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**CURRENT TRENDS IN THE  
POLITICAL AND SECURITY  
DIMENSION OF THE SOUTH  
CAUCASUS.  
A VIEW FROM IRAN**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Iran and Caucasus share more than just a common history. The cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and geographical cohesion of the Caucasus with Iran is an obvious factor that engages Tehran in the issues of this region. Therefore, The Islamic Republic of Iran was one of the first countries that recognized the newly independent states of the Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Geographically, Iran has a special situation in the southern borders of South Caucasus. Among the three neighbors of the region, Iran, Russia, and Turkey, only Iran has a border with Nagorno-Karabakh and also the only country that has a border with two parts of the Republic of Azerbaijan including the mainland of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. From cultural viewpoints, the region is important for Iran according to living million Iranian Azerbaijanis in the northwest of Iran including provinces of East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, West Azerbaijan, thousands of Armenian people in Tabriz, Tehran, Salmas, and Isfahan's Jolfa, Georgian community of Fereydunshahr in Isfahan. In the north of Iran, there are six cities where Talyshi is spoken Masal, Rezvanshar, Talesh, Fuman, Shaft, and Masuleh (in these cities some people speak Gilaki and Turkish as well) and the Tat people of Iran living in northern Iran, especially in the south of Qazvin province. It is therefore not surprising that Grigor Arakelyan, former Armenian ambassador to Iran was born in Tabriz and Jamshid Giunashvil, the first ambassador of Georgia to Iran for a period of ten years in the 1990s, was born in Tehran.

Furthermore, the Caucasus is one of the most important regions in Iran's approach towards its neighboring environment. There are several factors regarding the importance of the

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<sup>1</sup> Iran recognized the independence of Armenia on December 25, 1991, Georgia on January 4, 1992, and the Republic of Azerbaijan on May 15, 1992, and established its embassy in Yerevan, Baku, and Tbilisi in spite of political instability in the South Caucasus at the beginning of 1990s.

region for Iran including geographical proximity, historical, cultural, and religious linkages, transportation, as well as the presence of great regional and trans-regional powers. Indeed, Iran has a special and different role and place in the South Caucasus, because among three neighbors of the region, Iran, Russia, and Turkey, only Iran has sustainable and diplomatic relations with all three countries of the South Caucasus including Armenia and Georgia as two Christian countries and Republic of Azerbaijan as a Muslim and Shia country. As a matter of fact, there are no political relations between Armenia and Turkey from 1993 to the present time and from Russia and Georgia from 2008 until now. Therefore in this perspective, Iran has a unique place and role in the South Caucasus.

## II. IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Regarding Iranian foreign policy towards the South Caucasus, the Iranian governments have not released specific strategy or policy papers; however, Iran's 20-year grand vision, commonly known as "Horizon 2025", has put a huge emphasis on these regions. Under the approval of the Iranian Supreme Leader, the government published "Horizon 2025", an official document which, in terms of formality and legality, is second to the Constitution. The 2025 vision demonstrates the Iranian decision-makers' focus on Central Asia and the Caucasus which includes the regions in the broad geography of "Southwest Asia".<sup>2</sup> Therefore, based on this official document, all three countries of the South Caucasus are very important for Iran foreign policy and in this framework, various governments in Iran including Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997) Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) Hassan Rouhani (2013–present) had pursued expanding relations with Armenia, Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Although, Iran's foreign policy in practice has experienced ups and downs in relations with countries of the South Caucasus. In spite of its close and friendly relations with Armenia, Iran's relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia have experienced ups and downs in some periods of time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In official literature of Iran, especially by the Supreme Leader, "Southwest Asia" is used instead of "Middle East" because idioms such as "Near East", "Middle East" and "Far East" are defined by western geographical perspective. Therefore, in the official document of "Horizon 2025", Central Asia and the Caucasus are defined in the framework of the broad geography of "Southwest Asia".

<sup>3</sup> For more information see Houman A. Sadri, "Iran and the Caucasus States in the 21st Century: A Study of Foreign Policy Goals and Means", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Volume 14, 2012 - Issue 3, 2012, pp. 383-396.

