p. 102). A.V. Sarabiev, in turn, comes to the conclusion that there is no need to pay serious attention to the “Shi’a arc,” as it is just a propaganda scheme that suits both Iran and its opponents (Sarabiev, 2019, p. 58).

C. Çakmak (2015, p. 61) believes that the idea of a Shi’ite crescent has gained wider popularity and acceptance since the start of the Arab Spring, and this crescent could become a new reality in the Middle East. According to S. Avcı (2023, p. 125), Iran supports Shi’a groups using various political, economic, cultural, and propaganda tools to contain Sunni states in the region, and in this context, the Shi’ite crescent can be considered an important factor in the geopolitical processes in the Middle East.

I can refer to the works of other scholars who affirm or deny the Shi’ite crescent, but the fact is undeniable that the Iranian authorities instrumentalize the religious factor, namely Shi’ism, and effectively use it in the country’s foreign policy. As for the Shi’a/Iranian crescent, it can be viewed from the perspective of several factors.

1. *Military-political factor.* Today, Iran has proxy forces in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Tehran, using them, on the one hand, tries to counter Israel’s new peripheral strategy, which is largely directed against Iran, and on the other hand, it influences the configuration of the regional security system in the Middle East. In this way, Iran is ensuring its national security by pursuing an active policy on the Shi’a/Iranian crescent.

2. *Religious and ideological factors.* In one way or another, there is a struggle between Shi’ism and Sunnism within Islam. Iran, which considers itself the leader of the Shi’a world (Belov & Savicheva, 2021, p. 622), promotes the spread of Shi’a ideologies of the Ja’fari persuasion not only in the Middle East and the

South Caucasus but also in Africa. A significant part of the populations of Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria professes Shi'a Islam, which allows Tehran to have 'masses' that it can influence.

One way or another, Iran is pursuing an active policy in the Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi, and Yemeni directions and is also able to influence a certain part of the population in Azerbaijan and Bahrain. This is, in fact, the very same Shi'ite crescent. In other words, *the Iranian or Shi'ite crescent is Iran's influence and/or presence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Yemen* (Figure 1). Moreover, Tehran uses the Iranian crescent as an important element in defining the country's geopolitical interests. The author of this article has no intention of engaging in a polemic with experts who categorically reject the term 'Iranian crescent' or deny the existence of such a phenomenon in the Middle East. The Iranian factor in the region can be called differently, not the Shi'a or the Iranian crescent, but simply

Iranian sickle; however, this will not change the fact that there is a serious Iranian geopolitical project in the Middle East. I.e., the essence of the discussion is not how to choose the best term, but that Iran has serious levers of influence and pressure in the region. In general, the Iranian crescent has many geopolitical components and few religious-ideological ones.

Turkish Crescent

Since 2002, Türkiye, which shares a common historical past with the Middle East, has not only become more active in cooperating with the countries of the region but has also taken a special place in regional military and political processes. As a result of R.T. Erdoğan's policies, Türkiye has become one of the key regional players in the Middle East, capable of protecting its own interests (Avatkov & Sbitneva, 2023).



Figure 1. Iranian crescent influence zone (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Yemen)

Source: compiled by M.M. Aghazada on the basis of map in the Sharada.ru. URL: <https://www.sharada.ru/pdf-maps/maps/gruppy-stran/blizhnij-vostok-blankovaja-karta> (accessed: 25.04.2024).



Figure 2. Turkish crescent influence zone (Libya, Cyprus, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Qatar and Somalia)

Source: compiled by M.M. Aghazada on the basis of map in the Sharada.ru. URL: <https://www.sharada.ru/pdf-maps/maps/gruppy-stran/blizhnij-vostok-blankovaja-karta> (accessed: 25.04.2024).

Given Türkiye's active policy in the Middle East and the South Caucasus, I introduce the term *Turkish crescent*,⁴ which refers to Türkiye's influence and/or presence in Libya, Cyprus, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Qatar, and Somalia (Figure 2). Türkiye has military bases or military training centers in all of the above-mentioned countries.

