

Religion as a Security Issue in Azerbaijan-Iran Relations

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the religious factor on Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Azerbaijan and Iran have historically been in the same cultural and religious basin. This situation continued until the Turkmenchay Treaty of 1828. However, after this process, the two countries went through different political processes, and Azerbaijan has been culturally different since the Tsarist Russian period. This difference reached its highest level during the Soviet Union period, and the state and society gained a secular structure. In Iran, which is in the south, religious understanding gradually became dominant and peaked with the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. These processes prevented both states from becoming a unifying element despite the similarity of religion and sect, and on the contrary, continued to exist as an area of conflict. This situation was reflected in both countries' domestic and foreign policies. Azerbaijan's close relations with Israel, in contrast to Iran's developing relations with Armenia, are developments that confirm this hypothesis. Thus, it is seen that the similarity of religion and sect has emerged as a security problem in the relations between the two countries.

1. Introduction

Azerbaijan and Iran, two states with a shared historical and geographical context, present a complex relationship. The concept of Azerbaijan, historically political, has evolved into a geographical location and a state. Azerbaijan encompasses a significant part of Iranian territory, leading to occasional tensions between the two.

The division of the Azerbaijan region between Iran and Russia, with the Aras River as the border between the 1813 Gulistan and 1828 Turkmenchay Treaties, has led to what can be termed as a 'syndrome of division' in

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Azerbaijan and Iran. This syndrome, characterized by a sense of loss and disunity, was exacerbated by the establishment of the Republic of Azadistan in the region under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad Khiyabani in 1918 (Hasanlı, 2005, p. 35) and the Azerbaijan People's Government (21 Azeri Movement) under the leadership of Seyit Jafar Pishawari in 1945-46 (Bayır, 2019, p. 140-141). These events have caused the region to be viewed with suspicion in Iranian historical memory. The occupation and division of Iran in both world wars, which led to the reorganization of the international system, have further entrenched this syndrome in Iran's historical memory.

The emergence of Azerbaijan as an independent state after the collapse of the USSR has increased the uneasiness in Iran due to the reasons listed above. The fact that they historically shared the same geographical location and the existence of common religious and cultural factors did not turn into a unifying effect on the relations between the two countries. This situation constitutes the starting point of the study. Contrary to the hypothesis that the system consists of common thoughts, beliefs, and values, claimed by constructivists, it has structural features and affects social and political actions. These structural features, such as power dynamics, historical legacies, and geopolitical considerations, are seen to be practical in the relations between the two countries. This situation reveals the need to know which factor is effective in forming the ties between the two countries in the context of determining the main problem of the study. The study sought an answer to the main problem in light of the hypothesis that 'the structure of the international system is effective on Azerbaijan-Iran relations.' To understand this, the relations between the two countries will be examined in light of the hypotheses of neorealism, which has an essential place in the discipline of international relations.

2. Conceptual Discussion

Realism, a cornerstone in the conceptual development of International Relations, has maintained its relevance from the late 1930s to the mid-1980s, earning the 'theory of international relations' (Aydın, 2004 p. 33). Its enduring significance is rooted in its connection to issues that humanity faces. The realist theory encompasses all political, economic, military, and social issues that have been and will continue to be part of the history of civilization, transcending time and space (Ersoy, 2014, p. 159).

Factors such as the fact that power and force, which are the basis of realism, are elements that cannot be measured, the excessive emphasis on the state by not including non-state actors in the balance of power policy

and analyses, the confusion regarding the definition of national interest, and the negative treatment of human nature have led to the criticism of realism. However, realism has managed to continue its existence in the discipline by adding new additions and methodological changes, taking into account the changes in the international system in response to the criticisms directed at it. Realists insist on the hypothesis that the formation of the balance of power is based on human nature and the interaction of units. However, while realists ignore economic factors and focus on political and military issues, the increasing importance of economic factors, as in the oil crisis of 1974, has increased the criticisms against realism and led to a new approach. This new approach is Neorealism, which Kenneth Waltz laid the foundations for and called systemic theory.

Neorealism draws a structural framework based on the view that the international system consists of sovereign states and that these states have similar structures in terms of function. However, it is argued that the factor that differentiates these states is power distribution. Unlike the idea that the formation of the distribution of power is based on the interaction of human nature and units, Waltz based the distribution of power on the anarchic structure of the international system. Thus, neorealism has created a philosophy of international politics by adding system analysis to the unit-level analysis of classical realism (Çıtak, 2014, pp. 46-47).

Neorealism has three basic principles. First, the organizing principle of the system is anarchy, which in this context means the absence of a central authority that can enforce rules and decisions. Second, security-oriented behavior patterns make states similar to each other; finally, power distribution determines the actors' positions in the system (Waltz, 2015, p. 118). Although Waltz has similar views to classical realists in that the organizing principle of the system is anarchy, Waltz, unlike them, claims that states do not act with a rational decision-making process that they make alone. The decisions made by states emerge due to the interaction they create in proportion to their own and their opponents' positions in the system. In other words, neorealism claims that international politics and the search for security are produced by the positions of states in the system. In this process, states are interested in their positions and gains, and the gains and positions of states they see as rivals (Balcı & Kardaş, 2014, p. 127). According to Waltz, all states must protect their security, but this situation is limited by the anarchy that dominates the system because everyone's strategy depends on other states. The balance of power emerges as a product of this strategy.