However, after being elected president in 2013, Hassan Rouhani, Iran, and all three countries of the South Caucasus in the framework of “Neighbourhood Policy of Iran”. In this regard, Iran’s Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif announced the expansion of relations with other countries in the region and the promotion of the good neighbor policy as one of its top priorities. Subsequently, during his second term in office, President Rouhani is planning to formulate and implement an all-out, active neighborhood policy in order to play a more constructive role in the region. His government is especially focused on rectifying misunderstandings in relations with certain regional countries by reducing tensions and confidence-building in order to move towards a more secure and stable region. Critics of his government, however, argue that due to the priority that President Rouhani has given to the nuclear negotiations officially known as the JCPOA, and its implementation and preservation during his first term in office, Iran’s regional diplomacy has been weakened and marginalized in practice.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, regional policies must take higher priority during Rouhani’s second term in office. In practice, we had seen expanding Iran relations with all three countries of the South Caucasus in recent years. Specially bilateral ties between Iran and Azerbaijan have significantly re-improved from 2013 up to the present time and Hassan Rouhani has held eleven meetings with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev during different forums or mutual visits that is unprecedented in Iran foreign policy toward the South Caucasus. However, Iran’s foreign policy toward three countries of the South Caucasus is unparalleled especially in the field of high diplomatic meetings between leaders.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Seyyed Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi, Iran’s Foreign Policy Principles, and Priorities, Iran Review, November 12, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> For further details see: Вали Кузегар Каледжи, “Компоненты внешней политики Ирана на Кавказе: единство и баланс”, Иран и государства Южного Кавказа, Под редакцией: Вали Кузегар Каледжи, Центр изучения Ирана и Евразии, 2017, стр: 72-105.

### III. POLITICAL STABILITY AND SECURITY IN THE SOUTH CAUCAUSE: IN THE EYES OF IRAN

In order to better understanding Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus, we need to consider political stability and security in the South Caucasus in the "Eyes of Iran". In fact, How Tehran sees the current trends and tendencies in the political and security dimension of the North and South Caucasus? In answer to this question, we need to pay attention to the following issues:

#### 1. Maintain Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity: Non-ideologic and Pragmatist Approach

The overall tenets of Iran's foreign policy towards the Caucasian states are to respect their independence and sovereignty, maintain their territorial integrity, peace, stability, and security, preserve the current territorial borders without their consents, expand regional cooperation, and oppose the negative intervention of foreign Powers, to the detriment of regional order, stability, and security. In fact, in spite of a common claim in the literature devoted to Iranian foreign policy is about its ideological feature, related in particular to Iran's supposed will of exporting its peculiar Islamist model of government. But in practice, Iran's foreign policy has experienced a geopolitical behaviour in the Caucasus as well as Central Asia. By the time the USSR collapsed, the Islamic Revolution of Iran had a history of more than 10 years. Incumbent president Hashemi Rafsanjani had pursued a pragmatic foreign policy in order to rebuild the devastation of the Iran-Iraq war. Therefore, Iran pursued a less



ideologically driven foreign policy, especially in regard to Central Asia and the Caucasus.<sup>6</sup> This approach is defined with different impressions by Fred Halliday (flower band policy),<sup>7</sup> Svante Cornell (disinterested player),<sup>8</sup> and Shirin Hunter (Pragmatism).<sup>9</sup>

In this framework, Iran in contrast Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Pakistan recognized the independence of Armenia, but on the other hand, didn't recognize the separation and independence of Karabakh from the Republic of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Iran played the role of a mediator between Azerbaijan' as a Moslem and Shia country and Armenia as the only Christian neighbour of Iran and keep its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan at the same time, while Turkey cut its diplomatic relations with Armenia.<sup>10</sup> We had seen the same approach toward Tajikistan civil war by Iran regarding the Islamic Renaissance Party and the Tajikistan government.

