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MA Thesis

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What explains alignment? Armenian-Iranian cooperation in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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Abstract

Armenian-Iranian alignment in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the fields in the International Relations that lack research and proper attention. Given the role of Iran both in regional and global terms and the geographical location of Armenia on the chessboard of interests of the international players, this is a topic that should be addressed properly. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran tried to establish diplomatic relations with newly independent South Caucasus Republics that included both Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was accompanied by bloody conflicts. One of those conflicts was Nagorno-Karabakh over which Armenia and Azerbaijan were fighting and it was taking place right in the Iranian neighbourhood. Iran tried to take a position which would secure its borders and not present a threat to its national security.

The general perception is that in NK conflict Iran is backing Armenia, a Christian country, instead of Azerbaijan-a Shia Muslim country. In order to understand the logic of Iranian foreign policy, a multi-dimensional analysis was made. The thesis approached the topic from the perspective of the Constructivist paradigm of alliance theory and compared/contrasted it with the Realist/Neorealist thinking. The analysis of the empirical part was based on the National Security Strategy Documents of the two states, research of local and foreign experts both in academic sources and media, and the conducted interviews with Armenian experts and diplomats. So, by applying the theoretical part to the empirical part, the thesis argues that the Constructivist theory is capable of addressing how Iranian national interests resulted in the alignment with the Armenia, while other approaches of alliance theory would have predicted something different.

Keywords: Armenia, Iran, alignment, alliance theory, Constructivism, national interests, foreign policy, geopolitics, security, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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List of Abbreviations

ANRO - Azerbaijani National Resistance Organisation

CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organisation

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States

EEU – Eurasian Economic Union

IRI - Islamic Republic of Iran

MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs

NK – Nagorno-Karabakh

NKAO – Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast

NKR- Nagorno-Karabakh Republic

OSCE – Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

RA – Republic of Armenia

RSC – Regional Studies Centre

US - United States

YSU – Yerevan State University

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Iran started to develop diplomatic and economic relations with newly independent countries in its close vicinity, including Armenia. Even though Armenian-Iranian relations have seen much turbulence throughout the centuries, the new geopolitical setting has created conditions that directed the two states to develop a close relationship. In the centre of the research puzzle of my thesis stand Armenian-Iranian relations in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict. The research question is: "Why Iran has taken a strategic position that is in favour of Armenia in Karabakh conflict although alliance theory would have predicted something different"?

The reasons why this topic presents a puzzle are several. In the first place, the field itself is not well researched and most of the scholars in International Relations do not pay as much attention to this region as it is required. Yet, even if there are a number of researchers who have investigated the framework of the Armenian-Iranian relations, several aspects are overlooked or the main focus of analysis is the ethnic, nationalistic dimension. This thesis has approached the issue from the Constructivist perspective in IR and contrasts it with the Realist/Neorealist type of alliance theory. I will try to argue that Constructivism explains Armenian-Iranian alignment better than the Realist/Neorealist position of alliance theory because in this particular case the construction of Iranian national interests plays much more essential role than the approaches offered by the other theories.

The choice of the term alignment over alliance is a delicate matter that should be made clear from the very beginning. "Alignment" is a more general term that is used by scholars to define all kinds of collaborations which include the geostrategic, political and economic type of cooperation, they do not imply any kind of obligations towards the engaged parties and are not necessarily limited to military formations. Whereas the term "alliance" is used to define military cooperation and involved parties have certain obligations towards each other at the time of external threats. Therefore, the analysis of the empirical part will show that in the case of Armenian-Iranian relations it is more suitable to use the term "alignment" rather than "alliance".

The Realist work on alliance theory is mainly based on the military endeavours. They argue that states will enter into this kind of alliance only if there is an external threat. For Realists, alliances have two central values: first, states form alliances because there is a common threat to national interests of everyone involved in this alliance. Second, as alliances are based on threats, it is especially difficult for an alliance to evolve unless all involved parties agree to respond to the new threat (Fearon 1997). Another approach of the Realists scholars is that stats sharing the same ideology, on the one hand, are inclined to alignment as they have the same kind of threat perception, on the other hand, this may put a serious division between them.

Secondly, the Neorealist approach of alliance theory defines alliance as a set of mutual expectations between two or more states and they will have each others' support in disputes or wars with particular other states. Such interests arise chiefly from commonly perceived reality depending perhaps on the parties' relative degree of conflict with the same adversary. Therefore, they cannot be studied separately from the enmities and rivalries to which they respond. Neorealist scholar G. Snyder states: "alliances are formal associations of states for the use of military force, intended for either the security or the aggrandisement of their members, against specific other states, whether or not these others are specifically identified" (Snyder, 2003).

Finally, Constructivists argue that national interests and international system are both entirely socially constructed and they put the identity at the centre of alliance formation. Two important aspects that constructivists argue about the alliances are: first, states form alliances based on a perception that it is within national interest to do so. Second, alliances have the ability to form collective identities between their members (Finnemore, 1996).

From the Realist/Neorealist perspective it would have been logical to assume Iran backing up Azerbaijani claims in the Karabakh conflict since both countries share Muslim solidarity and what is more- there are about twice as many Azeris living in the north-western part of Iran than is the Azeri population in Azerbaijan. Yet, there seem to be other factors supporting the Constructivist theory to explain alliance formation in different conditions.

Furthermore, the topic is of central value to the discipline of the International Relations, because it is important to understand what position Iran, as an important regional and global player, has in the conflict and how ideologically two completely different countries such as Armenia and Iran, found common grounds for such deep alignment and cooperation. Even though currently Iran is a less involved party in the process of NK negotiations (although it has suggested being a mediator in the conflict a number of times), the general perception is that it has been more supportive towards Armenia rather than Azerbaijan.

In the meantime, it must be noted that the thesis does not aim to analyse the specifics of NK conflict or how it should be resolved. The ethnic dimension of the conflict is not presented as well, as for understanding the Armenian-Iranian alignment it is not relevant.

Research methodology

The research methodology is based on the evaluation and contrast of the Realist/Neorealist and Constructivist analysis of alliance theory. As for the empirical part, Armenian and Iranian National Security Strategy documents, assessment of different experts in academic sources and media articles defining possible reasons for alignment have been studied. Additionally, interviews held with seven Armenian analysts and diplomats supported and complemented the findings of the all above-mentioned sources. All in all, the key to resolving the research puzzle is the comparison/contrast of the Constructivist approach with the Realist/Neorealist alliance theory and analysed empirical evidence.

One of the major problems of the research was the absence of sufficient official documents on foreign policy doctrines of Armenia and Iran. In other words, neither Armenia nor Iran has officially adopted foreign policy doctrines. Instead, both countries have National Security Strategy Documents accepted in 2007 and 2011/2 respectively. However, there are two issues that are needed to be taken into account. These documents are more general and present what are the tasks and priorities of the countries in a broader sense, not particularly focusing on foreign policy approach

towards one or the other country. Second, given that documents have been adopted ten and five years ago respectively, they are not quite up to date, especially, taken into account the recent geopolitical developments in the Middle East and South Caucasus. One of the experts during the interview mentioned that the reason why Armenia's National Security Strategy Document has not been updated during the last ten years is the current geopolitical setting of the region when Armenia does not want to choose sides and prefers to develop equal relations with all the interested parties in the region. Nevertheless, the thorough analysis of local and foreign experts on Armenian-Iranian bilateral relations, their inter-relations with regional and non-regional global actors along with the media sources and interviews provided sufficient basis for creating the complete picture and substitute the possible gaps.

Data and sources

The key literature for the theoretical part is based on the research of Realist, Neorealist and Constructivist scholars such as Morrow, Fearon, Snyder, St. Walt, M. Barnett, Finnemore, and many others whose analysis is of central value for understanding the three mentioned concepts. For the empirical part, officially adopted National Security Strategy Documents of Armenia and Iran have been used, which gave the understanding of what are the state priorities on foreign policy issues. Along with the official documents on National Security Strategies, a number of articles and analysis on the foreign policy approaches of Iran and Armenia have been used in order to find the answer(s) to the research question. Additionally, even though the majority of the used literature is in English, I have had access to literature in Armenian, Russian, and Farsi, which let me observe the sources and materials in media of respective countries as well in order to substitute the gaps of missing official documents. Finally, during my research, I have been cooperating with Regional Studies Centre (RSC) and Caucasus Institute (CI) in Armenia, where I have had access to a significant amount of books, journals and articles published by local and foreign experts.

Thesis structure

The first section of the thesis starts with defining the difference between alignments and alliances and which term is more suitable in our chosen case. Then it continues with the analysis of the Alliance theory from the Realist/Neorealist and Constructivist perspectives. The focus is on when and how alignments and/or alliances are formed and which factors contribute to these formations. The Realist/Neorealist balance of power and balance of threat approaches are analysed and contrasted with the Constructivist understanding of national interests' formulation and their influence on the alignment patterns.

The second part starts with presenting how National Security Strategy Documents, academic sources and interviews present the formulation of Armenia's and Iran's interests in terms of bilateral relations and which spheres of cooperation they include. The main question is which factors made ideologically such different countries like Armenia and Iran ally with each other, while Azerbaijan is a Muslim country and from the first sight sharing much more similarities with Iran does not have as strong alignment ties with the latter as Armenia.

The third section gives the general overview of the NK conflict along with discussing Iranian involvement in the initial phase of the negotiations, and analyses how different factors according to the Armenian, Iranian and Russian media articles, academic sources and conducted interviews explain Iran's position.

Finally, the conclusion summarises the findings based on the discussed theoretical and empirical data. As a result, the thesis concludes how the Constructivist theory explains Armenian-Iranian alignment pattern, if it is an alignment, in contrast with the Realist and Neorealist approaches and why it was more beneficial for Iran to adopt a position that seems to be in favour of Armenia.

Part 1

Alliance theory from the perspective of Realist, Neorealist and Constructivist approaches

1.1 Alignment vs. alliance

Before discussing the alliance theory and the cooperation among states in International Relations, it is important to put a distinction between the terms "alignment" and "alliance" and see which one is more suitable to apply in our case. It is important to note that even today there is still a lack of taxonomy among the scholars when it comes to the distinction between the two terms, as the scholarship has not always kept pace with the transformation of traditional alliances and the emergence of new alignment archetypes (Wilkins, 2012).

Glenn Snyder defines alliances as "... formal associations of states for use or (non-use) of military force, intended either for the security or the aggrandisement of their members, against specific other states, whether or not these others are explicitly identified" (Snyder, 2003). Hans Morgenthau defines alliance as "a formal and mutual commitment to contribute military assistance in the event one of the alliance partners is attacked" (Morgenthau, 2005). St. Walt defines alliance as "a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states" (Walt, 1987). P. Weistman defines alliances as "bilateral or multilateral agreements to provide some elements of security to the signatories" (Weitsman, 2003). Robert Osgood defines alliance as a formal agreement that "guarantees states to cooperate in using their military resources against a specific state or states and usually obligates one or more of the signatories to use force or consider the use of force in specified circumstances" (Osgood, 1968).

Alliances may be unilateral, bilateral or multilateral groupings of states designed for defensive or offensive military collaboration. Alliance theorists seem to agree on the issue that alliances are meant to counterbalance powerful states (Waltz, 2010) or ones perceived as threatening adversaries (Walt, 1997). Booth argues that the traditional and

still predominant approach of alliances is based on the balance of power consideration and once there is no threat the alliance dissolves (Booth, 1987).

Alignments are defined differently. George Modelski classifies alignment as "all types of political cooperation" and alliances as "military collaboration" (Modelski, 1963). Snyder explains alignments as formations, where parties have a number of mutual expectations between two or more countries in case of disputes or wars with particular other states. Since alignments are mainly based on expectations during disputes, members are not required to act together all the time (Snyder, 2003). While alliances imply a certain level of commitment, alignments do not require that. S. Walt and S. David define alignment as cooperation between two or more states that includes mutual expectations of some degree of policy coordination on security issues under certain conditions in the future (Miller, 2011).

