

Continuity and Change in Iran's Approach toward the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis (1997-2018)

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Abstract

The current article aims at studying the elements of continuity and change in Iran's foreign policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis during Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani's administrations. It tries to answer the question as to which factors have contributed to continuity and change in Iran's foreign policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis between 1997 and 2018? The article shows that although the principles of Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus and the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis have not changed during this period, the changing role of the external powers – Russia and the West – as well as different foreign policy priorities defined by the three administrations, have caused changes in Iran's approach to this issue. An inductive approach and a qualitative research method has been used in this article. Official documents, news and research articles have been used as the main sources of data in this article.

Keywords: Iran, Nagorno-Karabakh, The South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan.

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1. Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran became a neighbor to the newly independent states in the South Caucasus, to be no longer under a constant security threat along its land borders from its former neighboring superpower. However, at the regional level, the collapse of the Soviet Union affected Iran's security, as the region's structural and internal features had made it susceptible to the occurrence and continuance of unstable security conditions.

Internal and structural challenges and crises in this region such as ethnic and identity challenges, imposed boundaries, territorial claims, and different sometimes competing security approaches of the countries in the region, coupled with regional and trans-regional rivalries led to the dominance of unstable and fragile security conditions in the South Caucasus (Koozegar Kaleji, 2014:39). One of the most important security problems in this region has been the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, an area 40 kilometers off the Iranian borders.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy is known to have established principles mainly rooted in its political ideology. But what bears repeating here is the fact that foreign policy, like any other phenomenon, is no stranger to changes and developments. Although enduring geographical structures and the main elements of a country's power have relative continuity, some aspects of foreign policy constantly change (Sajjadpour, 2007:49). The current article aims at studying the elements of continuity and change in Iran's foreign policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis during Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani's administrations.

The article tries to answer the question as to which factors have contributed to continuity and change in Iran's foreign policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis between 1997 and 2018? The main hypothesis of the article is that although the principles of Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus and the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis have not changed during this period, the changing role of the external powers Russia and the West as well as different foreign policy priorities defined by the three administrations, have caused changes in Iran's approach to this issue.

2. Research Methodology

Given the nature of the subject under discussion, a qualitative method based on the description and analysis of trends has been adopted. Although statistical information on the number of high-level meetings between Iranian, Armenian and Azeri officials has also been taken into consideration and analyzed, the nature of the study and the basis of final analysis remain qualitative. An inductive approach has been used in this article and it is tried to take advantage of the collected information in order to achieve a proper pattern for identifying the elements of continuity and change in Iran's approach toward the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

3. Findings

3.1. The Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

Historically, both the Armenian and the Azeri ethnic groups have been present in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Since the first century A.D., the region currently known as Nagorno-Karabakh was in the Caucasian Albania and considered as a part of the historical state Artsakh. Since the 4th century A.D. Christianity started to spread in the region. Since then and till the establishment of the Tsarist rule over the Caucasus in the early 19th century, the region was handed over several times between neighboring states and empires. According to 1813 Treaty of Gulistan between Persia and the Imperial Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh, together with the other cities and towns north of the Aras River was formally ceded to the Russian Empire (Amirahmadian,1994:292-297).

The conflict between the Azeris and the Armenians in Karabakh dates back to the early twentieth century. The initial crisis ended in 1922 by Stalin, the People's Commissar of Nationalities of the Soviet Union, to the advantage of the Azeris with the fall of the Karabakh region to the Republic of Azerbaijan. Karabakh, located between Azerbaijan and Armenia, became an autonomous region within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924. Despite the authoritarian communist rule in Moscow, the Armenians in Karabakh incessantly requested to join Soviet Armenia and in 1945, 1965, 1977 and 1987 demanded Moscow to do so. However, those requests were never granted. The main reason for the Soviet Union's rejecting Armenians' request was Moscow's concern that similar demands would be made by other Soviet nationalities and republics (CSS Analysis in Security,2013).

