

IRANIAN SOFT POWER IN AZERBAIJAN
AND
THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

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IRANIAN SOFT POWER IN AZERBAIJAN
AND
THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

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by
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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Anar Imanzade, certify that

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ABSTRACT

Iranian Soft Power in Azerbaijan and the Second Karabakh War

The various dimensions of Azerbaijan-Iran relations contain certain mechanisms of influence that the two states use against one another. One of these mechanisms is the projection of soft power by Iran onto Azerbaijan. This thesis focuses on the projection of soft power by the Islamic Republic in Azerbaijan through analyzing the available literature. Furthermore, the study makes a contribution to the literature by providing new knowledge about different kinds of Iranian soft power, which are categorized as religious and non-religious. Both methods of Iran's soft power projection are explored in detail and possible transformations of Iranian soft power in the context of shifting balance of power in the region after the Second Karabakh War at the end of 2020 are examined. To analyze Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan and the impact of the Second Karabakh War, this research uses two methods: expert interview and content analysis. Thus, it is intended that the thesis will give valuable insights into Azerbaijan-Iran relations and the use of soft power by the Islamic Republic while taking into consideration the consequences of the new balance of power in the region following the Second Karabakh War.

ÖZET

Azerbaycan’da İran Yumuşak Gücü ve İkinci Karabağ Savaşı

Azerbaycan-İran ilişkilerinin çeşitli boyutları, iki devletin birbirine karşı kullandığı belirli etki mekanizmalarını içermektedir. Bu mekanizmalardan biri de İran'ın yumuşak gücünün Azerbaycan'a yansıtılmasıdır. Sadece bu konuyu hedef alan sınırlı sayıda literatür olduğu belirtilmelidir. Bu nedenle, bu tez, mevcut literatürü analiz ederek İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin Azerbaycana karşı yumuşak güç projeksiyonuna odaklanmaktadır. Ayrıca tez, dini ve din dışı olarak sınıflandırılan İran yumuşak gücü türleri hakkında yeni bilgiler sağlayarak literatüre katkı sağlamaktadır. İran'ın her iki türdeki yumuşak güç uygulama yöntemleri de ayrıntılı olarak incelenmiştir. Tez, 27 Eylül - 10 Kasım 2020 tarihleri arasında gerçekleşen İkinci Karabağ Savaşı sonrasında İran yumuşak gücünün durumunu ve olası dönüşümünü tartışmaktadır. İran'ın Azerbaycan'daki yumuşak gücünü ve İkinci Karabağ Savaşının bunun üzerindeki etkisini incelemek için, araştırma iki yöntem kullanır: uzman görüşmesi ve içerik analizi. Böylece tezin Azerbaycan-İran ilişkileri ve İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin yumuşak güç kullanımı hakkında değerli bilgiler vermesi amaçlanmaktadır. Ayrıca tez, İkinci Karabağ Savaşı sonrasında bölgedeki güç dengelerinin değişimini de dikkate alarak konuyu güncel tutacaktır.

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DEDICATION

In memory of Major General Polad Hashimov

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ABBREVIATIONS

EU	European Union
ICRO	Islamic Culture and Communication Organization
IKRF	Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation
IPA	Islamic Party of Azerbaijan
IRCS	Iranian Red Crescent Society
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guardian Corps
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NKAO	Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (<i>Oblast</i>)
U.S.	United States
USD	United States Dollar

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Iran and Azerbaijan are countries which share common history, culture, traditions, and religion. These two bordering countries have also been connected to one another through ethnic community of Azerbaijanis living in Iran. In the contemporary period, Azerbaijan and Iran are enjoy stable and strong economic relations, particularly in the field of trade the two countries are important partners of one another. Between 1994 and 1997, Iran was Azerbaijan's top trade partner, however, after international oil contracts the EU replaced IRI (Lotfi, Golmhammadi, & Sarmadi, 2016). Even so, Azerbaijan was Iran's top 12 export partner with the value of products about 41 million USD in 2018. In the same year, Azerbaijan's exports to the Islamic Republic were far less than that of Iran's which were estimated about 3 million USD (World Bank, 2018). Iranian products are cheap and more affordable for poor Azerbaijanis which makes their import a strategic point for the Azerbaijani economy. In terms of tourism, Iran seems more interested in interaction with Azerbaijan, as the latter's citizens can stay in Iran without visa for 15 days (State Migration Service, n.d.) while Iranian citizens have to get visa upon arrival to Azerbaijan ("Nakhchivan to lift," 2019). The reason for Iran's more liberal visa policy for Azerbaijani citizens is telling about IRI's desire to closer interaction with the Azerbaijani public.

