

## Turkey, Iran and the South Caucasus: Challenges for Regional Policy after the 2008 August War

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### Abstract

In this article are discussed following questions: the problem of historical perception and historical memory of Turkey and Iran towards the South Caucasus; the new possibilities for activities of Iran and Turkey in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union; interactions of Turkey and Iran with South Caucasian countries but also new realities in relations of Russia-Turkey, Turkey-Iran, Iran-Russia after the 2008 August war in Georgia. It is stressed that after this war their politics is changed to some extent but these changes were not conditioned directly by this event.

**Key words:** the South Caucasus, Turkey, Iran, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, 2008 August War

### Özet

Bu makalede ařağıdaki sorular tartışılacaktır: Türkiye ve İran'ın Güney Kafkasya algısı ve tarihsel hafızası; Sovyetler Birliğı'nin dağılmasından sonra Türkiye ve İran'ın bölgedeki faaliyetleri; Türkiye ve İran'ın Güney Kafkasya ülkeleriyle karşılıklı etkileşimleri ve Ağustos 2008'de Gürcistan'da meydana gelen savařtan sonra Rusya-Türkiye, Türkiye-İran ve İran-Rusya ilişkilerinde konjonktürel değışiklikler doğrutusunda yaşanan gelişmeler ele alınacaktır. Bu makalede söz konusu ülkelerin politikalarının her ne kadar tamamıyla Ağustos savařına bağılı olmasa da bu savařtan sonra kısmen de olsa değıştiğı vurgulanacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Güney Kafkasya, Türkiye, İran, Gürcistan, Azerbaycan, Ermenistan, 2008 Ağustos Savařı

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (SU) the Caucasus became a part of the complex geopolitical game. The main focus of this article is to analyze politics and interests of Turkey and Iran towards the South Caucasian countries, especially Georgia. For my point of view after the 2008 August war the politics of Turkey and Iran has changed to some extent but these changes were not conditioned directly by the war. The official position of Turkey and Iran, despite of some controversial statements, towards Georgia's territorial integrity is not changed. But it must be stressed that both countries are more active now in the region. At the same time, Turkey and Iran are obliged to recognize interests of the most ambitious power in the region, i.e. Russia. It must also be noted that Russia became for Iran the most valuable economic partner in the early 1990's. On the other hand Moscow has also very close economic ties with Ankara especially in the sphere of natural gas supplies. Nowadays, Turkey and Iran, even if they could not be considered as rivals of Russia and the United States of America (USA), are very active and important actors in the region.

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## Historical Background

The South Caucasus historically and presently continues to be a key region for Iran and Turkey. The region constituted Iran's and Turkey's sphere of influence for centuries, and it was a major part of it was under direct rule of Iranian and Turkish states. It should be pointed out that even today many Iranian scholars consider the South Caucasus as a whole a historic part of Iran.<sup>1</sup> The situation changed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when due to the Russian empire's southward expansion the region shifted away from Middle Eastern empires. Although economic and cultural links remained quite extensive during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, contacts of Turkey and Iran with the region broke off following the creation of the USSR. From the mediaeval and early modern times Georgia was practically divided by Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran. Religion occupied an important place in their politics towards ethnically mixed population of Georgia with great Orthodox Christian majority. It is imperative to note that their religious policy differed with each other - when Ottomans preferred total Islamisation of population of the South-west Georgia or non-interference in the religious affairs of some provinces of Western Georgia, Iranians tried to convert Georgian elites in the Eastern part of the country without affecting Christian majority of the population. Religion plays an important role even in today's politics of these two countries— of course, it doesn't mean the Islamisation of country but to obtain the influence on the important Muslim minority of Georgia.