The rejection of the Armenians' demands living in Karabakh, who made up more than 80% of the population in the region, by the Communist government prompted them to declare independence and seek to reunite with Soviet Armenia in 1988. It was a result of the new atmosphere following Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power and the declaration of the Perestroika (economic reform) and the Glasnost (political openness). The declaration of independence was again rejected by Moscow. Later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, even the newly established Republic of Armenia did not formally approve the declaration, although the Armenian parliament raised claims on the necessity of annexing Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union intensified the crisis and a war broke out in the region in 1988, which continued until 1994. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Azerbaijan and Armenia turned the Karabakh conflict into a war between the two countries although Armenia did not confirm that its troops assisted the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. The war between Azerbaijan and Armenia continued until 1994, but the mediation made by Russia and some other countries put an end to it. The Republic of Armenia, which had gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, was able, thanks to the Armenian forces of Karabakh, to win the war with the Republic of Azerbaijan and capture not only Karabakh and the Lachin corridor which linked this region to the Armenian territory but also 15% of Azerbaijan's territory. Nearly 25,000 people were killed in this war, 185,000 Azeris fled from Armenia to Azerbaijan, approximately half a million Azeris were displaced from their homes in Karabakh and some other areas and moved to Azerbaijan. About 350,000 Armenians also fled from Azerbaijan to the Republic of Armenia (Lindenstrauss,2015).

The crisis and conflict in Karabakh subsided in 1994 and a ceasefire agreement was reached between the sides, but did not end and is still considered to be a frozen conflict. The main regional and international actors that have tried to mediate and resolve the conflict are Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE founded the Minsk Group with the participation of Russia, the United States, and France in 1992 (Vaezi, 2008:67). Given the policies of the two main parties to the conflict, namely Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as the interests of regional and trans-

regional actors, there's still no clear prospect for the conflict to be resolved in the near future.

3.2. The Principles of Iranian Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus

Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus has essentially had political, economic, and cultural aspects, rather than a religious or ideological orientation in the sense of exporting the Islamic revolution. Since the end of 1991, Iran's policy toward the newly independent states in Central Asia and the South Caucasus has had two distinct characteristics of non-interference in their internal affairs and a desire to expand bilateral economic cooperation. Accordingly, Iran has stated that its foreign policy aim is to establish peace and stability in the region (Haji-Yousefi,2008:114). At the same time, as an influential regional actor, Iran has been trying to expand its influence in the South Caucasus to compete with its rivals and to secure its national interests. However, Iran has faced challenges in realizing this goal. Iran's first challenge is the regional crises in the South Caucasus, especially the Karabakh crisis. The Islamic Republic officials have emphasized now and again that they do not accept any changes in the borders of the region. Iran has always insisted on ending the conflict, reiterating that it is in the interest of all the parties involved. Although the trans-regional powers especially the United States oppose Iran's growing role and influence in the region, Azerbaijan and Armenia have considered Iran as a regional power, the role of which can balance their relations with the other powers. Both countries also generally recognize Iran's role in the region (Roshandel & Gholipour,1994:127). The Armenians have been more welcoming toward Iran's role in the region, comparing to the Azeris. Azerbaijan's position on this issue has been rather ambiguous, and at least, concerning issues such as Iran's role in regional security arrangements or the presence of Iranian peacekeeping forces in the region, has been completely different from that of Armenia (Motallebi, Et. Al,2014:367). Meanwhile, Baku has now and again accused Tehran of supporting the Armenians to overcome the Azeris in Karabakh (Priego,2007).

The Islamic Republic of Iran has never supported military solutions and intervention by trans-regional and western powers to resolve the Karabakh crisis. On the contrary, officials and decision-makers in Iranian diplomacy have always believed that there is only one solution for resolving the Karabakh crisis and that is political negotiations. With this in mind, the

Islamic Republic of Iran's mediatory approach to resolving the crisis can be summarized in three important principles: 1. Cessation of violence in Karabakh; 2. No political or military intervention by the Western actors; 3- Approving the role of Russia in the process of resolving the Karabakh crisis (Valigholizadeh, 2016:92-109).

Iran's second challenge after the Soviet collapse was that the states that gained their independence from the Soviet Union were involved in the process of nation-building and state-building, mostly eyeing foreign models for this purpose. Thanks to its historical and cultural ties with these countries, Iran could play an important role in this process. Besides, Iran's geopolitics and economic power could have attracted the attention of the post-Soviet states. However, Iran faced many problems in fulfilling this role, due to the hostile nature of Iran-US relations and Washington's pressures on the South Caucasus countries not to expand ties with Iran (Haji-Yousefi,2008:94).

In the early years after the Soviet collapse, Iran-Azerbaijan relations were overshadowed by American influence on Azerbaijan's foreign policy, and the relations between these two countries, which could have been relatively warmer due to their common historical background, have not been so in practice (Sadri, 2012: 388). The cancellation of an oil agreement between Azerbaijan and Iran under the US pressure can be mentioned as an example in this regard (Seifzadeh,2005:194-195). Due to the secular nature of the Azerbaijani government and because of its relations with the US, NATO, Turkey, and Israel, Iran-Azerbaijan relations have been unstable and in some cases have caused security challenges for Iran (Khalifa Zadeh,2012: 71).

