Iran’s Security Posture in the South Caucasus After the War in Ukraine

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Iran’s engagement in the South Caucasus needs a new diplomatic taxonomy. The invasion of Ukraine reframes the way Iran, Russia, and Turkey engage with each other to define this region. Conceptually, for Iran the war in Ukraine is an opportunity to transition from the margins of a global rules-based system to the epicentre of a regional status quo as a rules maker rather than a pariah. The key to this new taxonomy is a working relationship with Turkey and Russia, reigning over the ambitions of Azerbaijan, and restricting the scope for Israeli influence. In this scheme, Armenia is an instrumental junior partner of geopolitical but limited geoeconomics significance.

Iran does not have a sphere of influence in the South Caucasus. However, the cumulative effect of conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza have changed the security landscape and Iran is determined to be a co-author of the emerging status quo. The key to molding the security landscape in the South Caucasus is the changing nature of the trilateral relationship between Iran, Turkey and Russia. The Astana Forum in 2017 brought a series of previously discreet and compartmentalized consultations between the three powers to the fore. Initially, the three states convened to negotiate the future of the Syrian Arab Republic, limiting Israeli, French, and American influence in the Levant. This Concert of Three did not amount to a shared vision on the status quo but was more a
statement on who should frame it. The same can now be said of the Caucasus. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this Concert promotes a region-first approach, limits Western involvement, but does not share a positive common vision. In this scheme, Iran seeks to remain a rule-maker rather than a rule-taker.

Meeting Russia on the Margins

The war in Ukraine creates a new space of economic opportunity for Iran in the Caucasus. Up until 2015, Iran’s trade turnover with the entire Caucasus did not exceed $600 million. That kind of clout was underwhelming compared to Turkey, Russia, or the EU.¹ The lifting of economic sanctions in 2016 saw an impressive rebound in oil exports and standards of living in Iran, which reformists hoping for the inflow of Foreign Direct Investment and the curtailing of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) hold over the political landscape.² The reintroduction of sanctions crowded out economic and political competition to the IRGC,³ subdued the credibility of the opposition, and channeled the process of regime-transition towards status quo maintenance.⁴ The war in Ukraine incentivizes Moscow to cooperate with Tehran to circumvent sanctions and complete its very own “Pivot to the Pacific,” maintaining exports, while facilitating the supply of its war production.

Iran is likewise completing a turn towards the East, a process triggered by the erosion of the Joint and Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement. Iran’s “Look East” policy has never been quite uncontested,⁵ but the principle that regional security should be negotiated by regional powers has been a variable of Iran’s Caucasus policy for more than three decades. As noted by Vali Kaleji, Iran supported Shevardnadze’s “peaceful Caucasus Initiative,” Demirel’s “Stability Pact,” and Erdogan’s “Stability and Cooperation” platform. The common denominator between these ini-

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atives was that Iran was engaged as a stakeholder while “outside powers,” primarily the United States, were kept at arms’ length. Clearly, as long as Russia was the single biggest fossil fuels supplier for the EU, Russia was eager to ensure that Iran was not “over-engaged” in the Caucasus. Historically, preventing Iran from becoming an alternative European energy partner was one of Moscow’s regional priorities.

The sanctions regime imposed on Russia forged an unprecedented unity of purpose, providing Moscow and Tehran with the incentive to create a parallel regime of economic governance. For Russia, the first priority has been to create alternative value chains that will sustain its war economy and enable its exports. These priorities are reflected in the re-heating of the International North-South Transport Corridor project, a vision for the construction of a 7,200 multimodal network linking Russia and India via Azerbaijan and Iran. The initial agreement for the development of the network dates back to 2002, but only when Russo-Indian trade volumes quadrupled in 2022 the stakeholders committed to the vision of circumventing the Suez Canal.