In addition to the economic ties, Azerbaijan's importance to the Islamic Republic encapsulates geostrategic dimensions as well. As for Tehran, it is crucial to secure its northern borders which has been getting smaller since the nineteenth century. For this reason, it is not sufficient to only have mechanisms to pressurize Azerbaijan but also to

be attractive in order to persuade its public. Multidimensional economic and political ties between Azerbaijan and Iran makes soft power projection an important part of them.

This study aims to examine Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan, first by analyzing its main components and instruments. Then the study explores the prior objectives and main reasons for Iran's soft power use in Azerbaijan. These findings are underpinned by specific cases and examples that help clarify generalizations and arguments extracted during the research process. Finally, the analysis of Iranian soft power is correlated with a contemporary issue: The Second Karabakh War. This correlation is constructed to understand the impact of the recent war on Iran's soft power projection in Azerbaijan in the context of Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Admittedly, the Second Karabakh War has changed the status quo in the region to a certain extent, hence one of the main goals of this research is to better understand the state of Iran's soft power in Azerbaijan within the framework of this new balance of power in the South Caucasus region.

By examining Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan, this study analyzes which of its values Iran chooses to promote within Azerbaijan to influence the Azerbaijani public. It is important to note that soft power can be generated not only by projecting attractive values, but also by spreading these values to become attractive. Nye (2008, p. 95) defines this process as *public diplomacy*, which he describes as follows: "Public diplomacy is an instrument that governments use to mobilize these resources to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments." Thus, public diplomacy is not an alternative to soft power, but rather, it is the means of promoting it. Accordingly, this study examines Iran's public diplomacy – or what we may call its soft power policy – in Azerbaijan. In doing so, this research attempts to answer the following questions: "How does Iran maintain and increase its

attractiveness amongst in Azerbaijani public?” and “What factors affected Iran’s public diplomacy discourse toward Azerbaijan following the Second Karabakh War?”

According to this thesis’ hypothesis, Iran’s public diplomacy in Azerbaijan stems from their common history, religion, and traditions. These three factors will be analyzed within the framework of soft power resources defined by Nye (2004), i.e., culture, foreign policy, and political values. While culture encapsulates the common history of Azerbaijan and Iran and their shared traditions, the study views religion through the lens of political values. In turn, all of these, and some other soft power elements, are projected mostly through foreign policy.

The study focuses on the impact of Iran’s religious soft power in Azerbaijan which has been projected via Shia Islam. While other elements and Iran’s non-religious soft power in Azerbaijan, such as medical tourism, culture will also be discussed in the study, religion is prioritized because it is hypothesized to be the main tool.

Later, the study will examine the transformation of Iran’s soft power as a result of the Second Karabakh War (a.k.a. the 44 Day War) which occurred between the months of September and November between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The war concluded with Azerbaijan regaining control over most of its previously occupied territories, including a significant part of former Nagorno-Karabakh region (NKAO). The results of the war changed the balance of power in the South Caucasus and engendered new geopolitical realities.

Admittedly, Azerbaijan-Iran relations experienced radical changes during the 44-Day War. Firstly, Azerbaijan has re-gained control over the districts located along the Iranian-Azerbaijani borderline. Secondly, the Statement of November 10 – the document signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia through Russian mediation, establishing

ceasefire – ensures that Azerbaijan will receive a direct route to its Nakhichevan exclave through Armenian territory, bypassing Iran. Thirdly, Iranian Azerbaijanis signified unprecedented support for Azerbaijan’s cause during the war. In a geopolitical dimension, all of these alterations shape the new balance of power between Azerbaijan and Iran. By discussing Iran’s role in the 30-years-long conflict, the study aims to also answer the following question: “How may the new regional balance of power transform Iran’s soft power policy in Azerbaijan?”