On the contrary, Iran-Armenia relations have always been intimate and friendly, except for periods during which Armenia has leaned toward the West. Armenia has used the transit route passing through Iran as the safest one compared with those crossing the Republic of Azerbaijan or the insecure areas stretching from Georgia to the Iranian borders. Yerevan considers close relations with Iran vital for achieving its national interests. The domestic needs of the two countries have also contributed to the development of comprehensive economic, political, cultural, and social relations (Koolae,1999:16-17). The close political and economic relations between Tehran and Yerevan have caused all Armenian parties with

different political and intellectual tendencies to pay particular attention to Iran and support the expansion of Iran-Armenia relations (Koozegar Kaleji, 2014:77). As stated by the Armenian Foreign Ministry, the two countries have established close ties in all areas and have promoted effective cooperation in energy, sports, environmental protection, health care, agriculture, education, sciences, culture and interprovincial relations (Moniquet & Racimora,2013:7).

3.3. Factors Affecting Iranian Foreign Policy toward the Karabakh Crisis

3.3.1. The Western Factor

While actively participating in the Minsk Group and playing a pivotal role in OSCE's initiatives for resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, the United States has also tried to play a separate role in the process of resolving the Karabakh crisis. While establishing and maintaining good relations with Armenia, the US has also supported Azerbaijan's general positions on the crisis. The expansion of its presence and influence in the crisis-stricken South Caucasus is one of US priorities in this region. Accordingly, by playing a role in the regional crises, the US would be able to prevent Moscow's dominant role in the former Soviet space. Therefore, there has always been competition between the US and Russia in this region. The White House hopes to limit Russia's power and influence in the post-Soviet region, particularly in the South Caucasus, and to play the main role in the region alongside its strategic regional ally Turkey (Tooysarkani,2010:13). Moreover, the United States has pursued an "everything-without-Iran" strategy in this region. This strategy has been successful, in practice and at various periods, to undermine Iran's relations with countries such as Azerbaijan and Georgia, which enjoy close military-security ties with the United States (Moradi,2006:37). At the same time, the Republic of Azerbaijan also tries to expand security and military cooperation with the Western military, political and economic organizations. Like Georgia, Azerbaijan believes that its security could be better attained by being integrated into that of Europe and the West. Therefore, Baku's efforts to join Western political and security structures and its cooperation with the United States are made in this regard (Firouzi,2010:104). In the meantime, Washington is expanding its relations with Azerbaijan through establishing various commercial and cultural institutions in this country and is also trying to win Azerbaijan's claiming to help it regain the occupied parts of

Karabakh. In an attempt to turn Azerbaijan into its permanent base against Russia and Iran in the geostrategic region of the South Caucasus, the United States is expanding its commercial and political relations with Azerbaijan (Valigholizadeh,2012:124). Baku's expanding ties with the West could also provide it with the necessary foreign support to recapture Karabakh (Yazdani & Fallahi,2016:419).

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 in the final years of Heydar Aliyev, the former President of Azerbaijan, intensified the Western-oriented approach of the Republic of Azerbaijan and brought Baku all the closer to Washington. When a military cooperation agreement was signed between the two countries in 2002, the Republic of Azerbaijan became one of the foremost allies of the US in the global war on terrorism. This approach continued with greater intensity and vigor by Ilham Aliyev, and Azerbaijan joined America's closest allies in the region when it became the first Muslim country to deploy military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Former US President George W. Bush thanked Azerbaijan's president for the effective activities of Azerbaijan's armed forces in Iraq and stated that, despite many difficulties, the role played by the government of Azerbaijan in establishing and consolidating democratic rule in Iraq was a clear example of its strong will (Koozegar Kaleji,2012:162). Indeed, when Barak Obama took the office, this fully supportive approach was changed and Baku faced criticism from Washington for its slow democratization process (Maher,2010).

Unlike the Republic of Azerbaijan, Armenia has always enjoyed very close relations with Russia. In fact, in recent years, Armenian officials have sought to maintain the traditional relations with Russia – which are very important both economically and politically – to achieve a balance of power with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Koolae & Goodarzi, 2015:59). At the same time, Armenia has been trying to develop its relations with the European Union and the United States. Armenian officials refer to this policy as the “mutual completion policy.” Meanwhile, the very powerful lobby of the Armenian Diaspora in the US is the factor that has always strengthened the bonds between Armenia and the US. The role of this lobby is to such an extent that some believe the Jewish-American, the Cuban-American, and the Armenian-American lobbies, are the most influential lobbies in the United States, respectively (Koozegar Kaleji,2012: 168). However, it should be also noted that Armenia's close ties with Russia

have always been a source of concern for the US, preventing the bilateral ties from expanding beyond a certain level.

