

## **ANALYZING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING IRAN – AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS IN THE WAKE OF THE NAGORNO – KARABAKH CONFLICT**

\*Danova A<sup>1</sup>., Kagazbaeva E.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Student, Ablai Khan KazUIRandWL, Almaty, Kazakhstan,  
e-mail: [aidadanova95@gmail.com](mailto:aidadanova95@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Candidate of Political Sciences, Professor, Ablai Khan KazUIRandWL, Almaty,  
Kazakhstan, e-mail: [kagazbaeva.e@gmail.com](mailto:kagazbaeva.e@gmail.com)

**Annotation.** This article analyzes the tumults Iran-Azerbaijan foreign relations, with a special focus on the factors that have shaped the historic trajectory of their relationship. This paper describes that Iran's covert support of Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has germinated differences between the two states, while also delving on the history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This paper shows with examples that it is realpolitik that drives the foreign policy of both the states, such as material or geo-strategic gains, than any ideological or religious motives.

The paper also analyses the role of global powers such as America, Russia, Israel and Turkey in shaping the trajectory of Iran-Azerbaijan relations. How a third country (Armenia) can play a pivotal role in the trajectory of foreign relations of two countries (Iran and Azerbaijan) has been elaborated with supporting evidence. It traces the historical roots of the paranoia that Iran and Azerbaijan have against each other, such as Iran's the fear of rising Azeri national consciousness in Iran and Azerbaijan's apprehensions related to Iran's expansionist aims.

The paper concludes on how relations can be improved between the two states, i.e., by solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, fostering common interests and ideologies, and respecting each other's sovereignty.

**Keywords:** Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azeri Nationalism, Middle East, Shia, Foreign Relations, Israel, Turkey, Soviet Union, America

### **Basic Provisions**

Iran-Azerbaijan relations have been studied and analyzed by many experts such as Houman, ASadri and Nader Entessar. The common argument is that their relations started as cordial that became hostile due to their different political agendas. Recently, Iran and Azerbaijani forces have conducted military drills in their borders to show their might and as a sign of their military power. However, their relations should not be considered as eternally bad, as both the countries have common history and culture and they follow the same sect of Islam (Shiism), which can help in improving their relations.

### **Introduction**

After the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, Iran started fostering close relationships with newly formed northern neighbors and aimed at creating influence. Iran couldn't remain passive in the wake of changing security conditions in the region, as Iran perceived peace in the region as necessary for peace in Iran. Iran and Armenia, two newly independent countries of the Caspian, germinated a territorial dispute over

the Nagorno-Karabakh region, leading them to war. Iran's relations with both countries resultantly have been greatly influenced by the conflict.

Iran's ambivalent role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reveals the uncertainty and ambiguity in its policy circles regarding Azerbaijan. On the one hand, it is concerned about Azerbaijan's growing influence in the region and the fear of stirring Azeri nationalism within Iran, and on the other hand, its affinity with the country for being one of the only four countries in the world with Shia majority population (other two are Bahrain and Iraq) is evident. Moreover, Iran is facing the dilemma of containing Azerbaijan's influence in the region, while also keeping the country's population contented, who are pro-Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh fiasco. Azerbaijan's close relations with Israel and Iran's de-facto support of Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have further alienated the Shia-majority countries from each other.

### **Description of materials and methods**

This article has analyzed the Iran-Azerbaijan relations by digging into the history of their relations. This paper does qualitative analysis of the Iran-Azerbaijan relations based on secondary sources available. It uses systematic and analytical methods to analyze the available information and gauging the authenticity of the secondary sources with another sources. It has used books, journal papers and newspaper articles for research purposes. The Authenticity of Houman. A Sadri and Nader Entessar's findings were examined with other sources such as Alex Vatanka and Professor Iram Khalid. Structuralist, functionalist, content analysis, and forecasting methods have been applied to this paper.

