



## THE CASPIAN REGION AND THE CAUCASUS: SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

## КАСПИЙСКИЙ РЕГИОН И КАВКАЗ: БЕЗОПАСНОСТЬ И РАЗВИТИЕ

DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2024-26-3-502-519  
EDN: BGCCGI

Research article / Научная статья

### Iran's Security Policy in the Caspian Region

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**Abstract.** The Caspian region is a strategically important area in the world. Iran and the USSR had an agreement dividing the Caspian Sea before the fall of the Soviet Union. This article analyzes Iran's foreign policy and security strategy in the Caspian Sea, emphasizing the objectives and actions undertaken by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The problem-chronological method, content analysis, and event analysis are used in this paper. As a result, it was revealed that Iran sought to achieve an equitable distribution of the Caspian Sea waters from its perspective. Iran defended this position at the summits of the Caspian states, but it is unclear exactly what proportion of the waters Iran owns, which is a major factor in the Iranian side's delay in ratifying the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. In terms of security and preventing foreign military presence in the Caspian region, Iran is generally satisfied with the agreements made with the Caspian countries.

**Keywords:** Caspian region, Iran, security policy, terrorism, border control, strategic interests, regional security

**For citation:** Medushevskii, N.A., Filin, N.A., Koklikov, V.O., & SamoiloVA, E.E. (2024). Iran's security policy in the Caspian region. *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, 26(3), 502–519. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2024-26-3-502-519>

**Acknowledgements:** The research is supported within the program “Project Scientific Collectives of RSUH/RGGU” in 2023. Project title: “Socio-political development of modern Iran through the prism of Iranian media texts.”

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## Политика Ирана в области безопасности в Каспийском регионе

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**Аннотация.** Каспийский регион, в контексте усиливающегося глобального противостояния между «Востоком» и «Западом», выступает одним из наиболее стратегически важных на Евразийском континенте. С 1990-х гг. дискуссии по поводу Каспийского моря разворачиваются вокруг двух основных тем: энергетических ресурсов и обеспечения безопасности. Важность этих вопросов привела к формированию различных и по большей части противоречивых взглядов в прикаспийских странах по поводу правового статуса и оптимального использования каспийских ресурсов. В исследовании рассмотрен подход Ирана к внешней политике и безопасности в Каспийском море, чтобы ответить на вопрос, какие цели преследует Исламская Республика Иран по этому вопросу и какие меры были предприняты в данном отношении. Были применены проблемно-хронологический метод, контент-анализ и ивент-анализ. В результате было выявлено, что Иран преследовал цель добиться равноправного, с его точки зрения, распределения акватории Каспия, отстаивая свою точку зрения на саммитах прикаспийских государств, однако точный процент акватории, принадлежащей Ирану, не определен до сих пор, что во многом и обуславливает затягивание иранской стороны с ратификацией Конвенции о правовом статусе Каспийского моря. В то же время Иран в целом удовлетворен достигнутыми соглашениями с прикаспийскими странами в области безопасности и недопущения иностранного военного присутствия на Каспии.

**Ключевые слова:** Каспийский регион, Иран, политика безопасности, терроризм, пограничный контроль, стратегические интересы, региональная безопасность

**Благодарности:** Исследование выполнено в рамках программы «Проектные научные коллективы РГГУ» в 2023 г. Название проекта — «Социально-политическое развитие современного Ирана через призму текстов иранских СМИ».

**Для цитирования:** Медушевский Н.А., Филин Н.А., Кокликов В.О., Самойлова Е.Е. Политика Ирана в области безопасности в Каспийском регионе // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Политология. 2024. Т. 26. №3. С. 502–519. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2024-26-3-502-519>

### Introduction

The contemporary world is evolving inside a crisis paradigm. The political rift between the “Western world,” which comprises the nations of Europe, the USA, Canada, Japan, Australia, and the global majority, has become increasingly apparent during the past 10 years. The dispute stems from the notion of a “unipolar world” under the leadership of the United States, which has shaped global affairs since the conclusion of the Cold War [Pfanenstiel, Yatsenko, Maksimov, Molodykh 2019]. Countries that

do not belong to the Western coalition oppose this model to the idea of a multipolar world, in which leading roles should be played by states that are leaders in global development, regardless of their affiliation with the club of liberal democracies.

In this regard, we can talk about the formation of a fairly large conditional coalition of countries that are opponents of the unipolar world order. This coalition certainly includes Russia, China, India, South Africa, and Brazil—i.e., the BRICS group of countries—as well as a number of countries that support this agenda [Podlesny 2022]. Among them, the key role is undoubtedly played by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has been developing for many decades under the conditions of sanctions pressure from Western countries and is the leading opponent of the Western-centric model of world order in the Greater Middle East.