Finally, Washington has managed to strike a balance between conflicting parties in the South Caucasus. Considerations regarding energy security have brought Washington close to Baku, while liberal movements in the US have a closer affinity with the Armenian lobby's positions. On the other hand, concerning the European Union, Brussels has no independent peacekeeping project on the Karabakh issue. Instead, France has been the plenipotentiary representative of the EU in the Minsk Group (Markedanov, 2016).

3.3.2. The Russian Factor

The South Caucasus has geostrategic importance for Russia. Russia can never ignore what is happening in this region, since it has various interests and concerns in the region, which is considered as part of Russia's "near abroad." The course of events also shows that finding a solution to any political and economic problem in the region is not possible without Russian participation (Noormohammadi & Sharbati, 2014:138). The main purpose of Russian foreign policy in the "near abroad" is to maintain its control and dominance over the former Soviet territories, a region in which, as stated by various official documents, no foreign power has the right to establish an active presence (Lake & Morgan, 2013:312). Given that Iran is at odds with the United States, it has needed to establish friendly relations with Russia, and has had to consider Russia's interests, at least in the "near abroad." Therefore, Iran has sought to pursue a defensive, pragmatic and cautious foreign policy in the region, trying to expand economic cooperation with the regional countries and to play a mediation role in the crises happening there (Haji Yousefi, 2008:115). Consequently, Iran and Russia both oppose the presence of trans-regional powers in this region, particularly the US (Sanaei & Karimi, 2012:74).

However, the Russians know that Iran's willingness to cooperate with them in the South Caucasus is expedient and due to the lack of other viable option. For Tehran, Moscow is not a strategic partner against the West, but is, in fact, a balancing factor. The Russians also have often used the Iranian card to gain concessions from the West. Russia has never allowed Iran to play a role beyond a certain level in its "near abroad." In general, Russia's goals in the Karabakh conflict are as follows:

1. Actively participating in the resolution of the Karabakh crisis within the framework of the Minsk Group, while playing the leading role in the implementation of the Minsk Group peace plan (Tooysarkani,2010:10);
2. Maintaining a strategic balance in the Caucasus and the Karabakh crisis, preventing the expansion of Western influence in the region, especially that of the US. In this context, Russia has established strong security links with Armenia, out of the concern that the US might further strengthen its foothold in Azerbaijan. Russia extensively supported Armenia by supplying arms and sending military experts to Armenia during the Karabakh conflict;
3. Preventing the spread of Islamism, particularly political Islam, in the process of resolving the Karabakh crisis;
4. Pursuing its geopolitical and strategic goals in the South Caucasus, given the geopolitical and economic importance of the Karabakh region (Zahrani & Faraji Louhesara,2013:110-111).

Nevertheless, Iran and Russia have been engaged in strong cooperation and partnership in political, security, and economic spheres, as they have common interests in opposing the US and NATO presence and intervention in the South Caucasus. Both countries criticize military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia on the one hand and NATO and the United States on the other. Russia and Iran also have common interests in nuclear cooperation, or at least Iran has needed close cooperation with Russia to counter the US and European pressure and opposition to its nuclear activities. Besides, Russia opposes the use of South Caucasus territories for threatening Iran's national security (Dehghani Firouzabadi,2010:229-230).

In general, what Russia seeks in the Karabakh issue, and seems to be very serious in playing a role in it, is to play the main role in resolving this crisis and also to prevent the other actors' active involvement in this process. The impacts of this approach on Iran have been evident and were seen in 2016 with the resurgence of hostilities in the region, in which Iran played a limited role in alleviating the crisis. This can be explained by Russia's reluctance to let Iran play the central role (Azizi,2017). Finally, Iran's attempt to play a positive role in resolving the crisis in Karabakh, as well as the civil wars in Tajikistan and Georgia before, indicate that it has moved toward closer cooperation with Russia in the former Soviet territories.