In the 1990s, the Constructivist theory of international relations emerged due to the increasing criticism of positivist theories and the inadequacy of the dominant theories of international relations in predicting the end of the Cold War. According to Nicholas Onuf, one of the important representatives of the movement, an essential reason for this inadequacy is that theorists interested in politics accept the view that anarchy prevails instead of order in the international arena (Özev, 2013, p. 483). Constructivism argues that the international structure belongs to the international society formed by states and accepts that this structure gains its existence and functionality based on a set of values, rules, and institutions widely accepted by states, ensuring the system's functionality. These values, rules, and institutions shape state behavior and interactions in the international system (Özev, 2013, pp. 484-485).

Constructivism has increasingly become a part of the field, as demonstrated by the contributions of Alexander Wendt. An attempt has been made to reveal a direct relationship between social factors such as identity, culture, and foreign policy. One of the important works of the post-Cold War period is Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations". Huntington stated that the determining factor in international conflicts and alliances would not be political or economic factors, but rather between different cultures and religions, and that this would continue in the 21st century.

Wendt tried to establish a theoretical basis for the relationship between identity and foreign policy. Wendt's structural constructivist approach assumed that identity and international social structures were mutually constructed and that these affected the interests. Therefore, states' foreign policies had a different content from the structuralism of neorealism. According to neorealism, the anarchic feature of the international structure without a central authority causes security concerns for states, and states pursue policies based on power. Therefore, the material-based explanations of neorealism turn into social relations in Wendt; the international structure, defined as the absence of a central authority, turns into a socially constructed structure (Ari, 2013, p. 499).

Constructivists argue that the system of common thoughts, beliefs and values has structural characteristics and affects social and political actions (Ari, 2013, p. 507). The focus of the study is religion, which is an important element of the social structure and is inherent to society. Although it is in line with the hypotheses of constructivist theory, the neorealist theory was chosen for this study. Despite the Muslim identity of both Azerbaijan and Iran, it has not become a unifying or influential element in foreign policy

outputs. As will be seen in the later parts of the study, the developing relations of Azerbaijan with Israel and Iran with Christian Armenia strengthen this idea. Therefore, the hypotheses of constructivist theory are insufficient to explain the relations between the two countries. The fact that the relations between Azerbaijan and Iran continue in a conflict-oriented manner gives the impression that a more decisive factor is effective in their foreign policies. This effect is thought to be anarchy, which dominates the system. Therefore, the study will be explained using the hypotheses of neorealist theory.

In the later stages of the study, the focus will be on whether religion affects the development of Azerbaijan-Iran relations. In this context, the main problem of the article will be revealed.

3. The Place of Religion in International Politics

Religion, an important factor in international politics from the end of the Roman Empire until the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, lost its influence after this date and was not considered a factor in foreign policy analyses. Scientific developments in Europe caused an approach based on the nation and national interest to prevail instead of religion. During the reign of Louis XIII (1610-1643), Richelieu, the king's prime minister and the cardinal of the Church, considered France's national interests separately from the interests of the Papacy (Sander, 2011, p. 98). The disappearance of religious wars centered in Europe also manifested itself in other parts of the geography but did not eliminate the fact that religion was a factor, and religion lost its fundamental determinant feature in international politics with the Westphalia. After this process, states began to pursue policies based on their national interests.

Religion gradually began to show itself in international politics in events such as the establishment of the state of Israel on religious grounds in 1948, the dominance of religion in the state with the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and the establishment of the US's religious-based "Green Belt" project against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. Following the establishment of Israel, the failure of Arab nationalism in the Middle East against Israel led to the establishment of religious-based organizations (Şahin, 2009, p. 10). During the Soviet Union period, religion was restricted in the states within the union due to the ideological structure of the regime. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam began to revive in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Christianity in Russia and Eastern European states. While there was a significant increase in the number of places of worship in these regions, religion began to make its presence felt in social life.

Along with this process, an increase in religious radicalism was observed in many countries of the world in parallel with religious and sectarian diversity. However, a development that is sharper than these examples and will overshadow all discussions was the religious-based terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the USA on September 11, 2001. With these attacks, religion, which had been pushed to the background in international politics since Westphalia in 1648, came to the fore again in 2001.

Kenneth Waltz states that neorealism is based on two fundamental principles, and religion regains importance at this point. The first of these principles is that states are in constant competition. Another vital element that allows realist theory to develop in a different field is “socialization”. Socialization means accepting competition between states, learning the social structures of rival states, and developing behaviors accordingly. The international system emerges due to these behaviors of states, and in an anarchic system, a balance of power is formed and their interests increase. States have to analyze the social systems of their rivals well, even in their competitive situation. Because states behave according to their social structures, in this case, religion, one of the critical elements of social structure and the role that religion can play, comes to the fore again in international relations. The fact that states know each other’s religious structures and perspectives well and behave accordingly shows that neorealism, a behavioral theory, has an essential dimension regarding religion (Ari v& Arslan, 2005, p. 33).