The Caspian Sea region is one of the most important areas for Iranian strategy. This region is valuable because it links Iran and Russia, the two main geopolitical actors in the area, and because trade and economic connection between these two nations is always expanding. Furthermore, this area is crucial to Russia's connections with the southern nations of the continent, such as Pakistan and India. Given that Russia now views both Iran and India as crucial allies in the “global confrontation,” maintaining open lines of communication with them is essential to carrying out a successful regional strategy and generating revenue from trade. It is no coincidence that it is in the Caspian region that the “North-South” transport corridor is currently being created with a total length from St. Petersburg to the port of Mumbai (Bombay) of 7,200 km.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, security and mitigating the risks of destabilization are essential aspects of regional policy that are increasingly being regulated by national laws and executive branch practices in addition to being the focus of international cooperation amongst nations that have access to the Caspian Sea.

In Russian historiography, there are quite a large number of works devoted to the policies of Russia and the CIS countries in the Caspian region. Among them, for example, the book by K.A. Markelov “The Greater Caspian in the Geopolitical Dimension” published in 2020 [Markelov 2020], the monograph by M.K. Magomedov “The Caspian on the Geopolitical Routes of Northern Eurasia: Energy-Political and Transport Dimension at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries” [Magomedov 2018],

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The North-South Transport Corridor was created to attract transit cargo flows from India, Iran and other Persian Gulf countries to Russian territory (via the Caspian Sea), and further to Northern and Western Europe. International North-South Transport Corridor — Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Retrieved November 1, 2016, from: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/economic\\_diplomacy/1537456/#:~:text=International transport corridor \(ITC\) «North — South»,to Northern and Western Europe](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/economic_diplomacy/1537456/#:~:text=International transport corridor (ITC) «North — South»,to Northern and Western Europe)

the book by P.G. Darabadi “The Caucasus and the Caspian in World History and Geopolitics of the 21st Century” [Darabadi 2010], etc. Simultaneously, Russia’s perspective dominates most published and well-known works about the Caspian region. Furthermore, the circumstances in the area are rapidly shifting, and novel challenges are appearing that have an impact on the degree of security in the region. All of this highlights the importance of looking at regional ties and concerns about maintaining stability and security from Iran’s perspective, which may be broadly defined in contemporary political practice as deciding the balance of regional growth. In light of the strengthening of Russian-Iranian collaboration and the development of a synergistic impact of regional policy, such an approach—which is based on the examination of sources of Iranian origin—is undoubtedly very important and has a clear practical importance.

However, there is a joint article by an Iranian postgraduate student studying in Russia, M. Khagbin, and a Russian expert working in Iran, A.N. Zhivotenov, “Iran’s Position on the Ratification of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in the Context of Integration Processes in the Caspian” [Haqqbin, Zhivotenov 2021], which attempts to consider Iran’s policy (as well as the opinion of the Iranian public) in relation to the Caspian problem in the context of regional security.

### **Background of the issue**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tehran found itself with its once stable northern border turning into a potentially conflict-filled zone. While the area around the Caspian Sea used to be a line of contact between just two states—the Islamic Republic of Iran and the USSR—after 1991, Iran found four neighbours with whom it had to build relations. In addition, exploration of hydrocarbon resources in the Caspian Sea has increased its geopolitical importance several times over and given rise to serious competition at the regional and international levels [Chernyavsky 2002]. The newly independent countries recognized all the rights and obligations arising from the previous Iranian-Soviet agreements at the highest level in the Minsk Agreement in December 1991 and in the Alma-Ata Declaration signed in the same year. At the suggestion of the then Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the five Caspian states discussed the possibility of creating a “Caspian Economic Cooperation Organization” at a meeting in Tehran on February 17, 1992 [Momtaz 1995: 123]. The political and economic problems of the new states forced them to use the energy resources of the Caspian Sea to overcome their own crises, and then disputes began about the legal status of the Caspian Sea. In particular, after Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan signed agreements with Western oil companies and opened the way to the Caspian for

American and British companies. In response, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia strongly protested that the legal status of the Caspian Sea had become uncertain.

Since 1998, Russia has signed bilateral agreements with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan on the division of the Caspian Sea and the demarcation of the border. In 2002, the first official summit of the heads of the five Caspian states after the collapse of the Soviet Union was held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, where environmental issues and possible options for dividing the Caspian were discussed, and in May 2003, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan signed an agreement on the division of the northern and central parts of the Caspian Sea among themselves (19, 27, and 18 percent, respectively). Iran considered any agreement that contradicted the general agreement to be invalid and illegal and continued to insist that it owned 20 percent of the Caspian Sea [Maleki 2009: 147].