3-3-3. The Domestic Factor: Changes in Iran's Foreign Policy Orientation

3-3-3-1. Khatami Administration and the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

Speaking about Iran's policy toward the South Caucasus, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami said: "The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is based on the principles of good neighborliness, rapprochement and creating a dialogue among civilizations and cultures, calls for peace, stability, and development in the Caucasus. Iran believes that peace and stability in the Caucasus would play a positive role in the growth and progress of the Islamic Republic of Iran and that instability in the Caucasus would be a negative factor for the expansion of Iran's foreign relations. A peaceful and stable Caucasus can connect the north to the south and the east to the west and be a bridge for expanding the relations between the neighboring countries in the region. It can be a venue for the dialogue among civilizations and cultures that will make it possible to create an atmosphere of friendship and cooperation between the countries in the region and their neighboring countries. This dialogue will also help find an effective and reliable mechanism to promote security and stability in the region," (Moradi,2006:39).

Regarding Iran's position on the Karabakh crisis, Khatami said, "Iran's position on the Karabakh crisis is clear. We condemn the Armenian military aggression against Azerbaijan and have announced this at various international organizations and at the highest levels. We believe that this crisis can be resolved through peaceful negotiations and peace processes," (Heydar Aliyev Heritage,2002). Therefore, the framework of the policy of détente and dialogue among civilizations, Khatami believed that the Karabakh crisis could be solved through the means of logic and dialogue, and not by resorting to the military force.

In the same vein, Khatami's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said in response to a question about the Islamic Republic of Iran's position on the problems in the Caucasus region that "Establishing security in this region is of special importance for Iran. Since the Karabakh conflict contributes to the lack of security in the Caucasus, it must be resolved as soon as possible." He emphasized that all necessary measures should be used to resolve the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh, saying that "There are many local opportunities for resolving this conflict that should be taken into account." Kharrazi also announced that the Islamic Republic of

Iran was ready to play a role in resolving this conflict (Jamejam Online, 2003).

However, two factors made Iran less inclined toward getting actively involved in resolving the Karabakh crisis in this period. On the one hand, the Minsk Group's activities in trying to resolve the Karabakh crisis reached its peak (Mahboobi & Mousavi,2013:7), and on the other hand, the relations between Iran and the parties involved in the Karabakh conflict were strained. Relations between Iran and Armenia at the political and commercial spheres diminished during 1997-2000 mostly due to the strengthened Israeli-Armenian relations, the gradual disregard of Iran's role in regional issues and the expansion of Armenia's cooperation with NATO (Gheisari & Goodarzi,2009:130). The relations between Iran and Azerbaijan were also reduced due to Heydar Aliyev's Western-oriented policies (Mahboobi & Mousavi,2013:7). These factors made Iran less inclined to be active in resolving the Karabakh crisis.

Iran's diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia at the presidential level during this period also indicate Iran's reluctance to engage in the process of resolving the Karabakh crisis. Khatami traveled only once to Armenia (Mikhailov,2013) and once to Azerbaijan, whereas Azerbaijani presidents traveled to Iran four times during the same period (Azerbaijan Embassy in Iran,2015). Besides, Khatami viewed the South Caucasus as a civilizational and cultural arena, and given the dominance of globalizing views, such as the theory of "Dialogue among Civilizations" over Khatami's foreign policy approach, the South Caucasus never gained a strategic position in Iranian foreign policy during this period.

3-3-3-2. Ahmadinejad Administration and the Negro-Karabakh Crisis

The main purpose of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy in the South Caucasus was to control regional and geopolitical conflicts. This was pursued by trying to manage the regional crises. Under Ahmadinejad, the pattern of relations between Iran and other countries was that of a multi-level relationship which was supposed to enable Iran to play an active role and strike a balance in various issue areas. In the South Caucasus, this policy required an understanding among Iran, Russia and the regional countries, based on multilateral interactions to reduce the presence and influence of the "third actors", notably the US, Israel, and Turkey (Mohammadi,2012:204-205). In this context, in the spring of 2010, Iran offered to mediate between

Armenia and Azerbaijan. Tehran's initiative to hold a meeting between the Armenian and Azeri representatives with the mediation of the Iranian side was announced on April 19, 2010, by Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki. It was seen as a means of assisting the conflicting parties to search for commonalities in their positions. The idea was raised in the same way as the trilateral summits of the Presidents of Armenia, Russia, and Azerbaijan. It was meant to help find new opportunities, in addition to those provided by the Heads of State of the Minsk Group and by OSCE, to bring the positions of the parties involved in the conflict closer to each other (Iran RU, 2016).