So, Snyder argues that "alignment" refers to "a broader and more fundamental term ... defined as expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions" (Snyder, 1997). Hence, an alliance is merely one form of alignment. Morgenthau claims that "not every community of interests, calling for common policies and actions also calls for legal codification in an explicit alliance" (Morgenthau, 2005). Consequently, alliance simply adds some formality to the relations between parties, while alignment is not signified by formal treaties, but is outlined by a variety of behavioural actions. While alliances include the military dimension of international politics, alignments do not solely focus on it and include a multifaceted sculpture of national and supranational postures. According to Ward, some of the theorists mistakenly use the terms alignment, alliance and coalition as equal to each other, while it should be highlighted that alignment is a covering concept for all the others (Ward, 1982).

In the case of Armenia and Iran, it is better to use the term alignment as the author of this thesis shares the opinion of those theorists who see alignment as a broader concept which includes all types of political cooperation and mutual expectation of some degree of policy coordination on security issues. The cooperation between Armenia and Iran, that has political, economic, cultural and other dimensions is not driven by external security threat, instead, there is another factor, such as state interests, that should be

taken into consideration. As it is in the case of alignments that they are not signified by formal treaties but are outlined by behavioural actions, the collaboration between Armenia and Iran also does not put legal obligations or limitations on parties in terms of cooperation with other states, even if there are certain expectations in case of security issues. In 2017 on the level of the Defence Ministers of the two countries the possibility of military cooperation has been discussed, yet at this point, it would be more precise to settle with the term alignment.

1.2 Realist approach to the alliance theory

Realist approach of the alliance theory has a central role in International Relations. Realists argue that the alliances are formed based on the military needs, and are created either for security reasons or the enhancement of their members against certain other states that present a potential threat. The main argument of Realism is that by entering into alliances states mainly try to respond the threats from the external environment.

George Liska highlights the fact that it is impossible to speak of international relations without referring to alliances. Throughout the history, it has been proven that the basic reason for countries to form alliances is either to secure their existence or to keep their superior position. In the meantime, he highlights the cause-consequence relation between the conflicts and alignments and claims that the latter is primarily determined by conflicts. Usually, conflicts cause polarisation that leads the weak state to try to secure its existence with the support of a stronger state. Additionally, Liska believes that the probability of an alliance to exist without an adversary is decreased because alliances are always against something or someone (Liska, 1962). However, there is an example that seriously contradicts to this statement. For instance, NATO was established in order to counterbalance the threat of communism and the Warsaw Pact. Even though the Pact does not exist anymore, the NATO still exists and is a functioning organisation. So, when there is a threat to a state's national existence, the latter will try to provide its security either by alliance formation or arms acquisition. By calculating the costs and benefits of these two options states can decide if it is worth to sacrifice some of its independence in an alliance with another state (Morrow, 1993).

Stephen Walt has an essential contribution in the Realist approach of alliance theory. He claims that the threat develops from a combination of geostrategic and military factors and "aggressive intentions". Hence, to determine what presents a threat to the state a combination of certain capabilities and intentions is required (Walt, 1987). He highlights three essential aspects of alliance formation. First, states usually have two options, they either balance against strong or threatening powers, or they "bandwagon" with them. Second, certain states share the same or similar identities which can either bring states closer together or drive them apart. Last but not least, Walt considers that another way of creating alliances is the military and economic aid, propaganda or political penetration (Walt, 1985).

When it comes to the question how states choose their allies there are two theories that are of central value: Balance of Power and Balance of Threat. At the centre of the traditional balance of power theory stands the idea that in order to avoid supremacy by stronger powers states join alliances. The primary theory comes from the Realist scholars, who claim that the states are the main actors in International Relations. Morgenthau believes that stability of the state can be obtained by preserving all the elements of the system. Besides, he argues that if a number of states will see that the power is being concentrated in hands of a hegemonic authority, they will try to do everything to disturb that kind of power concentration (Morgenthau, 1993).

 S. Walt argues that countries mainly join alliances to protect their interests from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a danger to their existence. There are two essential reasons why states will choose to balance: first, at the stake is their own survival. Second, alignment with a more precious ally increases the new member's impact, because the weaker party has a greater need for assistance. (Walt, 1985) To ally with the dominant power means to place one's trust in its continued welfare. States prefer to choose safer strategy and ally with those who cannot dominate their allies over those who can easily do that (Gulick, 1967). On the contrary, allying with a stronger side decreases the level of influence. Hence, alignment with the weaker side is the preferred choice. Defensive realism argues that balancing occurs when any state becomes too powerful. What great powers do is to build up their militaries which will make the other states feel less secure (Mearsheimer, 2006).

In his "Why alliances endure or collapse" analysis Walt argues that alliances are usually defensive or offensive. For instance, they are either intended to provide the means for an attack on some party or they intend to create an atmosphere of mutual guarantee in case of another state's aggression. Moreover, alliances can be formed between states with very different regimes and political values- such as the US and the Soviet Union, or parties sharing similar and mutually reinforcing values – such as NATO. One of the key reasons why alliances endure is because they share similar political values and have a highly institutionalised relationship. This kind of formations will be able to adapt new conditions easier and be better equipped in order to handle conflicts of interests (Walt, 2008).

The approach that states would rather ally with the dominant side rather than against it is quite common. The bandwagoning hypothesis claims that states tend to ally with the party that poses the major threat. The logic standing behind it can be discussed from two perspectives. In the first place, alignment with a state that poses a threat gives the bandwagoner a chance to avoid an attack on itself by diverting it elsewhere. Second, an essential driver for alignment with the dominant side is the fact that at the end of the war the results will be shared (Walt, 1985).

According to K. Waltz, balancing and bandwagoning are framed solely in terms of power. Balancing is alignment with the weaker party, while bandwagoning implies choosing the stronger party (Waltz, 1979). He, however, argues that this standpoint has certain flaws because it does not consider other factors when identifying potential threats and prospective allies. It would be more precise to say that states will rather ally with or against the most threatening power. Therefore, because balancing and bandwagoning are more accurately viewed as a response to threats, it is essential to consider all the factors that will affect the level of threat posed by states (Walt, 1987).

Apart from seeing the causes of alliance formation as a result of the external threat, Realist scholars also consider that ideological solidarity can lead to alignment. What they mean by ideological solidarity is that those states that share political, cultural and other similarities are more inclined to form an alliance. Walt argues that states are more likely to follow their ideological preferences when there is no threat to their security. In the case of great danger, states ally with whatever option they get (Walt, 1985). After

all, even if Walt admits that ideology plays an important role in alliance choices, Realist scholars believe that it is usually a secondary motivation for alignment and most of the time, ideological movements that strive for tight central authority are more likely to lead to conflict rather than cooperation.

Finally, the third aspect that Walt discusses the alliance formation is that economic and military aid from a foreign country will make the receiving state to become dependent on the donor. Hence, the more aid, the tighter the resulting alignment. This is reflected mainly in all the assisting projects that the US is implementing abroad. Meanwhile, it is essential to mention that instruments such as "bribery" and penetration are determinants of alignment, they can increase the productivity of existing alliances, but in the absence of common interests, they can be rarely created (Walt, 1985).

In Realist school of thought, Steven David's theory of omnibalancing suggests an alternative thinking, which gives a different meaning to the alliance formation. The main idea of the omnibalancing theory is that state leaders choose to ally with one country over the other depending on which of them would support to stay in power and provide their personal survival. Even if this alignment will be at the expense of promoting the long-term security of the state and the general welfare of its population, the leaders would be inclined to protect themselves and their personal interests. From this perspective, David argues that balance of power theory is limited as it focuses mainly on the external factors and fails to address the domestic ones (David, 1991).

1.3 Neorealist approach to the alliance theory

Like Realists, Neorealist scholars perceive alliances as a mean of security against adversaries. Therefore putting a distinction between studying them apart from other security policies and rivalries they respond is not possible. One of the most prominent works in the Neorealist school of thought belongs to Glenn Snyder, who states that alliances are only the formal subject of a broader and more basic phenomenon that is alignment. The latter implies that allying states have mutual expectations and in the case of disputes or wars they will have each others' support (Snyder, 1990).

Neorealist researchers perceive relations among states as a structure and they base their theory on the system level. Kenneth Waltz claims that system is composed of actions and interactions of its units. Here as well, states are central actors that exist in a condition of anarchy that, at a minimum, seek to keep their own survival and, at maximum, tend to universal domination. Moreover, Waltz claims that states usually achieve their purposes in two ways: the first is the internal effort, which implies improving economic capabilities of the country, building military power, and developing state strategies. Second is about external efforts that include actions directed towards strengthening and enlarging one's own alliance or to take actions to weaken the opposing one (Waltz, 1979).

According to the Neorealist school of thinking, there are alliance and adversary games that are played on three policy levels: armament, action and declaration. On the armament level, the game between adversaries is "arms racing". In the case of the alliance game, it is "burden sharing". The action level between adversaries simply implies decisions whether to attack or to resist an attack. On the contrary, the alliance game is about to provide the victim of the attack with the aid or more broadly, intervene in an ongoing war or not. However, the decisions to act cannot be completely identified with either adversary or alliance game for they are likely to be motivated by goals. Meanwhile, it is important to highlight that a decision to defend another state that is under attack may be driven to some extent by the fact that defender does not want the attacker to obtain resources and leverages and keep the resources of the defendant state for its own defence. In both games, the declaratory interaction is the use of communication to manipulate others' expectations of one's future behaviour. This includes both unilateral declaration and bargaining (Snyder, 1990).

An important aspect that Snyder refers to in his analysis is a distinction between multipolar and bipolar alliance systems that has been discussed in Waltz's research. To start with, it is essential to build the model of a multipolar system based on the following assumptions: a) there are three or more major states, b) they have approximately equal military power, c) there are no particular conflicts of interests among these states, d) they don't have complete information about each others' intentions and e) alliance cannot be formed in the peacetime. From these assumptions, it

follows that all will feel to some extent insecure, as each party perceives that it might be attacked by others even though it has no specific conflicts with them. (Snyder, 1990)

When it comes to the discussion of what states gain from alignment and how the gains are allocated, Paul Schroeder states the main benefit of an alliance is obviously security, however, there are many other non-security related values as well. For instance, the chances of getting attacked are significantly reduced. Second, they will have a greater capability for defence in case of attack. Third, alignment with a particular country may prevent its alignment with the adversary country of the given state. Taking into account all above mentioned, the principal costs of an alliance are the risk of erupting war and the limitation of action that should be in accordance with the partner (Schroeder, 1976).

To analyse the costs and benefits of alignment for both allies, three general factors should be taken into consideration. First, what is the level of need for the alignment? Second, to which extent parties of the alignment meet those needs. The third issue is what the actual duration of the alliance contract is. It is especially important to bear in mind that an ally whose military capabilities are not strong will provide little security benefits. On the contrary, the party that has strong military capabilities will be the one to have domination over the other members of the created alliance (Snyder, 1990).

Snyder and Walt share the idea that the global structure of alliance outside Europe has a less determining role. In Walt's study of "Alliances in the Middle East", it is shown that regional states tend to ally with superpowers in order to get aid mainly against a local enemy, rather than the opposite superpower. According to Walt, these small states are not interested in the global balance because they are so weak that do not even have the capability to influence that balance (Walt, 1985).

 Another general trend that took away the traditional understanding of alliance formation is that states are more in favour of another kind of military and political collaborations, such as military aid and arms sales. The great powers give more preference to military aid over the formal alliances because the latter contains the risk of confrontation with their nuclear counterparts. Besides, this kind of collaboration does not limit their political freedom. Moreover, aid and sales programs have significant

power to influence the recipient's alignment by increasing both his dependence and his expectations of more direct support (Osgood, 1968).

One of the main criticisms addressed to the Neorealist school of thought is that it often fails to explain or predict events or behaviour that Neorealists have never set out to explain or predict in the first place. It is usually unable to accurately account for the specifics concerning each case of war, power balancing, or power-seeking or alliance formation. However, what Neorealists can claim is that their theory can be a suitable starting point- a logical first cut (Jacobsen, 2013).

When security scholars identify the dynamics of alliance formation they mainly concentrate on two features of the state's strategic calculus: 1) the identification of the threat and 2) the identification of whether and with whom to ally in response to that threat. Realists, in general, believe that both steps are predictably stimulated by power politics and systemic pressures, material factors and threats to the state's security generate the definition of the threat and the decision to construct an external alignment. The neorealist approach to alliance formation is quite insistent that material factors dominate the definition of and the adopted response to that threat (Snyder, 1990).