Besides emerging as a potential transshipment hub, Iran is also an instrumental supplier of drones, ammunition, and missiles to the Russian war effort. The two countries have met on the margins of global governance and mutual interest dictates cooperation. Beyond the economic benefits of arms exports, Iran is gaining access to strategic technologies such as digital surveillance systems, attack helicopters, missile defense systems, and advanced fifth generation fighter jets and perhaps even support for Iran’s nuclear capability. Until the 07/10 events in Israel, there was an assumption

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8 Arjun Neil Alim, Joseph Coterill, “BRICS creator slams ‘ridiculous idea’ for common currency,” Financial Times, August 15, 2023, [https://www.ft.com/content/d8347bd0-cc4f-4c3b-9225-0ccd272330a6](https://www.ft.com/content/d8347bd0-cc4f-4c3b-9225-0ccd272330a6)
10 Hamidreza Azizi, “Deep Dive: Has Iran decided to send missiles to Russia,” Amwaj.media, February 22, 2024.
12 Natasha Bertrand, “Exclusive: Iran is seeking Russia’s help to bolster its nuclear program, US intel officials be-
that Washington would be try to drive a wedge between Moscow and Tehran.\footnote{Andrew England, Felicia Schwartz, “US asks Iran to stop selling drones to Russia,” \textit{Financial Times}, August 16, 2023, \url{https://www.ft.com/content/c237c531-a51e-4205-a934-0a13e0a50482}} After the events in Gaza, that prospect is less realistic. Engaging with Iran strategically is unlikely while both the U.S. and Israel want to avoid escalation.\footnote{Michael Horovitz, “Report: Iran cautioned Hezbollah not to spark full-scale war with Israel,” \textit{Times of Israel}, February 19, 2024, \url{https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-iran-cautioned-hezbollah-not-to-spark-full-scale-war-with-israel/}; US Envoy flies to Beirut in a surprise visit, says Washington doesn’t want Gaza War to expand, AP, November 7, 2023, \url{https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-israel-hezbollah-civilians-killed-a9a82a4432c9abd15443c31b5aa5858e}} Status quo maintenance is more likely. Washington’s scope to draw a wedge between Moscow and Tehran.

**Meeting Turkey in the Middle**

Similarly, Washington cannot draw a wedge between Iran and Turkey. Both in the Levant and in the South Caucasus, the U.S. faces what Sergei Markedonov describes as “the riot of the Middle Powers.”\footnote{Sergei Markedonov: The Caucasus and the Riot of the Middle Powers, \textit{Caucasus Watch}, December 28, 2023, \url{https://caucasuswatch.de/en/interviews/sergey-markedonov-the-caucasus-and-the-riot-of-the-middle-powers.html}} Turkey has been setting its foreign policy agenda with a regionally compartmentalized scope, refusing to engage in “maximum pressure” and continuing to import energy and trade with Iran. The Shaheen-Romney Bipartisan Bill of July 2022 set the tone of U.S. expectations in the context of the war in Ukraine, when the two Senators called on the Biden Administration “to rebuilt trust and bilateral relations with Turkey, a key ally in the Black Sea region and a bulwark against Iran.” That is an exercise in wishful thinking as Turkey has refused to sacrifice its regional partnership without any tangible benefits.

The deterioration of Ankara’s relationship to Washington intensified after the 2016 foiled coup attempt in Turkey. The cleavage continued to widen as Ankara objected to Washington’s ties with Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish forces. The 2019 procurement of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system spoiled defense cooperation on many levels, reducing U.S. levers on Ankara.\footnote{Turkey (Türkiye): Major Issues and U.S. Relations, Congressional Research Service, August 10, 2023, \url{https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R44000.pdf}} To the contrary, energy, trade, and security relations between Ankara and Tehran have been going from strength to strength. Turkey’s trade with Iran is surging.
in 2023 by an impressive 42%. For years, Turkey’s foreign minister, Hakan Fidan, cultivated amicable relations with Major General Qassem Soleimani. Ankara condemned Soleimani’s assassination and, in turn, Fidan’s appointment at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2023 was welcomed in Tehran. Like Iran, Turkey is the sole NATO member state that does not regard Hamas a terrorist organisation. The visit by Ebrahim Raisi to Ankara in January 2024 underscored the diplomatic distance between the U.S., Israel and Turkey.