4. The Religion Factor in Azerbaijan-Iran Relations

During the USSR period, religion was a factor in Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Iran was the first country where religion was used in foreign policy in Azerbaijan, where the majority of the population was Shiite. Stalin, who had been pursuing an expansionist policy against Iran since 1941, benefited from the clergy in Azerbaijan to implement this policy. In the decision taken in March 1944, “On the preparations to increase economic and cultural assistance to the people of South Azerbaijan,” the Soviet administration wanted to give special importance to religion and the clergy to influence the people. In line with this plan, a delegation consisting of the Head of the Religious Administration of Transcaucasian Muslims, Sheikhulislam Akhund Agha Alizade, Akhund Abdurrahim Akhuzade, Akhund Molla Muzaffer Mirzacanzade, and Ali Samedov was sent to the South Azerbaijan region and Tehran in May 1945. Stalin aimed to influence the Azerbaijanis in Iran in this way (Hasanov, 2011, p. 125). The Soviets carried out their

anti-Western stance against Muslim countries through their clergy. The head of the Religious Administration of Transcaucasian Muslims, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, declared at the international religious symposium in Dushambe in September 1979, at the Islamic Conference in Tashkent in May 1980, at the conference of religious scholars from all over the world held in Moscow in May 1982, and at the Islamic Conference in Baku in October 1986 that the Muslim states within the Union should support the Soviets against imperialism (Ehedov, 1991, pp. 181-183). The Sheikh-ul-Islam in Azerbaijan continued to hold talks with religious leaders in Iran. He negotiated with Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who significantly influenced South Azerbaijan and the Islamic Revolution but was later punished by Khomeini. The Sheikh-ul-Islam did this with the support of Moscow. Sheikh al-Islam traveled several times from Baku to Qom, an essential religious center in Iran, to meet Shariatmadari. However, according to Shaffer, Shariatmadari overestimated the official Islam that Moscow was trying to establish and the religious sensitivities of the people there (Shaffer, 2008, p. 121).

The official understanding of religion established in Soviet Azerbaijan and the significant secularization of society caused fractures in Azerbaijan's relations with Iran in the post-Soviet period. The political process experienced by Soviet Azerbaijan and the differences in the political processes experienced in Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution did not positively affect the relations between the two societies, despite the similarities in religion and sect. The influence of religion, both in its official and societal forms, continued to shape the dynamics of Azerbaijan-Iran relations, underscoring its enduring significance.

After the Islamic Revolution, discussions began about the place of religion in international politics when Iran began to use religious discourse in foreign policy. Although religion declined against the nation-state with the Westphalian settlement in 1648, it maintained its place in the Middle East, the birthplace of monotheistic religions. After the revolution in Iran, those who carried out the revolution began to use religious discourse in domestic and foreign policy. The revolution's leaders declared that the revolution would not be limited to Iran and would continue in all geographies where Muslims lived. The religious regime in Iran included the declaration that they were "the defender of the rights of all Muslims in the world" in the Iranian constitution (article 3/16) (Iranonline, 2017). Based on this article, the new regime considered itself responsible for protecting the rights of all Muslims in the world. Thus, this responsibility became the most fundamental basis of the "exporting the regime" policy to other states.

After the Islamic Revolution, all the instruments of the revolution were used to ensure the security and survival of the state. Religious rhetoric is just one of them. With the policy of ‘exporting the regime,’ the revolution leaders aimed to extend the state’s external security boundaries beyond its borders. In this way, the country’s security expanded to cover a vast geography. Iran’s crises in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria and its relations with the Lebanese Shiites are essential in terms of showing the limits of Iran’s security. With this regime’s export policy implemented in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, Iran has created a *lebensraum* (living space). It has sought to counter threats directed at it far beyond its borders. In the post-Khomeini period, Iran has tried to form its ‘regime export’ policy to fulfill its national interests and strategic calculations, demonstrating the depth of its geopolitical considerations.

In Soviet Azerbaijan, the number of religious education and places of worship was limited. For this reason, in the post-Soviet period, entering the country under the guise of religion became possible to fill the gap in this area (İsmayılov, 2016, p. 154). Until 1992, 54 religious societies were registered in Azerbaijan. Seventeen of these were mosque associations. There were a total of 162 religious officials, 100 of whom were imams, in officially operating mosques, churches, and synagogues. Until 1990, the number of people with higher religious education in Azerbaijan was 16. All these people who received education at the Mir Arap Madrasah in Bukhara and the Tashkent Islamic Institute worked in the Religious Administration of Caucasian Muslims or mosques in Baku (Abasov, 2014, p. 151). With the law “On Freedom of Religious Belief” issued on August 20, 1992, the activities of religious institutions and societies were made independent of the state. According to Article 18 of the law, the economic resources of religious institutions and societies would be donations and aid made in addition to their assets. The removal of the obstacle to the spread of religious views with this law paved the way for foreigners and citizens of the country to carry out religious activities in Azerbaijan. Article 8 of the law allowed religious societies to connect to centers outside Azerbaijan, while Article 24 allowed students to be sent to educational institutions abroad to receive religious education (Hasanov, 2011, p. 201). According to Gündüz İsmayılov, Deputy Minister of the State Committee for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan², this law later became the source of many problems in Azerbaijan. In the early years of independence, religious propaganda was