## Changing Face of International Politics in Caucasus

The author of this article cannot agree with opinions that 'the Great Game that Turkey and Iran were expected to play as regional powers never took place'<sup>2</sup> or 'when Soviet Central Asia suddenly found itself independent [...] there was much speculation about whether Turkey or Iran would win the hearts of the Muslim peoples in a New Great Game in Central Asia. The answer has been clear for some time: neither.'<sup>3</sup> The particular geo-political and geo-economical position of the South Caucasian region even obliged Turkey and Iran to be as active as possible in the region. Iran and Turkey embraced the collapse of the Soviet Union with 'mixed emotion'. This event relieved these two countries in one stroke from the threats of both the military presence of a superpower and the ideological challenge of Marxism as a historical universal rival claimant in the Muslim world.<sup>4</sup> After the dissolution of the SU and the creation of new independent states in Central Asia and Caucasus, Iran was left in the peculiar position of having land and direct sea borders with fifteen different states. Among them there are also new independent republics of the South Caucasus. Georgia has no direct border with Iran but historically and geopolitically Georgia and Iran could be considered as neighbors.

Because of its natural resources, its strategic location as a historical, geographical, and economic link between East and West, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian region, Iran inevitably plays an important role in the region, even globally, regarding peace and security,

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: M. Moradi, "Perspectives on European Union and Iran Cooperation in Provision of Stability and Security in Southern Caucasus", *Amu-Darya (Iranian Magazine of Center for Caucasian and Central Asian Studies)*, 2006-2007, #21-22, pp. 68, 83.

<sup>2</sup> M. Edwards, "The New Great Game and the new great gamers: disciples of Kipling and Mackinder", *Central Asian Survey*, 22(1), March, 2003, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> *The Economist*, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> M. Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy", *Central Asian Survey*, June, 2004, 23(2), p. 110.

both as an object as well as an acting subject.<sup>5</sup> Historically, Iran's ambitions are addressed primarily to the Persian Gulf. However, the Caucasus traditionally is an important region for Iran and it must be added that in recent years Caucasian direction of Iranian politics has been developed well. In this context it must be stressed that after the dissolution of the SU, Iranian politics towards its new Northern frontier was based on the recognition of the supremacy of Russia's interests. Theoretically, Iran as an Islamic republic must attach a considerable importance to the Islamic factor and geo-cultural role of Islam. At the same time, in these last two years relations of Iran with Russia became more complicated and today Iran does not consider Russia as the closest partner.

Concerning Turkey, it must be stressed that for decades, Turkey was one of the most pliable allies of USA, a strategic border state on the edge of the Middle East that reliably followed American policy, NATO's border with the southern frontier of the USSR. With the creation of new south Caucasian independent states Turkey naturally became an active actor in the region. In the post-Cold War period, the Western perception of threats, in general, converged with those of Turkey. Turkey's location at the crossroads of the three continents marks her strategic importance for the West.<sup>6</sup> It must be stressed that general direction of the Turkish foreign policy has not changed – Turkey only became more active in relations with its Arab neighbors and Iran, and in fact, Turkey tries to assure his role of key country in Western-Middle Eastern relations, which fully corresponds to its geo-strategic and geo-political position. So, it's not convincing enough the idea that 'In recent years, Ankara is trying to fundamentally change its geo-political positioning, in relation to the Greater Caucasus, and throughout the world politics.'<sup>7</sup> Turkey is not content with being the brightest star in its benighted neighborhood; she wants to play an important role in the world politics and this ambition may force Turkey to find a new balance among its competing identities.<sup>8</sup>

Turkey's activities in the Middle East should be seen as an opportunity for the US to use Turkey as a bridge to Muslim countries. With the renewed emphasis on geopolitics, Turkish officials are able to remind the USA in particular of Turkey's sensitive location, and this may help to strengthen perceptions of Turkey as a key pivotal state in the Caucasus.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, 70 percent of the world's known natural energy routes are situated around Turkey and this situation makes Ankara one of the most important routes for the transport of oil and natural gas from the Caucasus and the Central Asia to West.<sup>10</sup>

In general, the stability and prosperity of the 'Greater' Middle East region depends to a significant degree on maintaining the stability of Turco-Iranian relations. This concerns also

<sup>5</sup> E. Rakel, "Paradigms of Iranian Policy in Central Eurasia and Beyond", *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, Vol. 2, issue 3-4, Leiden: Brill, 2003, p. 561.