### **Results**

Iran and Azerbaijan share a common border, history, culture, language and religion, and despite that their relations are not that much cordial. Present-day Azerbaijan was part of the Persian Empire until it was captured by the Russian Empire in the Russo-Persian Wars (1826-28). Moreover, Iran and Azerbaijan are two of the four Shia-majority countries in the world. Despite these similarities, they have been at loggerheads on most regional and international issues. Iran has adopted a theocratic form of government and has aligned with the Russian and Chinese bloc in the international political arena, whereas Azerbaijan has a secular outlook and is politically aligned with the Western bloc.

As mentioned, Iran and Azerbaijan share the same history, culture and beliefs; logically, they should have been natural allies. However, that is not the case. Initially, When the Republic of Azerbaijan was proclaimed in 1991, Iranians were swift to develop diplomatic relations with it, considering it a welcome prospect for another Shia state in the region and a fertile ground for *Vilayat-e-Faqih* (government of the jurists) [1]. Fearing Iran's scheming, Azerbaijan turned towards Turkey for strategic partnership and started vouching for greater Azerbaijan. Sensing Azerbaijan's intentions for a greater Azerbaijan, Iran's initial euphoria ended and it clandestinely allied itself with Armenia in the first war between the Caucasus neighbors. When the name 'The Republic of Azerbaijan' was adopted, many in Iranian policy circles protested against the name, claiming that the name was never used for current Azerbaijan; though it was used for Iranian Azeri lands. It is aimed at, as nationalist

Iranians claimed, creating Azeri National consciousness in Iran and to claim on the Iranian lands. Even before that, the division of the Azeri community had started under the Soviet Union. To counter Iranian and Shia influence from the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union tried to infiltrate atheism in Azerbaijan during their occupation of the country. The policy, however, failed to produce the desired results, but it was not counterproductive [2, p.62]. The current secular Azerbaijani authorities fear that the Iranian version of the Islamic government system, Vilayat-e-Faqih (government of the jurists), will claim its roots in Azerbaijan as the country has a predominant Shia population. Despite all these misapprehensions of each other, both the Shia neighboring countries have many trade and diplomatic deals and cooperate on many issues.

Iran's relations with Azerbaijan have further soared after the 2020 War, as several issues (re)surfaced between the two countries. Both countries held military drills close to each other's borders and publicly proclaimed their capability to deal with any situation. Iran's major concern is that Turkey has used Azerbaijanian land to send Syrian fighters to fight in Armenia along the Iranian border [3]. Iran fears that the presence of terrorists on its border will have spillover effects and potentially could cross borders to threaten its security. Moreover, Iran is apprehensive that Israel is using Azerbaijan as a lynching pad against it. Iran has repeatedly claimed that it has crashed drones flying from Baku, and suspected Israeli attacks on its nuclear plants, especially on the Natanz Nuclear Complex in 2020, being operationalized from its northern neighbor, Azerbaijan.

### **Discussion**

Iran-Azerbaijan relations have been primarily influenced by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Nagorno-Karabakh is a disputed region between Armenia and Azerbaijan, internationally recognized to be a part of Azerbaijan. The conflict existed for centuries but was contained by the Soviet occupation of both countries. The Soviet Union decided after the occupation of Armenia and Azerbaijan that the Zangezur region will be Armenia's, while Karabakh and Nakhichevan regions will be under Azerbaijan's control [4]. With the dismemberment of the former Soviet Union in 1988-91, the conflict resurfaced, resulting in the First Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1988-94. Azerbaijanis were expelled from their region as Armenia appeared to be successful, resulting in the formation of the Republic of Artsakh, which de-facto controlled most parts of the region, but remained unrecognized internationally. The First Nagorno-Karabakh War left 30,000 people dead and over a million people were displaced internally, with eighty percent of them being Azeris. Twenty percent of Azerbaijan's land was also captured by Armenia. The independent state of Artsakh was established, but it was not recognized internationally, even including Armenia, which de facto supported it. Azerbaijan retorted back in 2020 and Armenia was forced to cede the territories it had occupied in 1994. A truce was reached under Russia's tutelage to end the conflict. Although small skirmishes continue even today, with various foreign countries supporting different groups, the chance of bigger war is not likely.