During the Second Summit of the Caspian Leaders in October 2007 in Tehran, the Final Declaration of the Caspian Summit was signed. This proclamation states that the Caspian Sea's territory should only be used for peaceful purposes and that no nation should be permitted to carry out military operations there. Iran, which has continuously resisted any military presence in the Caspian (particularly Western governments hostile to the Islamic Republic), represented its interests and objectives in this statement. The leaders of the five states further underlined that the spread of nuclear weapons inside the region is prohibited. In addition, Iran has again proposed creating the Caspian Economic Cooperation Organization [Mousavi 2009: 10], but to date it has not been created.

During this period, despite negotiations with neighbouring countries on the division of the Caspian Sea territory, Russia and Turkmenistan defended a common plan for dividing the seabed based on a modified median line of the coastline. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan insisted on implementing a plan for a full division of the surface and seabed. The Islamic Republic of Iran, which wanted to complete the process of determining the legal status of the Caspian Sea in accordance with the agreements of 1921 and 1940, called full common use of the water area its main priority, which the other four countries did not agree with. The fact is that if the Caspian was divided along the median line between five countries, Iran would receive only 11% of its water area and be very poor in mineral resources, and it could not suit the Iranian government, which advocates for Iran's equal status in all international treaties. From the point of view of the Iranian authorities, this means that when dividing the sectors, Iran should receive 20% of the territory, and its mineral wealth should be comparable to that of other countries. This position of Iran largely explained such great difficulties in the negotiations of the five Caspian countries. However, due to the common interest of the regional countries in maintaining peace and stability, these contradictions never

escalated into open conflicts and were the subject of negotiations, albeit quite difficult ones. At the same time, part of Iranian society puts forward unrealistic claims, wanting Iran to get as much as 50% of the Caspian Sea, claiming that Iran allegedly owned such a share before the collapse of the USSR, although this is not true: according to the treaties of 1921 and 1940, the countries received only a 10-mile zone as their property, and the main part of the Caspian was in common use and was not divided [Haqqbin, Zhivotenkov 2021].

The third summit took place in November 2010 in Baku, during which agreements were reached on security in the Caspian Sea. At that time, the parties came closer to concluding an agreement on the legal status of the Caspian Sea. The Agreement on Cooperation in the Sphere of Security in the Caspian Sea was signed on November 18, 2010, and additional agreements were added to the document in 2014 and 2021. According to the main provisions of the document, ensuring security in the Caspian Sea is assigned exclusively to the Caspian states. Within the framework of this agreement, the parties committed to cooperating in the fight against terrorism, organized crime, smuggling, and illegal trafficking of weapons, drugs, and money. In addition, the document outlines issues of ensuring the safety of maritime navigation, the fight against poaching, human trafficking, and illegal migration.<sup>2</sup>

In May 2021, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Iran's parliament) approved a draft protocol on cooperation in combating organized crime in the Caspian Sea, supplementing the Caspian Sea Security Cooperation Agreement. A representative of the Islamic Consultative Assembly's Legal Committee commented on the draft law as follows: "The draft law was prepared to ensure Iran's national interests in the Caspian Sea, and regional cooperation with participating countries can contribute to ensuring the security of the Caspian Sea."<sup>3</sup>

The fourth summit of the Caspian states took place in late September 2014 in Astrakhan. At this summit, in addition to security issues and issues related to legal status, environmental problems were also discussed. The following documents were signed within the framework of the summit: Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Hydrometeorology of the Caspian Sea, Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Prevention and Elimination of Emergency Situations in the Caspian Sea, Agreement on the Conservation and Rational Use of Aquatic Biological Resources of the Caspian Sea.

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<sup>2</sup> *Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA)*. Retrieved April 22, 2024, from <https://www.isna.ir/news/93042514627/> - قانون موافقتنامه-مربوط به همکاری در زمینه امنیت در دریای خزر ابلاغ شد  
همکاری-در-زمینه-امنیت-در-دریای-خزر

<sup>3</sup> *قانون سند الحاقی (پروتکل) در زمینه مبارزه با جرائم سازمان‌یافته*. All rights reserved. Retrieved April 21, 2024, from <https://www.ekhtebar.ir/>  
*Ekhtebar*. Retrieved April 21, 2024, from <https://www.ekhtebar.ir/>