In fact, maintain sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political stability is "red lines" of Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus and sees these matters as a threat to Iranian national security. Therefore, Iran permanently had a pursued "non-ideologic" and "pragmatist approach" toward the South Caucasus and "security" and "stability" are two key elements in Iran's foreign policy toward the region. For this reason, Iran was anxious about political instability in the Republic of Azerbaijan at the beginning of the 1990s, the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), and the Armenian protests in 2018. Indeed, Tehran worried

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<sup>6</sup> Ehsan Fallahi and Ali Omid, "Iran's Foreign Policy in South Caucasus, Offensive or Defensive?", *Journal Central Eurasia Studies*, Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Tehran, Volume 11, Issue 2, Summer and Autumn 2018, pp. 417-433.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Halliday, "The Empires Strike Back? Russia, Iran, and New Republics", *The World Today*, November 1995, p. 220.

<sup>8</sup> Svante Cornell, *Small Nations, and Great Powers*. London: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Shirin Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Spring 2003, p. 133.

<sup>10</sup> For more information see Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus: Relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia*, Publisher: Routledge, London, 2019.

about political interferences of extra-regional players especially the United States in the process of political developments in the South Caucasus.

In this framework, although Iran was anxious about western approaches of the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and Armenia protests in 2018, immediately recognized new leaders of two countries. One year after Rose Revolution, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili paid an official visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran on July 6-9, 2004, and met with his Iranian counterpart Seyed Mohammad Khatami. In the 2006 Russia–Georgia energy crisis the Georgian government accused Russia of conducting deliberate acts of sabotage with the aim of forcing the nation into surrendering its pipelines to Gazprom - the Russian state-owned monopoly,<sup>11</sup> Iran exported natural gas to Georgia. Indeed, during the 2008 Russia–Georgia conflict, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hassan Ghashghavi called “for an immediate halt to the clashes” and offer to help. Iran didn't recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in spite of Iran's close relationship with Russia and Western approaches of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. As a result, a flurry of diplomatic visits culminated in a trip by Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki to Tbilisi in July 2008, followed by an official visit by Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri to Tehran to set up a bilateral economic commission.<sup>12</sup> In spite of keeping western approaches by Georgian leaders including Giorgi Margvelashvili (2013- 2018) and Salome Zourabichvili (2018 up to present time) as well as the continuation of tensions between Georgia and Russia, Tehran has pursued its independent foreign policy toward Georgia.

Regarding Armenia protests in 2018, we see the same approach by Iran as well. During protests in April and May 2018, Iran was anxious about political instability in Armenia as

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<sup>11</sup> Georgia: Tbilisi Accuses Moscow Of Energy Sabotage, RFE/RL, 23 January 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Owen Matthews, Georgia's Saakashvili Has a New Friend: Iran, Newsweek, June 29, 2010.

the only Christian neighbour and some Iranian experts believed that western countries and NGO such as Soros Foundation supported protests, Iran sent a congratulatory message to the new prime minister of Armenia, Nickol Pashynian and emphasized on political stability in Armenia and keeping close relations between Iran and Armenia. During an official visit to Tehran on February 27, 2019, Pashinyan met with Iran's Supreme Spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, as well as the signing of memoranda of understanding that bolstered relations between the neighbouring countries. Indeed, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani travelled to Yerevan on September 29, 2019, to attend a summit of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).<sup>13</sup>

The Non-ideologic and Pragmatist Approach of Iran's foreign policy towards the Republic of Azerbaijan is very clear. Azerbaijan is a majority Shia state of more than nine million people, with Shias accounting for 85 per cent of the population, and therefore, the Republic of Azerbaijan is the second Shia country after Iran in the Muslim world. Iran officially supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and recognizes Karabakh as a part of this country. But Iran in contrast to Turkey, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Pakistan, didn't cut its relations with Armenia. Tehran has permanently emphasized dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan without external interference especially by extra-regional players. Although Iran always has been anxious about conditions of Azerbaijani Shia groups especially leaders of the Movement for Muslim Unity (MMU) such as Tale' Bagirzade (Sheikh Bagirov), provoking Azeri ethnic separatists in northwest Iranian Azeri province by some of the political groups, mass media, and NGO in Baku, and

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<sup>13</sup> In June 2019, the Iranian parliament ratified an agreement that allows the administration to join a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) countries. The agreement, signed in Kazakhstan in May 2018, sets the main rules of trade between the EAEU, Iran, and those of the World Trade Organization (WTO), of which Iran is not a member. The free trade zone is planned to be in effect for four years, under which the EAEU will grant Iran tariff concessions on more than 500 items. Russia's State Duma and the Federation Council had ratified the agreement to establish Iran-EAEU free trade zone in November 2018.