One of the main countries entangled in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is Iran, neighbor to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, which is involved in almost all geo-political games in the region, especially in the Middle East and the Caucasus. Iran's Caucasus policy is driven by self-interest, such as financial and geo-political, as opposed to any ideological war. Iran, although supports Azerbaijan officially, clandestinely supports Armenia in the conflict, which is Iran's one of closest trade partners [5, p. 160].

Iran's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is replete with contradictions, as the official stance of the state is drastically different from its practical moves in the region. Iran has close diplomatic relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and it has reiterated its neutrality during times of escalation, especially during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-94) when Iran itself was embroiled in a war with Iraq. It has offered to facilitate peace negotiations and pressed upon both parties to solve the conflict amicably according to the United Nations guidelines. However, it came as an aberration to the official policy that in 2020, the Friday prayer leaders, appointed by Ayatollah Khamenei, in four Turkic-majority provinces (West Azerbaijan, Ardebil, East Azerbaijan and Zanjan) in Iran rallied in favor of Azerbaijan, calling it a 'Shia household country' and terming its actions to recapture its lost lands as religiously legitimate and lawful [6]. Even Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's political advisor, equated Armenia's control of Azeri lands to Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories and urged Armenia to evacuate Azeri lands. Although Iran officially rallied behind Azerbaijan, it gravitates in favor of Armenia to maintain status-quo in the region, as a strong Azerbaijan could hamper Iran's regional dominance.

Iran has its concerns concerning Azerbaijan's growing influence in the region. Firstly, Azerbaijan has close relations with Israel, Iran's main rival in the Middle East. Iran is at loggerheads with Israel on a number of international conflicts, primarily on the long-standing Israel-Palestine issue. Azerbaijan, a Shia-majority country like Iran, has close diplomatic and trade relations with Israel, and it has decided in 2023 to open its embassy in Israel for the first time. Israel imports forty percentage of its petroleum consumption from Azerbaijan, while Azerbaijan imports 60 percent of its weaponry from Israel [7]. Azerbaijan used Israel-made weapons against Armenia in the 2020 war, and Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, has compared Azerbaijan-Israel to an iceberg, 90% of which remains under the surface.

Iran fears that Azerbaijani land and air bases would be used against it had there arisen a serious conflict with Israel. Moreover, Azerbaijan and its close ally, Turkey, can pose serious threats to Iran's regional hegemony. Iran's senior authorities have time and again blamed Turkey for creating instability in Caucasus for its material and geo-political gains. Iran's strategic goals are at loggerheads with Azerbaijan, which keeps religious affinity at bay. On the other hand, Armenia, Azerbaijan's main rival, is anti-Israel and its pro-Iran policy is evident, which Iran appreciates. When the former president of Iran Mehmoood Ahmadinejad publicly denied the Holocaust, all the countries criticized it except Armenia, which maintained that outsider issues (such as Holocaust) do not affect its relations with Iran [8, p.131]. Not surprisingly, Israel does not recognize the Armenian genocide of 1915 by the Turks, and sides with

Erdogan's Turkey. It is crystal clear that Iran-Azerbaijan relations are dented by Azerbaijan's closeness with Israel and Turkey, and Iran's paranoia of the trio.