Foundational to Ankara’s security coordination with Tehran is their common mistrust of Kurdish-led militias, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Iraqi Peshmerga, militia groups allied to Washington and Tel Aviv. Upon this foundation, Iran and Turkey have been building a broader understanding. According to Iranian sources, Tehran’s secret services have the leeway to target dissidents in Turkey and Turkish corporates enable the

22 “Turkey, Iran agree on need to avoid escalating Middle East tensions – Erdogan,” Reuters, January 24, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-turkey-talks-gaza-war-tensions-20240124/
funding of militia activity in Lebanon. Consistently, Turkey targets Mossad’s counter-Iranian activity in Turkey, which is why Mr. Fidan has been repeatedly described by Israeli security circles as a foe. This tactical cooperation has a strategically significant cumulative effect. While Washington affirms an “ironclad commitment” to the principle that Tehran will never acquire nuclear weapons, neither Russia not Ankara can be counted upon to enforce this policy line. That makes Iran’s regional marginalization unworkable, particularly as anti-Israel rhetoric in Ankara and Tehran converges. Theoretically, Turkey maintains the role of a potential mediator with Tehran, but this rarely yields measurable security effects for its western allies.

There is a caveat in this foundation of common interests between Ankara and Tehran. The ability of Turkey to compartmentalize its relationship with Iran in the Caucasus and the Middle East is challenged by its strong defense partnership with Azerbaijan. Following the June 2021 Shusha Declaration, the two states consolidated the Alliance of the 44-day war that was instrumental in Azerbaijan’s victory over Armenia. The two states proceeded to create a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council that falls little short of a mutual defense clause.

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This created a military foundation for the “less Russia, more Turkey” dictum.\textsuperscript{33} To be precise, Baku and Ankara are moving from a “two states, one nation” concept to a “two states, one military” trajectory, sharing not only procurement but also strategic concepts.\textsuperscript{34} This has created a perception of encirclement in Iran, motivating Tehran to extend limited military guarantees towards Armenia.\textsuperscript{35} Iran, like Turkey, compartmentalizes its interests in the Near East and the Caucasus; like Turkey, Iran finds that balance increasingly difficult.

**Iran & Filling the Russian vacuum**

The status quo in the Caucasus has been gradually shifting to enable Turkey, Russia, and Iran to create a Concert of three that can limit “outside interference.” That coordination is not underpinned by a shared vision for the nature of the emerging status quo. Their cooperation is framed as a series of transactional relationships that give rise to a volatile security landscape. Volatility stems from “plus three” component of the region – Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia – who have been striving to secure their own economic and security interests, often engaging with outside powers capable of tilting the regional balance. For decades, Azerbaijan looks first and foremost to Turkey as a security partner, but also to Israel. Georgia looks to Turkey and Azerbaijan to create an instrumentally unshakable partnership that shields the country from Russia, but also invests in the prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration. Armenia historically looked to Russia as an elder brother but is increasingly invested in closer ties with Iran and India. Following the war in Ukraine, which changed Russia’s security priorities, Tehran engages in this dynamic landscape to safeguard its own security interests.

**Georgia**

Georgia’s relationship to Tehran is historically a function of its need to deter Russia. Tbilisi’s ‘region first’ approach entails prioritizing its partnership with Ankara, a NATO power, and


Baku. This trilateral relationship has both economic and security significance. Following in Turkish footsteps, Georgia did attempt to forge an economically instrumental and compartmentalized partnership with Iran. Saakashvili’s fervently pro-Western government introduced a visa-free travel regime with Iran in January 2011 and continued to shadow Ankara’s position vis-à-vis Tehran. In the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara incident that irreversibly transformed Israeli-Turkish relations, Georgia accused Tel Aviv of cooperating with Russia and ordered the arrest of two Israeli businessmen. Meanwhile, business relations with Iran were flourishing and the government signed off on the Iranian takeover of Georgia’s JSC InvestBank. The listing of Iranian-owned companies in Georgia went from 84 companies in 2010 to 1,489 in 2012.

However, Tbilisi is not a “middle power” and Saakashvili’s administration was soon accused of enabling the circumvention of U.S. sanctions. Eventually, the Georgian Dream government in 2012 leaned towards normalization of relations with Israel, placed JSC Bank under temporary administration, froze the assets of more than 150 Iranian citizens, and suspended visa-free travel. When the JCPOA agreement was concluded in 2015, there was an assumption that Georgia would once again become Iran’s gateway to Europe. However, this prospect was once again derailed during the Trump Administration. Besides pressure from Washington, Georgia is responsive to the security concerns of its main economic partner in the region, Azerbaijan. Baku is concerned that Iran is escalating covert cultural and political outreach towards the Azerbaijani minority in the country.