This thesis regards soft power as another dimension of the power equilibrium in Azerbaijan-Iran relations. The Islamic Republic’s soft power policy has always been a major factor in ensuring its prevalence in power relations with Azerbaijan, as it is a more viable mechanism rather than direct military or economic threats. As a result of more recent geopolitical changes, the power balance between Iran and Azerbaijan tipped toward the latter. As the previous status quo was more favorable for IRI, the study expects to discover signs of possible changes in Iranian soft power policy in Azerbaijan that are directed toward counterbalancing Azerbaijan’s geopolitical gains.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 contains discussions about the theories on which this study is based, i.e. Joseph Nye’s soft power theory, Hans Morgenthau’s balance of power theory, and theories about the importance of religion in international relations. Chapter 3 discusses and analyzes available literature about historical factors shaping Iranian soft power policy, geopolitical factors in Azerbaijan-Iran relations and specific cases of Iran’s implementation soft power in Azerbaijan. Chapter 4 focuses on the objectives of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan. It provides an analysis on Iran’s Azerbaijan policy and the reasons that the Islamic Republic utilizes soft power in Azerbaijan. Chapter 5 answers the question of how Iran projects soft

power onto Azerbaijan and explores its different forms and limits. Chapter 6 discusses the new balance of power in the South Caucasus region, the ways Iranian soft power can be expected to evolve and finally, the shifting power balance between Azerbaijan and Iran.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical framework

The main theoretical tool used in this study is *soft power*. Soft power as a theoretical concept was developed by Joseph S. Nye in his book titled *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* in 2004. According to Nye (2004), there are two kinds of power: hard and soft. The former is projected via coercive and economic instruments, which include military threats, economic sanctions and other likewise means. The latter is implemented only through co-opting. The word “co-opting” means adopting an idea for one’s use. For Nye (2004), soft power projection means making others want to work for the realization of the same idea or ideas which you want them to work for. People, while being an actual target of soft power, are driven by their own wish to act rather than being coerced to do so. Moreover, Nye (2004, p. 7) describes the difference between hard and soft power in his book as follows: “Command power – the ability to change what others do-can rest on coercion or inducement. Co-optive power – the ability to shape what others want-can rest on the attractiveness of one's culture and values.” Suggesting such soft power (co-optive power) elements as values, Nye points to the intangible character of soft power tools.

In this study, religion is the most often mentioned factor of Iranian soft power, understandably because the majority of both Azerbaijani and Iranian populations affiliate to Shia branch of Islam (Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2009; Central Intelligence Agency, 2021b). Nye (2004) uses as an example in his theory of soft power the Pope’s influence over Catholics in the world,

which indicates his admittance of religion as a soft power tool. In this vein, providing information about and examining religion and its impact on society by referring to the works of certain scholars, such as Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler's work titled *Bringing Religion in International Relations* will be supportive of the hypotheses of the present study.

Fox and Sandler (2004) note that despite the surge of secular ideologies, such as Marxism, fascism and liberalism throughout the twentieth century, religion has made a comeback as a factor of international relations in the twenty-first century. For instance, labeling adversaries as "the axis of evil" or "big Satan" and "small Satan" refers to morality instilled through religion. Fox and Sandler focus on the unique characteristics of religion as a driving ideology and compare it, categorically, with other sets of beliefs in international relations. The scholars argue that religion may justify the violent actions of policymakers (Fox & Sandler, 2004). For example, the notion of martyrdom stems from religious beliefs and entails death as an inevitable result. Few ideologies which can encourage for such bold actions as religion can, when it is considered by individuals as a source of legitimacy.

Religious legitimacy is a powerful tool that can be used for both peace and violence while being an influential force to mobilize certain identity groups (Fox & Sandler, 2004). They also argue that religious authorities can more effectively instrumentalize religious legitimacy. In actuality, these arguments can be applied to Shia Islam's doctrine. Shia clerics and *ayatollahs* (a high religious rank in Shia hierarchy) who are mostly based in Iran also claim that they are the source of religious legitimacy "until the arrival of the last Imam." Moreover, an ayatollah's words possess not only spiritual but also political and social obligations. Iranian scholars often mentioned the

importance of the authority of clerics in Iran's soft power projection (Saedi & Moghaddamfar, 2014). Referring to Fox and Sandler's notes (2004) about certain identity groups falling under the influence of religion, this study also examines such groups in Azerbaijan who are affected by the expressions of Iran's religious authorities. For example, Iran's promotion of religious literature in Azerbaijan may be indicated (Ebrahimi & Katman, 2019). Religion in this case is inserted into the framework of public diplomacy tools and regarded as the means of receiving attraction for one's ideas (soft power). As Philip Seib (2013, p. 216) expressed: "As those responsible for their nations' public diplomacy survey their assets, religion should be among the potential tools considered for use."