Türkiye's policy towards Libya in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring was ambiguous. At the beginning of the civil war in Libya, the Turkish authorities opted for a wait-and-see position, while simultaneously trying to play the role of a mediator between the conflicting parties. The application of this approach in foreign policy was largely determined by the political views of the then Turkish Foreign Minister A. Davutoglu (2009–2014) on the Libyan

conflict (Uzunöner & Çıkrıkçı, 2023, p. 28). However, Türkiye then supported the Libyan National Transitional Council, the Government of National Accord since 2015, and the Government of National Unity since 2021. Currently, the Turkish authorities have established contacts and are conducting dialogue with all forces in Libya.⁵ Türkiye's Libyan policy needs to be seen in the context of its strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean as a whole. Particular attention should be paid to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye and the State of Libya's Government of National Accord on the delimitation of the maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean, signed on November 27, 2019.⁶ As for Türkiye's relations with the

⁴ The author of this article has repeatedly spoken about the Turkish crescent in his speeches at scientific events of various levels. This term was received with great interest by experts.

⁵ Türkiye — Libya Siyasi İlişkileri // Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-libya-siyasi-iliskileri.tr.mfa> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

⁶ Ibid.

Government of National Unity, 11 Memoranda of Understanding have been signed between them in various areas.⁷

Cyprus, strategically located in the Eastern Mediterranean, was under Turkish control from 1571 to 1878.⁸ After the Cyprus crisis of 1974, the Turkish Federal State of Cyprus was first established, followed by the independence of Northern Cyprus in 1983 (Bostancı, 2015, p. 336). In 2011, Türkiye concluded an agreement to establish an exclusive economic zone with the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (Tuna, 2020, p. 75). The Turkish Armed Forces maintain a 40,000-strong contingent in Northern Cyprus, known as the Turkish Peacekeeping Forces Command.⁹

The Syrian conflict, which started in 2011, is one of the most important issues on the regional and global political agenda. At the beginning of the conflict, the Turkish authorities were intent on overthrowing the regime of B. Assad, and therefore they actively supported the opposition forces. However, with the help of Iran and Russia, B. Assad managed to stay in power from 2011 until December 2024. In addition, Türkiye's strategic priorities in Syria have changed since the beginning of 2016 due to the active policy of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party and its ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which is banned in Türkiye and considered a terrorist organization (Altunışık, 2020, p. 5). Since 2017, Türkiye, Russia, and Iran have been holding regular meetings within the framework of the "Astana

format" to maintain the ceasefire and ensure the adoption of confidence-building measures between the conflicting parties in Syria. It is also worth noting that since 2016, the Turkish army has carried out five successful military operations in Syria: Operation Euphrates Shield from August 2016 to March 2017, Operation Olive Branch in January-March 2018, Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, Operation Winter Eagle in February 2022, and Operation Claw-Sword in November 2022.¹⁰ As a result of the overthrow of the Assad regime by pro-Turkish forces in December 2024, Ankara has strengthened its position in Syria.

Iraq is an important neighboring country for Türkiye in terms of security, energy, trade, and social interaction. Issues such as the Kurdish problem, terrorism, water distribution, energy resources, and the situation of Turkmens in Iraq occupy a special place in the relations between the two countries. Now, another important area in Turkish-Iraqi relations is the "Development Road" transport project. During the official visit of Turkish President R.T. Erdoğan to Iraq on 22 April 2024, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on this project.¹¹

Before R.T. Erdoğan came to power in 2003, there was no progress in Turkish-Qatari relations. Until 2010, bilateral relations mainly developed in the trade and economic sphere, but with the onset of the Arab Spring, security issues came to the fore. A new page in Turkish-Qatari ties was opened on December 19, 2014, when a memorandum of understanding was signed aimed at strengthening bilateral military and defense cooperation and allowing Türkiye

⁷ Türkiye — Libya Siyasi İlişkileri // Türkiye Cumhuriyet Dışişleri Bakanlığı. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-libya-siyasi-iliskileri.tr.mfa> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

⁸ Kıbrıs meselesinin tarihçesi, BM müzakerelerinin başlangıcı // Türkiye Cumhuriyet Dışişleri Bakanlığı. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/kibris-meselesinin-tarihcesi_-bm-muzakerelerinin-baslangici.tr.mfa (accessed: 21.03.2024).

⁹ Ankara adimini ilan etti... İşte Türkiye'nin KKTC'deki askeri gücü // Star. September 30, 2022. URL: <https://www.star.com.tr/guncel/ankara-adimini-ilan-etti-iste-turkiyenin-kktcdaki-askeri-gucu-haber-1739872/> (accessed: 23.03.2024).