At a joint press conference in Tehran with his Armenian counterpart Eduard Nalbandyan, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki touched upon the Karabakh crisis, saying that "The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict must be resolved in good faith, with serious political will and based on a peaceful approach." He reiterated Iran's clear position on friendly relations with the Republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia and Iran's readiness to assist in resolving the problems between Baku and Yerevan. According to Mottaki, "The Islamic Republic of Iran is most interested in solving the Karabakh problem because insecurity in this region is not in the interest of any neighboring country... and Iran is in favor of establishing peace in the region" (Fars News Agency, 2010). Mottaki's successor Ali Akbar Salehi expressed a similar position during a trilateral meeting with his Turkish and Azeri counterparts. He emphasized the need for maintaining peace and stability in the region, expressing hope that the Karabakh conflict would be resolved peacefully within the international legal frameworks (Fars News Agency, 2011). Generally speaking, during this period and according to the main principles of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy – the "Look East" doctrine, the necessities of the "constructive engagement" approach, as well as the "Global Management" tendencies – the South Caucasus was started to be seen from a new perspective. As such, Iran in this period was more inclined toward playing a role in resolving the South Caucasus crises, including the Karabakh conflict.

Ahmadinejad visited Azerbaijan five times from 2005 to 2013, whereas his Azeri counterpart Ilham Aliyev came to Iran only twice during the same period. Therefore, most of the visits were on Iran's initiative (Azerbaijan Embassy in Iran, 2015). Nevertheless, two events in 2012 deteriorated Iran-Azerbaijan ties. The first event was hosting the Eurovision Song Contest by

Baku, which meant crossing the Islamic Republic of Iran's ideological red lines and led to the withdrawal of the Iranian diplomatic staff from Azerbaijan (Akbarzadeh & Conduit,2016:65). The second one was that the National Assembly of Azerbaijan discussed the possibility of renaming the country to "Northern Azerbaijan." At the same time, Baku began to urgently encourage the Iranian Azeris to gain independence from Iran, pointing out that this region once seceded from Iran decades ago by the Soviet Union under the name of "South Azerbaijan." As a result, the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan were strained (Salehzadeh,2013:31).

During the same period, Ahmadinejad visited Armenia three times, in March and October 2007 and in December 2011. The Armenian officials also followed a tight schedule of visits at high levels (Mikhailov, 2013). Robert Kocharyan visited Iran once in July 2006 (Aftab News,2006) and Serzh Sargsyan once in April 2009 (Hamshahri Online,2009). At the end of these visits, documents were signed to expand ties between the two countries. For example, during Ahmadinejad's visit to Yerevan on October 22, 2007, three memoranda of understanding were signed on banking, construction of wind power plants, technical cooperation and investment (Dehghani Firouzabadi & Moradi,2010:25). During Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan's visits to Iran on April 13 and 14, 2009 eight documents were signed to expand relations between the two countries in various areas (Dehghani Firouzabadi & Moradi,2010:131-132).

3-3-3-3. Rouhani Administration and the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

Since assuming power in 2013, Hassan Rouhani announced that his foreign policy would be based on a realistic and balanced shift from confrontation to dialogue, constructive engagement, and understanding, to promote Iran's international status, security and development. Rouhani's "constructive engagement" policy requires a dual-aspect view of international relations. In other words, this policy requires Iran to confront hegemonic agendas and unilateral actions and policies in the international system, while pursuing détente, rapprochement and the development of relations with the principal actors of the system that enjoy the greatest level of international influence (Soltaninejad, Et. Al,2015:10).

As for the reflection of this viewpoint on Iran's policy in the South Caucasus, Hassan Rouhani said at a joint press conference in Yerevan with his Armenian counterpart that "Armenia and Azerbaijan are our two friendly

and neighboring countries, and we wish to witness a lasting peace in the Karabakh region through negotiation and political means. This lasting peace would benefit all the countries in the region.” According to him, “It is certain that there are no military solutions for achieving peace, and we can achieve security and stability in this region through political solutions. This requires engaging in negotiations in the framework of international regulations.” (Tasnim News Agency,2016a). Elsewhere, Rouhani stated that "Regional disputes and problems must be resolved through dialogue and negotiations and prevention of foreign interference. In the Karabakh region, attempts must be focused on preserving the ceasefire" (ISNA,2016).

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and other senior Iranian officials have also repeatedly stressed the need to end the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In a phone conversation with his Armenian counterpart at the peak of the latest round of fighting in Karabakh in 2016, Zarif emphasized the need for a ceasefire in Karabakh, calling for the return of peace to the region. He also called for a peaceful resolution of the differences between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this phone call, Zarif also said that “The Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to play a role in this issue if the warring parties would like it to do so,” (Mehr News Agency,2016). Regarding the latest round of conflicts between the Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Ghasemi also said that “The Islamic Republic of Iran calls on its two northern neighbors to show restraint and recommends that they make their utmost efforts for the return of peace and a peaceful resolution of their differences through dialogue and negotiations.” He emphasized that “International institutions and mechanisms responsible for resolving this crisis must carry out their duty to end the conflict.” Ghasemi went on to say that the Islamic Republic of Iran was ready to help the two countries and cooperate with them to establish peace and security in this region (Tasnim News Agency,2016b).