Finally, after numerous negotiations, in August 2018, the leaders of the Caspian states gathered for the fifth summit in Aktau (Kazakhstan) and discussed the definition of the legal status of the Caspian Sea, economic cooperation, environmental issues, logistics, protection of biological resources, security issues, as well as regional and international issues. On August 12, 2018, the parties signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea.<sup>4</sup> In parallel, six more documents were signed in Kazakhstan regarding the fight against organized crime, drugs, etc. Three of them are additional protocols to the Agreement on Cooperation in Security in the Caspian Sea, adopted in 2010.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the departments were informed that, in order to allow the countries to exercise their sovereign rights to use the substrate's resources and other lawful economic activities related to the development of seabed resources, the division of the Caspian Sea bottom should be carried out by agreement between the countries while taking into account generally accepted principles and norms of international law. The parties to the Agreement emphasized that in order to combat international terrorism and its financing, smuggling of weapons, drugs, psychoactive substances and their precursors, illegal extraction (fishing) of aquatic biological resources, as well as preventing illegal immigration and combating smuggling at sea and other crimes in the Caspian Sea, they are ready to cooperate with each other. The Agreement states that in order to ensure the effective implementation of the terms of this document, as well as cooperation in the Caspian Sea, the parties will create a mechanism for regular consultations of the five countries at the highest level in accordance with the agreed procedure under the control of the ministries of foreign affairs, the rotation of which will occur at least once a year in one of the countries.<sup>6</sup>

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said the following about this agreement: “The agreement completely prohibits the movement of foreign warships in the Caspian Sea, which is extremely important from the point of view of the national security of the Caspian states.” And the then Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran said: “According to the laws, up to 15 nautical miles from the land of each country is considered its coastline, and up to 10 kilometers after that—the fishing area. Until a final agreement on the division of the territory of the Caspian Sea is reached, this same law is in effect.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. *President of Russia*. Retrieved April 10, 2024, from <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5328>

<sup>5</sup> اظهار نظر کارشناسی درباره: “لایحه پروتکل همکاری در زمینه مبارزه با ج. All rights reserved. زمینه امنیت در (مورخ ۲۷ آبان ۱۳۸۹ - ۱۸ نوامبر ۲۰۱۰) *Civilica*. Retrieved April 21, 2024, from <https://civilica.com/doc/1162871/>

<sup>6</sup> کنوانسیون رژیم حقوقی دریای خزر امضا شد/ متن کامل کنوانسیون // پایگاه اطلاع رسانی ریاست جمهوری اسلامی ایران Retrieved April 23, 2024, from <https://www.president.ir/fa/105642>

<sup>7</sup> نگاهی سریع به رژیم حقوقی دریای خزر در گذر تاریخ / Retrieved April 22, 2024 from <https://farsi.alarabiya.net/iran/2019/08/12/>

The agreement was extremely important for the Caspian Sea countries, as the path to its signing involved many disagreements over five summits and 48 working group meetings.<sup>8</sup> The exact borders of the countries in the waters and on the seabed of the Caspian Sea are still in question, although the signed agreement states that “the definition of the boundaries of internal and territorial waters among the Caspian states will be carried out in accordance with the agreement between these countries, taking into account the principles and norms of international law.” The Islamic Republic of Iran still insists on its 20 percent share,<sup>9</sup> and the Iranian Navy has already conducted several military exercises in the Caspian Sea.<sup>10</sup> Some Iranians perceived the agreement as a “betrayal,” believing that Iran’s share in the division of the Caspian Sea was only 11%, but officials, including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, denied this, saying that Iran’s share would ultimately be significantly more than 11%, although it had not yet been precisely determined, and that Iran did not make any concessions [Haqqbin, Zhivotenkov 2021].

On June 29, 2022, the sixth round of talks between the Caspian states was held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. For the first time, Iran’s new president Ebrahim Raisi attended the event instead of Hassan Rouhani. Naturally, the security issue is still considered a priority for Iran in the Caspian Sea talks. Although the definition of the boundaries of the waters and the seabed of the Caspian Sea remained unresolved at this meeting, the final statement published following the meeting of the heads of the Caspian states reached agreements on the following issues:

1. Ensuring security and stability in the region;
2. Ensuring stability and balance in the issue of armaments of the Caspian states, military development within reasonable limits, taking into account the interests of all Caspian states without compromising each other’s security;
3. Compliance with agreed measures in the field of military activities, predictability and transparency of exercises;
4. The impossibility of the presence of armed forces of other countries in the Caspian Sea;
5. The inadmissibility of providing coastal territory to a third country for conducting military operations against another country in this region.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> World News (2018). *IRNA News Agency*. Retrieved April 22, 2024, from <https://www.irna.ir/news/82832789/> اجلاس-سران-کشورهای-ساحلی-خزر-نیمه-دوم-2018-برگزار-می-شود

<sup>9</sup> Art. 21369. November 28, 2023. *حراست ایران از 20 درصد خزر // روزنامه خراسان*.