Azerbaijan

For decades, Tehran and Baku are embroiled in a competition for the hearts and minds of Turkic-speaking Shia minorities in Georgia. The historical subscript is important in that respect. Iran recognized the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991, despite the fact the state shares its name with a region in northwest Iran. The calculation was that Azerbaijan is a Shia state and formerly a part of the Persian Empire and would inevitably reanimate its cultural ties with Tehran as it distanced itself from Moscow. Instead, this common past provides the foundation for a symbolic contest over the hearts and minds of Turkic-speaking Shia populations in the region. The managing director of the Javan daily, linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), once referred to people living “on both sides of the Aras river” as culturally Iranian. The flip side of the effort is described by Ali Hajizade, an Azerbaijani information warfare analyst, who points to dozens of Iranian-sponsored media platforms using the Latin alphabet to exclusively introduce Shia militancy to citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan or the Azerbaijani minority in Georgia.

Iran and Azerbaijan make no secret of their enmity. Caucasus experts in Tehran typically dismiss the very term “Azerbaijan,” referring instead to “the Republic of Baku.” The mirror image of this discourse in Baku is a frequent reference to “South Azerbaijan,” a territory twice the size of the Republic of Azerbaijan encompassing regions of Qajar and Pahlavi Iran. Azerbaijan insists that the Azerbaijani national minority in Northern Iran merits a degree of ethno-linguistic autonomy and self-governance. For more than two decades, the locus of the Azerbaijani national movement in Iran was among certain clerical circles, football clubs, and the student movement of the University of Tabriz. That emergent Azerbaijani national movement made itself visible during the First Karabakh War in 2020, when demonstrations in Tabriz articulated support for Baku.

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41 Aboddollah Ganji Twitter Account, October 1, 2021, Managing Director of the Javan Daily, affiliated with the IRGC. https://twitter.com/ab_ganji/status/1443853234079256583?s=20
45 “Memorandum submitted by The Congress of Iranian Nationalities for a Federal Iran, the largest coalition of Iran,” UK House of Commons, March 2, 2008,
Iran fears is a secessionist threat amid a socio-economic crisis.46

Baku and Tehran signed a nonaggression pact in 2005. Tehran assured Baku there would be no incursion by Armenian troops via its territory and, in turn, Baku provided similar assurances to Tehran, which feared NATO expansion. In line with this commitment, Azerbaijan’s 2010 military doctrine expressly forbids the installation of foreign military bases in the country.47 However, the situation started to change when in 2012 Azerbaijan started investing in a security partnership with Israel.48 This has been called the “iceberg relationship,” in the sense that its biggest part extends below the surface. The two parties cooperate on communications, military procurement, reconnaissance, and intelligence gathering.49 Israeli systems bolstered Azerbaijan’s qualitative military advantage during the Second Karabakh War and is not dispensable.50 At times, both parties have taken a conciliatory tone,51 signing a Memorandum of Understanding in January 2019 in which Tehran committed to the recognition of Azerbaijan’s sovereignty, including the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, while Baku offered assurances regarding Israel’s presence.52

However, the invasion of Ukraine changes the context of this relationship. Without Russian objections, Azerbaijan has consolidated sovereign control over Karabakh and Tehran now fears Baku may be looking for further gains in

Southern Armenia. At the same time, Israel’s need to develop a “go-it-alone” option against Iran, without U.S. support, means that Azerbaijan is a more significant ally. Time and again, Iran accuses Azerbaijan of providing airfields to Israel that enable direct action within its territory. Baku denies this accusation and publicly denies Israel the refueling support that would render attacks deep into Iranian territory a credible threat. However, several independent sources with an understanding of Israeli covert operations suggest that Azerbaijan has been used as a base to coordinate covert activity in Iran. For instance, an attack against Iranian nuclear installations in Isfahan in January 2023 was carried out with small quadcopter drones. At least one Iranian source suggests Iran has retaliated against Israel in Azerbaijani territory.