<sup>6</sup> N. Atesoglu Guney, "The New Security Environment and Turkey's ISAF Experience", In: N. Atesoglu Guney (Ed.). *Contentious issues of security and the future of Turkey*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006, p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> S. Markedonov, "Iran activates in the Caucasus", [iran.ru/rus/news\\_iran.php?act=news\\_by\\_id&n=1&news\\_id=71129](http://iran.ru/rus/news_iran.php?act=news_by_id&n=1&news_id=71129), 11.07.2009.

<sup>8</sup> J. Traub, "All Roads Lead to Istanbul". October 15, 2010. [ForeignPolicy.com](http://ForeignPolicy.com)

<sup>9</sup> G. M. Winrow, "Pivotal State or Energy Supplicant? Domestic Structure, External Actors, and Turkish Policy in the Caucasus", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1, Winter, 2003, p.92.

<sup>10</sup> See: S. Baynham, "Eurasian Janus: Turkey's Security and Defense Dilemmas in the Aftermath of the Iraq War", *Defense & Security Analysis*, March 20, 2003, pp.280-284.

the Caucasian region. Under the present circumstances, although Iran has not abandoned its scholastic rhetoric, its policies have become rather pragmatic. Tehran maintains the outward attributes of revolutionary ideology, but pragmatism now stands above the ideology. In general, like the shah's government, the Islamic Republic came to attach primary importance to stability along its own borders and good relations with neighboring states.<sup>11</sup> The same can be said concerning Iranian politics towards the South Caucasus and Iranian perception of the role of great powers, first of all of Russia in this region.

### **Russia and Iran**

For the past two centuries the greatest threat to the security and territorial integrity of Iran has been posed by the Russian empire and its successor the Soviet Union. Now for the first time in nearly two centuries the potential threat to Iran from that country is removed and their relations are better balanced, or at least less disadvantageous to Iran. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran chose to cooperate with Russia in pursuit of stability along its northern border, to purchase modern military equipment from Moscow, which it could not buy from the West, Russia has to help Iran for nuclear technology e.g. building a power plant for Iran at Bushehr, and to develop to some extent diplomatic support for Tehran's positions, particularly regarding confrontation with the United States.

Russian policy reflected the pursuit of disparate positions and interests within the Russian political and economic elite. Though economic interests drove Russia's initial policy towards Iran, eventually the Russian government had to deal with the consequences of Russian-Iranian cooperation for Russia's broader strategic objectives.<sup>12</sup> As Iran came under continued external pressure, it sought in Russia a diplomatic and military partner. This relationship between Moscow and Tehran, alarmed the USA which can be considered as an alliance. Washington's fear stemmed from probability for providing Iran with nuclear materials and technology. Tehran considers its region instable especially after 1998 and started to erect two new nuclear power stations on its south-eastern frontiers.<sup>13</sup> As it has been observed by some scholars the Russo-Iranian alliance may turn into an important geo-political fact in the post-Cold War era of the region.<sup>14</sup>

Iran and Russia agreed with each other to build and strengthen existing north-south transportation routes. The fact is that the Baku–Ceyhan pipeline strengthened the position of the USA, which was amounted to US\$ 3.5 billion.<sup>15</sup> Neither Iran nor Russia is willing to abandon the Caspian region's strategic wealth to the USA. Both the powers have been engaged in building therefore the alternative transport routes out of this region to the Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> Sh. Bakhsh, "Iran's Foreign Policy under the Islamic Republic, 1979-2000", In: C. Brown (ed.), *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*, London & New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2001. p. 255.

<sup>12</sup> H. Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers, Russian Alignment with China, Iran, and Iraq in the Unipolar Era*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> F. Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> M.P. Amineh, "Sicherheit und Entwicklung in Eurasien—neue Gedanken zur Geopolitik im Zeltalter der Globalisierung", in E. Reiter (ed.), *Jahrbuch für Internationale Sicherheitspolitik*. Vol. I. Hamburg: Emitter, 2002, pp. 267-301