<sup>10</sup> *Tasnim News*. Retrieved 23, 2024, from <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/04/09/2530251/> ارتش در دریای خزر آغاز شد

<sup>11</sup> *Tabnak*. Retrieved April 23, 2024, from <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1127252/> بیانیه پایانی نشست کشورهای ساحلی خزر+جزئیات/رئیس و پوتین در آغوش یکدیگر+عکس پوتین-در-آغوش-یکدیگر-عکس



### Terrorism in the Caspian Sea

The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea currently forms the basis for internal cooperation among the Caspian Five countries. The document has become fundamental for the system of interaction between the five countries; it is even called a kind of Constitution of the Caspian Sea [Pivovarov 2019]. As V.V. Putin noted, “the multifaceted interaction of the Caspian Five states has received a modern legal basis for many years to come... The Convention secures for the five states exclusive and sovereign rights to the Caspian Sea, responsible development and use of its subsoil and other resources, reliably guarantees the resolution of all pressing issues based on the principles of consensus and mutual consideration of interests, ensures a truly peaceful status of the Caspian Sea, and the absence of armed forces of non-regional states in the Caspian.”<sup>12</sup>

Following the revolutionary events of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and as the internal armed conflict in Syria and Iraq intensified, a part of the population of the Caspian region joined the ranks of international terrorist organizations (ITOs), so the problem of radicalization of Islam has been one of the most important in the last decade. Iran, which took a direct part in the confrontation with terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, is at the forefront of the fight against this problem, and Tehran’s failure in the international war against radical ideas will bring new waves of extremists to the Caspian. This, in turn, triggers a chain reaction and poses threats to economic and energy security.

In this regard, it is important to note the principle of equal and indivisible security,<sup>13</sup> according to which the security of one country is not possible without ensuring the security of neighbouring states. It also follows that threats arising in one part of the region extend to others. Therefore, internal cooperation is necessary to ensure stability at the local level. This, in turn, is the basis for global interaction with other external actors. The situation in the Caspian region is similar: Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Russia are all equally concerned about security challenges. As a result, the issue of radicalization in one nation becomes a universal one, which will ultimately cause instability in every state.

Iran and Turkmenistan directly border Afghanistan and are in close proximity to ITO activity zones in the Near and Middle East, which creates a threat of the spread of extremist ideology among the local population. However, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, being relatively remote from the hotbeds

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<sup>12</sup> Statement by Vladimir Putin following the Fifth Caspian Summit, August 12, 2018. *President of Russia*. Retrieved April 13, 2024, from <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58297>

<sup>13</sup> Russia is forming a new security architecture in Eurasia, Lavrov said. *RIA Novosti*. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from <https://ria.ru/20240313/bezopasnost-1932705133.html>

of instability, are no less interested in counterterrorism mechanisms since they fully face all the associated problems. One of the main ones is the recruitment of recruits from the population of the Caspian states. Iran is protected in this regard more than others due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of its citizens are Shiites—non-Orthodox Muslims—from the point of view of predominantly Sunni radical groups. At the same time, the proximity to Iraq and Afghanistan, where the situation is far from favorable, forces Iranian law enforcement and security agencies to strengthen measures to prevent threats from ITO activity in border areas. Iran is actively waging an internal struggle against cells of ITOs, whose members penetrate the territory of the IRI through neighboring states. It is also important that in the Iranian legal field there is no such thing as extradition of those accused of terrorism-related crimes. These people, if they are citizens of other countries (even those friendly to Iran), are tried within the country according to local laws. All this implies that the level of threats that the Islamic Republic faces does not allow for “lowering the temperature” and taking any other measures regarding this issue.

There are a number of signed agreements between Russia and Iran on the fight against terrorism at the level of various intelligence agencies and defence ministries [Medushevsky 2022]. One of these documents provides for a mutual exchange of information related to warning signals about planned crimes on the territory of the Russian Federation or Iran,<sup>14</sup> which allows the intelligence services to work quite freely. In addition, the well-coordinated partnership between the two countries expanded on a larger scale with the onset of the Syrian crisis—Russia and Iran together helped the SAR government army carry out work to identify and eliminate terrorist groups, including ISIS\* and the cells under its control.

Following the signing of the JCPOA and the lifting of some restrictions on arms supplies, Russia sold military equipment to Iran, in particular the S-300 systems. In August 2016, Hassan Rouhani and Vladimir Putin discussed the conclusion of a bilateral military agreement and the development of military-technical cooperation between the two countries.<sup>15</sup> In March 2017, the countries signed

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<sup>14</sup> Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the extension of the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the mutual protection of classified information. Official Internet portal of legal information. Retrieved April 13, 2024 from <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202309260002?index=2>

\* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>15</sup> *Tasnim* مذاکره روحانی و پوتین برای "توسعه همکاری نظامی" / قرارداد نظامی جدیدی در راه است؟ *Tasnim News*. Retrieved April 23, 2024 from <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/05/17/1151046/> مذاکره روحانی و پوتین برای توسعه همکاری نظامی - قرارداد نظامی جدیدی در راه است

a joint statement on a roadmap for the implementation of cooperation projects. Iran and Russia viewed terrorism in all its forms and manifestations as one of the most serious threats to international peace and security, regional and international stability and sustainable development, and emphasized that any terrorist acts were criminal and unjustified, regardless of the motives, circumstances, time and persons who committed the terrorist act.