Azerbaijan’s relationship with Israel does present certain security liabilities, including Iran’s brand of “forward deterrence.” Historically, Tehran supports paramilitary groups in the Levant, supporting groups mobilizing against Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel’s Foreign Minister, Eli Cohen, recently pointed the finger at Iran for foiled attacks against the Embassies of Israel in Baku, as well as Athens and Nicosia. President Ilham Aliyev has accused Iran of attacks against Azerbaijan’s Embassy in Tehran. There were similar allegations following the brief occupation of Azerbaijan’s Embassy in London. Successive arrests of Shia militants in Baku in November 2022 and April 2023

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suggest the threat is taken seriously.\(^59\) The operational capability of these groups has been questionable but there are sources pointing to Shia militancy making some inroads in Azerbaijan’s Talysh community\(^60\) since the establishment of the Huseyniyun movement in 2013.\(^61\) The Huseyniyun is an ideological affiliate of Hezbollah, initially branded as a strand of Soleimani’s “Axis of Resistance.” Two independent sources suggest this movement evolved from a core of Azerbaijani volunteers who fought with Iranian-backed militias in Syria.

**Armenia**

The stakes are getting higher in the standoff between Tehran and Azerbaijan because Russia ceased being the regional guarantor of the territorial status quo. While Iran historically acknowledged the South Caucasus as part of Russia’s “Near Abroad,” during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Moscow only stepped in when the outcome of the conflict was close to its resolution. As a co-signatory of a ceasefire agreement without peace, Russia maintained leverage as a status quo guarantor, pushing the “re-freezing” of the conflict. However, the security guarantees for the Armenian population of Karabakh proved short-lived and, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin endorsed the “reintegration” of Karabakh. As argued by Laurence Broers, the bigger picture is that is moving from a “frozen conflict management” approach to building a stake in an alternative regional order.\(^62\)

Entering this regional order as a rule maker rather than a rule-taker is a key Iranian objective. A security partnership with Armenia provides Iran with a lever vis-à-vis Azerbaijan; in turn, Armenia is a landlocked country whose security is entirely reliant on Iran’s cooperation. Yerevan has had its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan sealed for decades and, during the Second Karabakh War, Georgia proved less than dependable when it comes to the transit of arms and supplies. The problem at hand was

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further accentuated by the fact that the Georgian-Russian border has been sealed off several times, which is problematic given that this was historically Armenia’s main route for arms supplies. In sum, Iran has been for Armenia an existentially significant logistics partner both for trade and security logistics.63

This alignment of interests is dynamic but a constant in the calculations of Yerevan. In 2013 both countries made a step towards the West: Yerevan negotiated an Association Agreement (AA) with Brussels64 and Tehran started negotiations on a nuclear deal. In this context, the rationale for a strategic partnership seemed irresistible. Even after Moscow “persuaded” Armenia to abandon an AA in favor of the Eurasian Customs Union, Tehran continued to see in Yerevan a potential gateway to Europe’s energy market.65 Again, Moscow lobbied to decrease the size of a planned natural gas pipeline


cow could do little to address the arms race disparity between Yerevan and Baku. Russian security guarantees did little to prevent the four-day war of 2016 or the Second Karabakh War of 2020. However, Moscow’s most substantive failure was the unwillingness to step in when Azerbaijani troops advanced into Armenian territory. Following Azerbaijan’s first incursion in May 2021, Yerevan did not invoke the CSTO’s Article 4, presumably to shield the damaged credibility of this unreliable deterrent. However, Armenia did call on the CSTO when in September 2022 Azerbaijani troops launched a broader offensive within Armenian proper in Goris, Sotk, Jermuk, Kapan, Var- denis, Artanich, and Ichkanassar. Russia sole response was the dispatch CSTO Joint Chief of

Staff Anatoly Sidorov for a “fact-finding” mission.

Russia is no longer Armenia’s elder brother in the Caucasus. In August 2022, Azerbaijani troops took control over the Lachin corridor linking Armenia to Karabakh with Russian peacekeeper standing by as observers. From December 2022 to June 2023, Baku disrupted supplies from Armenia to Karabakh and the Russian peacekeepers stood idle. By the end of September 2023, over 100,000 civilians left Karabakh, fearing the advance of the Azerbaijani army, despite assurances from Baku. Moving away from the Russian security umbrella is less contested in Yerevan and by the end of


71 Armenia asked CSTO for military support to restore territorial integrity amid Azeri attack, Armenpress, September 14, 2022, https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1092504/


February 2024, Yerevan “froze” its CSTO membership, which in practical terms means withdrawing its permanent representative and boycotting events. Armenia’s foreign and security policy is now one of self-reliance, a posture that is unworkable without Iranian cooperation. Since 2017 Armenia began looking to India to diversify its military procurement. Since the Second Karabakh War and more resolutely after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, India has replaced Russia as Armenia’s foremost military procurement partner, with French platforms also gaining ground. New Delhi and Yerevan have been drawing Tehran into the fold of this partnership, lending industrial cooperation with logistical credibility.