<sup>15</sup> A. Ehteshami, *Globalization and Geopolitics in the Middle East*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 85.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline is now complemented by the nearly completed South Caucasus gas pipeline from Baku to the Turkish city of Erzurum through Georgia, which will carry natural gas from Azerbaijan to the Turkish and European markets. Turkmenistan can be seen also as a part of the strategic 'pipeline wars'. The USA and the EU try to persuade Turkmenistan to supply Turkmen gas to Europe via 'technically and politically difficult route from the Caspian to Azerbaijan and Turkey by passing alternative Russian and Iranian pipeline routes. Tehran hopes to purvey Turkmen gas via Iran into Turkey and onward to the West. Turkey wins either way, but is now committed to Iran for the development of Iranian gas resources for sale to Turkey as well as onward transmission to Europe, despite Washington's displeasure with the idea.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Iran and Russia were quietly locked in a struggle to delineate oil-drilling rights in the Caspian. At one point in 2001, Iran actually sent gunboats and planes to scare off a joint project between Azerbaijan and the British Petroleum, attempting to make a de facto claim on the sea over which Russia and other littoral states signed agreements simultaneously.

Since 1989 there have been considerable strains on the relations between Moscow and Tehran: The Soviet army's bloody entry into Baku in January 1990, Russia's support for the ex-communists in the Tajik civil war, and the war in Chechnya in 1995. Each of these episodes tested Iran's commitment to its relations with Russia concerning the support of Islamic movements and of the Muslim peoples in the former SU.<sup>17</sup> Regarding domestic pressures the leaders of Iran gave the highest priority to the relationship of their country with Russia. The pragmatism of Iranian politics towards Russia contradicts even the fundamental principles of the Iranian constitution like "defense of the rights of all Muslims without allying any hegemonic power."<sup>18</sup> The strategic and economic benefits of a constructive relationship with Moscow were too valuable to Tehran to risk for the uncertain gains of assisting its coreligionists.<sup>19</sup> However the Russo-Iranian relations are fragile. While Russians consider themselves as the last bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism, the Iranians see Russia as a "newcomer" in the region. Russia aims to be the main player in its southern neighborhood. Therefore, Moscow is opposed to the significant presence of any other regional power with ethnic and cultural affinity with the indigenous peoples of this region.<sup>20</sup> It was evident that the Iranian-Russian relations were primarily like a marriage of convenience and a matter of mutual commercial benefit. Neither side demonstrated desire for any long-term commitment and each of them seemed suspicious of the other and was willing to take opposing positions on the issues such as Caspian demarcation and pipeline strategy when it suited their immediate interests. For example, Russia did not want that Central Asia's oil and natural gas should be exported via Iran and Russian politicians were not happy with Iranian energy exports to

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<sup>16</sup> G. Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, Washington, D.C.: US Institute for Peace Press, 2009, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> M. Mohsenin, "Iran's Relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus", *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, 4, 1996, p.87.

<sup>18</sup> A. Ehteshami & M. Zweiri (eds), *Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad*. Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 2008, p. XII.

<sup>19</sup> S. Maloney, *Iran's Long Reach: Iran as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, Washington, D.C.: US Institute for Peace Press, 2008, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Sh. Hunter, *Iran's foreign policy in the post-Soviet era: resisting the new international order*, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010, p. 106.

Armenia and Georgia. Today, Russia considers Iran as a geo-political rival. Russia's central role in the crisis over Iran's nuclear-research programs, currently a matter of intense negotiation in and between the United Nations Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), is only the most visible indicator of the Russian-Iranian relations becoming more uneasy and competitive.<sup>21</sup>

### **Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan**

There are some obstacles to friendly relations between Turkey and Iran in the region. The hypothetical revival of a pan-Turkish movement, that disappeared together with the Ottoman Empire in the beginning of the twentieth century, is perceived as a danger by Iran. With the establishment of the Black Sea Economic Co-operation Organization (BSEC) Turkey has created her own economic cooperation organization excluding Iran. Turkey's good relations with Azerbaijan forces Iran to turn even more towards Russia in order to compensate for its international isolation.