Before constructing a correlation between soft power and balance of power conceptions, it must be noted that according to Joseph Nye (2011), soft power on its own cannot be bad or good, meaning its cause is defined by those who instrumentalize it. Thus, soft power, like hard power, can be used to achieve different goals. He also notes that traditional realists, such as E.H. Carr and Machiavelli do not oppose the nature of soft power as it is far from being "idealistic and liberal." Carr defines three categories of power: military, economic, and power over opinion (soft power), and Machiavelli says that the greatest danger to the leader is to be hated (Nye, 2011). Both thinkers underscore the importance of the power of opinion and attraction. Only neorealists regard power as a solely tangible element of international relations due their structural judgement of international relations (Nye, 2011). On this ground, by agreeing with Nye, it may be argued that there is no contradiction between realism and soft power. Hence, in order to explore the correlation between the new balance of power in the region and

Iran's soft power policy in Azerbaijan, it is necessary to study the concept of balance of power.

The balance of power theory is a central notion of the realist international relations theory. This concept refers to the existence of balance in power relations between the states. According to Hans Morgenthau (1948, p. 131), the balance of power performs two functions: "ensures stability in power relations of states" and "insures the freedom of one nation from the domination of the other." Morgenthau (1948) argues that in order to ensure stability, the ascendancy of one state over the other state should be prevented. In doing so, two methods can be applied, either by changing or by preserving the status quo (Morgenthau, 1948). Accordingly, the status quo can be both conducive or destructive for saving equilibrium (balance) in power relations.

In conclusion, this study will utilize two theories: Joseph Nye's soft power theory, and the balance of power theory extracted from Hans Morgenthau's book titled *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Soft power will be studied as a factor in the states of balance of power in pre- and post-war (the Second Karabakh War) periods. For this study, it is important to determine to what extent Iranian soft power could influence the balance of power in IRI's relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan without under and overestimation. Furthermore, the current role of Iranian soft power in the balance of power between Azerbaijan and Iran will be discussed. Hence, the study aims to reveal the respective role of soft power during periods of stability and instability regarding power relations between Azerbaijan and Iran.

2.2 Methodology

This study tries to answer the research questions in two phases: data collection and data analysis. Data collection will be conducted based on expert interviews. There are certain reasons for opting to use this method. First, this method is less time-consuming that is relevant for a master's thesis. Secondly, there is no need to justify the cause of the study as the experts themselves are sufficiently informed about the topic and its importance. Thirdly, in this specific research case, expert interviews seem to be the most relevant method as there is little research on Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan, limiting the amount of relevant literature, and other methods to gather empiric data appears to be complicated. Attempts for quantitative interviews among the population would be unreliable in terms of accuracy and, supposedly, not safe for ordinary people. For these reasons, experts who have been directly and indirectly engaged in the explored topic for a long time could be optimal sources of information. It needs to be noted that experts are not only sources of information but also accurate interpreters of available data. Thus, the experts' views have also been helpful in the understanding of the collected data. In order to prevent expert mistakes and bias, the collected data will be supported by factual basis via newspapers, magazines and academic works.

2.3 Data collection

There are 11 interviewed experts who have been chosen by taking into consideration such criteria as the fields they are specialized in, their work experience, and academic positions. There are two former ambassadors, two academicians, four researchers, and one former politician. Generally, the experts worked in and conducted research on Iran and/or Azerbaijan. It is important to note that the requests to get in touch with Iranian

experts, in order to preserve diversity in the collected data, were rejected by two employees of Iranian news media and one former senior diplomat of Iran to Azerbaijan. For this reason, it was impossible to interview experts representing the Iranian government.

It is assumed that the interviewed experts' knowledge will be helpful and conducive in answering my research questions. The participants have been contacted through their email addresses and social media accounts. Six experts have been interviewed online, via Zoom and consented to audio and video recording, while the five participants (who have been met in person) agreed for audio recording only. The list of experts is presented in Appendix A.

The interviews are semi-structured and open-ended. The interview questions had been prepared and presented to interviewees before the interviews took place. The questions are also presented in Appendix B. It should be noted that right before the recording interviews, participants had read and signed consent forms approved by the Ethics Committee. The Ethics Committee approval can be found in Appendix C. While conducting the interviews, Irving Seidman's instructions written in his book titled *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and Social Sciences* (2005) were pursued. The participants answered concretely structured questions. However, the substance and length of their answers depended solely on them. Some parts of the interviews haven't been recorded due to certain participants' desire to keep them off the record. Moreover, the interviewees have been kept focused on the topic of interviews and asked some follow up questions when necessary. The participants have also been allowed to talk about their desirable points which were not directly mentioned in the questions and never been interrupted.