Azerbaijan and Israel close bilateral relations, however, Iran supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. As mentioned, Hassan Rouhani has held eleven meetings with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev during different forums or mutual visits that are unprecedented in Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus.

## 2. Opposition to Separatism and Violence in Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Iran opposition to ethnic dynamics and separatism is one of the fundamental factors in Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus. Iranian society is created by different ethnic groups and therefore, Iran opposes with any ethnic-political dynamics. In this framework, Iran never recognized the independence of Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in spite of good and close relations between Iran and Armenia as well as Iran and Russia Federation. We had seen this approach toward ethnic dynamics and separatism in Chechnya and Dagestan in North Caucasus in two last decades, Iraqi Kurdistan and annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation.

After Russia and its closest allies chose to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008, the Ambassador of Iran to Russia, Seyed Mahmoud-Reza Sajjadi, said in early February 2009 that his nation will not recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence in the near future, "as it can cause war in many areas".<sup>14</sup> Paul Goble in Eurasia Daily Monitor believes that Because Georgia has been at odds with Iran for so long, Tehran has focused on developing ties with the two breakaway and unrecognized republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to send Tbilisi a message that its unwillingness to cooperate with Iran has real costs. Iranian actions in recent months, Shakaryants says, have convinced the leaders of South Ossetia that Iran may soon recognize their "republic" diplomatically. Such an outcome could

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<sup>14</sup> "Iran Not to Recognize Abkhazia, S. Ossetia's Independence Soon". FARS News Agency. 2009-02-07.

prove a watershed in their eyes because, in the words of one commentator there, “Iran is not Nauru [a Pacific island country that recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia early on, at Moscow’s prodding].” More likely, however, Iran will continue to develop ties just short of diplomatic given that recognition of South Ossetia (or Abkhazia) would further isolate it from other countries and may not even be what Russia wants at the present time.<sup>15</sup>

The author disagrees with this argument and in contrast with Paul Goble, I believe that opposition to ethnic dynamics and separatism is one of a fundamental factor in Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus. Iran is not Syria that recognised Armenian Genocide, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Two weeks after Syrian government recognized the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, Evgeny Fedorov, Russian State Duma, sent a letter to Iranian parliament in October 2016 and wanted Iran to become the seventh country to recognize the annexation of Crimea to Russia, but Iranian parliament didn't answer to this letter, in spite of Tehran and Moscow both have been backing President Bashar al-Assad since 2011.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, we had seen the same approach by Iran. Iran never recognized the independence of Karabakh, didn’t cut its relations with Armenia and based on Iran's role as mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis at the beginning of 1990s,<sup>17</sup> Tehran has announced that ready to mediate in the Karabakh Conflict. In this regard, during “Four-Day War” in Karabakh in April 2016, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif talked

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Goble, “Tehran Expanding Efforts to Counter the US, Israel and Turkey Across South Caucasus”, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 16 Issue: 173, December 12, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Ali Kushki, “Does Tehran say yes to Crimea proposal?”, Tehran Times, October 28, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Iran had successful mediation in Tajikistan's civil war (1992-1997), but in Karabakh Conflict was unsuccessful. For more information see Ceyhun Mahmudlu & Shamkhal Abilov, “The peace-making process in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: why did Iran fail in its mediation effort?”, Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, Vol. 26, Issue 1, 2018, pp. 33- 49.