As we see from the presented literature, Realist and Neorealist scholars analyse the alliance formation from the perspective of military needs and a potential threat that is posed to the state security from the external environment. Scholars of both schools of thinking share the idea that alignments are determined by conflicts and are always created against some kind of threat and it is practically impossible to study them apart from enmities and rivalries they respond. Hence, the possibility of existence of the alignment without a threat is seriously decreased if not completely eliminated.

Realist scholars claim that states sharing the same or similar identities can bring states closer or drive them apart. Iran and Azerbaijan share the same Muslim identity, yet this did not bring two countries close to each other. At the same time, it does not mean that it is the same Muslim identity that drove them apart. So this shows that Realist approach does not have the capacity to address the Armenian-Iranian alignment case.

Even though Neorealist scholars believe that the main gain from the alliance is security, the distinction between the Realist and Neorealist school of thinking is that there are

many other non-security related values that matter. The main difference, however, between Realist and Neorealist schools of thinking is that to Realists' mind both steps are stimulated by power politics, systemic pressure, material factors and threats to state security. Whereas Neorealists insist that material factors dominate the definition of and the adopted response to that threat. Another approach that Neorealists have towards alignments formed in the Middle Eastern countries is that countries of this region ally with superpowers in order to get aid against a local enemy, rather than the opposite superpower. This approach does not apply to Armenia-Iran case as well.

Given all these determinants of alignment, this thesis argues that neither of these two theories has the capacity to explain the Armenian-Iranian alignment case because the latter is not a threat driven. The collaboration of these two countries is not limited to military cooperation or there is a need to keep the domestic power with the support of the external ally etc. Hence, in the next section, the Constructivist approach of alliance theory will be discussed.

1.4. Constructivist approach to the alliance theory

The origins of constructivism in International Relations trace back to mid-1980s, when critical and post-modern theories suggested alternative readings of the very notions of reality, truth and structure, and questioned widely accepted understandings of the IR concepts and subfields such as the study of foreign policy (Flockhart, 2012). Constructivism does not suggest solutions to certain problems in IR. However, it does offer an alternative understanding of central IR themes such as the meaning of anarchy and balance of power, the state identity and interest relationship, and the prospects for change (Hopf, 1998).

Given the "security dilemma" of the anarchic international system, states form foreign policy identity which helps to stabilise their alliances with other states and obtain their certain position in a security community. In International Relations the state identity formation helps to glue over any provisional differences of interests and create a long-term alignment. State identity may even compel a government to hold to a particular foreign policy, again because of both their domestic politics and the long-term

international goals they intend to achieve. Moreover, what is important to highlight is that state identities are constructed not solely from domestic nationalistic thought, but they are rather influenced by state elite's definitions of the state's foreign interests and its best options for security and trade alliances. Last but not least, another essential point to mention is that the state identity is formed and may change in accordance with the external situation. Hence it may diverge from the ethnic identity and lead the country to make a different kind of alignment choice (Wendt, 1994).

Michael Barnet in contrast to the realist approaches of the alliance theory argues that the construction of state identity suggests theoretical leverage over the issue of the threat construction and the choice of the alliance partner. According to Constructivist approach, the potential threat to the state security can be better explained from the perspective of identity rather than the logic of anarchy. While Realist scholars calculate what are the costs of additional units of security taken into consideration the state's military power and highlight the importance of manoeuvring between the fears of entrapment and abandonment, the variable of state identity, which is equal to the perception of national interests, indicates which states can be more or less desirable partners. Barnett offers an alternative understanding of security dynamics by proposing a direct link between state identity and strategic behaviour. He argues that Walt's theoretical framework and observations identify politics of identity rather than the logic of anarchy. Barnett adopts strong support for ideational rather than materialist forces in particular when it comes to alliance formation. In his theoretical discussion Walt suggests a number of examples of how intent makes an essential component of threat construction, however, the concept of intent is left underspecified and not enough theorised. Even though Walt does not specify how intent is defined, the main focus in it is "ideology". (Barnett, 1996)

There are certain functions that identities perform in a society. They tell you who you are and they tell you who others are (Taifel, 1981). In defining who you are identities imply a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of action in particular domains. The state identity implies its preferences and consequential actions (Eyre, 1996). Therefore, it is important to understand what how the national interests of states are defined and how they make their choice in case of alignment.

Constructivism refers to state identity as an empirical question that should be theorised within a historical context, whereas Neorealist approach assumes that all units in global politics have only one meaningful identity - self-interested states. In general, in international politics states are assumed and/or expected to have single eternal national interests across time and space. However, Constructivism assumes that they are variable and may change according to the historical, cultural, political and social context (Hopf, 1998).

Constructivism and Neorealism share the understanding that interests entail choices, but Neorealist scholars further assume that state interests are stable and they are the products of the social practices that mutually constitute actors and structures (Keohane, 1988). Here is one of the weaknesses of the Neorealists, as nothing is stable, which immediately shows that it cannot address and explain the Armenian-Iranian alignment case. Iranian interests, instead of staying stable, have changed significantly because of regional and global developments, otherwise it would be impossible to address why they do not back Azerbaijan that share's the same Shia Muslim identity.

An essential question to ask in the constructivist approach is: why assume that a shared foreign policy identity can be a good basis for pacific relations and cooperation? Probably it will be more reasonable to think that conflict may occur among those actors who have a shared identity (Walt, 1987). After all, conflict is a part of the social relationship, as George Simmel has stated in his essay named "Conflict". This does not mean that wherever we see conflict it derives from realist world or anarchy. The sources of conflict may vary and that is why shared identity does not guarantee peaceful cooperation and prevention of conflict. (Simmel,1964).

In contrast to anarchy and material factors, when it comes to analysing the conflicts, identity offers better conceptual basis, at least, in two ways. First, scholars affirm that the relationship between identity and construction of the threat is of a special type. If we consider that not all states with shared identity will give the same definition to the threat, then they will treat those outside the group as a threat or will agree on the means to confront the threat, as there is an essential connection between identity and threat (Connolly, 1992). Wendt argues that identity might be better able to predict whether two states will be friends or foes than any other theory would suggest (Wendt, 1992).

Second, a possible source of conflict among actors sharing common identity is their constitutive norms. Those states that share a basic identity and organise themselves into a self-constituted group are likely to construct norms that instruct them on how they are to enact their identity. This can lead to two kinds of conflicts. First, actors with a shared identity might very well debate and contest their associated norms. Second, actors will contest to present themselves as acting in a manner that is consistent with the group's norms and to portray others as acting in a manner that is inconsistent with those norms and thus potentially threatening to the group. If we put it another way, then we should say that rivalry is not over military power but rather it is over the images and the presentation of self, threats, hence, derive from a rival's attempt to portray itself as acting in a manner that violates the group's norms (Barnett, 1996).

In sum, Barnett argues that identity is connected to the threat construction and represents a potential source of alliance formation. When contrasting it with the Neorealist analysis that states the choice of alliance partner is largely dependent on a rational calculation of costs and benefits deriving primarily from material factors, Barnett considers how identity shapes the choice of alliance partner and builds a foundation for alliance creation.

Furthermore, identity makes some partners more attractive than others. The best example is the democratic peace theory according to which countries that share similar values are not inclined to start a war against each other (Levy, 1988). Second, identity not only provides some leverage over the choice of the alliance partner, but it also suggests that the maintenance of that alliance can be dependent on the parties' mutual identification. Therefore, common identity might not make the basis of alliance stronger, but on the contrary, undermine the alliance's foundation. Because an essential basis for the strategic association is not simply shared interests in relationship to an identified threat but rather a shared identity that promotes an affinity and mutual identification, the language of community arguably better captures this type of strategic association. Besides, there are two essential aspects of the identity that should be taken into consideration when it comes to alliance formation. First, identity provides a better conceptual link to the construction of the threat than do anarchy and other materialistic

derivations. Second, identity potentially informs as to who is deemed an attractive ally (Adler, 1994).

In Constructivism, norms have an essential place. In order to see the distinction between norms and the construction of national interests and why this thesis gives priority to the second one, some characteristics of norms should be discussed. Katzenstein defines them as "standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity" (Katzenstein, 1996). Because norms by definition imply a quality of "oughtness" and shared moral assessment, they prompt justification for action and leave an extensive trail of communication among actors that we can study. Norm influence can be perceived as three stage processes: 1) norm emergence, 2) broad norm acceptance – "norm cascade", 3) internalisation (Finnemore, 1996).

The characteristic mechanism of the first stage is persuasion by norm entrepreneurs. The latter usually try to persuade a critical mass of states to embrace new norms. The second stage is attributed by a dynamic of imitation as the norm leaders attempt to socialise other states to become norm followers. The norm internalisation occurs when norms acquire taken-for-granted quality and are no longer a matter of broad public debate. It is important to understand that norms do not occur out of thin air. They are actively built by agents having a strong understanding about appropriate or desirable behaviour in their community (Finnemore, 1996).

As we see, the Constructivist approach to the alliance formation is significantly different from the Realist and Neorealist schools of thinking. The state identity and perception of national interests of the state have central value in Constructivism. In the case of Armenia and Iran, it must be argued that state interests are the decisive factor for the alignment.

Armenia and Iran both share common interests which make them attractive allies for each other in order to develop peaceful and mutually beneficial cooperation. What Constructivist scholars argue is that the state interests is variable and may change depending on historical, cultural, political and social contexts. We clearly see this pattern in the case of Iran which has changed the definition of its national interests and entered into an alignment with Armenia, even though it was expected that the religion

will play a more decisive role in its foreign policy. Therefore, the hypothesis that this thesis suggests is that Constructivist approach has a better capacity to explain the Armenian-Iranian alignment case than other theories because it is not focusing merely on the external security issues but rather on the construction of the national interests of Armenia and Iran. As Finnemore argues, constructivism is a social theory that makes claims about the nature of the social changes. It does not have a capacity to produce specific connections about political outcomes that can be tested in the social science. Hence, from this perspective Constructivism is similar to rational choice which is argued in the case of Iran.

The empirical data that includes analysis of the National Security Strategy documents, various comparative studies on the Iranian-Armenian relation and the conducted interviews with the Armenian experts and diplomats show that the Constructivism theory among all the other discussed theories has better grounds for explaining the alignment pattern of Armenia and Iran. In order to make it more distinct, the next chapter will discuss the foreign policy approaches of Armenia and Iran, how the national interests of the two countries are constructed and what leads Iran to make an alignment choice that contradicts the general assumption of the alliance theory.

Part 2

Armenian and Iranian foreign policy approaches and construction of national interests

2.1. Armenia's foreign policy towards Iran and the construction of its national interests

This section of the thesis is going to analyse how Armenia see the alignment with Iran and what are the reasons of cooperation based on the National Security Strategy Document of the Republic of Armenia (RA), analysis in academic sources, interviews with experts and diplomats and local media. It is important to mention that all these sources discuss the importance of alignment with Iran from the geostrategic, economic, cultural and psychological perspective. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that when one searches information on Armenian-Iranian relations on the media majority of the information found has an emphasis on the Armenia's economic benefits from the cooperation with Iran. Yet, in order to understand why Armenia allies with Iran a multidimensional analysis must be made.

Throughout the history, the geopolitical position of Armenia has left the country with a difficult choice on how to act on the chessboard of interests of different regional and non-regional global actors. The fact of being at the crossroad of diverse interests has made Armenia try to keep balance and develop equally friendly relations with all the interested parties in the region. As every state, Armenia's foreign policy is aimed at reinforcing the country's external security, preserving favourable conditions for its development, develop and strengthen cooperation with the partner states, tackle the issues with the regional problems and create an atmosphere of cooperation (National Security Strategy Document, 2007).

Armenia does not have officially accepted foreign policy doctrines that address issues of cooperation with other states. However, it has a National Security Strategy Document adopted in 2007 that to some extent reflects the foreign policy approaches. The main idea reflected in the Document is comprised in the concept of complementarism. The

term is related to the name of Vardan Oskanyan, who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1998-2008. The policy of complementarism is meant to preserve the balance between the interests of the regional and international powers instead of siding with one or another (Minasyan, 2009).