2 It was established by President Heydar Aliyev in 2001. The Committee's main field of activity, headquartered in Baku, is to establish an appropriate framework for protecting freedom of religious belief according to Article 48 of the Constitution (Samedov, 2014).

carried out by people who went from Azerbaijan to Mashhad and Karbala for religious visits. In addition, many religious publications were smuggled into the country illegally. Since the infrastructure to train clergy was insufficient in the country, people went abroad for religious education.

Iran is still the leading country among these countries. Students who went to the Qom region of Iran would return to their countries with the religious education they received and provide religious services. Students who receive education in Qom madrasahs reach the highest religious authority in Iran, the Ayatollah rank. This rank has political authority in addition to religious matters. When we look at the Guidance (Velayeti Fakih) (Ramazani, 1988, pp. 19-20), the most authoritative authority in Iran, elected from among the Ayatollahs in Iran, the importance of the Ayatollah rank is seen. The clergy who returned to Azerbaijan from these centers were not only concerned with religious affairs but also acquired a politicized religious understanding and worldview. This understanding contradicts both the social structure of Azerbaijan and the national interests of Azerbaijan. It has also been determined that these people who received education in the religious centers of Iran later had political ties with the Iranian administration. These will be discussed shortly.

The religious movement experienced in Azerbaijan in the 1990s also impacted civil society organizations and political parties. In 1991, a group from the AHP founded the Azerbaijan Islamic Party (AİP), a religious party inclined to public values in Iran. This party was the only “ideological” party among the religious organizations operating in Azerbaijan (Abasov, 2014, p. 147). In 1994, with the Treaty of the Century, Azerbaijan turned its face to the West. The AİP, which determined pro-Iran, anti-Israeli, and anti-Western policies, was prevented from participating in the parliamentary elections to be held in the autumn of 1995 (Yunusov, 2004, pp. 193-194; Hüseyinli, 2001: 170). Nine party members were detained after twenty people sent to Iran by the AİP to receive political and military training were caught at the border by Azerbaijan. Iran increased its activities against Azerbaijan during this period. Thirteen people working on behalf of Iran were caught by April 1997. In April 1997, when the AİP senior executives were tried, the court announced that the party leaders had attempted to spy for Iran, which caused a crisis in Azerbaijani-Iranian relations (Aslanlı & Hesenov, 2005, p. 235). According to İmambeyli, contrary to expectations, the arrest of the party leaders did not cause a reaction in society. According to some sources, the AİP was a political force with 50 thousand supporters and sympathizers (Hasanov, 2011, p. 198). This lack of reaction in society revealed that the party did not impact Azerbaijani society as expected. The

fact that the opposition in Azerbaijan is generally anti-Iranian causes the government's activities to be supported. Iran's position in the international system is another factor that facilitates the policies Azerbaijan implements against Iran.

In Azerbaijan, religious activities have been transformed into a tool for the power struggle of states. Sunnism and Shiism, two different interpretations of Islam, have become an instrument of the rivalry between Turkey and Iran. Turkey was also sending clergy to counter Iran's activities in Azerbaijan through its clergy. The conflict between the Sunni imams sent from Turkey and the Caucasus Muslims Religious Administration (KMDİ) has occasionally manifested itself. The recall of Abdulkadir Sezgin, the Religious Services Counselor of the Baku Embassy in 1995, from Baku has been accepted as a success of the KMDİ (Abasov, 2014, p. 152). The increasing influence of the Sunni sect and the Wahhabis in the northern regions of Azerbaijan, such as Shamakhi, is a positive development for the US, as Iran's influence has been limited. When US-Iran relations are considered, this situation is evaluated as a limitation of the Shiite hinterland that Iran is trying to create.

In 1996, the Azerbaijani press began to increasingly show its discomfort with the activities of foreign religious organizations in the country. Sheikhulislam Allahshukur Pashazade met with Aliyev to have their activities monitored. Since such activities of foreigners were considered dangerous within the state, taking measures in this area was not difficult. In 1992, an article was added to the law that paved the way for foreigners to carry out religious activities in the country, prohibiting the religious activities of foreign nationals in Azerbaijan. In addition, it was made mandatory for religious communities in the country to carry out all their activities under the auspices of the Sheikhulislam (Yunusov, 2004, p. 198). After this change in the law, the official registration of religious societies was again made to the Ministry of Justice. During the registration, many structures under the control of foreigners were closed and deported. According to official statements, before registration renewal in 1996, the number of Islamic societies was 178, but this number dropped to 120 in 1998 (Yunusov, 2004, p. 198). Although some of the religious groups with foreign roots were deported, they gained many supporters and representatives as a result of their activities in the country since the 1990s. The statements of Tofik Babayev, a high-level official of the Ministry of National Security, at the meeting held in May 2001 regarding religious groups in the country revealed the seriousness of the situation. Babayev stated that radical groups under the protection of Iran and some other states were trying to take over the state by operating under the name of religion and that the Wahhabis were also increasing their

influence in the country (Hasanov, 2011, p. 204). These developments in Azerbaijan showed that the influence of the Sheikh-ul-Islamate on religious communities was weak. For this reason, a state institution called the “State Committee on Work with Religious Institutions” was established in 2001 to deal with religious societies (Samedov, 2014, p. 205).