Another concern regarding Azerbaijan that Iran has is that Azerbaijan germinates and supports Azeri and Turkic nationalistic tendencies amongst the Azeri/Turkic population of northern Iran. The Azeri community is the largest ethnic minority in Iran, comprises of almost thirty percent of Iran's 83 million population, which outnumbers the Azeri population in Azerbaijan. With the formation of Independent Azerbaijan, Iran is fearful that voices for a unified Azerbaijan would arise; Iran has similar issues with Pakistan (Baluchistan) and Turkey as well. As Iran has a glorious history of conquests and it prides itself on its rich history, it wants to preserve its national coherence and unity. Azerbaijan, in the past, has provided hints that the Azeri community in Iran would be better off with it, as it was before the Soviet capture of present-day Azerbaijan. Especially, the first president of Azerbaijan, Abdulfaz Elchibey, had expressed such views that had greatly irked Iran [8, p.149]. Azerbaijan has in the recent past refrained from indulging in such expansionist tendencies, calling them unrealistic and undesirable. Iran, however, views Azerbaijan with suspicion. In the wake of Azerbaijan's successes in Armenia and elsewhere, Iran would like to contain the growing Azerbaijani/Turkic national consciousness, so that the Turkic/Azeri population of Iran does not support a united Azeri country. "An Azeri-Turkish military victory on the other side of the border is likely to boost the Ankara-Baku alliance's ethnocentric, sociopolitical influence across northwestern Iran and embolden secessionist forces at the expense of the central government in Tehran." [9]. As an outsider would suppose that Iran's foreign relations with its neighbors would be driven by religious sentiments, but realpolitik and strategic goals drive Iran's foreign relations.

Although Iran officially supported Azerbaijan in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Iran has reacted angrily due to the prospects of Azerbaijan's control of the Zangezur Corridor in the aftermath of the war. Armenia has hesitantly agreed under the ceasefire agreement signed in 2020 with Azerbaijan and Russia to rebuild the Soviet-era routes and gives free passage to all the parties in the agreement. The trilateral ceasefire agreement signed in 2020 stated: "All economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles and cargo in both directions." [10]. Nakhchivan is an autonomous region under Azerbaijan's control; Armenia's Zangezur Corridor disunites it from the rest of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan (and Turkey) wants to enjoy unhampered trade through the corridor but is not ready to give trade access through its territories to Armenia. The proposed trade route will connect Azerbaijan with Turkey through the Armenian Syunik province. Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev exclaimed that the Zangezur Corridor will connect the Turkic nations with each other, and warned in a joint press conference with Recep Tayyip Erdogan that "both Turkey and Azerbaijan will take necessary steps for the realization of the Zangezur Corridor," should Armenia not agree to it [11]. Iran analyzes the Zangezur Corridor as a pan-Turkist agenda that will connect all the Turkic nations. It can give

Azeri national consciousness a boom in Iran. Moreover, Azerbaijan has taken over many of its territories from Armenia that it had to give up to Armenia in the first war, including the main highway linking Iran to Armenia, Russia and the Black Sea [12]. Azerbaijan has imposed heavy taxes on Iranian vehicles and arrested Iranian truck drivers in 2020 claiming that they had crossed the border illegally, thus effectively paralyzing trade between Iran and Armenia. Iran fears that even if Armenia struck a deal with Azerbaijan (and Russia), its interests would not be properly safeguarded. Moreover, Iran views Azerbaijan's moves as a threat to the regional multi-billion project, International North South Transport Corridor (INST), a 7200 kilometers trade route that aims to connect the Indian Ocean and the Caspian Sea through the Persian Gulf, which will go up to Russia and North Europe [13].

No region in the world has been free of global superpowers wrestling for domination since World War Two, between the American-led capitalist faction and the Russian-backed 'Socialist' group. The Caucasus region is one of the main casualties of the power struggles during the Cold-War era, which is still being affected by it. During the post-Soviet breakup, some former Soviet suzerainties opted to join the Western camp, such as Azerbaijan. Iran-Azerbaijan relations have been determined greatly by the Russian-American rivalry. Iran's policy concerning Caucasus has been cautiously designed not to infuriate the Russians, as the sanction-laden Islamist regime needs Russia's support in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the proxy wars in the Middle East and beyond. Azerbaijan, on the other side, has sided with the Western bloc, along with Turkey, to balance Russian secretive support of Armenia in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Moreover, Azerbaijan has skillfully played the card of 'facing the dangers of Islamic radicalism' to curry favor with the West, especially the United States of America [2, p. 70]. Iran, along with Russia, aims to stop Western peacekeeping forces to come into the region, which, in their view, can destabilize the Caucasus. Moreover, Americans want to keep an eye on China, Russia, and Central Asia from the Caucasus by establishing NATO units there. The Iran-Azerbaijan relations are likely to remain the way they are till the global power struggle between the two big blocs continues and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not resolved.