Armenian foreign policy has an essential task to strengthen the security of the country and develop its relations with neighbouring countries. As the focus of the thesis is Armenian-Iranian alignment, the foreign policy approaches towards the other countries or international organisations will not be discussed. Sh. Kocharyan, current Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Armenia (RA), mentions that relations with neighbouring countries are of high priority for Armenia as it is bound by these states throughout the history (Kocharyan, 2012). This statement obviously refers to Iran, as whenever there is a discussion about the bilateral relations between the two countries historical ties are brought forward immediately.

Since the 1990s, the Armenian leadership has made it clear that it is ready to get engaged in regional and global integration process regardless the fact that the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict has not been resolved. Given the status quo in the conflict over the NK, it is not realistic to expect that the latter will be solved in a short-term period, and not even in the medium-term. Consequently, Armenia should take this into account and try to develop its relations with other regional countries (Iskandrayan, 2010). In this context, Iran stands in a very special position,

According to the National Security Strategy Document, developing friendly relations with Iran has objective reasons for Armenia such as neighbourhood, historical-cultural ties and mutual economic interests. One of the transit routes connecting Armenia with the external world passes through Iran. Especially given the isolation from Armenia's two neighbours: Azerbaijan and Turkey, Iran has an important strategic role connecting Armenia with Asia and the Middle East. Two countries cooperate in the energy field and implement a number of projects aimed to provide Armenia with alternative means of energy security. Moreover, relations with Iran are of central value for Armenia, because Iran being a significant player in the region and in the Islamic world, leads a balanced policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (National Security Strategy Document, 2007).

When discussing Armenian-Iranian relations one should be careful with misleading and extreme statements such as Iran is an Islamic country and may present a threat to Armenia from the religious perspective. On the one hand, it should be made clear that Iranian foreign policy's priority is not presenting a threat to the national or religious identity of Armenia. On the other hand, the misleading impression that the relations of two countries are perfect must be avoided, because Iran perceives South Caucasus as its historical land and this idea has been inserted in minds of Iranians over years. The proof of this is that even during the everyday conversations Iranians mention about this. This implies that Iran has not given up the idea to see South Caucasus as a part of its territorial control[1].

One of the leading experts on Iran in Armenia, Vardan Voskanyan, in his interview mentions that it should be taken into account the interrelation of Armenia and Iran dating back to centuries. The Armenian and Iranian border in our region, and by our region both the Middle East in a broader sense and South Caucasus is included, is one of the oldest borders that have ever existed in the world. This is an important factor, given that in the region there are newly created countries that do not have precise understanding, in the first place, regarding their own identity. In this sense, the historical Armenian-Iranian good relations give us a proper basis to build our relations nowadays. Even though in modern political science this factor is ignored most of the time, Mr Voskanyan believes that this is still a significant factor and should be taken into consideration[2].

Another important feature is the cultural and political co-relation between Iranians and Armenians that dates back to centuries. For instance, one of the proves of Armenians being a local nation is Achaemenid leader Darius 1st's Behistun Inscription, where Armenia's name is mentioned in three languages. There are two bright examples in terms of productivity between Armenian-Iranian military-political alignment coming from ancient times. First is the text on the friendship of Kourosh and Tigran Ervandyan mentioned by Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi, and the second is when the military commander Krasos's head was shown to the Parthian military commander

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[1] Interview with an Armenian Diplomat, MFA, April 11, 2017
[2] Interview with the Head of the Iranian Studies Department at the Yerevan State University, April 5, 2017

Suren in Artashat after defeated by Armenian-Parthian soldiers in 53 BC. This lets the two countries build their relations, not from the very beginning, but base them on historical, cultural, political, linguistic strong grounds[3].

Given that the main concern of Armenia is its security, then the foreign policy is directed towards providing proper conditions for the state's development. Taking into account the specifics of the geographical position of Armenia, closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, the connection with the external world is highly dependent on Iran and Georgia (Mesamed, 2013). In this context, the role of Iran is highly important, especially in the light of the war broke out between Georgia and Russia in 2008. It showed that Armenia should diversify its foreign policy and establish closer relations with Iran because the Russia-Georgia war was perceived as an essential security threat to Armenia (Markarov, 2016).

Another leading Armenian experts Richard Giragosian, who is the Head of the Regional Studies Centre (RSC), supports the idea that Iran has been always important for Armenia as an alternative or secondary way to overcome isolation. Given that two of four Armenia's borders are closed, Georgia has an essential role for much of the transportation and energy and Iran is a very important alternative. This is why Armenia imports 20-25% of its trade through Iran. Besides, when international sanctions are lifted, Armenia can position itself as a unique bridge linking Iran with the West[4].

Iran's geographic position from the perspective of transit route has vital importance for Armenian national interests not only in terms of security but also the economy. According to the Transportation Minister G. Beglaryan, Armenian and Iranian governments have agreed to ship two containers from the Indian port Mumbai to the Black Sea and on to Europe via the Persian Gulf and Iran in order to see if it is economically more beneficial route compared to Turkey and Azerbaijan. According to rough calculations, the cost of transit route should be lower and Armenia may seriously benefit from this (News.am, 2016).

On the Presidential level, the leaders of the two States H. Rouhani and S. Sargsyan have discussed that all efforts will be put in order to create Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor.

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[3] Interview with an Armenian Diplomat, April 11, 2017.
[4] Interview with the Head of the Regional Studies Centre, April 12, 2017.

The Armenian government has borrowed $150 million from the Kazakhstan-based Eurasian Development Bank last year to rebuild a 20-kilometer road currently going through a mountain pass close to Agarak. It is planned to construct a 4-kilometer tunnel there which will significantly shorten travel from the Iranian border to Yeraskh, a railway station about 50 kilometres south-east of Yerevan (Danielyan, 2017). The Armenia-Iran railway will add to Iran's role as a transit route for Armenia. The latter can also contribute to the Chinese "New Silk Road" project (News.am, 2015).

Goods coming from India and Iran will be transported to Yeraskh by trucks and then shipped to Georgian Black Sea port of Poti by rail. (Harutyunyan, 2016) At the same time, Iranian Ambassador to Armenia Seyed Kazem Sajjadi stated that Iran is interested in this project and is planning to send experts to evaluate the possibility of railway construction (Asbarez.com, 2016). From this perspective, Armenia sees Iran as an actor the cooperation with which will significantly boost its economy which is a serious investment in its security and is considered to be one of the main tasks embedded in the National Security Strategy Document.

Armenia sees Iran as an important partner in trade relations as much as in geopolitical and security issues[5]. In general, during the last five years, Armenia and Iran enjoyed fairly stable and mostly sustainable trade relations. Currently, Iran serves as the 7th trading partner for Armenia for exports and stands 5th for imports (National Statistics Service of Armenia, 2016).

The energy sector is another sphere of cooperation with Iran that makes a serious contribution in constructing the Armenian national interests. According to the barter agreement between the two states, Armenia has been exporting electricity to Iran in exchange for gas since 2009[6].

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[5] From 2005-2011, trade turnover between Armenia and Iran doubled, increasing from 177.7$ million to 323$ million. However, imposing sanctions on Iran in 2012 had a negative impact on bilateral economic relations and resulted in the reduction of both imports and exports (Business for business, 2016).

[6] By now, Armenia has imported 2.2 billion cubic meters of gas and provided 6.2 billion kilowatt hours of electricity. According to the Armenia's Deputy Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Hayk Harutyunyan, the agreement is beneficial for both parties, and Armenia plans to import more Iranian gas, and hence export more electricity. Additionally, he said that Yerevan and Tehran signed a $120 million agreement on the construction of a third electrical transmission line between the two countries during the coming 18 months (Baghdasaryan, 2016).

Given that Armenia does not have oil and gas resources, it is highly dependent on the import of gas from foreign countries, meaning Russia and Iran. In this sense, Iran has a central security and economic role in terms of gas supply, because it is an alternative to Russia and to some extent may decrease Armenia's dependence on it. Yet, it has faced a number of difficulties. The gas pipeline between Armenia-Iran was ready to function from March 2007. Initially, the diameter of the gas pipeline was supposed to be 56 inches wide, but it was reduced only to 28 inches, because of the Russian intervention (Baghdasaryan, 2016). Armenia accepted this reality because it is highly dependent on Russia in a number of fields, whereas Iran took into account its policy adopted towards the Caucasus and Russian interests in the region (Khachatryan, 2006).

It will be economically cheaper for Armenia to import Iranian rather than Russian gas because of the geographical location since the transit costs will not be as high as in the case of Russia[7]. Nevertheless, the diversification of Armenian gas imports will be difficult not only because of the Russian pressure but also due to the limited capacity of Armenian-Iranian gas pipeline launched in 2007. Meanwhile, the head of the Islamic Republic's national gas company Alireza Kameli said that Georgia and Iran have negotiated imports of Iranian natural gas through neighbouring Armenia and Georgia can receive it at its border (Azatutyun Radiokayan, 2016). This is another way how Armenia can benefit from the bilateral relations with Iran and why the development of collaboration with Iran is so essential.

Another project that is of central value for Armenia is the construction of hydro-electric station located in Meghri. The construction of that facility officially started in December 2012 and is planned to be completed in 2018. According to the agreement, the construction costs ($323 million) will be paid by the Iranian side and in return, the produced energy during the first 15 years will be provided to Iran for free, after which Armenia will have the complete ownership of the power plant (Armenpress news agency, 2015).

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[7] According to Armenian Customs Service Data, for instance, in 2014 Armenia paid over $183 per 1000 cubic meters for Iranian gas and roughly $266 for Russian gas imports. In 2015, the price was $188 and $122 respectively. Even when the Gazprom reduced the gas tariff, it did not make any difference for Armenian household and corporate consumers. So, the Gazprom uses its monopoly in this sphere and sets its own pricing policy (News.am, 2015).

The opinion that the economic cooperation is the base for political relations with Iran is quite widespread. However, even if economy plays a significant role in Armenia's perception of Iran, it should not be overestimated. Mr Voskanyan states that: *Armenian-Iranian alignment is not merely economy based, geopolitics matters a great deal. We have seen a number of examples that the economy does not have any influence on political relations when at the stake are geopolitical interests. A good example is the case with the Russian aeroplane that was shot by Turkey given the Moscow's reaction that followed the incident*[8].

Tourism is another sphere of cooperation the development of which is in Armenia's national interests. Taken into account that Armenia does not have natural resources, developed industry, way out to the sea etc, it should try to develop other directions that to some extent can promote the country's economic development. Hence, tourism is one of those fields. Armenia is one of the main tourism destinations for Iranians because of the close geographical location, attractions and entertainment. Iranian tourists hold the third position among all the tourists visiting Armenia after Russia and the United States (Baghdasaryan, 2016). One important achievement in this field was the adoption of visa-free travel regulation which let citizens of both countries travel freely (Radiofarda, 2015). Even though visa fees were not an obstacle for tourists to travel, this kind of regulation showed how high the level of mutual trust and partnership between the two states is.

From the psychological perspective, one aspect that contributes to the construction of Armenia's perception of Iran is the animosity with Turkey. This pushed Armenians towards Iran, especially after the Armenian Genocide of 1915, as many found their refuge in Iran. When Armenians were running from the Ottoman forces, Iranians accepted them and protected them. Iranians have a saying that the Holy Book (referring to Koran) does not raise a hand on people and as Iran considers itself as the true follower of Islam they did not permit bloodshed on their territory (Iskandaryan, 2017). Besides, the fact there is a significant Armenian Diaspora living in Iran and they have the possibility to preserve their culture and religion without facing any pressure from the Islamic regime constructs a friendly image of Iran in Armenia (Zarifian, 2008).

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[8] Interview with the Head of the Iranian Studies Department at the YSU, April 5, 2017.