2.4 Data analysis

In order to analyze the data collected via interviews, content analysis was utilized. In doing so, Mariette Bengtsson's research titled *How to Plan and Perform a Qualitative Study Using Content Analysis* (2016) was taken as a guideline. First, the whole interview data has been transcribed. It was decided to examine the interview data through manifest analysis, i.e., by focusing on what has been said rather than what has been intended to be conveyed. Then the coding process by identifying meaning units (decontextualization) and marking them with colored pencils took place. After dropping data that was not directly related to the research topic (recontextualization), the marked data were brought together under common categories (categorization). Finally, the final texts and the transcripts' coincidence was checked in order to be sure that the data was utilized accurately (compilation).

CHAPTER 3

IRANIAN SOFT POWER

3.1 The origins of Iranian soft power

In order to understand the impact of Iranian soft power on Azerbaijan, it is necessary to study the nature and features of Iran's soft power itself. For this reason, this chapter describes and examines the reasons for which Iranian strategic thinking adopted Shia Islam as one of its soft power instruments. The chapter includes a brief history of Iran describing the preliminary conditions for Shiism to become a leading political force in Iranian socio-political life, some examples of Iran's religious soft power use and the ways of its instrumentalization.

In hard power terms, Iran's military power is one of the strongest in the region, and it ranks 14th in the world, exceeding Saudi Arabia and Israel (Global Firepower, 2021). Even so, some scholars argue that Iran relies mostly on soft power in order to increase its influence in its region (Afzali, Zaki, & Dashti, 2018). Undoubtedly, there are many reasons for Iran's reliance on soft power to a greater extent than on hard power. Firstly, Iran has strained relations with such regional powers as Israel and Saudi Arabia and it is surrounded by powerful countries like Turkey and Pakistan which are not Iran's adversaries but still opponents. Secondly, survival under international sanctions also makes "becoming attractive" important for Iran as its financial resources are also limited. Therefore, using hard power resources to achieve its strategic goals is costly and risky for Iran. However, these are contemporary factors, it is also important to examine history in order to understand how Iranian soft power and its religious characteristics have been shaped.

Iran had been a major power in the South Caucasus for several centuries beginning with Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE) to Safavid Empire (1501-1736) and the Zand Kingdom (1751-1794), while Iran's modern history begins with Qajar Empire (1794-1925). According to Ariane M. Tabatabai (2020), the Qajar Empire was the starting point when the Iranians had undergone a sense of national humiliation because their country – a one-time regional power – became a backward nation-state. For the first time since the Arab incursions (633-654), Iran had been invaded by foreign powers, such as Britain and Russia, and this happened not only once. Persia's territories had started shrinking as a result of defeats in the Russo-Persian wars when Persia fully lost control over the South Caucasus. These eternal territory losses were documented in the Golestan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) treaties, which are perceived as a humiliation by the Iranians up to this time. Notably, the territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan were also among the lost territories.

As a result of numerous defeats, Iranian authorities, clerics, and other segments of the Iranian population had realized their country's vulnerability in the face of European and Russian military and technological advantage. As usually is the case in times of crisis, alternative ideological movements began emerging in Iran in the nineteenth century. One of them was the urge among certain Shia clerics to get engaged in politics, in other words, to politicize the religion. In doing so, the clerics made an informal alliance with the merchant class, which was envisioned to protect both groups from the Shah and foreign powers. This alliance also provided the clerics with financial resources and helped increase their prestige (Tabatabai, 2020). Supposedly, both classes suspected that the state was in collusion with foreign powers.