Concerning Iranian-Azerbaijani relations it must be stressed that Azeris have strong cultural and religious ties with Iran despite their close linguistic identification with the Turks. Azerbaijan is the only Muslim country among ex-Soviet republics, in which Shia Islam is practiced by a majority of the people (approximately 70 percent). However, a major source of concern among Iranian officials in their relations with Baku has been the existence of irredentist territorial claims by Azerbaijan on large parts of northwestern Iran. There are four reasons for strained Iranian relations with Azerbaijan as follows: The distribution of oil fields in the Caspian Sea; the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia; a significant ethnic Azeri minority among Iranian population; ideological incompatibility of the regimes. The Turkmenchai Treaty (1828) is considered as a turning point in the history of Azerbaijan, which regulated the Araxes River, the new border between Russia and Persia. According to this treaty Azerbaijan was divided into two entities, of which southern part belonged to Iran and northern one to Russian Empire.<sup>22</sup> In the aftermath of the Turkmenchai Treaty Azeris started to build a collective national identity, which was emerged as a political power in Azerbaijan in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the Soviet-era historical revisionism, the notion of 'northern' and 'southern' Azerbaijan was created and propagated throughout the USSR. It was charged that the 'two Azerbaijan', once united, were separated artificially by a conspiracy between imperial Russia and Iran. This has somewhat suited with the irredentist feelings among Azeri nationalists. For these reasons Tehran opposes the idea of a united Azerbaijan.<sup>23</sup>

Most Iranians consider that their Azerbaijani fellow-citizens have been fully accepted to be as a part of the population of Iran for centuries. Even some of them think that Azeris of their country are Turkophone Iranians rather than a separate nationality. Iranian point of view indicates that Azeris integrated well into Iranian society in every aspect and they contributed

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<sup>21</sup>J. Owen, "Russia and Iran: old neighbours, new rivals", [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions\\_government/rivals\\_3407.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/rivals_3407.jsp)

<sup>22</sup> A. Alstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, Stanford: Hoover Institute, 1992, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> B. Balci, "Between Sunnism and Shiism: Islam in post-Soviet Azerbaijan", *Central Asian Survey*, 23(2), June, 2004, p. 209.

to the modern history and culture of this country.<sup>24</sup> According to the Iranian officials their Caucasian provinces -among them there were those territories, on which Russia incorporated the northern Azerbaijan- were forcibly separated from Iran by Russian military power in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this context it must be stressed that Iran suggested that northern Azerbaijan should rejoin with its historical, cultural and religious homeland, i.e. Iran. However the Azerbaijani interpretation about the unification of both Azerbaijan is very different. Azerbaijanis support the idea that they are ethnic Turks- or a composite 'Caspian' nationality originating in the Caucasian Albanians- and view Azerbaijan as a historic country that has suffered a series of foreign conquests and occupations by Iranians and Russians. The Iranian and Russian rules were established was by force, which still holds sway in southern Azerbaijan. Reunification should take place in a single Azerbaijani nation-state after the liberation of southern Azerbaijan.<sup>25</sup>

A dynamic Turkish presence in Azerbaijan contributes to weaken Shiism as well. The competition of Turkey and Iran in the field of Islam started in the beginning of the twentieth century when the ideas of Turkish intellectuals prevailed in the country. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the Turkish state and the private organizations originating from Turkey have played a crucial role in the weakening of Shiism.<sup>26</sup>

Iran has close relations with Armenia especially compared to Azeri-Iranian ties, which demonstrates the non-ideological nature of Iranian policy toward the region and very limited because of rapid demographic decline of the Armenian community in Iran that was exiled to the United States.<sup>27</sup> Tehran plays an advantageous role in the Karabach conflict between Erevan and Baku that is eventually more acceptable neutral mediator than either Ankara or Moscow.

Turkish-Armenian relations have been developed very well recently. This process began with "football diplomacy" between both countries that reached its peak by the signing of two protocols in Switzerland on 10 October 2009. The presence of senior international dignitaries at the event reflects the geopolitical importance of this agreement. It is worth to note that Russia struck a significant deal with Armenia on August 2009, pledging to secure the country's borders from external aggressions. On its part, Turkey made a pre-emptive action just days before Medvedev's visit to Yerevan by signing a similar treaty of Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance with Azerbaijan.