As for the relations between Iran and the countries involved in the Karabakh conflict, it should be said that the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, which had deteriorated during the Ahmadinejad era, started to improve. Ilham Aliyev's first official visit to Iran in the new period came on April 10, 2014, followed by Rouhani's visit to Baku on November 12 (Amirahmadian,2014:60). In fact, Rouhani's most significant achievement in the South Caucasus was the considerable development of Iran-Azerbaijan

relations, which marked a completely different bilateral atmosphere comparing to the period between 2007 and 2013. A clear manifestation of this trend was five bilateral meetings of the two presidents during Rouhani's first term in office (three visits to Tehran by Ilham Aliyev and two visits by Hassan Rouhani to Baku), as well as three multilateral meetings in Istanbul (at the 13th Islamic Summit Conference), in New York (at the United Nations General Assembly) and in Davos, Switzerland (at the 45th World Economic Forum). The formation of the Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia tripartite mechanism for the realization of the North-South Corridor, particularly by connecting the rail networks of the three countries, was another sign of the expansion of ties between Tehran and Baku (Koozegar Kaleji,2017).

In the same vein, the development of Iran-Armenia relations, particularly in the economic field, was pursued more seriously during this period. The 12th meeting of the Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation between Iran and Armenia was held in 2014. A wide range of economic cooperation has also been taken into account in the form of various joint committees, including the banking, finance, investment, trade and industry, oil and gas, electricity and other committees (ISNA,2014). However, comparing to the bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, Iran-Armenia relations did not experience a balanced development during this period. During Rouhani's first term in office, the president, the prime minister and the speaker of the national assembly of Armenia visited Iran once and the Armenian foreign minister twice. However, the Iranian President's visit to Armenia took place in December 2016, three years after Serzh Sargsyan's attendance at Rouhani's inauguration in August 2013. Iranian Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri's visit to Armenia in October 2015 and Zarif's two visits to the country were meant to fix the imbalance between Iran's relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Nonetheless, Rouhani's eight bilateral and multilateral meetings with his Azeri counterpart, compared to his two meetings with the Armenian president, indicated that comparing to the two previous Iranian administrations, there was a greater imbalance in Iran's highest-level diplomacy with Azerbaijan and Armenia (Koozegar Kaleji,2017). During Rouhani's second term in office, and especially since the time Nikol Pashinyan became the Armenian Prime Minister, relations between the two countries started to expand once again, comparing to the period between 2013 and 2018 (Abrahamyan,2018).

It should be noted that although there was no major military confrontation between Azerbaijan and Armenia since the 1994 ceasefire, military clashes erupted between the two countries on April 2, 2016. Following the 2016 incidents, the Rouhani administration doubled down on its efforts to mediate between the two sides and cool down the conflict (Azizi,2016). In sum, it could be said that during Rouhani's presidency, Iran has pursued a more active foreign policy regarding the South Caucasus and particularly regarding the Karabakh conflict, although Iran's role has remained restricted to diplomatic moves to encourage dialogue between the two sides.

4. Elements of Continuity and Change in Iran's Approach toward the Karabakh Crisis

A review of what was said in the previous sections shows that contrary to Khatami's foreign policy emphasis on détente with the West and the idea of "Dialogue among Civilizations" as the basis for interactions with the world, the fundamentally revisionist and ideological nature of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy caused Iran to embark on a path of confrontation with the West, while adopting a "Look East" strategy as the main basis of its foreign relations. Indeed, the term "East" in this expression was a broad and rather vague concept, which included Russia, China, Latin America, and Africa. As such, the tendency to enhance ties with the South Caucasus countries during this period should be interpreted not as an independent initiative for this region, but as part of the "Look East" strategy (Barzegar,2009). In other words, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, the South Caucasus started to be seen essentially as a political and strategic arena for Iran within the framework of its confrontational approach to the West. However, under Rouhani and with the reorientation of Iran's foreign policy, the model of "Constructive engagement with the world and expansion of cooperation with all countries, particularly with the neighbors" topped the list of the country's foreign policy principles. In the Karabakh crisis, the Rouhani administration's emphasis has been on a lasting peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and on using a political approach to resolving the crisis within the framework of international regulations. Such a viewpoint has been based on the argument that the stability and security of the countries in the region impact each other.