Religious and cultural issues have continued to be problematic in Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Since Iran failed in its policy of influencing the regime and social life it considered for the whole country in the first years of independence, it seems to have shifted this policy to a regional level. It has started communicating with the social segments it can reach, especially in the southern regions close to its borders and the Absheron Peninsula. Because the Tehran administration’s failure in this area is evident, Iran lost its positive influence on Azerbaijan in the first years of Azerbaijan’s independence, especially due to its stance on the side of Armenia in the Karabakh war. The fact that the Karabakh war increased nationalist feelings in Azerbaijani society and its developing relations with Christian Armenia, despite its Muslim identity, caused the Tehran administration’s statements to lose credibility.

According to the foreign policy approach established after independence, while Azerbaijan’s relations with the US and Israel are developing, there are problems in its relations with Iran. Parallel to this situation, measures against Iran are being increased in Azerbaijan. In 2002, twenty-two out of thirty madrasahs were closed in Azerbaijan, most of which belonged to Iran. In statements made by official representatives, it was reported that the closed madrasahs had not been operating in accordance with the law for more than six years and were dangerous to the country’s security. Iran’s activities in Azerbaijan are not limited to madrasahs. Many students from the southern regions of Azerbaijan are provided with educational opportunities in Qom, one of Iran’s religious centers. In January 2003, the Chairman of the State Committee on Work with Religious Institutions, Rafik Aliyev, stated that he met with 200 students receiving education in Qom during his visit to Iran (Hasanov, 2011, p. 210).

Iran continues its religious propaganda activities against Azerbaijan through television. It carries out such activities, primarily through the Seher TV channel established in 1992. According to the information on the official website of Seher TV, it reports that it broadcasts to “Azerbaijani” citizens living outside Iran and to citizens in Azerbaijan. The channel’s primary purpose is to carry the influence of the Iranian Islamic Revolution beyond its borders and strengthen relations between Muslims in Iran and Azerbaijan

(Seher TV, 2017). However, Iran makes accusations through the channel that Azerbaijan is committing ethnic discrimination. The channel claimed that the editor-in-chief of the Talysh'in Sesi (Tolişi Sedo) Newspaper, Novruzeli Mammadov, and one of the newspaper's employees, Elman Quliyev, were sentenced to 10 and 6 years in prison for treason and spying for Iran and that the Azerbaijani government discriminated against the Talysh³ and that the individuals above were arrested because they were Talysh (Günaz TV, 2017).

Azerbaijan's hosting of the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest caused a new crisis in Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Iran recalled its ambassador from Baku, accusing Azerbaijan of humiliating Islam and allowing a gay march (Deutsche Welle, 2018). According to Resmiye Rzalı from the Azerbaijan Newspaper, the real reason behind Iran's stance is that Azerbaijan's continuous friendship with Western countries, in particular, bothers Iran. Another reason is that the isolations regarding Iran's nuclear issue make Iran aggressive in its foreign policy (*Azərbaycan Qəzeti*, 2012). The Baku administration detained Recep Abbasov, who led a group of forty people, because the groups that would carry out terrorist activities in centers such as Qax, Zaqatala, Sheki, and Quba were affiliated with SEPAH. They are still in prison (Musavat, 2018).

One of the groups operating in the Absheron Peninsula of Azerbaijan with Iranian support is the Imamites. When this group realized that the Azerbaijani intelligence was following them, they crossed to the Iranian side and continued their activities there. They started broadcasting a program called "Imams Consult" (Imams Talk) on a radio broadcast from Ardabil to the Absheron Peninsula. One of the leaders of the Imamites, Evezagha Imanullayev, stated in his statements about the organization's goals that they aimed to establish an Islamic society in the southern regions of Azerbaijan and that they did not recognize any authority other than Islam there (Hasanov, 2011, p. 224). Considering the influence of the Iranian central government on domestic politics, it is not possible to assume that it is unaware of such activities within its borders. Other groups similar to the Imamites also operate in the southern regions of Azerbaijan. One of these is the armed group called the Northern Army of Imam Mehdi (North

3 The Talysh ethnic group lives south of Azerbaijan, on the Iranian border. All of the Talysh are Shiite and speak a language close to Persian. In the 1990s, with the support of Iran, they declared the Talysh-Mughan Republic under the leadership of Alikram Hummatov. However, when Heydar Aliyev came to power in Azerbaijan, Hummatov was arrested, and the separatist uprising was suppressed. Their population is 76 thousand. Iran is intensifying its activities in this region and using them as a threat to its relations with Azerbaijan.