The balance of power in the international system since the end of the cold war undergoes profound shifts, which marked the end of old control mechanism of both superpowers. The agreement between Iran on one side and Brazil and Turkey on the other side on 17 May 2010 on the exchange of enriched uranium<sup>28</sup>, and the sanctions by the United

<sup>24</sup> E. Herzig, *Iran and the Former Soviet South*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs. Russian and CIS Programme, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> B. Balci, *op.cit.*

<sup>27</sup> B. Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran*, Paris: Arman Collin: 2010, p. 201.

<sup>28</sup> As it was noted in *The Economist*: Georgian diplomats may have an eye on Turkey's attempts to befriend both the west and its enemies. President Saakashvili was one of the first leaders to welcome the proposal in May made by Turkey and Brazil to broker a deal on Iran's nuclear ambitions. My friend's enemy is...my neighbour. *The Economist*, November 8, 2010, online [http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2010/11/georgia\\_geopolitics\\_and\\_iran](http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2010/11/georgia_geopolitics_and_iran)

Nations imposed on the Tehran reveal deep cracks of the international system. During these talks Turkey and Brazil are presented themselves as ambitious powers which are ready to play central role in the solution of key issues of the global world politics.

### **Iran and Georgia**

Despite the declared good-neighborhood approach Georgia has nowadays no close ties with Iran. However Georgia maintained good relations with Iran in history. The fact is that Georgia has been able to preserve Christian faith despite of the Ottoman and Iranian influences in the region. However Iranian culture and political system had an enormous influence on Georgia. From the most ancient times Iranian state system in Georgia was considered as a model. It must be noted that the first official agreement in the history of independent Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union was signed with Iran. In the very beginning Georgia was very interested in close ties to Iran, which it gave up later due to Western orientation of the country. Even at the preliminary stage the former president of Georgia Edward Shevardnadze, tried to improve mutual ties between Iran and the West, which did not succeed. Subsequently Georgia turned to Turkey, the USA and Western Europe as potential partners.<sup>29</sup> Western orientation of Georgia and its complicated relations with Russia certainly does not help for the rapprochement with Iran. Georgio-Iranian Relations can be considered as 'Cold good-neighborhood'.

In sum, Iranian politics towards Georgia is determined by following factors: 1) Iran, as a big territorial state, has no pretension towards neighbors, including Georgia; 2) Iran does not want that the USA and NATO gain influence in the Caucasus, for which reason it supports Russian interests in region; 3) The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline does not correspond to the Iranian economic interests and diminishes the importance of Iran as a transit route for Caspian oil and natural gas. 4) Iran is interested in Georgian transit routes to Black Sea and Europe; and 5) Iran draw attention to the Muslim minorities of Georgia, which causes competition between Turkey and Iran.

### **The Attitude of Iran and Turkey towards the 2008 August War**

Turkish and Iranian governments always reaffirm their adherence to the principles of respect for internationally recognized borders, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. In fact, 'Iran can easily be considered as a territorial stable state with its well-established borders.'<sup>30</sup> Generally speaking, August crisis in Georgia caused a broader and emergent geopolitical confrontation. First of all, it must be stressed that Iran practically did not express well-defined position in this issue till now. Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad said in UN General Assembly on September 23, 2008 in his usual manner that "the lives, properties and rights of the people of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are victims of policies and provocations of NATO and certain western powers and the underhanded actions of the Zionists."<sup>31</sup> However, it must be stressed that in the available Georgian, English and Russian versions of Iranian President's speech (e.g. newspapers like

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<sup>29</sup> E. Efeğil & L. A. Stone, "Iran's interests in Central Asia: a contemporary assessment", *Central Asian Survey*, 20(3), 2001, p. 357.

<sup>30</sup> E. Herzig, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> *Civil Georgia*, Tbilisi, September 24, 2008.

