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# Azerbaijan's Geopolitical Landscape

**Contemporary  
Issues,  
1991–2018**

Edited by  
Farid Shafiyev

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# Introduction

Farid Shafiyev

The present book is built around several major foreign policy issues faced by the Republic of Azerbaijan since it regained independence in 1991. These issues include the conflict with Armenia and related matters, the relationship with the West, the complexities of its relationship with Russia, and ties with other Muslim countries, including Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The first chapter, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Deconstructing Stereotypes and International Imagery,” is dedicated to the most acute issue for Azerbaijan’s security and foreign policy: the conflict with Armenia. Taking into account recent academic publications in the English language—including Svante Cornell’s edited volume<sup>1</sup>—which have analysed the historical, legal, and international aspects of the conflict, Shafiyev’s chapter scrutinises the impact of lobby groups on the perception of the conflict in the global media, in public discourse, and among policy-makers in Western countries.

Further chapters deal with Azerbaijan’s relations with important regional countries and blocs. In “Rethinking Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy Strategies vis-à-vis Hegemony-Seeking Russia, 1991–2017,” Kamran Ismayilov explores the dynamics of relations between Azerbaijan and Russia, the latter of which was the region’s former metropole. Not long after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia’s attempts to re-establish its dominion over the South Caucasus have become evident. In this

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1 Svante Cornell, ed., *The International Politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: The Original “Frozen Conflict” and European Security*, New York: Palgrave, 2017.

regard, one of the most difficult tasks for newly independent Azerbaijan in its relations with Russia was to find an appropriate foreign policy strategy that would reinforce the country's independence, sovereignty, and political autonomy. In the face of Russia's hegemony-seeking policies, Baku has responded in a way that can neither be characterised as hard balancing nor bandwagoning, as neoclassical realism would posit. Instead, Azerbaijan's foreign policy behaviour, especially since the end of 1993, has represented mixed patterns of balancing, which take indirect non-military dimension and cooperation towards a number of low-salience areas. In this respect, Baku conceals its true strategic intentions and counteracts Russia through less provocative means. Kamran Ismayilov unpacks the concept of "soft balancing" to both understand and explain how Azerbaijan has attempted to deal with the threatening policies of its northern neighbour. To this effect, the chapter traces Azerbaijani-Russian relations from 1991 to the present day, in order to demonstrate empirical examples of the soft balancing mechanisms employed by Azerbaijani governments.

In "Azerbaijani-EU Relations: More Opportunities on the Horizon," Anar Valiyev reviews the history of relations between Azerbaijan and the European Union. He argues that Azerbaijan aims to develop its relationship with Europe as a strategic decision, despite some obstacles presented by the different priorities of Baku and Brussels: for the former, economy and energy; and for the latter, political development. Azerbaijan attempts to pursue its own objectives within the context of this partnership, focusing on economy, energy, trade, and education. One central aspect of Azerbaijani-EU relations is the joint energy projects, namely oil and gas pipelines, from Azerbaijan to Europe. In "Azerbaijan's Place in West-Central Eurasian Energy Security," Robert Cutler underlines the importance of Azerbaijan to European energy security, giving an overview of many transregional projects involving Azerbaijan, from the 1990s through to the present day.

In the next chapter, "Azerbaijan and Turkey: Analysis of Mutual Cooperation and Strategic Relations since the Independence of Azerbaijan," Shamkhal Abilov analyses the relationship with Azerbaijan's closest ally, Turkey, in the context of the "one nation, two states" concept. He concludes that relations between the countries will remain strong through more enhanced cooperation in all spheres. The more complex relationship between Azerbaijan and Iran is explored by Mitchell Belfer in "The Next Front? Iranian Ambitions and Azerbaijan's Strategic Bulwark." According to Belfer, Azerbaijan is plagued by a triple security dilemma that

hems the republic into a dangerous region with aspiring geopolitical actors (notably Iran, Russia, and Turkey), brewing asymmetric challenges (growing ISIS influence in the North Caucasus and Central Asia), and a simmering dyadic conflict with an expansionist Armenia that continues to occupy Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent regions. Given this dire security situation, Azerbaijan seems locked into a policymaking approach of strategic juggling: dealing with each challenge in part to contain, but not reduce, its impacts. Belfer, however, does not believe conditions must be this way. Azerbaijan has much more power than it currently projects, and it is capable of solving the multitude of challenges through a reassessment of its policy choices. This chapter argues that Azerbaijan needs only to comprehensively deal with one of its strategic challenges in order to solve the others; and that one challenge is Iran. Since Tehran has never reconciled itself with Azerbaijani independence, its chip-away policy has meant that it supports Armenia, assists radical Islamist elements entering Azerbaijani territory, and prevents Baku's unfettered access to Caspian gas. This work presents an assortment of strategies that may be developed by Azerbaijan to limit Iranian power and signal to its other adversaries the potential costs associated with their current policies concerning Azerbaijan. Belfer's strong criticism of Iran is not shared by some experts, who believe Azerbaijan should continue its balancing acts with regard to all regional powers.<sup>2</sup>