¹⁰ Türkiye — Suriye Siyasi İlişkileri // Türkiye Cumhuriyet Dışişleri Bakanlığı. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-suriye-siyasi-iliskileri-.tr.mfa> (accessed: 23.03.2024).

¹¹ Lakstygai I. Türkiye Involves Qatar and the UAE in the Transport Corridor Through Iraq // Vedomosti. April 23, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/economics/articles/2024/04/23/1033649-turtsiya-vovlekaet> (accessed: 24.04.2024).

to establish a military base in Qatar (Kınık, 2022, p. 31). As a result, Türkiye opened its first foreign military base in Qatar in 2015 (Shlykov, 2023, p. 146). The Turkish factor in Qatar increased in 2017–2020 — during the ‘Qatar blockade.’ It was with Türkiye’s support that the coup attempt in Qatar was prevented, which made the blockade effectively meaningless (Duran, 2022, p. 169). It is also worth noting that over the past decade, more than 90 agreements have been signed within the framework of the Türkiye — Qatar Supreme Strategic Committee, established in 2014.¹²

Turkish-Somali relations acquired a new character after the official visit of R.T. Erdoğan to Somalia on August 19, 2011.¹³ Following this visit, Türkiye’s largest overseas aid operation began, and since then more than USD 1 billion has been provided to Somalia in the field of humanitarian aid and development.¹⁴ During this period, trade between the two countries increased and military and security cooperation expanded. Subsequently, a Turkish military training base near Mogadishu was opened in 2017 to train and strengthen the Somali army (Şahin, 2022). A major event in bilateral relations was the signing of a framework agreement on defense and economic cooperation between the countries on February 8, 2024. The agreement covers defense and security issues and is intended for a period of 10 years of cooperation. Under the terms of this agreement, the two countries will establish a joint naval force that will protect Somalia’s maritime territory and facilitate the development of marine resources for 10 years (Devecioğlu, 2024, p. 9).

¹² Karyağdı Duran Z.H. Türkiye ile Katar pek çok alanda güçlü ilişkilerini koruyor // Anadolu Ajansı. July 18, 2023. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/turkiye-ile-katar-pek-cok-alanda-guclu-iliskilerini-koruyor/2948417> (accessed: 27.03.2024).

¹³ Türkiye — Somali Siyasi İlişkileri // Türkiye Cumhuriyet Dışişleri Bakanlığı. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-somali-siyasi-iliskileri.tr.mfa> (accessed: 27.03.2024).

¹⁴ Ibid.

Thus, as a result of the policy pursued by R.T. Erdoğan’s Türkiye over the past 20 years, a Turkish geopolitics in the Middle East has emerged, which the author of this article calls the Turkish crescent. The Turkish crescent, on the one hand, is aimed at strengthening Türkiye’s position in the region and, on the other, at containing Iran’s ambitions. Today, the Iranian and Turkish crescents are directly clashing in Syria, Iraq, and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijani Factor in the Iranian and Turkish Crescents

The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the Republic of Azerbaijan within the framework of the Iranian crescent should be analyzed in terms of three main factors.

Ethnic factor

The number of Azerbaijani Turks living in Iran is about 30 million people (Aghazada, 2023, pp. 724–725); and after the victory of Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War, there has been a rise in political nationalism among them. This worries the Iranian authorities and forces them to take this factor into account in their relations with Azerbaijan.

Religious-ideological factor

Most of the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan professes Islam of the Ja‘fari school, which is the official religion of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Article 12 of the country’s constitution.¹⁵ It is worth noting separately that there is a concept of ‘taqlid’ in the Ja‘fari school, which originated in the 10th century but became widespread after the collapse of the Afsharid Empire in the 18th century. ‘Taqlid’ means that every Muslim must follow an authoritative religious scholar. Its

¹⁵ Full text of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran with amendments [Matne kamile qanune esasi cumhuriye eslamiye Iran hemrah ba eslahat] // Lorestan University. (In Persian). URL: https://www.lu.ac.ir/uploads/123456_20436.pdf (accessed: 24.03.2024).

active use since the mid-18th century is purely political in nature, because after the collapse of the Afsharid Empire, the territory from the then-northwestern India to Iraq and the North Caucasus was lost, which had been first part of the Safavid Empire and then part of the Afsharid Empire. In order to maintain influence among the peoples of the ‘lost territories,’ the religious aristocracy paid special attention to ‘taqlid’ from the mid-18th century. This policy continued in the 19th and 20th centuries, even during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) in Iran, indicating the important role of the religious aristocracy in Iran’s political life before the 1979 revolution.¹⁶

However, while the religious factor had been used by the Iranian authorities in limited circumstances before, after the religious aristocracy came to power in Iran in 1979, it became one of the main foreign policy instruments. For example, since the early 1990s, the Iranian authorities have sent religious figures to various cities of the Republic of Azerbaijan in order to attract the masses loyal to the Iranian clerics. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the Republic of Azerbaijan became one of the “first and main targets of Iranian-Shi’a attention” (Sazhin, 2019, p. 165).