*Sakartvelos Respublika, The Georgian Times, News Georgia, Regnum, etc.*) the word “region” is omitted in the relevant passage. This places “Georgia”, “Ossetia” and “Abkhazia” significantly changes the content of Iranian President’s statement. In general, Tehran has been presenting the August war as an object of a lesson to the countries of the Persian Gulf: Georgia had made a mistake since it took the US promises for granted and now it has to pay an immense price for its naivety. Therefore, the Gulf countries would be better off establishing closer links with Iran in the security sphere, rather than looking toward unpredictable America.<sup>32</sup>

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is known to have proposed the idea of creating an organization of security and cooperation in the Caucasus that should include Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and Russia in order to create “a platform of stability and security in the Caucasus.” Iran, however, is not among these countries, which has riled Tehran. Iran is extremely sensitive about the appearance any external players in its neighborhood in Caucasus. Iranian authorities are absolutely convinced that the problems of the Caucasus can be solved only by the regional countries<sup>33</sup> and the presence of non-regional players in the region such as the USA, Britain, China, or Israel only worsens the situation. Many Iranian experts believe that Moscow is intensely occupied by its domestic political issues today and is not strong enough to defend the Caspian and Caucasus from external influences.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the rapprochement of Georgia with Iran does not correspond to the Russian interests and Russian officials tried several times to ‘show’ to Iranians that Georgia is an ally of the USA and it will be used by Americans in case of military action against Iran. Georgia contributes to the long-term plan for the USA to initiate military action against Iran. According Vladimir Zakharov, the director of the Institute of Political and Social Studies of Black Sea-Caspian region, Georgia strongly wishes the deployment of US military bases on its territory. ‘It is clear that relations between Georgia and USA reached an impasse, which will continue for as long as Mikheil Saakashvili remains president of Georgia’, sums up the expert.<sup>35</sup> In this case it is necessary to stress Georgia that has no intention and even no possibility to become a military base for American troops, which absolutely does not fit with its own long-term interests. This should also be clear for the US-government.

Georgian-Iranian relations significantly changed in 2007, in which both countries signed a bilateral agreement on no visa obligation of their citizens. This should lead to a broader cooperation between the two countries. Consequently direct flights between Tehran and Tbilisi are resumed. A new consulate of Iran opened in the seaside city of Batumi as well, which became increasingly a popular tourist destination for Iranians. It is crucial for Tbilisi that Iran supports for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity instead of recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Iran and Georgia intend further cooperation in transport and energy projects. A visa-free regime and cooperation in the tourism sector proved to be the area in which Tehran’s international “constructivism” and Tbilisi’s pragmatism

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> In the concept of "regional countries" Iran's strategy includes the South Caucasus, as well as Turkey, Russia and Iran itself.

<sup>34</sup> S. Markedonov, op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> [http://www.iran.ru/rus/news\\_iran.php?act=news\\_by\\_id&news\\_id=67416](http://www.iran.ru/rus/news_iran.php?act=news_by_id&news_id=67416)

converged in preventing recognition of occupied territories. Considering anti-Iranian stand of the US Congress however it was not easy for Tbilisi to strengthen its ties with Tehran. With the openness and transparency of its Iran policy, however, Georgia was able to convince the USA that its primary partner in the Caucasus had no hidden agenda.<sup>36</sup>

In the most generous interpretation is said to become Georgia as a normal partner to Tehran, which Iran already enjoys with its common neighbors such as Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.<sup>37</sup> But since Georgia is considered as a particularly close partner of the United States that attracted intense attention of Iran. The Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia Kalandadze underlined that Tbilisi consulted with Washington before it intensified its ties to Tehran. Georgian government does not think that maintaining good dialogue with Iran disturbs Georgian-US relations. According to a Western diplomat, Washington advised Tbilisi should not lose the “broader perspective” in its relations with Iran. However it is not quite clear whether Washington supported entirely Georgian initiative regarding Iran or not. Georgian analysts, such as Alexander Rondeli, predict that Washington is reluctant to see deepening ties between Tehran and Tbilisi. Although Washington considers Iran as a rough state, it sees the necessity that Georgia would maintain good relations with its neighbors.<sup>38</sup> According to the ‘famous’ WikiLeaks informations: “Georgia tries to build relations with Iran. Georgia agreed with many of our arguments about the policy of Iran and was ready to put these questions directly to the Iranians. Georgia is still faced with the last of Tehran’s anger when a few years ago, the US was granted an Iranian smuggler.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Georgia can not alienate an influential regional neighbor and chief trading partner”, wrote Ambassador of the US in Georgia John Bass.