In her chapter "Emerging Strategic Partnership between Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia: Azerbaijan's Policy of Overcoming Geography and Common Incentives," Lucie Švejdová reviews relations with another important Islamic country: Saudi Arabia. Due to its geopolitical position, alliance diversity is an essential component of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. To balance the influence of two regional powers, Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan has always sought to build a strategic partnership with allies beyond the Caucasus. This chapter analyses bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia, focusing particularly on recent developments including the expansion of cooperation in military and military-technical spheres. The mutually beneficial outcomes of strengthening strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia, particularly in the areas of security and defence, are examined in this chapter.

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2 Marius Mazziotti, Djan Sauerborn, and Bastian Matteo Scianna, "Multipolarity is Key: Assessing Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy", *CESD Working Papers*, 2013, accessed on 7 December 2018, [http://cesd.az/new/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Paper\\_Multipolarity\\_is-key\\_Assessing\\_Azerbaijans\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](http://cesd.az/new/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Paper_Multipolarity_is-key_Assessing_Azerbaijans_Foreign_Policy.pdf).

# CHAPTER 1

## **The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Deconstructing Stereotypes and International Imagery**

Farid Shafiyev

### **Introduction**

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan has been faced with the enormous task of not only building its statehood, developing new government institutions, army, and judiciary, but also reforming its economy and replacing the Communist system with a market system. But the paramount problem faced by Azerbaijan has been its conflict with Armenia. The Azerbaijani side maintains that it faced aggression from Armenia, which resulted in the occupation of its territory in Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions. Armenia claims that the conflict is between the central government in Baku and the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh.

As much as the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict was a real battle, it also represented a fight for international support, as each side attempted to project an image of the conflict that cast it in a favourable light (as a victim against an aggressor). In this regard, the Armenians had many advantages when the conflict erupted in 1988, as its well-established Christian diaspora had strong ties with foreign governments and citizens. This helped to garner the support of the mass media and certain public advocates, as well as securing direct military and financial contributions from both regional and global players—such as Russia and the United States—once the conflict became international, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. While ordinary Azerbaijanis complain that the West is sympathetic to Armenia due to a common religion, American and European experts tend to blame Azerbaijan’s poor human rights record for its negative international image. Some experts believe that the claim

that Armenian lobbyists influenced the dissemination of this narrative about Azerbaijani has been blown out of proportion.<sup>3</sup> This chapter seeks to disapprove this assumption.

### **Five Factors behind Armenian Image-Making in the Ethnic Conflict with Azerbaijan**

In 1992, the US Congress imposed sanctions on Azerbaijan through the notorious Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. At that time, Azerbaijan was ruled by President Abulfaz Elchibey, who was generally favoured by the West for his pro-democratic and pro-Western stance. Despite this, Azerbaijan was the only post-Soviet country that was punished by American sanctions. Section 907 was lobbied for by the Armenian-American community, which was “well positioned to influence US foreign policy.”<sup>4</sup> One of the authors of Section 907 was Senator John Kerry, a highly influential politician who became secretary of state during the second Obama administration. During the 2004 presidential election, Kerry advocated for “throwing Azerbaijan under a bus.”<sup>5</sup>

During the course of the debate on Section 907, Armenia’s own military offences and human rights abuses—including the extermination of the entire Azerbaijani population in Khojaly, the largest massacre in the conflict—were not mentioned in the US Congress. American scholar Thomas Ambrosio, describing the situation of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict in the beginning of the 1990s, referred to “a highly permissive or tolerant international environment” which allowed the Armenian “annexation of some fifteen percent of Azerbaijani territories.”<sup>6</sup> Armenia

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3 Sergey Rumentsev, “Long Live Azerbaijani Diaspora!”, *OpenDemocracy*, 18 May 2017, accessed on 07.02.2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/sergey-rumyantsev/long-live-azerbaijani-diaspora>.

4 David King and Miles Pomper, “The U.S. Congress and the Contingent Influence of Diaspora Lobbies: Lessons from U.S. Policy Toward Armenia and Azerbaijan”, *Journal of Armenian Studies*, 8 (1), 2004: 79.

5 David Seagal, “Time to Hit The Brakes On That Cliché”, *Washington Post*, 1 May 2008, accessed 01.06.2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/30/AR2008043003607.html>.

6 Thomas Ambrosio, *Irredentism: Ethnic Conflict and International Politics*, Connecticut: Praeger Publisher, 2001, 146.

received strong military support from Russia,<sup>7</sup> and was one of the biggest recipients of US aid per capita among post-Soviet states.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the claim concerning the influence of the Armenian lobby should be taken seriously when dealing with the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. If the human rights record of Azerbaijan is the issue, then two questions should be posed:

- 1) Why did the United States punish Azerbaijan during President Elchibey’s rule?
- 2) Why was Azerbaijan singled out in the Freedom Support Act while many other post-Soviet countries, including Armenia, had significant problems with human rights in the immediate aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union?