to his Azerbaijani counterpart about the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, inviting both sides of the conflict to prevent another crisis in the region. “In view of the existing regional problems, all must do their best so that we do not witness another crisis”, Zarif said in a meeting with Elmar Mammadyarov on the sidelines of a trilateral foreign ministerial meeting involving Iran, Turkey and Azerbaijan in Ramsar on April 5, 2016.<sup>18</sup> In fact, rising tension in the Caucasus and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a serious threat for Iran national security and can provoke ethnic mobilizations in Azeri and Armenian population in Iran. Therefore, “self-restraint” of both sides of the conflict, prevention of war, dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan without interference by an extra-regional player and mediation in the conflict are main priorities of Iran toward Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Therefore, in contrast to Samuel Huntington’s argument in the clash of civilizations, Iran didn’t support Azerbaijan, as a Muslim and Shia country against Armenia as a Christian country in the South Caucasus. In fact, Iran tries to define close relations with both sides of the conflict and create political stability and sustainable security in the northwestern borders of Iran. In result, Iran has a different situation and position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in comparison with Turkey, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan that has cut its relations with Armenia or didn’t recognise the independence of this country.

### 3. Offensive Policy and Opposition with External Forces: United States, NATO and Israel

Naturally, any country will defend itself against all existential threats posed to it by another country and will take steps to boost its defensive and deterrent capabilities.<sup>19</sup> Basically, Iran believes that presence and interference of extra-regional players could not help to political

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<sup>18</sup> “Tehran Ready to Mediate in Karabakh Conflict”, Financial Tribune, April 05, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Dehghani Firoozabadi, Op. Cit.

stability and sustainable security in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf and is anxious about destructive consequences of military institution's interferences in West Asia. This priorities clearly has reflected in Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE), an initiative aimed at promoting security in the Persian Gulf that offered by President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hassan Rouhani in United Nations General Assembly in September 2019.

On the other hand, the regional states' perception of the Iran foreign policy in South Caucasus is not in direction with which Iran practically has followed in the region. They do not evaluate Iranian behaviour without considering the Iran orientations in the Middle East. The conception of the Iranian Foreign Policy in South Caucasus has created in the light of the dominant discourse of Iranian foreign policy in other regions and world politics. In system theory, different regions, especially neighbouring regions, have an impact on each other. But these areas have not the same significance and effectiveness. Accordingly, the Middle Eastern developments have significant effects in the Caucasus. Tehran's behaviour in the Middle East has caused the US denial of the Iran role in many issues of the Caucasus like as energy transmission pipelines, the militarization of the Caspian Sea and the desire to join NATO by the neighbouring states. In addition, the USA by pursuing "everything without Iran in the Caucasus" tries to eliminate Iran's role in different projects in the region.<sup>20</sup>

In this perspective, Iran is opposed to external forces such as the United States, NATO and Israel in developments of the South Caucasus and emphasizes on "Cooperative Security" in the region with the contribution of Armenia, Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as three neighbours of the region including Iran, Russia and Turkey (pattern of 3+3). Therefore, Iran is opposite with interference of NATO and United States in Karabakh, Abkhazia and

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<sup>20</sup> Fallahi and Omid, op. Cit.

South Ossetia, establishing Military bases by NATO and United States in the South Caucasus and activities of Israeli intelligence agencies in the region against Iran.

With increasing tensions between Iran and the United States and implementing new sanctions, withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on May 8, 2018, “maximum pressure” campaign on Iran, isolation of Iran and following hostile policy against Iran by Donal Trump, Neighbourhoods of Iran including the South Caucasus has taken into consideration by the United States. In this regard, John Bolton, President Donald Trump's former national security adviser visited all three countries of the region in October 2018 and tried to create an anti-Iran campaign in the South Caucasus.<sup>21</sup> Washington hopes to reduce trade volume between Iran and three countries of the South Caucasus. But Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan try to preserving and expanding its economic relations with Iran regardless of the sanction condition. For example, Armenia Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan emphasized that “Armenia will never join an anti-Iran movement”.<sup>22</sup>

Since one of the major goals of new US sanctions is to reduce Iran's oil exports to zero, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are not be directly impacted. However, the US sanctions impacts on other fields especially banking connections and trade. Connecting the railways, linking national electrical grids, developing customs cooperation as well as expanding trade, sport and tourism ties,<sup>23</sup> are among the efforts made by Tehran and three countries of the South Caucasus. Therefore, bilateral and multilateral ties have developed further despite the US sanctions.