Although it is not connected with the 2008 August war, Russian-Iranian relations deteriorated after the support of UN sanctions against Iran by Russia last year. It will be useful to note that in an article published in the *Jomhuri Eslami* newspaper, Heshmatola Palahat-Pishe, member of foreign relations committee of Iranian Mejlis, wrote that according to a recent opinion poll 96 percent of Iranian population did not consider Russia a reliable partner either in the political or economic sphere of cooperation. According to him “There are historical reasons for this distrust. Russia is in pursuit of its own specific interests, rather than considering Iran strategic partner. Following the Caucasian crisis Russia tries to go well with the USA by using the Iran issue as the trump card... The Russians are viewing Iran as a mound behind which to hide and use Iran as a protective shield. The Russians only want that this mound doesn’t crumble away, who think that most of America’s hostile motivations will be redirected at Russia if there is no Iran.”<sup>40</sup> To summarize, Iran aims to safeguard the existence and territorial status quo of the multiethnic Iranian nation-state and to make best use of its geographical position as energy transit country between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf.

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<sup>36</sup>“Characteristics of Foreign Policy in 2010: Increased Maturity, Courage and Patience”, <http://www.tabula.ge/article-2779.html>

<sup>37</sup>G. Nodia, “Georgia Walks A Line Between Washington And Tehran”, November 19, 2010. <http://www.rferl.org/>

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.iran.ru/rus/news\\_iran.php?act=news\\_by\\_id&news\\_id=65175](http://www.iran.ru/rus/news_iran.php?act=news_by_id&news_id=65175)

<sup>39</sup> In 2008, relations between two countries hit a low when Georgia extradited an Iranian citizen to the US to face charges related to breaking the arms embargo against Iran.

<sup>40</sup> *Jomhuri Eslami* newspaper, October 6, 2008.

Concerning Turkey, it must be stressed that after the August war relations with Russia became much closer, especially in the fields of joint energy projects. Besides that the pro-Russian business lobby in Turkey has become a powerful pressure group, which seeks to deepen Turkish-Russian relations continue. Turkish construction companies like ENKA, GAMA and Tekfen have made extensive investments in Russia and have helped construct pipelines and power stations in Turkey to deliver Russian natural gas.<sup>41</sup> Some analysts stress that “While the West would like to see Turkey play a key role in helping strengthen Georgia’s entry into NATO, Turkey will be wary of further alienating Moscow and has been more neutral on the Abkhaz separatist issue than Tbilisi would like.”<sup>42</sup> Turkey tries at least in semi-official level to establish economic ties with self-proclaimed Abkhazia, whereas it maintains at the same time close and good relations with Georgia. Because of its sizeable citizens from Abkhaz and Georgian origin Turkey is for a peaceful settlement of this conflict.

It can be concluded that Turkey and Iran have different ambitions in the Caucasian region. Today Turkey and Iran are important international actors on different levels with significant interests and goals in the South Caucasian region.

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<sup>41</sup> G. M. Winrow, “Turkey and the Greater Black Sea Region”, In: N. Atesoglu Guney (Ed.). *Contentious issues of security and the future of Turkey*, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006, p. 124.

<sup>42</sup> G. Fuller, op. cit., 139. At the same time, According to the WikiLeaks, during the 2008 war, Turkey was ready to send its troops under the status of NATO, to the Georgian province of Adjara, in the case of the entry of Russian troops in this province. The document dated by August 14, 2008, notes that Turkey’s intentions were more than serious. According to the document, Prime Minister Erdogan and members of the Turkish parliament visited Moscow and met with President Medvedev. They announced to the Russian side that, if Russia will conduct military operations near the 100-kilometer zone from Turkey, the Turkish side, as a NATO member, has the right to enter its units in the zone of conflict, and protect the neighbours of the Alliance states.

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