Later, the Shia hierarchy was formalized and consolidated its power by creating such titles as ayatollah, and enlarging religion's role in social and political spheres. The clerics were also inheriting the idea that Persia should defend Muslims against foreign powers, such as Russia and Europe, irrespective of whether they were within or outside the country. This approach stems from Qajar Empire's doctrine and is reflected in the contemporary foreign policy rhetoric of the Islamic Republic (Tabatabai, 2020). A prominent example of this argument is the murder of Russian diplomat Alexander Griboyedov. Griboyedov was on a diplomatic mission in Iran after the Turkmenchay treaty (1828) was signed. He was hosting two Muslim convert women who escaped from the Shah's harem and sought refuge at the Russian Embassy. When the Shah demanded them back, Griboyedov refused, causing an outcry in Iran, especially among religious Iranians. A decree issued by cleric Mirza Masih calling for taking back the refugees, resulted in Griboyedov and his 37 men being killed by the followers of the cleric (Tabatabai, 2020). Two indicators of the social attitude of Iranians can be seen in this incidence: the strict pursuit of clerics' orders and the hatred against foreign powers and their representatives. Another reason for the apparent hatred against foreign powers is the perception that they betrayed Iran numerous times in history (Tabatabai, 2020). For instance, despite signing the Finckenstein agreement in May, 1807 to help Persia in case of foreign aggression, Napoleon signed the Tilsit treaty (July, 1807) with Russia thereby breaking its pledge to aid Persia. Later, there was an unsuccessful cooperation attempt with Britain as well. Tabatabai (2020) argues that these and likewise events laid out the foundations for distrust against foreign states with a substantial role of clerics and religion.

Despite rising social demand for religion and clerical authority, Reza Shah, who took power in Iran after the Qajar Empire had collapsed (1925), was a proponent of modernization reforms in Iran, especially in the areas of culture and military (Tabatabai, 2020). His policies, which reflected a European model of state, excluded Shia Islam from Iranian politics and caused both the clergy's and people's reactions. Reza Shah's neglect of religion and focus on Persian nationalism engendered the first separatist movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and Iranian Kurdistan provinces, which made Iranian elites think twice about the definition of the "nation" (De Groot, 2007). The clerics, whose influence was growing at the time, opposed Reza Shah's modernization plans and expressed their distaste for Western values to be inserted into Iranian society and politics. Thus, Reza Shah's dispute with the clergy was already considerable before he was overthrown by the British and Soviets.

After the foreign-induced palace coup, his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's reign began. Mohammed Reza Shah was also a modernizer like his father. Iran and the United States had enjoyed cooperative relations during his reign, which was not approved by a significant section of Shah's opponents (De Groot, 2007). The Shah was not the only one in charge of Iranian politics; his biggest opponent was Mohammed Mossadegh, Iran's Prime Minister, who was also popular among religious Iranians (De Groot, 2007). Mossadegh's political views were different from those of Shah, as by attempting to diversify the Iranian economy and make Iran a self-reliant power, he wanted to end the domination of great powers in Iran's energy sector. On this ground, he ordered the nationalization of Iran's oil sources, which belonged to British and American companies at that time (Tabatabai, 2020). Consequently, Mossadegh, who would later be remembered as Iran's national leader by Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters, was

overthrown via the joint operation held by the British and American intelligence services in 1953 (De Groot, 2007; Byrne, 2013).

Afterward, the majority of the Iranian population had turned away from the Shah and unified around Ayatollah Khomeini who was a dissident sent to exile in France by the Shah in 1964. In 1979, the Shah fled the country he was not controlling anymore and never returned, and Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran and laid the foundation of the current Islamic Republic. Tabatabai (2020) argues that Khomeini's success was rooted in people's negative attitude toward the Shah rather than in his own popularity. The reason for this negative view of the Shah was his alliance with the United States.

Two important factors should be taken into consideration while analyzing the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Firstly, by closely cooperating with the West, the Shah allowed American and British companies to dominate the energy sector, but Iranian people, driven by historical traumas of interventionism and betrayal, were assured that foreign powers steal Iran's wealth and national resources. Thus, a significant number of Iranians thought of the Shah as an American puppet. Secondly, one of the characteristics of Iranian culture perceived as a unifying factor by most Iranians, Shia Islam, was neglected by the Pahlavi dynasty and instrumentalized by Khomeini. Eventually, a popular uprising toppled the Shah, and Ayatollah Khomeini came to power with a new driving force in Iranian politics, this time embedded in the Constitution of the new Islamic Republic: Shia Islam. Subsequently, Shiism developed not only into a unifying value for Iranians but also into a soft power tool for Iran which has been conducive to its proactive foreign policy toward countries with Shia communities, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Azerbaijan.

As a result of the Islamic Revolution, with Shiism as the official ideology of Iran, the unity necessary for the functioning of the state was finally established after a turbulent period which caused the strife between Shahs and most of the Iranian population. However, the same factors created tension in Iran's relations with most of its neighbors and former allies, such as the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. These alterations in Iran's relations led to crises such as the Iran hostage crisis (1979) and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Morphed into a politically and economically isolated state, the Iranian government picked religious soft power by using politicized Shiism as one of its main foreign policy instruments. Unlike other regional powers, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, a Shia-majority population was (is) Iran's unique heritage, and there were many Shia communities in neighboring countries allowing for possible penetration, despite some of them being Sunni-majority states, such as Syria and Bahrain.