Geopolitical factor

Türkiye and Israel have close ties with Azerbaijan. For Türkiye, Azerbaijan is a “bridge” on the way to the Central Asian region. Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and the transformation of the Turkic Council into a full-fledged Organization of Turkic States in 2021 were assessed in Tehran as challenges to its national interests. Although Iranian officials supported Azerbaijan

in their statements and congratulated it on its victory in the Second Karabakh War (Filin, Koklikov & Khodunov, 2021, p. 21). In the context of Israel’s new peripheral policy, directed largely against Tehran, Tel Aviv pays special attention to Azerbaijan, as a significant part of Iran’s population is made up of ethnic Azerbaijanis. In this regard, Azerbaijan is perceived by the Iranian authorities as a “source of threat,” which from time to time becomes the cause of tension in bilateral relations between Baku and Tehran.

As far as Türkiye’s policy towards Azerbaijan is concerned, first of all, it should be considered from the point of view of three factors.

Ethnolinguistic factor

Azerbaijani and Anatolian Turks belong to the Oghuz group of Turkic-speaking peoples; in connection with it, the Azerbaijani and Turkish languages are very similar, and even before the 16th century, the ancestors of the present Azerbaijani Turks and Anatolian Turks spoke the same dialect. In this regard, the famous modern Turkish historian İ. Ortaylı, in his interview, noted the following: “Why do we love the Azerbaijani dialect? Because it is our youth, the youth of our culture and our language, and everyone loves their youth.”¹⁷ It is precisely due to the language factor that Turkish soft power works most effectively in Azerbaijan compared to other directions of Ankara’s foreign policy.

Religious-ideological factor

Common Turkic origin, religious unity, and similar culture, customs, and traditions are among the factors that determine the level and pace of development of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. The Turkic identity is especially clearly manifested in bilateral relations and is

¹⁶ Compared to Iran, where the religious aristocracy has had serious levers of influence on all spheres of life in the country since the beginning of the 16th century until today, in Türkiye from 1923, after M.K. Atatürk proclaimed the Turkish Republic, until 2003, i.e., R.T. Erdoğan came to power, the religious aristocracy did not have any significant influence on the political life of the country.

¹⁷ Azərbaycanlılar Türk müdür // YouTube. January 13, 2013. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67xRXPgk-w> (accessed: 01.04.2024).

the cornerstone for strengthening the ties between the peoples of the two countries at the ideological level. The phrase “one nation, two states” is often used in relation to Türkiye and Azerbaijan, indicating the high level of relations (Avatkov, 2022).

Geopolitical factor

Azerbaijan’s geographical location allows it to play the role of a “bridge” between Türkiye and the Central Asian countries. In particular, after Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and the establishment of the Organization of Turkic States in 2021, the importance of Azerbaijan in promoting Turkish interests in Central Asia has increased. The issue of implementing the Zangezur Corridor has appeared on the agenda, the opening of which, on the one hand, will ensure land communication between Türkiye and the main part of Azerbaijan, and, on the other, will give an impetus to the development of multilateral relations between the members of the Organization of Turkic States. With the signing of the Shusha Declaration on June 15, 2021, Türkiye and Azerbaijan officially became military allies (Guzaerov, 2023).

It should be noted that historically, ethnolinguistic and religious-ideological factors have played a key role in the interaction between Eastern Anatolia, the South Caucasus, and northwestern Iran. The Azerbaijani Turks, who profess the Ja’fari school of Islam like the Persians and have common ethnic roots with the Anatolian Turks, were a kind of link in the interaction between the Persians and the Anatolian Turks throughout the long Middle Ages. However, with the incorporation of the South Caucasus into the Russian Empire in the early 19th century, the Azerbaijani Turks lost this ‘status.’ And after 1991, i.e., after gaining independence, the Republic of Azerbaijan became primarily a ‘field’ of religious and ideological struggle between Türkiye and Iran.