The parties also paid special attention to the need for collective international participation in the fight against terrorism based on international law, the UN Charter, respect for the sovereignty of countries directly affected by terrorist attacks, and without “double standards.” In this statement, the presidents of the two countries, emphasizing the importance of combating terrorism, including by concentrating international efforts on preventing violent extremism, welcomed the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution “A World Against Violence and Extremism (WAVE).” They also insisted on the need for a global confrontation with the idea of takfirism as the main driving force behind the inclination of young people to join terrorist groups.

In November 2017, the presidents of Iran, Russia and Azerbaijan held an official meeting to discuss the development of trilateral cooperation in various fields, including countering terrorism, extremism, peace and stability in the Caspian region and others. In June 2023, during a visit to Moscow, the Commander-in-Chief of the Law Enforcement Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Commander-in-Chief of the National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation signed a memorandum of understanding on developing and expanding security and military cooperation and exchanging experience in combating the emergence of unrest. The parties also agreed to develop bilateral cooperation in various fields, including counter-terrorism, combating drug trafficking, combating arms and ammunition smuggling, combating organized crime and other areas of law enforcement and security.<sup>16</sup>

In December 2023, the Iranian Majlis approved a draft agreement on cooperation in the field of information security between Iran and Russia.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of the government-written draft law, consisting of nine articles and an appendix, was defined

<sup>16</sup> IRNA News Agency. Retrieved April 23, 2024, from <https://www.irna.ir/news/85154696/> - تفاهم نامہ همکاری ی امضا کردند نامہ همکاری ی امضا کردند

<sup>17</sup> جزئیات موافقتنامه همکاری ی ا ی ران و روس ی در حوزه امن ی ت اطلاعات که در مجلس تصویب شد / دل ی بخش-بازنشر-1616501/59-جزئیات موافقتنامه-همکاری ی ا ی ران روس/Jamaran News and Information Center. Retrieved 23, 2024, from <https://www.jamaran.news/روس/ایران-روس/مخالفات-برخ-ی-نمایندگان-چ-ی-ست-ی-در-حوزه-امن-ی-ت-اطلاعات-که-در-مجلس-تصویب-شد-دل-ی-ل-نگران-ی-مخالفات-برخ-ی-تowards-the-end-to-the-end-of-the-war>

as follows: “combatting the specified threats and strengthening information security, combating crimes committed in the field of using information and communication technologies, technical and technological assistance and international cooperation.”<sup>18</sup> In April 2024, on the sidelines of the 12th International Meeting of High Representatives in Charge of Security Issues, members of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding on security issues. Based on this memorandum of understanding, the level of relations and cooperation between the two countries will increase in various strategic areas.<sup>19</sup>

The tragic events of recent years show that it is impossible to carry out a complete “cleansing” of radical elements in the territory of even one country (let alone an entire region). The most illustrative examples of these threats are the terrorist attacks in Iran. Among the most high-profile are the attacks by ISIS\* on the parliament building in central Tehran and on the Imam Khomeini mausoleum in 2017; the explosion during a military parade in Ahvaz in September 2018, for which the Patriotic Arab Democratic Movement in Ahvaz claimed responsibility; the terrorist attack on the territory of the Shah-Cheragh mausoleum in Shiraz and the shooting of law enforcement officers in the city of Iza in the fall of 2022. Returning to the topic of border security, one cannot miss the terrorist attacks in the province of Sistan and Baluchestan in southeastern Iran, where the border with Afghanistan and Pakistan runs. Over the past few years, this territory has become the sad record holder for the number of terrorist attacks. In December 2018, a suicide bomber from the Ansar al-Furqan group blew himself up in the city of Chabahar. Just a couple of months later, in February 2019, another terrorist, this time from the Jaysh al-Adl group, detonated an explosion near an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) bus. In December 2023, another terrorist attack occurred in the Rask region, killing more than a dozen police officers.