In sum, from the Armenian side alignment with Iran, in the first place, seems to be a natural choice, as two of its four borders are closed and there is a need to have a connection with the outside world. Armenia has a way out to the external world via Georgia as well, however, given the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008, there was a need to find an alternative to Georgia. Armenia and Iran have strong cooperation links in the fields of economy, energy, trade relations and a number of projects are implemented in this field, however, the alignment with Iran is not merely economy driven. In the construction of Armenian interests towards Iran, the multi-dimensional analysis shows that geopolitics, security, economy, some psychological aspects play significant role, however, among all the mentioned dimensions the security and geopolitics play the most decisive role.

2.2 Iranian foreign policy towards Armenia and the construction of its national interests

When we talk about the foreign policy doctrines of Iran it is important to take into consideration the rich history, culture as well as diplomatic traditions of this country. It should be stated that Iran, like Armenia, does not have foreign policy doctrines as such, but its main foreign policy goals are embedded in the National Security Strategy Document adopted in 2012. In this document, there is not much stated about the approach towards Armenia, it is rather included in the policy adopted towards the Caucasus region and presents general statements that Iran develops friendly and cooperative relations with neighbouring Muslim and non-Muslim countries are mentioned. So, this section as well is based on the National Security Strategy Document, analysis of experts, academic/media articles, and interviews on how Iranian national interests towards the region and particularly Armenia are formulated.

If we compare the early-Islamic period, middle ages and current Iranian foreign policy we can see that the main aims and directions, in general, have not changed. However, depending on the challenges of the given time-period Iranian government has made certain adjustments to its national interests in order to meet the current needs. After the Revolution, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) was based on a

number of objectives that are embedded in the country's Constitution and the National Security Strategy Document. According to these documents, outside the Iranian borders, Iran aims to preserve and promote its regional and global position, spread its ideas, including Islamic democracy, expand its bilateral and multilateral relations, particularly with neighbouring countries, foster peace and security at both the regional and the international levels through positive engagement, and promote international understanding through dialogue and cultural interaction (Sanahan, 2015). The last two points specifically lead to the Iranian approach towards the NK conflict which will be discussed later on.

Having the preservation of security of the borders as a primary concern, it is clear that Iranian foreign policy has a realistic and rational approach. Even though the West and some neighbouring countries of Iran had concerns about the Islamic Republic's mandate to export the revolution, Iran's regional foreign policy in the Caucasus is completely pragmatic. When studying different approaches the Islamic regime used towards Caucasian Republics we see that the geopolitical and economic realities that Iran is facing today are completely different (Sadri, 2012). This shows that religious ideology does not play a role in defining its relations with Armenia.

The multi-dimensional analysis of Iranian-Armenian relations shows that there are a number of reasons why alignment with Armenia is in Iranian national interests. First, when the Caucasus region was a part of the Soviet Union, the only way connecting Iran with Europe was Turkey. Turkey used this fact in order to put pressure on Iran and dictate its own rules in terms of bilateral relations (Bethayi Asal, 2006). In accordance with this, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the main tasks of Iranian foreign policy became the establishment of good relations with the newly independent neighbouring countries (MFA of IRI, 2017). This would let Iran get away from the Turkish pressure and obtain alternative way connecting with Europe. Even though there are religious differences between Armenia and Iran, geopolitical position of Armenia makes Iran ignore religion-based approaches and focus on the rational calculations. So the decision to ally with Armenia was in line with Iran's national interests.

Iran perceives Armenia as a country that experiences the same kind of isolation as Iran. If Armenia is isolated because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and closed borders

with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Iran is isolated because of the international western sanctions. Despite their religious division, both Tehran and Yerevan need regional and global allies. Therefore, mutual benefits and cooperation connected with the alignment have driven away any possible ideological and religious differences (Sadri, 2012). This makes it visible that there is a need to take into account three aspects in terms of bilateral relations with Armenia: strategic, geographic and geopolitical specifics (Giragosian, 2005).

According to Barzegar, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, regionalism has become one of the main features of the Iranian Foreign Policy (Barzegar, 2010). The global diplomatic approaches of the revolutionary regime appear to frame even the most pragmatic regional position over the South Caucasus (Bataille, 2010). Strategically Armenia has a position that makes it an attractive ally for Iran. It would have been definitely more beneficial for Iran if the border between Turkey and Armenia was open. Nevertheless, the fact that Turkey conditions normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations with the NK conflict decreases the prospect of more beneficial transit conditions for Iran. Yet, Armenia is a better alternative given the previously put pressure from Turkey. In this contexts, it is interesting to see that Iranian media, even when talking about the external pressure on Iran, highlights the importance of alignment as a two-way collaboration between Armenia and Iran, especially taken into account the close historical, cultural, political and security ties (Iranian Diplomacy, 2009).

No matter how important the role of history in bilateral relations between the two countries is, the current security and geopolitical situation of the region is a more decisive actor. The Armenian and Iranian relations have been stable and sustainable and the sphere of cooperation has been mainly political and economic. The fact that Armenia's geographical location provides Iran with access to European countries makes Armenia a more attractive partner (Koolaee, 2010). Some of the scholars claim that Iran has put more emphasis on its economic interests versus adopting fully religious ideology in their foreign relations and understood that many countries were reluctant to trade with Iran, if it decided to spread Islam forcefully (Gresh, 2006). Further analysis will show that if in Armenia's case economy may play a very important role, in Iran's case economy is still not as decisive as the geopolitics. Consequently, from the Iranian

perspective, it is better to focus on the strategic role of Armenia for securing Iran and its geopolitical role.

As it has been already mentioned before, in order to understand the reasons why Iran chose alignment with Armenia a multi-dimensional analysis should be done. From the political perspective, the Iranian-Azerbaijani relations significantly explain the drivers resulting in Iran's alignment choice. To start with, it is important to mention that Iran and Azerbaijan share a number of similarities. First, both countries have historical-cultural, religious serious commonalities. Second, Azerbaijan is the second country after Iran with Shia Muslim majority population. Third, there are around 20 million Azeris living in Iran. Finally, in its foreign policy, Iran has adopted an approach to give priority to Muslim countries when establishing relations with other countries (Begijanyan, 2015).

However, along with these similarities, they have a number of differences that seem to be much more essential in defining the alignment pattern. First, they have ideological differences- Azerbaijan is a secular state, Iran is an Islamic republic. They do not share the same approaches about jurisdictional issues of the Caspian Sea. The pollution of the Sea poses a long-term threat to Iran's economic interests. (Dorraj, 2013) Third and most importantly, there is the issue of "Iranian Azerbaijan" – a northern region of Iran bordering with Azerbaijan. Nationalistic circles of the Republic of Azerbaijan have claims to join this region with the Republic of Azerbaijan because there are around 15-20 million Turkish-speaking Iranians – Azeris, living there. This was extremely expressive during the presidency of the first president of RA Abulfaz Elichibey. Even though the situation changed and the Azerbaijani rhetoric towards "Iranian Azerbaijan" became more subtle, Iranian government still remains suspicious. While some scholars argue that this is one of the reasons explaining Armenian-Iranian alignment, it is mostly denied by the Iranian officials. Additionally, pan-Turkism or Pan-Turanism also includes "the attachment of Iranian Azerbaijan to the Republic of Azerbaijan" as it will be necessary to establish a land corridor between Azerbaijan and their Turkish-speaking ethnic kin in Central Asia. Hence, this leads to Armenia and Iran's displacement (Zarifian, 2008). In terms of Pan-Turanism and Pan-Turkism, it must be also noted that this rivalry has its deep roots in Iranian history that is embedded in the Iranian epic

poem "Shahnameh" (transl. King's letter) where the main topic is the enmity between Iran and Turan. This implies that the differences between Azerbaijan and Iran, the threat to the Iranian territorial integrity and the possible rise of Turkic actors in the region play a much more essential role in constructing national interests than the religion and the fact of Azerbaijan being a Shia country when allying with Armenia.

Iran-Turkey relations are another major aspect revealing Iranian interests in alignment with Armenia. Traditionally these two countries never had excellent relations. However, even if they are presented as radically different in political-economic-social models, there are still some aspects that bring those two together, such an example is the Kurdish issue. On the other hand, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey and Iran have become competing actors in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The idea of influence is very important for Iranians, as during the rule of the Persian Empire Iran had an influence on a larger territory than it has today, and Iranian leaders have always been open that it is essential for Iran to maintain a broad influence in the region. So, given that most of the ex-Soviet Caucasian republics have chosen to have closer relations with Turkey rather than Iran, Armenia is the only country that has taken a pro-Iranian position (Zarifian, 2008).

A noteworthy aspect of understanding the Iranian foreign policy towards Armenia can be reflected in once incident as well. For instance, in 2007, Mahmud Ahmadinejad had an official visit which was supposed to last for 22 hours. Going back to Tehran he announced that even though the visit was planned for 22 hours, he spend half an hour more. Yet, the head of the Armenian MFA declared that he finished the program 30 minutes earlier and missed two important events, one of which was attending the Armenian Genocide Memorial. In fact, this way Iran was trying to avoid any negative reaction from Baku and Ankara, as in 2004 President Mohammad Khatami visited the Genocide Memorial, which arose a wave of condemnation and dissatisfaction in Baku and Ankara. Ahmadinejad was highly criticised by media for having this official visit to Armenia, let alone he would visit the Genocide Memorial (Begijanyan, 2011). This shows that Iranian leaders are extremely careful in their actions and do not want to cause anger and dissatisfaction inside the country which may lead to the weakening of their positions. In other words, even though Iran values good relations with Armenia,

Iranian political leaders lead a balanced foreign policy in order not to trigger anger of their Muslim neighbours and cause separatist movements inside the country.

One of the leading experts of the National Defence Research University in Armenia, Benyamin Poghosyan, sees the construction of Iranian interests in the context of the cooperation with Armenia the following way: first, Iran sees Armenia as a partner taken into consideration the Azerbaijan-Turkey relations and the growth of the Turkish impact. In other words, Iran sees Armenia as a partner which can decrease or neutralise the Turkic factor in the South Caucasus[9]. Additionally, Iran continues to stay anti-Turkish states, as Iran-Turan relations have political-ideological contradictions for centuries, just like the Armenian-Turkish relations (Torgomyan, 2008).

Armenia is a strategic partner for Iran because of security reasons. First, in Yerevan Tehran has found the right partner to decrease Ankara's influence in the South Caucasus. Both states are aware that Russia plays a significant role in the region in limiting Western influence (via NATO and EU) and decreasing the Turkish role. For Tehran, however, Russian influence in the region provides an opportunity to offer a "lesser-evil- partner" option for interests in Caucasus states (Sadri, 2012). Second, another security concern directed against Iran is coming from Azerbaijan. Iranians had major concerns that Azerbaijani territory can be used for US-Israeli machinations against Iran. Third, Azerbaijan's close cooperation with the West and its growing interests in joining NATO presents a serious threat to Iranian national security in the region as Iran does not want to see any kind of foreign military forces close to its borders (Dorraj, 2013). Therefore, all these aspects contributed to the Iranian alignment choice that will counterbalance the Azerbaijan-US-Israel collaboration and create the opposite Armenia-Russia-Iran vector.

Mr Poghosyan further argues that Armenia is an alternative way towards Europe and Russia. As for Europe, the North-South transportation corridor that is under construction is going to play a vital role in connecting the region with Europe. Meaning that the route will get to Georgian ports and then through the sea to Ukraine. As Iran supports diversity, they want to have different alternatives and Armenia can play an essential role here[10].

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[9] Interview with the Executive Director of the Political Science Association of Armenia, April 12, 2017.
[10] Ibid, April 12, 2017.

Iranian leaders realise how important the ties with Armenia are in securing the economic survival of Iran given the current climate of economic sanctions and isolation that both states face. Iran has a stronger relationship with Armenia than with any other Caucasus country in the world, while Armenia's major objective is economic security Iran seeks to expand its oil and natural gas exports into Eastern Europe (Sadri, 2012). As the spheres of economic cooperation have already been presented in the previous section, there is no need to discuss it in this chapter as well.

Another aspect making Armenia attractive ally for Iran is Armenia's membership to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Armenian ambassador to Iran Artashes Tumanyan, in an interview given to the Iranian "Donyaye Eghtesad" Iranian newspaper, mentions that the economic cooperation with Armenia is of vital importance for Iran, as Armenia is a member of the EEU which gives a new meaning to the Armenian-Iranian cooperation because of two major factors. First, this means that by entering Armenia Iranian goods will have access to the EEU. Second, when Iranian investors establish an organisation in Armenia, then the produced products can circulate in EEU countries without taxes. This implies that they immediately have access to a market of 200 million populations living in the EEU (Tumanyan, 2015).