### **Conclusion**

Iran-Azerbaijan relations have been characterized by diplomatic and formal acceptance of each other, but harboring deep misunderstandings and misapprehensions clandestinely. The countries with a shared history and religious beliefs went on to follow different forms of government and outlooks on life, as secular Azerbaijan followed a radically different path when compared to theocratic Iran. The global power struggles between the US led capitalist bloc supports Azerbaijan and Turkey against the Russian-backed faction consisting of Iran and Armenia in the Caucasus. Iran-Azerbaijan relations remain torrid due to Azerbaijan's proximity with Israel, which is Iran's arch-rival in the Middle Eastern fiascos. Iran's can not tolerate its neighboring Shia country's closeness with the Israel, the eternal "enemy of Muslims", as the Irani religious circles call the Jewish state. Iran's fears that installing Israeli advanced technology near its borders in Azerbaijan is a security threat for the Islamist regime.

The fear of rising Azeri nationalism in Iran and Azerbaijan's apprehensions regarding Iran's alleged expansionist views in the region divide the two Shia-majority countries. Moreover, Iran views Azerbaijan's affinity with Turkey in the region as a Pan-Turkish agenda that could produce secessionist tendencies in Iran. Finally, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have shaped the historic trajectory of the Iran-Azerbaijan relationship. Iran has secretly sided with Christian Armenia against Shia Azerbaijan in the ongoing conflict to balance Azerbaijan's influence in the region, which has acted as a catalyst for increasing their mutual misunderstandings.

There have been repeatedly many attempts to resolve Iran-Azerbaijan relations, and all have failed to produce the desired results. The starting point of improving Iran-Azerbaijan relations is to find ways to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as it appears to be the main reason of the distorted relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. With the Russian-brokered deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, it can be realistically hoped that both countries mend their ways and improve their relations. It can only be achieved if both countries let go of their expansionist aims and become more accommodating of the other. Following the United Nations Security Councils resolutions (822, 854, 874 and 884) regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and respecting the sanctity of the territorial sovereignty and autonomy of the other states is the way forward.

Iran-Azerbaijan can foster good relations as they have plenty in common, including history, culture, language, ethnicity and religion. If both countries vow to let go off their hegemonic ambitions and start negotiating with each other as equal stakeholders on all outstanding issues, they can make substantial progress in improving their relations. Their relations can improve on long-term basis if they increase Cultural exchange programs between the two states, cooperate in geo-strategic issues, bolster mutual trade and commerce, and finally, if they let go off their expansionist views and end their paranoia of each other. Only by improving their relations, the oil-rich neighboring countries can embark on a path of unhindered progress and prosperity.

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## **АНАЛИЗ ФАКТОРОВ, ВЛИЯЮЩИХ НА ИРАНО-АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ В ХОДЕ НАГОРНО-КАРАБАХСКОГО КОНФЛИКТА**

\*Данова А.<sup>1</sup>, Кагазбаева Э.<sup>2</sup>

\*<sup>1</sup> PhD докторант 2 курса КазУМОиМЯ имени Абылай хана, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: [aidadanova95@gmail.com](mailto:aidadanova95@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Кандидат политических наук, профессор КазУМОиМЯ имени Абылай хана, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: [kagazbaeva.e@gmail.com](mailto:kagazbaeva.e@gmail.com)

**Аннотация.** В данной научной статье анализируются отношения между Исламской Республикой Иран и Азербайджаном. При этом особое внимание уделяется факторам, которые сформировали историческую траекторию их отношений. Данная работа описывает факт того, что негласная поддержка Ираном Армении в Нагорно – Карабахском конфликте привела к разногласиям между двумя государствами, а также углубляется в историю данного конфликта. Статья также показывает, что на стратегию внешней и региональной политики обеих стран в большей степени влияют материальная и геостратегическая выгода, нежели какие-либо идеологические или религиозные мотивы.