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<sup>21</sup> Joshua Kucera, “Bolton visits the Caucasus amid anti-Iran campaign”, *Eurasianet*, October 23, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Mahnaz Abdi, “Iran-Armenia economic ties not affected by U.S. sanctions”, *Tehran Times*, September 2, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Iran has a visa-free regime with Armenia and Georgia that has helped to increase tourism between Iran and the region. For example, Iran was 5th biggest origin for Georgia tourism in 2018 and 2nd largest contributor to Armenia tourism in 2017.



Generally, in spite of “maximum pressure” campaign on Iran and following hostile policy against Iran by Donald Trump, Iran’s foreign and defence policy in the Caucasus will be a more “defensive” rather than an “offensive” nature. As mentioned, the overall tenets of Iran's foreign policy towards the Caucasian states are to respect their independence and sovereignty, maintain their territorial integrity, peace, stability and security, preserve the current territorial borders without their consents, expand regional cooperation and oppose the negative intervention of foreign Powers, to the detriment of regional order, stability and security. Therefore, despite the fundamental contradiction between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West, Tehran has tried to build constructive relationships with the Western-oriented countries in South Caucasus. Iran is the only neighbour of the region that has embassies in all three South Caucasus states, while Russia and Turkey have closed their embassies respectively in Georgia and Armenia.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Opposition to Fundamentalism (Wahhabism) and Terrorism in North Caucasus

The North Caucasus includes in the Republic of Adygea, Karachay–Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia–Alania, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and the Republic of Dagestan is very important for Iran. Basically, Iran sees this region as a part of the Russian Federation and supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia in North Caucasus. This approach was clear about separatism, violence and war in Chechnya and Dagestan in the 1990s that is another sign of non-ideologic and pragmatist approach of Iran's foreign policy towards the Caucasus. In recent years, Iran is anxious about rising fundamentalism (Wahhabism) and terrorism in North Caucasus. In this regard, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant –

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<sup>24</sup> Fallahi and Omid, Op. Cit.

Caucasus Province (Wilayah al-Qawqaz) is a serious threat for peace and stability of the region as well as Iran national security.

It seems that most of those who have fled Syria and Iraq are may go to five new lands: North Caucasus, Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen. Therefore, ISIS fighters from Russia, Azerbaijan and Georgia can return to North Caucasus. The return of battle-hardened mujahedin will have destructive consequences on security in the Caucasus especially on separatism and violence in Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It can change “ethnic-oriented” conflicts to “religious-oriented” conflicts like Kashmir and Palestine that can lead to more complexity of frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus and will threat process of peacemaking in the region seriously. Indeed, Fundamentalism based on Wahhabism anti-Shia views can escalate Shia-Suni tensions in the Caucasus and creates the new front of conflict between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the region. Indeed, the return of terrorist and fundamentalist groups would be a serious threat for economic infrastructures especially transit networks and energy pipelines and facilities.

#### 5. Supporting Multilateral Mechanisms: The Practical Path to Expanding Political and Economic Relations

Many analysts believe that narrow and precise trilateral or quadrilateral mechanisms could, in part, eliminate the existing inefficiency of regional organizations. Many political and economic projects and plans such as energy pipelines and transit corridors need to participation three or more countries. Therefore, Iran in recent years has tried to define various multilateral mechanisms with its neighbours. In Central Asian region, the three-lateral mechanism established among Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to focus on transit and business issues can make up for the problems of Iran’s lack of ground and geographical communication with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and

Turkmenistan's policy of permanent neutrality.<sup>25</sup> Iran- Afghanistan-India is the second multilateral mechanism for expanding trade and transit corridors via Chabahar Port in the south-east of Iran. Chabahar Port is exempted from the US sanctions on Iran and therefore, this multilateral mechanism is very important in current circumstances.