Even though Türkiye is traditionally considered a Sunni country and Azerbaijan is a Shi’a country, this factor not only does not hinder the development of bilateral relations but also contributes to changing the religious climate in the societies of these countries. For example, in the last 30 years, Azerbaijan has undergone a process of Sunnitization, while in Türkiye, on the contrary, a process of Shi’itization of the population has been observed, in particular in Eastern Anatolia. However, it is worth noting that in the Shi’itization of the population of Türkiye, a special role is played not by the religious figures of the Republic of Azerbaijan, but by the ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran and being its citizens. If for Ankara the Sunnization of the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the future can have a serious impact on the Azerbaijanis living in the territory of Iran, thereby strengthening Türkiye’s position within Iran and even forming a fifth column, then Tehran, in order to form a loyal mass in Türkiye, uses its citizens — the ethnic Azerbaijanis — in the Shi’itization of the Turkish population due to the language factor. In other words, the religious-ideological factor occupies a key place in the long-term policy of Türkiye and Iran towards each other, and the Azerbaijani factor is an important tool in the implementation of their strategy against each other.

It is also worth noting that after Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War, a ‘*geopolitical new moon*’ is being observed in the South Caucasus. The term refers to the new geopolitical realities that have emerged in the region since the Second Karabakh War and are influencing the regional security architecture. Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War not only upset the balance of power and changed the geopolitical atmosphere in the region but also contributed to the formation of a new, but not yet fully established, regional status quo in the South Caucasus. Under these conditions, special

attention is being paid to intra-regional integration processes, in particular, the unblocking of all transport networks in the South Caucasus.

The results and consequences of the Second Karabakh War forced Iran to reconsider its policy in the South Caucasus (Golmohammadi & Markedonov, 2024, p. 154). While Iran pursues an active policy in the Middle East, it is practically absent in the South Caucasus due to the strong Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem, strengthened after the signing of the Shusha Declaration in 2021, and the limited resources of the Iranian authorities in this region. In particular, the absence of pro-Iranian proxy forces in the South Caucasus is the major reason why Iran remains outside the main geopolitical processes in this region. After all, thanks to its proxy forces in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, the Iranian authorities manage to play their geopolitical ‘game’ in the Middle East.

For Türkiye, the Second Karabakh War was on the one hand a successful experience in terms of achieving results by combining its growing military power with the diplomatic moves of recent years, and on the other hand, Azerbaijan’s victory in the war was important for Türkiye in terms of strengthening its leadership in the Turkic world (Valiyev, 2021, p. 13). The ‘geopolitical new moon’ in the South Caucasus allows the Turkish authorities to limit Tehran’s attempts in the Azerbaijani link of the Iranian crescent as much as possible, as well as to expand military and political ties with the countries of Central Asia. Moreover, the new geopolitical realities create favorable conditions for the development of trade and transport routes between Türkiye and the countries of Central Asia.

Conclusion

In light of the aforementioned evidence, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has been gradually expanding its influence in the Middle East. In particular, because of the Arab Spring, a historic opportunity arose to change the system of regional security in the Middle East, in which Iran not only plays one of the key roles but also claims to be the leader of the region. Tehran has thus succeeded in creating an Iranian crescent, i.e., a zone of influence in the Middle East that regional and global players are forced to take into account.

R.T. Erdoğan, who became the head of Türkiye in 2003, began to gradually develop military and political ties with the countries of the Middle East. The geopolitical changes in the region after the Arab Spring also allowed Ankara to strengthen its influence in the Middle East. As a result, a Turkish crescent was formed opposite the Iranian crescent. Moreover, while Tehran mainly uses proxies in the countries of the Iranian crescent, Ankara officially has its own armed forces, unlike its rival in the countries of the Turkish crescent.

Having historical, cultural, ethno-linguistic, and religious-ideological ties with Iran and Türkiye, Azerbaijan is an important link in the clash of the Iranian and Turkish crescents. In this rivalry, the religious and ideological dimension is acutely evident, which is the cornerstone of the stumbling block in the Azerbaijani segment of the Iranian and Turkish crescents. Considering the successful policy of the Turkish authorities towards Azerbaijan, including the full support provided to Baku before and after the Second Karabakh War, it can be argued that Iran lost to Türkiye in the Azerbaijani segment of the clash of the two crescents.

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