В статье также анализируется роль таких мировых держав, как Соединенные Штаты Америки, Россия, Израиль и Турция, в формировании траектории ирано-азербайджанских отношений. Было проанализировано то, как третья страна (Армения) может играть ключевую роль в траектории внешних отношений двух стран (Ирана и Азербайджана). В данной статье прослеживаются исторические корни паранойи, которую Иран и Азербайджан питают друг к другу, такие как страх Ирана перед ростом азербайджанского национального самосознания в Иране и опасения Азербайджана, связанные с экспансионистскими целями Ирана.

В статье приводятся выводы авторов о том, как можно улучшить отношения между двумя государствами, то есть путем решения Нагорно – Карабахского конфликта, поощрения общих интересов и идеологий, а также уважения суверенитета друг друга.

**Ключевые слова:** Иран, Азербайджан, Армения, Нагорно-Карабахский конфликт, Нагорный Карабах, азербайджанский национализм, Ближний Восток, шииты, международные отношения, Израиль, Турция, Советский Союз, Америка



# ТАУЛЫ ҚАРАБАҚ ҚАҚТЫҒЫСЫ КЕЗІНДЕГІ ИРАН-АЗЕРБАЙЖАН ҚАТЫНАСТАРЫНА ӘСЕР ЕТЕТІН ФАКТОРЛАРДЫ ТАЛДАУ

\*Данова А.<sup>1</sup>, Кагазбаева Э.<sup>2</sup>

\*<sup>1</sup> Абылай хан атындағы ҚазХҚжӨТУ PhD докторанты, Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: [aidadanova95@gmail.com](mailto:aidadanova95@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> саяси ғылымдарының кандидаты, доцент, Абылай хан атындағы ҚазХҚжәнеӨТУ, e-mail: [kagazbaeva.e@gmail.com](mailto:kagazbaeva.e@gmail.com)

**Аңдатпа:** Бұл ғылыми мақалада Иран Ислам Республикасы мен Әзірбайжан арасындағы аласапыран қарым-қатынастары талданады. Бұл ретте ерекше назар қатынастарының тарихи траекториясын қалыптастырған факторларға аударылады. Бұл еңбек Таулы Қарабақ жанжалында Иранның Арменияға үнсіз қолдау көрсетуі екі мемлекет арасындағы келіспеушіліктерге әкелгенін сипаттайды, сонымен қатар осы қақтығыстың тарихына тереңірек үңіледі. Мақалада сондай-ақ екі елдің сыртқы және аймақтық саясатының стратегиясына кез келген идеологиялық немесе діни себептерден гөрі материалдық және геостратегиялық игіліктердің көбірек ықпал ететіні көрсетілген.

Мақалада сондай-ақ Америка Құрама Штаттары, Ресей, Израиль және Түркия сияқты әлемдік державалардың Иран-Әзірбайжан қарым-қатынасының траекториясын қалыптастырудағы рөлі талданады. Екі елдің (Иран мен Әзірбайжан) сыртқы байланыстарының траекториясында үшінші елдің (Армения) қалай шешуші рөл атқара алатыны айтылады. Бұл мақала Иран мен Әзірбайжанның бір-біріне деген паранойясының тарихи тамырларын іздейді, мысалы, Иранның Ирандағы әзірбайжандық ұлттық сананың көтерілуінен қорқуы және Әзірбайжан Иранның экспансияшыл мақсаттарынан қорқуы. Мақалада екі мемлекет арасындағы қарым-қатынастарды, яғни Таулы Қарабақ жанжалын шешу, ортақ мүдделер мен идеологияларды ілгерілету, сондай-ақ бір-бірінің егемендігін құрметтеу арқылы қалай жақсартуға болатыны туралы авторлардың сақтық тұжырымдары берілген.

**Тірек сөздер:** Иран, Әзірбайжан, Армения, Таулы Қарабақ мәселесі, Таулы Қарабақ, Әзірбайжан ұлтшылдығы, Таяу Шығыс, шииттер, сыртқы байланыстар, Израиль, Түркия, Кеңес Одағы, Америка

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