The terrorist attack during the funeral processions at the cemetery in the city of Kerman on January 3, 2024, on the anniversary of the death of IRGC General Qasem Soleimani, caused a large-scale resonance not only in Iranian society but also throughout the world. The Afghan cell of ISIS\*, Vilayat Khorasan\* (also ISIS-Khorasan\*, ISIS-Kh\*), claimed responsibility for this. During a meeting held in Tashkent on March 29, 2024, the Council of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) condemned a series of terrorist attacks in which the

<sup>18</sup> موافقتنامه همکاری امنیت اطلاعاتی ایران و روسیه چه پیامدهایی دارد؟ // عصر ایران Retrieved April 23, 2024, from <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/925446/ی-دارد>

<sup>19</sup> یادداشت-تفاهم-امنیتی-بین-ایران-و-روسیه-امضا شد Eghtesaad 24. Retrieved April 23, 2024, from <https://eghtesaad24.ir/fa/news/237272/یادداشت-تفاهم-امنیتی-بین-ایران-و-روسیه-امضا-شد>

\* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

\* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

group was involved. The published message spoke not only about the event in Kerman, but also about the terrorist attacks committed on March 22, 2024, in the Crocus City Hall building in the Moscow region and on March 26 in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The RATS SCO Council also reaffirmed its “commitment to an uncompromising fight against any manifestations of terrorism and expressed confidence in the speedy exposure and punishment of all organizers and perpetrators of these terrorist acts.”<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that at the time of writing this article (May 2024), three Caspian region states are full members of the SCO: Russia, Iran, and Kazakhstan.

Counterterrorism policy in Iran is considered to be a defence and security issue and is under the full control of the Supreme Leader.<sup>21</sup> The main organizations with counterterrorist responsibilities are the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the Law Enforcement Forces, the Armed Forces, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These units constantly coordinate with each other within the framework of the Supreme National Security Council, with the approval of the Supreme Leader, who has a wide range of powers: control over the three branches of government in the country, command of the army, determination of the main directions of domestic and foreign policy, and many others [Filin 2020]. The Chief of the General Staff, the Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC, and the Supreme Commanders of the Security Forces and the Armed Forces are also appointed by the Supreme Leader.<sup>22</sup>

The territorial and economic areas of the Caspian Sea are intertwined in such a way that its legal status among the Caspian states has not yet been fully determined in terms of international law, and in the general principles of international law, these issues should be resolved in accordance with the principle of justice between countries [Mohsen, Bagheri 2016: 144–145]. Most of the disagreements arose due to the important role of the Caspian Sea in oil and gas production. In fact, the disagreements between the coastal countries regarding the legal status of the Caspian Sea arise from the use and exploitation of the natural resources of the Caspian Sea by these countries, and issues such as shipping and fishing are not the subject of real disputes [Mohsen, Bagheri 2016: 153]. And this is even though the other four Caspian states have been extracting oil and gas from the bottom of the Caspian Sea in recent years, and Iran’s share in gas and oil production in the Caspian is zero [Kariani 2014: 198].

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<sup>20</sup> On the 41st meeting of the RATS SCO Council. *Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*. Retrieved April 15, 2024, from <https://ecrats.org/ru/press/news/9523/>

<sup>21</sup> Iranian Constitution, art 110 (1) and (2): the authorities and responsibilities of the Supreme Leader: 1. determining the overall politics of the Islamic Republic system of Iran after consultation with the Expediency Council, and 2. supervising the proper implementation of the general policies of the system.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, art 110 (1, 2, 4, 5 and 6).

The Caspian Sea division plan was first proposed by Azerbaijan and was strongly supported by Western companies due to the interests of oil corporations. In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many European companies signed major contracts with Caspian states to participate in oil exploration and production in the Caspian Sea (Valdani, Hosseini, 2016, p. 52).

The topic of the presence of other countries in the region and the militarization of the Caspian Sea has forced Iran to increasingly talk about security threats. The competition between the Caspian states, Russia and Turkey for energy supplies to the West has also disrupted Iran's energy security.

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan believed that their interests and national security would be in line with interaction with extra-regional powers in the Caspian Sea. Therefore, the issues related to the Caspian Sea in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran have become one of the most important issues of the country's diplomatic apparatus. Economic interests related to security issues, as well as diplomatic efforts to ensure Iran's historical rights in the Caspian Sea have increased its importance in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The absence of any type of weapons and military equipment in the Caspian Sea and the withdrawal of warships from the Caspian Sea have become some of Iran's important actions in this regard. In the process of militarization of the Caspian Sea, contrary to previous statements by the Russian authorities and some Caspian states regarding the prevention of the expansion of military exercises in the waters, there is strengthening and expansion of military units and the construction of military facilities in the Caspian Sea, and even at a faster pace than before [Al-Eslami, Hossein, Hosseini, Shiravand 2014: 126, 130].

In addition, the warm relations of its close neighbour, Azerbaijan, with Israel, which is actively trying to increase its economic, political, and military influence in the areas bordering Iran, may become a cause of instability for the political situation and interests of the Islamic Republic. In this context, by the early 2000s, a strategic alliance was formed between the United States, Israel, Turkey. and Azerbaijan to prevent the hegemony of Russia and Iran in the region [Mohammadi Al-Muti 2006: 100]. Therefore, to maintain security in foreign policy, Iran viewed the expansion of diplomatic, economic and military relations with the Caspian states as an obstacle to the presence of extra-regional powers in the Caspian, as well as a path to demilitarization of the Caspian Sea.