Imam Mehti Army), led by Seid Dadashbeyli, who was captured in January 2007. This organization aims to seize power by force and establish a regime based on Sharia. The common point of these organizations that carry out destructive activities in Azerbaijan is their relations with Iranian intelligence. The organization is financed by the “Əl Qüds” (El Quds) organization, and its members go to Qom to receive technical and military training from the Iranian intelligence SEPAH in order to carry out their activities more effectively (Şabanov, 2010, p. 28). According to Gündüz Şabanov, a researcher at the Azerbaijan Strategic Research Center, the Iranian factor should always be considered when investigating the problem of religious radicalism in Azerbaijan.

The incident that brought Iran’s religion-based policy towards Azerbaijan to its highest point was the Nardaran town, 29 km from Baku, where religion has been increasingly politicized and Shiite rituals have become widespread since the early 2000s, and the fatal incidents that took place there. Nardaran, where religious Shiites live and have a population of 8,000, has been a place where attention has been drawn to the eventful demonstrations that have lasted for eight months since June 2002. Although the events were initially organized with demands for social services, the religious slogans used in the demonstrations revealed the nature of the demonstrations. However, the demonstrations ended when government officials promised to solve all social service problems in the town (Hasanov, 2011, p. 224).

Iran’s activities in the society continue in the southern regions of Azerbaijan, such as Nardaran. The social life in these regions is similar to the Iranian lifestyle. The black chador, which is not generally used in Azerbaijan, is widely used by women here. The mosque where Nardaran Piri is located, which is located near the entrance of the town, is used as an important visitor center. There is also a grave under the mosque that is said to be of Rahime, the daughter of the seventh Imam Kazim. This place is considered an important place for Shiites to visit⁴.

The fatal events that took place on November 26, 2015, in Nardaran, Azerbaijan, were a turning point in Azerbaijan-Iran relations. The head of the “Muslim Unity Operation” Hacı Taleh Bakirzade, who is responsible for the events, studied in Qom for ten years and later lived in Najaf, strengthening the idea that Iran was influential in the events. Taleh’s statements targeting the government and the system in many places caused the events to escalate. In an operation conducted by the police in Nardaran on November 26,

4 Observations I made in Nardaran during my research in Azerbaijan in June 2017.

2 police officers and four civilians were killed. After the operation, Taleh Bakirzade and 14 of his supporters were arrested. After the events, the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Ali Larijani, said, "Iran has nothing to do with the events, and our relations with Baku are based on friendship. The Nardaran events are Azerbaijan's internal affairs." However, the regional developments and Bakirzade's relations with Iran leave Larijani's statements hanging in the air (Trend, 2018). In an interview he gave to Sputnik on October 18, 2016, regarding religious extremism in Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev said, "For us, the main problem is to protect ourselves from negative external influences, namely the influences of religious extremism" (Sputnik, 2017). The expression "external influence" is striking in Ilham Aliyev's statements. Iran is seen as the source of religious external influences and conflicts in Azerbaijan. Not mentioning the name Iran does not eliminate this situation; moreover, the expression "external influence" points to Iran.

Efforts are being made to eliminate problems in Azerbaijan-Iran relations at the official level. The Azerbaijani delegation, which visited Tehran under the leadership of the President of the Caucasus Muslim Administration, Sheikholeslam Allahshukur Pashazade, on August 6-7, 2017, met with the President of Iran's Organization of Civilization and Islamic Affairs, Abuzer Ibrahim Turkmen. Turkmen stated that the course of relations between the two countries is pleasing. Turkmen, who said that the days of Azerbaijani civilization were held in Tehran last month, emphasized the shared values between the people of the two countries. The year 2017 was declared the "Year of Islamic Solidarity" (Year of Islamic Brotherhood) in Azerbaijan (Kətanov, 2017). The same year, the "Islamic Solidarity Games" were held in Baku (Veliyev, 2018, p. 31).

Regarding the relations between the two countries, Pashazade said that those who try to sow discord between the two brotherly countries will be unable to do so. Ilham Aliyev made a similar statement at the Extraordinary Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on the Jerusalem Issue in Istanbul on 13.12.2017. Aliyev expressed the negative impact of third parties on Azerbaijan-Iran relations and said, "Armenia wants to establish friendly relations with various Muslim countries. This is the greatest hypocrisy. Muslims around the world should know that Armenia, which destroyed our holy mosques, cannot be a friend of Muslim countries" (Rehimov, 2017). As everyone knows, Armenia-Iran relations are rapidly developing in many areas, especially economic ones. Armenia, which has become a problematic area for Azerbaijan-Iran relations, is expelling many Muslim Turks from their homelands during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and is also destroying their historical and cultural heritage. This approach,

which aims to erase cultural traces, is systematically continued by Armenia. Ilham Aliyev's statement that "Muslim countries cannot be friends of Armenia" refers to Iran. This Muslim country has developed relations with Armenia in the region and has helped Armenia escape isolation.