The psychological aspect of Iranian perception of Armenia also plays some role in the construction of the national interests. It can be seen in the saying "The Armenian does not lie" and they are loyal people. Besides, at the time when the Iranian leaders and elites were considering their country being exploited by colonial powers such as England and Russia, they accepted Armenians as a stable and reliable group. Already in the second part of the 20th century, it is a common perception among Iranians that Armenians gave their lives to the nation at the time of Iran-Iraq war as many of them had participated in the war (Zarifian, 2008).

This leads to the next point: the role of Armenian minority living in Iran. Tehran has a special foreign policy adopted towards the Armenian minority living in Iran which aims to demonstrate democratic, pro-human rights nature of the Islamic Republic. This has an important place on Iranian foreign policy agenda, as it is criticised by the US and the EU for non-compliance with international standards on human rights. Last but not least, the good relations with Christian Armenia are used by the Iranian authorities to demonstrate the dialogue of civilisations promoted by reformist President Mohammad

Khatami. The Iranian ambition to appear as an advocate of religious dialogue is aimed to appear as ''a bridge between East and West" not only in their historical roles as a Diaspora but also as an important element of their contemporary identity (Mirzoyan, 2010).

Part 3

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the construction of Armenian-Iranian alignment

3.1 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and its role in the Armenian-Iranian alignment in Armenian, Iranian and Russian media articles

Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) is a disputed region between Armenia and Azerbaijan over which a war broke out in 1988. Nowadays, most Armenians use the term Artsakh along with the term Karabakh in Armenian, Russian and English. Even though in English the official name of the territory is ''Nagorno-Karabakh Republic'', ''Artsakh'' is an attractive alternative that has distinctive political and ideological significance.

In the 19th century it was a part of Armenian cultural and literary movement and from the geopolitical perspective, it is significant from three aspects. First, Artsakh is the authentic Armenian name for the territory, one that joins the modern territory to a genealogy of ancient Armenian polities. Second, the use of the term is meant for purification of the language, as the name ''Karabakh'' is held as somewhat imperfect because it implicitly signifies Persian and Turkic impact upon the territory. Hence, by highlighting the Armenian version of the term the foreign influence is somehow minimised. Third, the term is related to the idea of revivalist agenda and project, an imagined ''return to an original identity'' after the history of foreign capture and repression. The term Karabakh came into use following the Mongol and Turkic invasions of the region in subsequent centuries. However, Armenians have tended to use the terms Artsakh and Karabakh interchangeably since (Toal, 2013).

The reason of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's existence lies back in 1921 when the Caucasus bureau, governed by Joseph Stalin, changed a decision initially considering NK as part of Armenia and awarded it to the Soviet Azerbaijan by giving it wide regional autonomy. Originally, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO)

shared a border with the Soviet Armenia but by 1930s that link was eliminated, and the NKAO became an enclave with a majority Armenian population surrounded by Azerbaijani territory (Toal, 2013).

In 1988, Nagorno-Karabakh voted to secede from then-Soviet Azerbaijan and join Armenia, which put the beginning of a bloody war between the two countries throughout the years to come after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result of war around 30.000 people died and hundreds of thousands displaced before 1994 ceasefire agreement. Armenian forces took control over the Nagorno-Karabakh and several surrounding regions which are considered to be buffer zone and provide security of the NK population from direct threats. Even though the ceasefire agreement was agreed, low-scale fighting continued along the borders (The Economist, 2016).

In 1992, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Since 1994: OSCE) joined the settlement process of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1994 ceasefire agreement was mediated by Russia, Kyrgyzstan and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Inter-parliamentary Council and Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh signed the Bishkek Document on May 5, 1994. According to that document, signatory parties agreed to a ceasefire effective from that date on. The institute of co-chairmanship of Russia, France and USA of the OSCE Minsk Group was created later on, in 1997, which since then has been the only agreed format with the mandate from the OSCE to conduct mediating activities for the peaceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict (MFA of NKR, 2017).

In the regional context, all immediate neighbouring countries of the Karabakh conflict have their own national interests, in the first place, in terms of security. Since the beginning of the conflict, Iran has officially announced that it does not support any of the parties and stands for the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

To understand the Iranian position a thorough analysis was required. At the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Iran has just got out of the eight-year devastating war with Iraq and had completed the transition process of the post-Khomeini era. At this period, Iran was focused on domestic issues, especially its post-war reconstruction and renewal of political ties. The new president of the Islamic Republic, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was trying to moderate Iranian foreign policy and re-establish relations with

the West, including the United States but also, a major Iranian concern for this time-period was to keep stable relations with Russia and avoid any behaviour that could contradict their interests (Hunter, 2017).

By the end of 1992, Armenia had captured the majority of the Karabakh's territory and forced around 700.000 Azerbaijanis to flee their homes in the area (Leeuw, 2000). This triggered a massive amount of influx of Azerbaijanis to cross the Iranian border. Iran sent troops to the borders by the beginning of 1993 and provided Azerbaijan with humanitarian aid for refugees. Tehran was afraid that this will trigger nationalist sentiment, therefore prevented refugees from further entering the country. Besides, another threat from the created situation was that it could have been used by outside powers to destabilise the country from the inside (Gresh, 2006).

In order to provide its own security and strengthen its positions in the region, Iran decided to bypass its political competitors: Russia and Turkey and tried to negotiate a dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In order to implement this plan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran Ali Akbar Velayati arrived in Baku and suggested to establish a ceasefire, at least, for a short period of time. As a result, both Armenian and Azerbaijani sides agreed to stop fire for a couple of days. However, by the time the agreement would enter into force, Armenian forces have already planned to seize the city of Khojalu which had an important strategic position for both parties, as it was considered to be the gate to Stepanakert and from here Azeri forces were in a position to open fire on Armenian populated territories. Besides, the only airport of Nagorno-Karabakh was located in Khojalu, so all these factors contributed to the implementation of operation planned by the Armenian forces. The seizure of the city showed that Iranian mediation was not successful, which, of course, undermined Iranian reputation in front of the Azerbaijani population. In order to save face, Iranians initiated another attempt to bring the parties around the negotiations table (Glebov, 1992).

In 1992 second round of negotiations started. A meeting on the presidential level of the two countries took place and it was agreed to establish a ceasefire, end the economic blockade of Armenia, let international observers have access to the area, exchange prisoners and make a joint decision on the issue of refugees. The presidents agreed to these conditions, however, on the next day news came from Shushi, a city where

Azerbaijanis were holding the last position in NK, that Armenian forces have taken control of the city and are threatening Nakhchivan (an Azerbaijani-controlled territory on the East of Armenia bordering with Turkey). This meant that another attempt of negotiations was failed. As a result, the Iranian deputy of foreign relations publicly denounced this act as ''undisguised aggression'' and declared that Iran considers NK as part of Azerbaijan and will not accept any change of borders in the region. Iranian authorities were scared of brake out of aggressive movements in the northern region of the country, hence at some point, the relations with Azerbaijan strengthened and ties with Armenia weakened. In 1993, Iranian President Rafsanjani, during his visit to Baku, announced that Iran will not provide Azerbaijan with military aid. However, they will not let Armenia advocate open aggression against Azerbaijan as well (Sharpe, 1995).

Along with the above-mentioned incident during the negotiations, there were other reasons as well that made Iran step aside from the negotiations process. Factors such as pressure from Turkey and the United States, Azerbaijani ultra-nationalist, Pan-Turkic, and anti-Iranian elements made them keep a lower profile. However, this did not imply that Iran would not follow how further events evolve. As long as there is the issue of ''South and North Azerbaijan'' and security of its borders, Tehran will continue to keep an eye on this conflict (Minasyan, 2010).

In order to have a better understanding of Armenian-Iranian alignment in the context of NK conflict, it is important to present some findings from the Armenian, Iranian and Russian media as well.

As it has been already mentioned before, there is a significant amount of Turkish-speaking Iranians –Azeris living in Iran. Azerbaijan still in the 1990s had presented territorial claims in order to establish its project of "Greater Azerbaijan". Even though after Heydar Aliyev's coming to power the issue has obtained more subtle character it is not ignored by the Iranian leaders. Moreover, according to some of the experts, it provides solid grounds to explain one of the reasons of alignment with Armenia. According to one article in Russian media in the light of this year's Presidential Elections of Iran that will take place on May 19, 2017, the separatist mood in Iranian Azerbaijan region has grown. Azerbaijani National Resistance Organisation (ANRO) has addressed to the US President Donald Trump not to consider them as Iranians. They

mentioned that Iran has occupied their territories which led them to seek a home in Europe and the US for decades (Tarasov, 2017). This shows that even today, the threat to territorial integrity of Iran is as realistic as it was in the beginning of 1990s and Tehran should respond to it properly.

Another Russian source analysing Armenian-Iranian relations in the light of NK conflict refers to the comments of the Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran Bahram Ghasemi on the trilateral meeting among Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia. Ghasemi states that the resolution of the NK conflict without taking into consideration the opinion of its people is impossible. The role of people will be of central value in the conflict regulation. This kind of announcement may be perceived as supporting the Armenian approach, however, at the time of the meeting with the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, President of Iran Hasan Rouhani mentioned that Iran has always supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. This kind of policy implemented by the Iranian government may be understood the following way. According to Lana Ravandi-Fadai, an academician from the Centre of Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies in Moscow, this might be Tehran's reaction to the close relations developed with Israel and the US, fearing that the territory of Azerbaijan may be used for establishing a US military base and also, the West may play a card of common history between Iran and Azerbaijan and trigger Turkic nationalism for the unification with its Iranian Northern Azerbaijan. This led to Tehran's support to Armenia in NK conflict as a counterbalance to Baku's political choice (Tarasov, 2017).

Along with leading this kind of policy, Iran has always announced that Armenia and Azerbaijan should be determined in the peaceful resolution of the NK conflict and not let third actors intervene and deepen the crisis. The minister of Defence Hossein Dehghan recently during the Azerbaijani Defence Minister's official visit again highlighted the importance of this approach (Dehghan, 2017). According to the Russian sources, the third party is not Russia, as given that Caucasus Republics were part of the Soviet Union, they fall under the region of Russian influence. The third parties here are Turkey and all the other external powers.

Previous Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Makhson Pak Ayin, at the interview with the correspondent from the Russian Gorchakov Fund of Public Diplomacy, mentioned

that security is the main regional concern for Iran and they are interested in the preservation of peace in the region. From the Iranian perspective, the reason why the conflict is not solved is foreign intervention and lack of will for the conflict resolution, as that may lead to decreased dependence on external powers. Hence, Iranian side is convinced that in order to preserve the regional stability it is important that the regional countries build strong cooperation ties with one another. This way it will be possible to create strong regional cooperation and overcome the disagreements (Gadjiev, 2013).

Armenian journalist Gegham Baghdasaryan states that in 2011 Iranian Embassy in Armenia made two very important announcements that should be carefully analysed. First one refers to the peaceful settlement of the conflict based on international law and Iran's willingness to contribute to it. Second, which is more interesting, is the fact that the official position of Iran regarding the foreign policy will be presented by the President of the IRI, Minister of the Foreign Affairs and the Spokesperson of the MFA. All the other approaches should be perceived as private opinions. This announcement followed the statement of the religious leader of Ardabil imam-juma ayatollah Seyed Hasan Ameli who stated that Iran has helped Azerbaijan during the NK conflict. He particularly mentioned that Iranian politicians do not refer to their help to Azerbaijan because of certain diplomatic reasons. However, as a religious leader, he has to say about it in order to give an answer to the questions and suspicions of their Muslim brothers. In his speech, he specifically mentions that generals from Tabriz and Ardabil have cooperated with each other and helped Azerbaijan to stop Armenian aggression. Besides, Iran also helped to bring thousand soldiers from Afghanistan that participated in the war (Baghdasaryan, 2010).