Ultimately, the Iranian policy in the region has been one of status quo maintenance. Iran is unwilling to agree to the construction of a transport corridor between Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave, described as the Zangezur corridor, which would put in question its border with Armenia. That assertion has been underscored by military maneuvers. In October 2021 Iran’s IRGC forces realized an unprecedented military maneuver along the Iranian-Azerbaijani border, which included exercises for amphibious crossings of the Aras River, heliborne and parachute jump operations, nocturnal strikes, and the simulated seizure of routes and heights controlled by the hypothetical enemy.

moved a massive 50,000 troops force along its border with Armenia, making clear that further incursion into Armenian territory would be a *casus belli* for Tehran. Driving this message further still, Iran opened a consulate in Kapan, in Syunik. Unlike Russia, Iran views Azerbaijan’s positioning in South Armenia as a threat and is willing to use all means to hold Azerbaijan’s ambition in check. Brussels appears to echo this position. Despite being a strategic foe with Brussels in Ukraine, Tehran welcomed the soft deterrent effect of the EU observation mission in Southern Armenia.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem for Tehran is that the creation of an alternative “system” to western governance, framed regionally, requires cooperation with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia. Neither the International North South Trade Corridor nor the reconnection of Iran to the Caucasus railway network can happen without some degree of cooperation with Azerbaijan. Engaging with Baku, supporting Yerevan, and creating instrumentally indispensable relations to Ankara and Moscow is a delicate balance that Iran is not always able to strike.

### Conclusions

Iran, Turkey, and Russia share sufficient diplomatic understanding to maintain a balance of power in the Caucasus. This balance is dynamic and the status quo is in flux. In the context of the war in Ukraine, Russia is no longer the undisputed regional security hegemon, not least because the Kremlin relies on Turkish and Iranian cooperation for its war effort. This provides scope for the emergence of a “parallel system” in which sanctions against Iran will be

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80 “Maj. General Bagheri: we will not tolerate changes in borders of regional countries,” IRNA, September 22, 2022, [https://iranpress.com/content/66756/maj-gen-bagheri-will-not-tolerate-changes-borders-regional-countries](https://iranpress.com/content/66756/maj-gen-bagheri-will-not-tolerate-changes-borders-regional-countries);

81 “Why Iranians are calling for war with Azerbaijan,” *Middle East Eye*, April 11, 2023, [https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-azerbaijan-war-are-calling-why](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-azerbaijan-war-are-calling-why);


rendered ineffective. Iran wishes to mould this post-Ukraine system as a rule-maker and that is creating tension with Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is invested in its partnership with Israel both to contain Iran and to retain its military edge vis-à-vis regional powers. Baku’s partnership with Tel Aviv is fundamental rather than easily dispensable. That is a manageable sore point for Baku’s relationship with Ankara given the “two states, one nation” relationship. For Iran, Baku’s attachment to Israel presents an imminent security threat. In the words of the Rome-based Iranian foreign policy analyst, Abdolrasool Divsallar, Iran is not ambitious but rather “threat averse.” Tehran’s main objective is to affect Baku’s strategic calculus rather than initiate conflict. Iran’s levers against Azerbaijan are Armenia and Shia militancy.

Iran’s security guarantees vis-à-vis Southern Armenia are limited in scope but founded on national security considerations and credible military resources. On the other hand, Armenia’s national deterrence is entirely predicated on Iran’s logistical cooperation. Meanwhile, the traditional instrument of deploying paramilitary Shia forces – an Axis of Resistance – has been of limited impact in the region. However, the proxy standoff between Turkic nationalism and Shia militancy lays the foundations for escalation, particularly if combined with Israeli determination to derail Tehran’s nuclear program.

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