In the South Caucasus, the three-lateral mechanism of Iran-Russia-Azerbaijan is the most important mechanism established in line with the North-South transit corridor. This three-lateral mechanism is important since the Republic of Azerbaijan, as a non-EEU country, borders both Russia and Iran from north and south, and due to its suitable transit and economic infrastructures can play an important role in connecting Iran with EEU. Iran-Azerbaijan- Turkey is the second multilateral mechanism for dialogue and cooperation in different issues of the region. It seems that for completion of this process, the following are some the most significant mechanisms proposed for the sake of better relations within the region: "Iran-Armenia-Georgia"; fulfilment of "North-South Road Corridor Investment Program" that requires political coordination of and economic support for reviving the Iran-Armenia-Azerbaijan road corridor and the railroad between Armenia and Iran, commonly known as the "Southern Armenia Railway" and is linked to the Georgian railway network, necessities the activation of Iran-Armenia-Georgia trilateral mechanism in order to bring another South Caucasian economic and transit pillar into force. Indeed, "Iran-Armenia-Russia"; given the fact that Armenia is the only South Caucasian state which is a member of the EEU, some requirements including transit coordination, customs tariffs, banking/insurance issues and FTAs establishment lead to facilitate the trigger of Iran-

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<sup>25</sup> The East Caspian Railway, set up since 2014 in 920 kilometres and connecting the city of Uzen in Kazakhstan to Gorgan in Iran, is part of the North-South rail corridor and can be used to increase the economic and commercial relations between Iran and EEU. Another importance of this communication route is its role in connecting the EEU and China's Silk Road Project known as "one belt, one road". In February 2016, a freight train from China could for the first time pass the railway route through China, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan to enter Iran; this was a great and new development in the region.

Armenia-Russia trilateral mechanism, quickly accelerating and expanding the connection between Iran the EEU. If these multilateral mechanisms fulfil, will create a circle around borders of Iran including Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, Iran- Afghanistan- India, Iran-Russia-Azerbaijan, Iran- Azerbaijan- Turkey, Iran-Armenia-Georgia, and Iran-Armenia-Russia. Aforementioned mechanisms can play a vital role in expanding trade, energy and corridor transit among ports of the Black Sea to the ports of the Persian Gulf, North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), Chinese Silk Road - initiative One Belt, One Road (OBOR), Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), European Union (EU), and Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA).

## IV. CONCLUSIONS

The paper studied Iranian relations with the Caucasus within the overall dimension of its foreign policy. The dynamics (cultural, religious and ethnics ties), regional and international developments have shaped Iranian policies towards the region. A common claim in the literature devoted to Iranian foreign policy is about its ideological feature, related in particular to Iran's supposed will of exporting its peculiar Islamist model of government. But in practice, Iran's foreign policy has experienced a geopolitical behaviour, non-ideologic and pragmatist approach in the Caucasus. Maintaining sovereignty, territorial integrity, political stability in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as prevention of war and violence in Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia is "red lines" of Iran's foreign policy toward the region and Tehran these matters as a threat for Iranian national security.

Iran follows its independent foreign policy in the region and never recognized the independence of Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in spite of good and close relations between Iran and Armenia as well as Iran and Russia Federation. On the other hand, Iran didn't cut its relations with Armenia, in spite of its close cultural, religious and ethnical relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan as only Muslim and Shia country in the Caucasus. Indeed, offensive policy and opposition to external forces especially the United States, NATO and Israel and opposition to fundamentalism (Wahhabism) and terrorism in North Caucasus are another two priorities of Iran foreign policy toward the Caucasus.

Recently, Iran is faced with new political and economic pressure by the United States. Under these circumstances, the South Caucasus is part of "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran, isolation of Iran and following hostile policy against Iran by Donald Trump. But Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan try to preserving and expanding its economic relations with Iran

regardless of the sanctions condition. Indeed, Iran tries to keep and expand its relations with the Caucasus via agreement on preferential trade with Eurasian Economic Union on 862 products and define multilateral mechanisms like Iran-Azerbaijan-Turkey and Iran-Russia-Azerbaijan. In spite of all problems and limitations, Iran's foreign and defence policy in the Caucasus is more "defensive" rather than an "offensive" nature and Iran hopes to expand political, economic and security cooperation with Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Russian Federation can preserve its historical and traditional influence in the Caucasus.