This information is confirmed in Iranian media, particularly, in Raja news agency it is mentioned that the religious leader of Ardabil said that it is time to address the allegations from the Azeri population of Iran and Muslim world in general. Along with this, Iranian officials also mention that the NK conflict has turned into a leverage that is used by the external forces to put pressure on the engaged parties (Iranian Diplomacy, 2008). Even though it is not directly mentioned what Iranian side implies by external parties, however, the context following this statement is about the US possible attack on Iran by using their alignment with the regional countries. This may let us assume that

Iranian politicians imply the US and Israeli alignment with Azerbaijan. In this context, another Iranian official Mohsen Rezaei, who is the secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council, stated that if the government of Azerbaijan prefers the cooperation with Israel over Iranian national interests, then they have to accept the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh will be forever gone (Mohamadzade, 2016). Of course, this kind of announcement caused anger among leaders who have a pro-Azerbaijani approach and was criticised, however, the reality is that Iranian leaders have taken into consideration Azerbaijani-Israeli-US cooperation and acted based on rational calculations.

According to some experts, Iran has only one partner in the region – Armenia, and the announcement of the Ayatollah's representative is aimed to exclude ex-President Ahmadinejad from the only partner in the region. Nevertheless, some sources in Baku also tried to deny these allegations, but an Azerbaijani newspaper "Eni Musavat" referred to an Azerbaijani general Sardar Gamidov who confirmed that there have been afghan fighters participating on the Azerbaijani side that was brought from Iran. This information has been confirmed by the previous Minister of Defence of Azerbaijan Rahim Gaziyev and by the Head of the Republican Islamic Party Gadji Nuriyev, who particularly mentioned that it is time to reveal the fact that Iran helped Azerbaijan in the NK conflict and without its help the damage would have been much bigger. An Azeri journalist and editor of the "Zerkalo" newspaper Rauf Mirkadyrov hold the position that Iranians say one thing in Armenia, another in Azerbaijan (Baghdasaryan, 2011). This entire piece illustrates what kind of balanced policy Iran tries to lead by on the one hand, trying to show the Muslim audience that they share solidarity with them, on the other hand, acting from the position that coincides with Armenia's national interests.

Previous Armenian Minister Seyran Ohanian has confirmed that during the Karabakh war there have been Afghan soldiers fighting on the Azerbaijani side, however, he did not refer to the issue that Iran had anything to do with them (Ohanyan, 2013). This is completely understandable because Armenian-Iranian relations are in such a positive phase now that there is no need to refer to that.

In Armenian media, one can also see articles discussing what kind of crises situations Armenia and Iran have overcome. For instance, one of the CIVILNET sources mentions

that during the NK conflict, students from different Universities of Tehran have organised protests in front of the Armenian Embassy in Iran with slogans "Go away Armenian fascism", "Go away occupiers" etc and condemned the Armenian aggression and demanded to bring out Armenian forces from Karabakh. These demonstrations were accompanied by attacking the premises of the Embassy and attempt to break the gates. On the other hand, another incident happened when in March 1994, in the territory of NK an Iranian aeroplane flying from Moscow to Tehran carrying family members of Iranian embassy diplomats to Russia was hit. As a result of a mistake of Armenian forces around 40 people lost their lives. This created a crisis situation between Armenia and Iran (Hakobyan, 2016). As we see, there have been actions on both sides that from time to time have caused difficulties in bilateral relations. Yet, the stakes and benefits from the cooperation are so high that parties decided to focus on advantages that the collaboration offers rather than negative aspects.

When the question of geopolitical interests towards Armenia is discussed in the Iranian media, there are two aspects that are made clear. First, they mention that Iran is not interested to see Turkey as a strong country in the region and as long as Armenia stands between Nakhichevan and Turkey in the West, and Iranian Azeris and the Republic of Azerbaijan on the East, the Turkish appetite for implementation of their Pan-Turkic project will not be satisfied. Second, is the factor of Armenian Diaspora and its strong lobby in the US and Europe. Iranian leaders believe that if they support Armenia in NK conflict then they can use the powerful Armenian Diaspora abroad in their own interests and open the closed doors for them (Yousefi, 2016).

Armenian and Iranian Presidents had an official meeting in December 2016 during which a number of issues have been discussed including NK conflict. Apart from saying that Iran supports the peaceful resolution of the NK conflict based on the norms of the international law, Rouhani also has mentioned that Armenia and Iran should cooperate with each other in the regional security issues, particularly in Syria and Iraq. Rouhani has mentioned that Armenian and Iranian approaches in the international field basically coincide with each other and share the same approaches (Azatutyun Radiokayan, 2016). This is another proof that Iran highly values cooperation with Armenia in the geopolitics of the region in a wider sense.

Iran has suggested a number of times get re-involved in the negotiations process. The offer has been accepted by the Azerbaijanis side but Armenia has not given a final response to that yet. Not because Armenia has doubts in Iranian intentions, but it may mean change of the negotiations framework. In Armenian media and among experts the opinion that in NK conflict Iran supports the preservation of the status quo and the preservation of the current borders is highly circulated, as it stands between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkish speaking population of Iran. This implies that Iran does not support the return of any of the buffer territories around the NK to Azerbaijan and bringing peacekeeping forces to the region. In this sense, there is a question how Iranian-Russian interests contradict each other, as Russia basically agrees to the return of the territories to Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, it is not clear how Russia refers to the idea of bringing peacekeeping mission. One aspect that is clear is that will present more threat to Iran if those forces will be brought to its Northern border from the Azerbaijani side in case the control of territories will go back to Azerbaijan (Muradryan, 2010). This explains why Iran may be interested in getting involved in negotiations process so to build a different kind of political relations with Russia.

3.2. Armenian-Iranian alignment in the context of NK conflict based on the academic sources and conducted interviews

In order to be able to understand why Iran's policy has a pro-Armenian profile, it is important to understand the context of Iran-Azerbaijan relations. From 1990-1994 the relations between Azerbaijan and Iran can be divided into three distinct phases. The first round, from 1990 to mid-1992 was a period of gradual strengthening of the ties between the two countries. However, between mid-1992 and mid-1993, relations suffered as Elchibey pursued a pro-Turkish policy and he was particularly well-known for his past speeches with the rhetoric of creating the ''Greater Azerbaijan'' which included the northern region of Iran as well. Since mid-1993, Baku and Tehran improved their relations due to Aliyev's balanced policy towards neighbouring countries. Even though Iran opened an embassy in Baku in 1992, the Iranian authorities had problems with competing with Turkey's increasing influence in Azerbaijan (Sharpe, 1995).

The relatively long borders with Azerbaijan and Armenia made Iran adopt a policy that will not pose a threat to the conflict escalation and spilling over its own territory. Therefore, in contrast to its ideology-laced policy adopted towards the Middle East, Iran adopted a neutral position in NK conflict and did not support either of the parties even if Azerbaijan is a Shiite Majority country. There are approximately 15 million ethnic Azeris living in the north-west region of Iran named Aturpatakan (Atropatene) or in Farsi -Azerbaijan, which has nothing to do with the Republic of Azerbaijan (Mesamed, 2013). Hence, Iran was worried that support for Azerbaijan against Armenia will provide a basis for the unification of the two "divided" regions that have been separated by the Persian and Ottoman Empires[11].

After all, as a result of Azerbaijan's increased rhetoric for unification with "southern Azerbaijan", the same as Iranian northern region Azerbaijan, Iran started to cooperate more closely with Armenia and as a result, parties signed a treaty of friendship and economic cooperation at the end of 1992. In 1992 also the embassy of IRI (Islamic Republic of Iran) was opened in Armenia, and at the end of the year, the Armenian Embassy in Tehran was opened (Mesamed, 2013).

Another noteworthy point between Iranian-Azerbaijani relations that led Iran to adopt a policy that seems to be in Armenia's favour is that in 1994 Azerbaijan offered 5% of Azerbaijani stake in the exploitation of the Caspian oil sea shelf to Tehran and they immediately accepted it because of pragmatic foreign policy and economic interests. However, this agreement was annulled by President Aliyev in 1995 under the US pressure and its new stakes in the Caspian basin oil projects. Iran's initial response to this decision was verbal lash out at the Aliyev government, but afterwards, Iran decided to counter Azerbaijan's actions by aligning itself with Russia and Armenia as Iran's national economic interests were threatened by Azerbaijan's pro-Western policy and rapprochement with the US (Gresh, 2006).

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[11] The reason why "divided" is in brackets is that the Republic of Azerbaijan was established only in 1918, and the choice of name "Azerbaijan" was not a coincidence. The name Azerbaijan has its roots in historical realm of Atropatakan (or Atropatene). The choice of the name Azerbaijan in 1918 angered the Persian government as they suspected that this will eventually lead to territorial claims by the Azerbaijani government (Swietokhowski, 1995).

At the same time, intense relations with Azerbaijan led Iran to adopt a cautious policy and support the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh in order to prevent further displacement of Azerbaijanis who might stir nationalistic sentiment and threaten the national sovereignty of Iran. Meanwhile, Iran's support for Armenia insured the government of Iran that Armenia could remain strong enough to stave off a possible future armed conflict with Azerbaijan (Gresh, 2006).

Pan-Islamic sentiment has been overlooked in Iranian foreign policy as the pragmatic calculation of national interests has played more important role in the case of alignment with Armenia. One aspect of that is the "Russian-centric" element in Iran's policy toward Eurasia and Russia's support for Armenia in NK conflict. In this sense, Tehran hopes that its support towards Armenia would prompt more positive attitude of Russia toward the Islamic Republic (Dorraj, 2013).

Whatsoever, Iran officially kept neutrality in NK conflict also because they did not want to undermine Moscow's role in the region and interfere in an issue that was perceived as an issue of Russian regional interests. If Iran increased the violence in the region, it would have ended up with external intervention, meaning bringing international troops close to Iran's borders, either by Russia or NATO, neither of which was in Iran's interests as it would lead to disturbance of the regional balance of power (Gresh, 2006). On the one hand, siding with Azerbaijan would produce a certain level of pressure from the rich upper Armenian elite in Iran. This could have been perceived also as a religious move and would have been internationally criticised. On the other hand, Islamic government would not side with a Christian country against a Muslim republic. Hence, neutrality was the safest option (Papazian, 2001).

Interviews conducted with the diplomats and analysts in Armenia revealed a number of important aspects of Iranian-Armenian relations in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. One of the Armenian diplomats and a former Ambassador, who preferred not to be named, sees the following distinct reasons for the Iranian interests in the peaceful and quick resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. First and foremost, Azerbaijan was not against the Iranian involvement in the mediation process. Second, the conflict was on the Iranian border which presented a serious security threat to Iran, hence there was a need to act. Last but not least, there was a plan to construct a hydroelectric station

on Araks river which was interrupted because of the war and as a result, the construction was finished only in 2002. Moreover, in the context of Karabakh conflict, Iran tries to keep a balanced foreign policy. What is meant by that is that from time to time during the meetings with Azerbaijani officials Iran announces that they support the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, they mention that people's right to self-determination is an important human right and should be respected at the time of the final resolution of the conflict. This balance may be disrupted from time to time, but Iranian officials try to restore it[12].

Analyst and head of the Iranian Studies Department at the Yerevan State University, Vardan Voskanyan argues that Iranian approach towards Karabakh conflict has two layers – visible and invisible. On the visible side, on the diplomatic level Iranian approach is neutral. Yet, there have been periods when Iranian approach has included to some extent anti-Armenian approach as well. This refers especially to the period when Heydar Aliyev came to power and Iranians were expecting that Baku will support Iran, as when being the governor of Nakhchivan he had a pro-Iranian position. Nevertheless, after coming to power in Baku, Iranian expectations did not come true as Aliyev announced about "One nation two states" ideology, by that referring to Azerbaijan and Turkey. That is another factor why Iranian approach towards the Azerbaijan has changed. Thus, this is only about one episode, and in general, Iranian official position has always been neutral[13].