Compared with the other four Caspian Sea countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran has paid the most attention to the demilitarization of the Caspian Sea in line with Tehran's efforts to achieve a reduction in the level of hostilities and arms race in the Caspian Sea. The issues of peaceful settlement of differences and demilitarization

of the Caspian Sea were priorities on the agenda of the Iranian authorities at the second summit of the Caspian states in 2007, and such a policy has been pursued by Iran to this day. Iran has always wanted to use diplomatic solutions to reach agreements and bring the countries of the region closer together [Al-Eslami, Hossein, Hosseini, Shiravand 2014: 146].

To improve national security, Iran has pursued a policy of energy, economic and trade security with its neighbours in the Caspian region, and in this regard, many meetings have been held and many documents have been signed on cooperation in the fields of trade, finance, economy, tourism, culture, etc. From the perspective of Iran's foreign policy, such relations can also bring countries closer together so that the possibility of making decisions that threaten the security of the other side will be extremely unlikely.

The population of the Caspian territories, although predominantly Muslim, does not have a common identity based on religion, so the religious factor plays a minor role in local conflicts. However, the problem of radicalization of Islam is dangerous because it can further split the population of the Caspian five countries, which are not very united with each other, because of their different religions. Most Muslims living in the Caspian region are Sunnis, while Iranians and Azerbaijanis are predominantly Shiites. However, this factor does not affect the political orientation or activity of Azerbaijanis in any way—Iran and Azerbaijan still have rather tense relations for a number of reasons. For example, Azerbaijan's independence served as a catalyst for the growth of the importance of ethnic identification (to the detriment of pan-Iranian and Shiite) among Iranian Azerbaijanis. This is a factor that affects the overall stability of the regime in Iran and forces it to concentrate more resources on its domestic situation.

Political developments in Iran and the reaction to them directly affect the stability of the entire Caspian region. Iran is at the forefront of the fight against international terrorism. In case of failure, a huge region from Syria to Afghanistan and from the Strait of Hormuz to the Caspian Sea will be under threat. Energy security, the unimpeded operation of international transport corridors, and much, much more depend on this. The states of the Caspian region are focused on creating a peaceful and good-neighbourly atmosphere among themselves, but they place greater emphasis on interaction in the economic sphere than on cooperation in the security sphere, sometimes neglecting Iran's position. If the states of the Caspian region still manage to form a common political line and develop mechanisms to combat terrorism, this will guarantee their common security and will go far beyond the issue of energy resources. Thus, it can be said that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the Caspian Sea looks like this:

Iran believes that instability in the region is detrimental to the country's interests and security, and seeks to find ways to deal with it. In the economic sphere, the Islamic Republic seeks to comprehensively develop relations with neighbouring countries. Expanding diplomatic cooperation with those countries in the region that pursue a policy truly independent from the West, demilitarizing the Caspian Sea, and preventing the presence of extra-regional powers on the common borders of the Caspian states are undoubtedly considered priority issues for Iran, which also affect the security of other Caspian states. That is why Iran has always wanted the Caspian Sea to be a "sea of peace and stability" [Al-Eslami, Hossein, Hosseini, Shiravand 2014: 148–149]. At the same time, Iran remains the most important actor in the region in terms of security, containing the threat of extremist penetration into other countries not only in the Caspian region, but also further into the Middle East, Central Asia, Russia, etc.

### **Conclusion**

Iran's approach to the Caspian Sea is focused on two main goals: keeping the sea fairly divided and keeping it from becoming militarized. Iran has requested a united strategy for the Caspian Sea's partition, voicing displeasure with unilateral acts of delimitation. Nevertheless, the Iranian government signed all five of the main agreements and participated in all five Caspian state summits. The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea has never been ratified by the Iranian parliament, presumably because of concerns that it does not entirely align with Iranian national interests. However overall, Iran has continued to pursue stability and security in the Caspian region throughout the period under review; the country shares Russia's interests in preventing the militarization of the Caspian Sea and the entry of extra-regional actors into the region. Iran plays a stabilizing role in the architecture of regional security as it also acts as a barrier to the development of extremism and terrorism in the Middle East and the Caspian area. The Iranian government's and society's approaches to the Caspian Sea are somewhat different from one another. The government, particularly under Hassan Rouhani, takes a more moderate stance and is willing to make some concessions, but a large portion of the population has exaggerated and unrealistic expectations regarding this matter.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 23.06.2024

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 06.08.2024

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 30.08.2024



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