In order to utilize Shiism as a soft power tool abroad, Iranian political classes had to develop their own educational, spiritual, and legal institutions focusing on Shia Islam within the Islamic Republic. It needs to be noted that the spiritual center of Shiism had been the city of Najaf (Iraq) for many centuries; however, Iran started turning the city of Qom into a new center of Shia theology following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. One of the reasons for that was the rift between the Iraqi and Iranian clerics over the notion of *Wilayat Al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic jurist), which envisions the politicization of Shiism. Phillip Smyth (2012) defines these groups as Khomeinists - the supporters of religion's interference in politics - and Quietists - the group advocating for religion's abstinence from the political realm. In other words, Qom-based Khomeinists assert that clerics should be allowed to actively participate in politics while Najaf-based

Quietists believe clerics must be engaged in only religious affairs. Consequently, Qom became a center for Shia theology based on an Iranian (Khomeinist) model of political teachings.

Mehdi Khalaji – a former student at the Qom Seminary – argues that the Qom Seminary does not only produce scholars of Islamic law and theology but rather missionaries and preachers (Khalaji, 2010). According to Philip Smyth (2012) these missionaries have been particularly important in peripheral states with Shia communities, such as Azerbaijan, Iraq, etc. Smyth's and Khalaji's points can be evidenced by such people as Taleh Bagirzade and Movsum Samadov educated in Qom and based in Azerbaijan who will be discussed later. By training and sending such missionaries abroad, Iran builds a network and assigns a person-in-charge within Shia communities. Another scholar, Igor Pankratenko (2012), argues that Shia communities abroad are Iran's best partners for cooperation in increasing its sphere of influence. An example of this argument is Iran's cooperation with the Lebanese Shiites through political and militant organization Hezbollah. Moreover, the Shia doctrine allows these communities to cooperate with Iran and keep most of their cooperation in secret by creating a deceptive image of being members of the mainstream community (Pankratenko, 2012). It makes detecting Iranian missionaries even harder in case they decide to conceal the cause they work for.

Some of the examples of Iran's religious soft power projection through Shia communities are its cooperation with Shia communities in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Iraq has a tremendous religious affinity with Iran, as more than half of Iraq's population are affiliated with Shia Islam (Evason, 2016). According to Michael Eisenstadt (2011), Iran's soft power in Iraq is ensured thanks to Shia clerical networks. In spite of the

presence of entrenched theological centers in Iraq and one of the most famous Shiite clerics Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, Iran continues using Shiism within the framework of its soft power (Sullivan, 2009). Iran's religious soft power continues influencing Shiite communities even in Iraq, a country where the oldest Shiite Seminary is situated (Sullivan, 2009; Smyth, 2012). Also, Iran's religious soft power worries Saudi Arabia, whose oil-rich territories – eastern provinces – are mostly inhabited by Shiites who are potential targets for penetration by Iran (Kissinger, 2014). According to CIA World Factbook (2021a), 10-15% of the Saudi population are Shia Muslims, which is sufficient for pressurizing the Saudi government (when necessary), although there are no official Saudi sources engaged in the data collection based on religion or ethnicity.

Iranian and foreign scholars agree that Iran's soft power is primarily based on Shia Islam and the country's cooperation with Shia communities abroad. (Mirfakhrahi & Bandpai, 2017; Weitz, 2015;). Saedi and Moghaddamfar (2014) go further by explaining the details of religious soft power projected by Iran. They argue that there are four main components of Iran's religious soft power: *marja* ("a source to follow"), the notion of martyrdom, *Mahdism*, and the model of the Islamic Republic. Marja is a status given to high-rank Shia clerics. Marja can issue legal orders which are obligatory to his followers. To get their desirable outcomes, they can encourage their followers-Shiites for actions at home and abroad. The second component is martyrdom which is a forceful motivation for a Muslim who accepts death as the outcome of his action. Mahdism is the third component which means the expectation of the arrival of Imam Mahdi, the Savior, who will come and restore justice in the world according to Shia belief. This hope is believed to grant Shia Muslims high endurance in the battles against others. The fourth component is Iran's political regime: the Islamic Republic. The establishment of this

regime type destroyed the stereotypes about religion's complete absence in politics and made Iran's political system attractive to Shia communities in other countries (Saedi & Moghaddamfar, 2014). Presumably, the fourth component gave rise to the well-known notion of "the export of revolution" that has been popular among the Iranian ruling elite.