Accordingly, the nature of the foreign policy orientations of the three administrations have impacted their approach toward the South Caucasus

and, as a result, the role each of them played in the Karabakh crisis. The Khatami administration viewed the South Caucasus primarily as a civilizational-cultural arena within the framework of the “Dialogue among Civilizations” theory. For the Ahmadinejad administration, the region was mostly a political-strategic sphere for Iran’s potential maneuvering based on the “Look East” strategy. As a result, while the South Caucasus was not a top foreign policy priority for Iran in the Khatami administration, Ahmadinejad was inclined to define a more active role for the Islamic Republic in this region, and in Iran’s northern neighborhood in general. Nevertheless, Iran was not successful in expanding its ties with the South Caucasus and to have a say in the diplomatic efforts to solve the Karabakh issue.

To analyze this issue, one should, first of all, take into account the influence of the United States and of its strategic allies in the South Caucasus, resulting in the disinclination of the South Caucasus countries to develop relations with Iran beyond a certain extent. Meanwhile, the Iranian administration at the time was cautious not to provoke the Russian sensitivities by taking over a more active role in Russia’s “near abroad.” This was manifested in Iran’s rather passive position on the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, though it was a good opportunity for Tehran to develop relations with Tbilisi, especially in the field of energy exports (Koolae, 2010: 101). As such, it could be said that while under Khatami it was Iran’s priorities that prevented further development of relations with the South Caucasus countries, the role of the great powers, namely Russia and the West, was the main factor preventing the expansion of ties between Iran and the South Caucasus under Ahmadinejad.

Finally, under Rouhani and within the framework of its “balanced” foreign policy approach, more attention was paid to the development of ties with the neighboring countries, at the same time as trying to normalize relations with the West. However, at least as far as the Karabakh crisis is concerned, no major change was witnessed in Iran’s involvement in the South Caucasus. That was mainly because like the two previous administrations, Iran’s approach toward the Karabakh issue was on the one hand, subject to the broader concepts in Iranian foreign policy and on the other hand, impacted by the nature of Iran’s relations with the great powers. As such, Iran has never had a specific strategy for the Karabakh conflict per se, or even for the

South Caucasus as a separate region with its own characteristics; hence, the ups and downs in Iran's role and involvement in the region (Koolae,2010: 104) were mainly caused by the internal and external factors affecting Iran's foreign policy in general.

To summarize, insisting on the necessity of resorting to peaceful measures for resolving the Karabakh crisis and declaring readiness to take up a facilitating role in this regard have been the main elements of continuity in Iran's approach toward the crisis. The negative role of the great powers, both Russia and the United States, in terms of denying an active role for Iran in the region, has been the other element of continuity. Meanwhile, the elements of change have been related to the changes in the general foreign policy orientations of the three administration, i.e. how they see Iran's deserved role in solving the crisis. In other words, talking about Iran's approach toward the Karabakh conflict, we have witnessed a change in the "viewpoints" and a strong element of continuity in the nature of "actions" and "(non)achievements."

5. Conclusion

Iran's position on the Karabakh crisis can be summarized in three key principles: First, since the beginning of the crisis, Iran announced its neutrality and has so far followed a policy of mediation, stating in various ways that it is ready to mediate between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Second, Iran is after a peaceful resolution of the crisis through political and diplomatic methods and by preventing any military confrontation that may cause catastrophic implications for both sides and the region. Third, Iran opposes the presence of trans-regional powers in the process of resolving the Karabakh crisis. Iran has always insisted that the foreign powers must not interfere in the resolution of the crisis and that the crisis must be resolved through regional arrangements. Iran believes that the presence of great powers, including the United States and NATO in the region has expanded the crisis. Meanwhile, Iran is generally in favor of Russia's strong presence and active role in the region, because it believes that a strong Russian presence can prevent Western influence around the Iranian northern borders. This is despite the fact that the very role of Russia and its support for Armenia has considered to be one of the sources of the prolongation of the Karabakh conflict (International Crisis Group,2019).

Generally speaking, the Islamic Republic's approach toward the Karabakh crisis has contained constant principles, which have resulted in a strong element of continuity in Iran's policy toward the issue. Nevertheless, the Western and Russian factors, together with the shifts in Iran's foreign policy orientation under each of the three presidents discussed in this article, have led to changes in Iran's priorities in the South Caucasus, as well as its actions and behavioral patterns in the case of Karabakh.

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