The most critical issue in Baku-Tehran relations is Iran's religious and cultural expansion activities towards Azerbaijan. It is possible to see this in the thoughts of every official or civilian citizen in Azerbaijan. In particular, the Nardaran incidents in 2015 strengthened this idea. However, after the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, one of the leaders of the Hashd al-Shaabi, by the US on January 3, 2020 (Anadolu Agency, 2020), the discussions in the Azerbaijani public opinion signaled that Iran was influential in its policies towards Azerbaijan. Despite the widespread coverage of news that Soleimani supported Armenia in the Karabakh War (Türküstan Info, 2020), the fact that many Azerbaijani social media users made Soleimani their profile picture can be seen as a sign that Iran's influence on Azerbaijani society is increasing.

The continuous development of Iran-Armenia relations has the potential to cause continuous fractures in Azerbaijan-Iran relations. On February 26, 2019, the anniversary of the massacre of 613 Azerbaijani people by Armenians in Khojaly on February 26, 1992, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan paid an official visit to Iran. The visit date and the interest shown to Pashinyan were important in showing the level of relations between the two countries. Pashinyan met with the Armenian community at Tehran's "Ararat" Sports Club. After the meeting, the photograph Pashinyan took with the group had a banner in Armenian that read "Karabakh is Armenia's and the End" in the background, and Iran's failure to intervene in this situation increased Baku's suspicions towards Iran (Axar, 2019).

TractorSazi fans hung a banner reading "Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan" in the stadium on March 1, 2019, in response to what happened during Pashinyan's trip. However, Iranian officials intervened in the banner, and the intervention failed when the fans resisted (Aslanlı, 2019). Following the reactions shown in both Azerbaijan and South Azerbaijan to the photo Pashinyan shared, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Behram Kasimi was forced to make a statement that it was normal for Pashinyan to meet with Armenians living in Iran at the "Ararat" sports club, but that it was unacceptable to open a banner in Armenian about the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

Despite the statements of the Foreign Ministry spokesman, the sincerity that emerged during Pashinyan's meetings with both President Hassan Rouhani and Guide Ali Khamenei in Iran was widely covered in both the northern and southern media. Hadi Bahadiri, MP for Urmia in Iran, said in his statements, "Karabakh is an Islamic and Azerbaijani land. We will ask the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the parliament why such an incident, which is against the official policy of the country, was allowed to take place within the borders of Iran." South Azerbaijani MPs Ruhullah Hazretpur Talaiyye and Nadir Gazipur also submitted a parliamentary question to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In a statement to the Azerbaijani Embassy, the Ministry announced that they "condemned the banner that was opened and supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan" (Aslanlı, 2019). Even though a profound statement was made at the official level, the situation that emerged in both countries is important in showing the problem's existence. The relations between Armenia and Iran are not limited to the political and economic fields; cooperation between the two countries also continues in cultural areas. Iranian companies restore historical artifacts in the lands occupied by Armenia. While doing this, Azerbaijani traces of the artifacts are erased, and an attempt is made to present them as Persian and Armenian. Pashinyan, in an interview with Iran's IRNA news agency, emphasized the historical bonds of friendship between Armenia and Iran and said that relations with Iran are the basis of Armenian politics, that they want to develop relations, especially in economic areas, and that the agreement to be made between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union will increase relations between Iran and Armenia in this context (Azadlıq, 2019). Rouhani also said at the signing ceremony of the agreements between the two countries, alluding to the US, that other states should not interfere in Iran-Armenia relations. Before Pashinyan visited Iran, it was announced that they would cooperate in transporting Iranian natural gas from Armenia to Georgia and Europe via the Black Sea (Aslanlı, 2019).

The fundamental factor underlying the problem in Azerbaijan-Iran relations requires a much broader perspective. The national interests and security of both countries are incompatible. Iran's regional security concerns and interests, and Azerbaijan's US/Israel-oriented foreign policy approach, which positions itself, cause problems in its relations with Iran. For this reason, Iran is trying to take action against Azerbaijan's weak points in its Azerbaijan policy. A similar situation applies to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan occasionally makes statements about South Azerbaijan, one of Iran's most important problems, with nationalist rhetoric, causing Iran to be uneasy.

On December 15, 2019, a conference titled “Indigenous Peoples of the Caucasus-Caspian Region in Light of Scientific Facts and Falsifications” was held in Armenia with the participation of forty-five experts from Armenia, Russia, Iran, and Georgia. The statements made by Iranian expert Salar Seyfoddini regarding Karabakh and Iran’s interests in the region were important in terms of showing the content of Iran-Armenia relations. Seyfoddini stated that although there are various areas of conflict among the countries in the region, Iran is the only country with good relations with all the states. He also stated that there is a prevailing mistrust towards Azerbaijan in Iran and that most Iranian officials do not trust the promises made by Azerbaijan despite strong bilateral relations. Seyfoddini continued his speech by stating that Iran is not disturbed by the current status quo regarding Karabakh and suggested that if the region is in Azerbaijan’s hands, it will be under the control of Israel and the USA (Türküstan İnfö, 2019).

