



# Iran: Friend or Foe of Turkish-Muslim World?

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Could anyone answer the question why there are more rivals rather than allies among Turkish-Muslim countries in the world for the post-1979 revolutionary Iranian governments? In its neighborhood Iran threatens Azerbaijan's security, Iran intervenes into internal affairs of Iraq, in Syria competes with Türkiye or supports anti-Turkish terrorist organizations, Iran's problems with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries are only some known facts for above mentioned question. Could it be explained with Iran's historical imperialistic ambitions or with its intense jealousy strategies toward those Turkish-Muslim world which does not share same Shii ideology with Iran. Could it be the reason for support of Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories for three decades?

It is known that, from Iran's perspectives territory of the current South Caucasus region has been part of the so-called Greater Persian Empire throughout history. For that reason Iran tries become the only political and military power and follows all its expansionist aspirations in the region. If we go back to the end of 1980's (January 1, 1989) we can remember Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's letter to then-Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev, which Iran asked for further domination over some regions (the South Caucasus and Central Asia) in the Soviet Union.

Approximately three decades have passed since the above-mentioned letter but ambitions of Tehran have not changed. Tehran continues to remain one of countries which challenges Azerbaijan's national security. Even there were attempts by a group of Iranian lawmakers to draft a bill (April 2013) on annexation of Azerbaijan to Iran based on the 1828 Turkmenchay

Treaty, which ended the Russian-Persian war. Iranian lawmakers tried to make comparison with the British-Chinese deal over Hong Kong deal and claimed that the treaty was valid only for 100 years and current Azerbaijan was supposed to be returned to Iran.

On Iran's side, unfriendly strategies towards Azerbaijan are mainly explained with Azerbaijan-Israel relations and concern over the north-western parts of Iran populated by Azerbaijani Turks and their claim for independence from Tehran. But of course, it would not be difficult to understand that behind the Tehran's unfriendly position toward Azerbaijan and Turkey are new geopolitical realities and geopolitical competition between regional and non-regional actors following the liberation of Nagorno Karabakh region by Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia during the Second Karabakh War, strengthened it's strategic position and geopolitical importance in the calculus of regional powers.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stressed that his country, which preferred

the status-quo before the Second Karabakh War, would not tolerate any regional geopolitical changes and this would be considered to be a red line. For Iran, border changes in the region could lead the formation of political-military alliance of Azerbaijan, the US, Turkey, Armenia and Israel supported by the Western world, and the above-mentioned alliance could challenge and threat strategic interests of Iran in the region.

Official statements made by Iranian officials following the Second Karabakh War showed that Tehran would not be comfortable with Azerbaijan's complete victory over Armenia, which especially was achieved with Turkish and Israeli military support. Deployment of only Russian and not Turkish peacekeepers in the region was crucial for Iran. Iran is also very concerned about the Azerbaijan-Türkiye military alliance.

Joint military drills The Three Brothers-2021 in the Caspian Sea (September 2021) involving Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Pakistan, was considered by Tehran as a threat to its vital interests. For Iran, this kind of shifts in the geopolitical map are understood as tool for strengthening its geopolitical rivals like Türkiye and Pakistan in its neighborhood. Spokesman for Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Khatibzadeh argued that the agreements signed between the five countries (Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan) overlooking the Caspian Sea stipulates that any military presence on Iran's shores would be illegitimate. Representative of the supreme leader in the province of Ardabil, which borders Azerbaijan, Hassan Ameli, called on the IRGC to display its strength to Azerbaijan. Following the above mentioned drills and call by Ameli, Iran announced also about the military drill near its borders with Azerbaijan.

Iran tried to explain the reason of its decision to carry out military drills with Israel's presence near its borders, in the southern part of Azerbaijan and dubbed the drills "Conquerors of Khyber"—referencing to the animosity between Jews and Muslims.

Iran, for a long, tries to spread its political and religious ideologies and to overthrow secular state system in Azerbaijan. Iran finances some terrorist organizations like Huseyniyyun, against Azerbaijan.

### **Economic-Military Dimensions of Turkish-Iranian Competition**

If we look at the geographical map of the region, we can see Iran's geostrategic location allows it to be a bridge for transit routes between Europe and East Asia with West Asia. But because of Tehran-Washington relations and international sanctions on Iran, make it impossible to become involved to regional projects which Tehran governments could benefit economically. Instead of reducing its problems with international community, Iran focuses on Islamic countries with aim to create problems and challenge national and security interests of those countries. Iran sees Türkiye as a rival which tries to benefit from Tehran's inability to function as a regional hub for transit routes and trade. Türkiye's ambitions to connect with Central Asian countries via the Caspian Sea is a direct challenge to Iran's national interests.

Azerbaijan's attempts to establish a transit corridor across southern Armenia is another challenge for Iran's economic interests. Since 1990's land connections between Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave passed through Iranian territory, and Tehran governments used it as a leverage against Azerbaijan especially in 1990's and 2000's. And opening the Zangezur corridor would diminish the Iran's leverage.

Iran concerned also about Türkiye's ambitions to expand its influence not only in Azerbaijan but also in the broader South Caucasus and Central Asian regions. It could be understood as Iran's fear based on pan-Turkic ambitions of Türkiye. For that reason, the Zangezur corridor project is seen by Tehran government as a tool for Türkiye's direct military access to the South Caucasus and the western part of the Caspian Sea. Also, for

Iran the realization of the Zangezur corridor, is seen as a tool that could strengthen pan-Turkism in the region.

Iraq is also considered by Iran as an important strategic country of its influence in the Middle East. And Türkiye is also one of the main goal of Iranian politicians and military leaders to contain in the region. It is known that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) targets Turkish military positions in northern Iraq. Iranian-aligned proxy groups coordinate with the terrorist organization PKK to conduct some of the attacks. Officially, Iran also criticize Türkiye's anti-terrorist military operations in the north part of Iraq.

One of another concern for Iran is the energy pipeline project that would connect Iraq to Europe via Turkish territories. The IRGC and its proxies attacks to the energy company's residence and to the oil refineries near Erbil (March-May 2022) is proof of Iran's concerns. According to Iran, above-mentioned pipeline project would limit their access to global energy markets and therefore to prevent the construction is the only option.

Next to competition in energy issues, Iran is worried also Türkiye's increased political influence in Baghdad. Iran and its proxies see Turkey's military operations against the terrorist organizations and its military presence as greater threat than the American occupation of Iraq in 2003.

Above-mentioned realities are only some known facts about Iran's deep state ideology against Azerbaijan and Turkey's strategies in the region.

Sharing with some countries same historical roots, with others same religious roots could make Iran more trustworthy country in the Turkish-Muslim world. Instead of confronting with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, not being jealous of strengthening role of Türkiye and Azerbaijan in the different parts of the world would only be beneficial for Iran itself. To rebuild trust with its Turkish neighbors Iran must coordinate not compete in the regional issues. Isolating itself

from any regional cooperation projects and choosing the wrong side in any conflict or confrontation which Azerbaijan and Türkiye are parts, would end with new anti-government coup in Iran.