On the invisible side, Iranians are more interested in keeping the current border in the region of Meghri or at least, its change not in favour of Azerbaijan because the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan is often used by foreign states to pose a threat to Iran. So, the shorter the border the lower is the possibility of threatening Iran in this context. In Azerbaijan the issue of creating a "united Azerbaijan" which will include the northern region of Iran where Azari (name of the language spoken in this region of Iran) speaking Iranians are living has been discussed on different levels. This issue obviously cannot be overlooked by Iran, as the population of the northern region of Iran very often

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[12] Interview with an ex-Ambassador, April 4, 2017.
[13] Interview with an Armenian Diplomat, April 10, 2017.

falls under the Azerbaijani propaganda coming from Baku. Therefore, in this context, it is clear that Iranians have distinct position towards NK conflict:

1.   Preserving the status quo in terms of borders.

2.   Stand against the idea of bringing peacekeeping mission to the region, as they avoid seeing military forces of third countries in their neighbourhood, even if they will be in the peace keeping framework.

3.   It is obvious that Armenia's, including Artsakh, strong position in the region is also in Iranian interests, as it is an allying country and a serious barrier between the northern Turkic borders for Iran. Consequently, taken into account all these aspects, Iran has a pro-Armenian profile[14].

Benyamin Poghosyan, Executive Director at the Political Science Association of Armenia, claims that taking into consideration the strategic alliance between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Iran perceives Armenia as a significant partner in its policy to prevent the growing influence of Turkey in the region. This is one of the key reasons why Iran tacitly supports the current status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At the same time, friendly relations with Armenia allow Iran to reject accusations of pursuing mainly a religion-based foreign policy. Moreover, the membership of Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) also provides Iran with a possibility to view Armenia as a launching pad for entering the EEU market that has 170 million population. The possible signature of an agreement on free trade area between the EEU and Iran, as well as Armenia's plans to establish a free economic zone near the Iranian border later this year makes Armenia a more important economic partner for Iran. Besides, Armenia is also an alternative transit route for Iran to link India and Europe through Georgian Black sea ports[15].

Mr Poghosyan also mentions that in NK conflict Iran is more interested in the preservation of status quo. "Given the fact that Iran is worried about the increase of Turkic elements in the region, it is not interested in changes in current borders. How this presents pro-Armenian position we can discuss from the perspective of the Armenian

[14] Interview with the Head of the Iranian Studies Department of YSU, April 5, 2017.
[15] Interview with the Executive Director at the Political Science Association of Armenia, April 12, 2017.

national interests. If we claim that preservation of status quo is in Armenian interests, then we can also argue that Iran has pro-Armenian position"[16].

Mr Voskanyan states that Iran is a Shi'a country, and such a second country in the South Caucasus is Azerbaijan. Hence, on the ideological level, we can hear from different religious leaders, statements about cultural and historical commonalities of the two countries. At the same time, it should be taken into account that the context of those announcements is one: Iran, in a broader sense, is inclined to the establishment of the pro-Iranian government in Azerbaijan. From the Iranian perspective, it will be good for Iranians if that government will be pro-Islamic – almost the same that they have in Iran now, which will lead to consuming Azerbaijan into Iranian system. Iranians do not lead a policy directed to the division of the Azerbaijan. Instead, they tend to completely consume it[17]. From this perspective, it becomes clear that backing Christian Armenia is more in Iranian Interests, as Iran has more pragmatic reasons for that.

Sergey Minasyan, the Deputy Director of the Caucasus Institute in Armenia, believes that Iran preserves neutrality given the fact that it is a Shia country and has a big number of Iranians of Turkic origin living in its territory. Armenia has good relations with Iran because of its closed borders and the isolated position. From this point, cooperation with Iran is not only beneficial from the NK conflict's perspective but in general sense as well. Iran's involvement in the negotiations process may add some mechanisms of trust in the process. However, it may also mean change of the OSCE Minks Group negotiations framework which is not in Armenia's interests. Nevertheless, it should be also taken into account that the US is involved in the negotiations, which decreases the possibility of Iran being a party to it[18].

If we discuss the Iranian involvement in the mediation process, Mr Poghosyan states that the possibility for Iran to get involved in mediation mission is minimum. In his opinion, those announcements are mainly meant to show that they are a part of the ongoing developments in the region and are not isolated. Besides, as the official Armenian approach is to keep the framework of the OSCE Minsk group and there is no question of doubting the functionality of the chosen framework, Mr Poghosyan adds: *I*

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[16] Ibid, April 12, 2017.
[17] Interview with the Head of the Iranian Studies Department, April 5, 2017.
[18] Interview with the Deputy Director of the Caucasus Institute, April 6, 2017.

don't think that Iranian mediation is possible as changing the framework is not in Armenia's interests. We know that Azerbaijan tries to change the framework. Finally, I do not believe that Iran may suggest something new for the conflict resolution, as started from 1997 all the configurations have been suggested[19].

Head of the Regional Studies Centre (RSC), an independent think tank in Armenia, Richard Giragosian disagrees with the general assumption that Iran favours Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. *It could be argued by the Azerbaijani side that Iran is in favour of Armenia. In other words, the fact that Iran is not backing fellow Shia Muslim country despite the neutrality means that it is seen as pro-Armenian*[20]. When discussing the issue of Iran's involvement in the negotiations process, then Mr Giragosian believes that "Iran is a vested actor and in many ways should be more included in the peace process. Much of the resistance prior to the nuclear deal has led to the Western opposition. However, there have been several times during the 1990s where even the US was briefing the Iranian government on the Minsk Group peace process which was an element of recognising Iran as a potentially positive stakeholder in post-conflict stability"[21]. Finally, Mr Giragosian concludes that Iran's involvement in the negotiations process does not mean that it may be used by Azerbaijan to bring Turkey in as it is already a member of the OSCE, even if it is not an active one. However, he believes that Iran may still bring a positive change to the negotiations process.

Another Armenian diplomat mentioned during the interview that when speaking about the Armenian-Iranian relations and the NK conflict, a very important aspect is to take into account the ethnic origin of the official representative speaking about those relations. If the politician is an ethnic Azeri, he will show his support towards the Republic of Azerbaijan. Officials of the medium and low profiles from time to time mention this fact, whereas high level ethnic Azeri officials do not speak about it in order to avoid scandals. After all, when analysing actions of some of those officials, they try to disturb Armenian-Iranian good relations. Such example can be protests organised by Azeris in 1992-94. A more recent example is the organised protests in Tabriz during the four-day war between Azerbaijan and NK forces in 2016. Protests of Azeris living in

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[19] Interview with the Executive Director at the Political Science Association of Armenia, April 12, 2017.
[20] Interview with the Head of the Regional Studies Centre, April 12, 2017.
[21] Ibid, April 12, 2017.

Tehran did not take place as a result of the serious measures implemented by the Iranian government[22].

To sum up this part, a couple of aspects should be made clear. The multidimensional analysis of Armenian, Russian and Iranian media articles along with the academic sources and expert views contribute to the construction of the image that Iran supports Armenia instead of backing up Azerbaijan in NK conflict. So, the answer to the question how they do it can be reflected in several aspects. First, the preservation of the status quo is in Iranian interests, as it will mean there will be no change in the borders. There is a buffer zone between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Northern Iranian Azerbaijan region which eliminates the Azerbaijani nationalistic threat. Second, a number of sources mention that Armenia is Iran's only partner in the region, as they do not have any problematic aspects in terms of cooperation and presenting a threat to one another, whereas the fact that Azerbaijan cooperates with the US and Israel, is perceived as a serious threat to Iranian national interests. Third, Iran does not want to see Turkey as a powerful country in the region, therefore, as long as the relations between Armenia and Turkey are not normalised, Turkey does not have a chance to achieve that. All these factors contribute to the construction of the perception that in NK conflict Iran has adopted a pro-Armenian approach.

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[22] Interview with an Armenian Diplomat, April 11, 2017.

Conclusion

To summarise all the findings it should be noted that this thesis has analysed the Armenian-Iranian alignment in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The research question was: "Why Iran has taken a strategic position that is in favour of Armenia in Karabakh conflict although alliance theory would have predicted something different"?

First and foremost, it was made clear that in Armenian-Iranian case it is better to use the term alignment rather than an alliance because alliances mostly refer to the military formulations and usually put a certain obligation on the members in terms of cooperation with other states. Whereas alignment is a more general term that includes the political, geostrategic and economic dimension of cooperation, it is not limited to only military cooperation, and most importantly, does not put limitations on engaged parties in terms of cooperation with other states or organisations under which Armenian-Iranian case fits.

Second, the analysis of Realist/Neorealist and Constructivist approaches of alliance theory showed that both Realist and Neorealist scholars perceive the establishment of alignments as a result of threat perception and need to response to that threat. Besides, while Neorealist scholars argue that state interests are stable and they never change, Constructivist scholars argue that state interests are not stable, they change and can be constructed in accordance with the national interests of the state and presented challenges of the given time period.

Third, the contrast and comparison of National Security Strategies of Iran and Armenia, different analysis on the construction of interests of both states along with the conducted interviews showed that if in Armenia's case the cooperation with Iran is a basic need given the geographical isolation and economic difficulties, Iran is a pragmatic country and acts based on its own national interests and rational calculations. Therefore, even if the Realist approach of alliance theory would have predicted that it is more realistic for Iran backup Azerbaijan, a Shia Muslim country, in the context of Karabakh conflict, the Constructivist approach has the capacity to explain how Iranian national interests are

constructed, hence resulted the impression that Iran has a pro-Armenian rather than a pro-Azerbaijani profile.

Even though history is an important factor in the development of bilateral relations between Armenia and Iran, it should be made clear that for the current state of relations the latter does not play an essential role and must not be overestimated. It serves as a basis for those relations, but it is geopolitics and pragmatic Iranian policy rather than history that has a decisive role in this alignment.

In Nagorno-Karabakh conflict Iran officially has a neutral position and in practice leads balanced policy. What is meant by the balanced policy is that when having meetings with Azerbaijani officials, Iranian leaders mention that they support the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan which includes the NK as well, whereas at the time of meetings with Armenian counterparts they mention about the importance of peoples' rights to self-determination. Meanwhile, the general perception is that Iran has a position that is more in favour of Armenia than Azerbaijan. It should be made clear what is meant by "in favour of Armenia" statement because if Iran has a position that coincides with Armenian interests in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it still does not imply that Iran supports the Armenian version of Karabakh conflict's resolution.

 The rational calculations and pragmatic approach are visible most vividly, at least, in two aspects. First, any incident that may pose a threat to the territorial integrity of Iran is perceived as a security threat. Iran was worried that the Azerbaijani propaganda in the context of creating "Great Azerbaijan" may trigger separatist movements among the significant number of Azeri population living in its North-western region that is why officially they have adopted a neutral position towards the NK conflict. At the same time, from time to time Iranian leaders support the idea of peoples' rights to self-determination and seem to have pro-Armenian profile in order to make clear for Azerbaijan that they need to be cautious in their relation with the US and Israel that may use the Azerbaijani territory and pose a threat to the Iranian security.

 Furthermore, alignment with Armenia and its strong position in the region is a counterbalance to the rise of Turkic elements on the Iranian borders. The anti-Turkic sentiments in Iran have deep roots which have been reflected even in the famous Iranian

epic poem Shahnameh, where the Iran-Turan rivalry is the main topic of discussion. Consequently, given the historical rivalry of those two forces, it is understandable that the rise of Turkic factors is not in Iranian national interests nowadays as well and as long as Armenia is between those actors and Iran, they are secured.

The analysis of different media articles, academic sources and expert views shows that they also contributes to the construction that in NK conflict Iran has a pro-Armenian profile by highlighting issues such as nationalistic sentiments towards the Iranian Azerbaijan, the threat to the territorial integrity of Iran, Azerbaijan's pro-Western policy and cooperation with Israel, Iran's position towards the rise of the Turkey's role in the region and some other aspects.

Additionally, alignment with a Christian country shows the international community that Iranian foreign policy is not only religion based, but rather value based, as Armenian-Iranian case can be one of the best examples of dialogue between two major religions: the first Christian country and the only Islamic theocracy of its kind. This decreases the level of criticism addressed towards Iran from the western countries.

Finally, even though geopolitics and security play a more decisive role in Armenian-Iranian alignment, the cooperation in economic, transport, tourism and energy sectors are also important. For Armenia, Iran offers a big market to export its goods and boost economy, while for Iran, Armenia is a way connecting it with the external world given the atmosphere of international sanctions.

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