This approach, which is important in terms of showing the level of threat felt by Iran from Israel and NATO, is the issue that worries Iran the most in relations with Baku and creates a security crisis. Tehran MP Ali Mutehhari announced that Iran sided with Armenia for security reasons, regardless of whether Azerbaijan was right in the war (Günaz TV, 2019). Iran’s policy towards Armenia has not changed significantly since the beginning of the Karabakh War. The fact that trucks with Iranian license plates were reported in the media to be carrying cargo to the Karabakh region caused discomfort on the Azerbaijani side. Although Iranian officials deny the images, the truth does not change (Azadlıq, 2020). Another issue that causes discomfort in Azerbaijan is the construction of bridges over the Aras River to the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, thus opening a direct route between Armenia and Iran. Reacting to this issue, Azerbaijani MP Fazıl Mustafa argued that Azerbaijan should increase military cooperation with Israel in response to Iran-Armenia relations. Mustafa said that although Azerbaijan did not support any sanctions imposed on Iran, Iran supported Armenia at every opportunity and that Azerbaijan should respond to Iran at every step from now on (Strarateq.az, 2020).

Tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia turned into a hot war due to Armenia’s attacks on the city of Tovuz in Azerbaijan⁵. On September 27, 2020, Armenia launched a hot war after the deaths of civilians as a result of Armenia’s attacks on Azerbaijani settlements. Armenia attacked Ganja

5 Although the Tovuz region is approximately 200 km north of the Karabakh front line, Armenia is attacking it. The region is strategically important because it is on the route of energy and transportation lines built jointly by Azerbaijan and Turkey. For this reason, Armenia intends to destabilize it.

(Azərbaycan, 2020) and Terter (Günaz TV, 2020) with rockets, causing the deaths of civilians. With the Azerbaijani army's launch of the offensive, the Armenian military's resistance was broken, and the Armenian military's weaknesses, which were tested in the April Fights (April Clashes) in 2016, were revealed.

Azerbaijan's advance in the war zone caused Russia and Iran to approach the war more cautiously compared to the First Karabakh War, but there was no change in their positions towards Armenia. The seizure of lands in the Iranian border regions by Azerbaijani forces was enthusiastically welcomed on the other side of the Aras River. The seizure of the region where the historical Khudaferin Bridge is located by Armenian forces was welcomed with joy by the Azerbaijanis in the south (Facebook, 2020).

The Azerbaijani lands occupied with the support of Russia in the First Karabakh War were recaptured (Məktəb Guşəsi, 2020). Although the support that Armenia requested from Russia in the war was not at the desired level, Russia's support in terms of military equipment continues. Putin's statement that "the war is being waged outside Armenian territory" (World Bulletin, 2020) in response to questions directed to Putin regarding the functioning of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) shows some visible change in Russia's policy in the First Karabakh War. Although Ali Akbar Vilayati, the international affairs advisor of Iranian religious leader Khamenei, stated at a conference he attended in Tabriz that international seditionists were causing problems in the South Caucasus, that the region was a place where Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis lived together and that he hoped for the war to end as soon as possible (Günaz TV. Ali Akbar Vilayati, 2020), images showing that the weapons sent by Russia were being delivered to Armenia via Iran spread rapidly in the press and on social platforms. In the statements made by Vilayati, there was no satisfaction with either the religious unity between the two countries or the return of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

The balance of power in the region, especially the Karabakh issue, is important in showing the nature of Azerbaijan-Iran relations. This issue acts as a litmus test in bilateral relations. Even if the Karabakh issue is resolved, the southern Azerbaijan issue and the positions taken by both countries in the international system prevent the future of Azerbaijan-Iran relations from becoming cooperation. The similar religious identities of both countries do not become a unifying element in their foreign policies. The constructivist hypothesis that the system consists of common thoughts, beliefs, and values, has structural characteristics, and affects social and political actions

is insufficient to explain the Azerbaijan-Iran-Armenia-Israel equation. As long as the pressures and threats created by the international system on the problematic areas of both states continue, religion will not be able to become a unifying and influential factor in Azerbaijan-Iran foreign policies.

Conclusion

This article briefly examines the theoretical discussions on state foreign policy behaviors before discussing the effects of religion in international politics and Azerbaijan-Iran relations in the context of this conceptual discussion.

One of the study's results is that religious and sectarian affiliation has a weak effect on Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Both countries' foreign policies are based on national interests and depend on the international system's influence, which is in line with the hypotheses of the neorealist theory.

The second conclusion reached in the study is that, as constructivists claim, religious and cultural structures do not affect Azerbaijan-Iran foreign policies. On the contrary, the threats and pressures posed by the anarchy that dominates the international system in both states cause security-based policies to be pursued.

The third conclusion reached in the study is that religion does not affect the alliances established by both states in the I. and II. Karabakh wars depend on their positions in the international system. The nature of Azerbaijan's relations with Israel and Iran's relations with Armenia confirm this idea.

Finally, although the discussions on Azerbaijani social media after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani give the impression that Iran influences Azerbaijani society, especially the recent II, the anti-Iranian attitude of almost the entire Azerbaijani society due to Iran's aid to Armenia during the Karabakh War has been an important development in terms of showing the failure of Iran's expansion policies in Azerbaijan based on sectarian and religious factors.

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