These questions open up the complex matter of the stereotypes and geopolitical games that have evolved in regard to Azerbaijan and have helped Armenia to garner sympathy in the West. There are five factors that advanced the Armenian annexation in the media and on the real battlefield.

## **1: Religion**

The first factor is religion, which had a huge influence on the perception of the conflict in the eyes of Westerners. Armenian leaders used every opportunity to position the country as a “Christian outpost” surrounded by hostile Muslim states. The reality is that since its independence in 1991, Armenia enjoys good relations with Iran.<sup>9</sup> Armenia even helped Iranians to cope with American sanctions, by offering them western

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7 Armenian-Russian relations are shaped by centuries-long geopolitical interests of Russian Empire, though Russia supplied weapons to both sides of the conflict since 1992. See Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Caucasus World, 2001; Stepan Danielyan and Knar Babayan, “Nagorno-Karabakh; the Edge of Russia’s Orbit”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 2016, accessed 01.06.2018, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay\\_nagorno\\_karabakh\\_the\\_\\_edge\\_of\\_russias\\_orbit](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_nagorno_karabakh_the__edge_of_russias_orbit); Gaidz Minassian, “A Russian Outpost in the Caucasus?”, *Russia/NIS Centre*, February 2008; Farid Shafiyev, *Resettling the Borderland: State Relocations and Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018.

8 Stephen M. Saideman and R. William Ayres, *For Kin or Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism, and War*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, 88.

9 Andrew C. Kuchins, Jeffrey Mankoff, Oliver Backes, “Armenia in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Foreign Economic and Security Interests”, *Report of Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, Washington, 2016, 11-12.

banking services,<sup>10</sup> while Armenian ambassador Armen Navasardyan has suggested that the country, as well as the surrounding region, will benefit from Iran's nuclear weapons programme.<sup>11</sup> Armenia's relations with Iran are multifaceted and friendly; the two countries have even found common ground in acting against Azerbaijan, although politically, Iran has always supported Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.<sup>12</sup> Thanks again to its diaspora, Armenia also has good relations with Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt.

The Armenian political narrative has emphasised the myth of the first Christian state (though it is claimed that it was not Armenia that first adopted Christianity in AD 301, but rather Osroene (Edessa), in AD 201<sup>13</sup>); its survival in Muslim and Turkish regions through the centuries; and the current struggle to maintain its identity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Europe's great powers exhibited a mixture of humanitarian sentiment and strategic interest in Armenia as an outpost of Christianity within the Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> The idea of a "surviving Christian outpost"<sup>15</sup> became quite attractive and was well-received by various politically-active Christian groups in the West. This can be seen with Christian Solidarity Worldwide, whose once active leader, British Baroness Caroline Cox, deputy speaker of the House of Lords from 1985 to 2005, lobbied strongly on behalf of Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan. Thomas de

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- 10 Louis Charbanneau, "Exclusive: Iran Looks to Armenia to Skirt Bank Sanctions", *Reuters*, 21 August 2012; Justin Vela, "Iran May Look North to Skirt US Sanctions", *The National: UAE Edition*, 25 November 2012.
  - 11 Marianna Mkrtchyan, "Armenian Diplomat: Armenia Will Get Benefit from Iran's possession of Nuclear Weapons", *Arminfo*, 10 January 2018, accessed 12.02.2018, [http://arminfo.info/full\\_news.php?id=28862&lang=3](http://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=28862&lang=3).
  - 12 Claude Moniquet and William Racimora (eds.), "The Armenian-Iran Relationship: Strategic Implications for Security in the South Caucasus Region", *European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre*, 13 January 2013; Robert Krikorian and Joseph Masih, *Armenia At the Crossroads*, Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013, 117-119; Harout Harry Semerdjian, "Christian Armenia and Islamic Iran: An Unusual Partnership Explained", *The Hill*, 14 January 2013, accessed 12.04.2018, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/276961-christian-armenia-and-islamic-iran-an-unusual-partnership-explained>; Fareed Shafec, "Inspired from Abroad: the External Sources of Separatism in Azerbaijan", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, 2 (4), 2008: 205-206; Svante Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence*, Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2015, 328-330.
  - 13 Cheetham Samuel, *A History of the Christian Church During the First Six Centuries*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1905, 58; Charles George Herbermann, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New-York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913, 282.
  - 14 Ronald Grigor Suny, *They Can Live In The Desert But Nowhere Else': A History of The Armenian Genocide*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015, 91.
  - 15 See the photography book by Ardillier-Carras Françoise and Balabanian Olivier, *L'Arménie : Avant-Poste Chrétien Dans Le Caucase*, Grenoble: Ed. Glenat, 2003, highlighting the country as Christian outpost.