When it comes to exporting and imposing Shia values on other countries, Iran uses various methods. Mirfakhrahi and Bandpai (2017) argue that Iran sends missionaries, publishes and disseminates religious literature, opens offices for its own organizations and institutions to get in touch with foreign publics, and represents *Pro-Iranism* and Islam as a single identity. For example, Islamic Culture and Communication Organization (ICRO) operates in many countries, including Azerbaijan. ICRO is engaged in sponsoring religious and cultural events in countries it operates in (Berkley Center, 2020). Another scholar, Mohammed Alsulami (2016), claims that Iran's soft power is projected through establishing charity organizations under the pretext of assisting the poor, but in actuality, Iran is spreading Shiism, attracting students to study at Qom Seminary, producing sectarian movies, TV series, and launching TV channels in local languages. In sum, along with spreading its slogans and symbols in other countries, Iran's religious soft power strategy aims to demonstrate Iran as a stabilizing factor in the region and the leader of the Muslim world (Malekhzadeh, 2015).

Based on the discussions above, it might be concluded that past experience had a considerable impact on the shaping of Iran's soft power policy. For many Iranians, the losses of vast territories, particularly in the South Caucasus in the nineteenth century, represent historical traumas. They tend to believe that the main reasons for the loss of these territories were the betrayals and interventionism of Western powers (Tabatabai, 2020). Iranian scholars Mirfakhrahi and Bandpai (2017) consider Taherians, Saffarians,

Samanids, Gaznavids, Seljuks, and the Kharazmi Shahs as strong representations of Iranian dynasties despite not all of them having Persian origin. For Iran, history is still very important, and the official ideology sees cultural commonalities, including religion, as a factor assisting in keeping influence in the territories of former Persia and beyond. At the same time, all these regions require differentiated concentrations of soft power and public diplomacy. For example, in secular Azerbaijan, Iran wants to increase the proportion of the population who consider religion as their main guideline (Rubin, 2014), while in Iraq, Iran aims to weaken the positions of Quietist Iraqis and turn them into Khomeinists (Smyth, 2012).

In order to scan the literature explaining the reasons why Iran needs to project soft power, the Azerbaijani-Iranian relationship should be discussed in the next chapter. In this discussion, a brief history, geostrategic and cultural problems will be examined within the framework of Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. Additionally, the relations of Azerbaijan and Iran, and with third countries and their impact on the relations between the two also need to be taken into consideration.

3.2 Azerbaijan-Iran relations from a geopolitical perspective

The origins of Iran's religious soft power were discussed in the previous chapter, and before examining its implications in Azerbaijan, a deeper look into Azerbaijan-Iran relations, is necessary. Only through understanding the details of Azerbaijan-Iran relations it is possible to see the factors shaping Iran's soft power in this country. For this reason, this chapter discusses a brief history of major events, risks, and complications in the context of bilateral Azerbaijan-Iran relations that will give a clearer sense of the reasons for Iran's soft power use in Azerbaijan, the details of which will be

studied in the next chapter. While discussing the geopolitical framework of Azerbaijan-Iran relations, cultural and religious matters will be put aside.

Azerbaijan and Iran share a long 689 km border which makes close interaction between the two countries inevitable. In addition, sea borders, trade and demographic traffic, relations with third countries, and indirect territorial claims, and separatist sentiments make Azerbaijan-Iran relations complex. An in-depth analysis of the whole Azerbaijan-Iran relations is not the subject of this study; however, the factors contributing to Iran's soft power policy in the context of this bilateral relationship will be broadly discussed. In order to do so, two important dimensions of Azerbaijan-Iran relations will be examined: the irredentism/separatism in Iranian Azerbaijan and the Republic of Azerbaijan's relations with Iran's adversaries, in particular NATO and Israel. The time frame extends approximately from 1988 to 2020.

Administratively, Iranian Azerbaijan consists of three provinces: East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Ardabil. These regions are mostly inhabited by Iranian Azerbaijanis of Turkic origin, speaking the same language and possessing cultural commonalities with the people living in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Estimates of the Iranian Azerbaijani population vary from 15% to 24% of the whole population of Iran (Elling, 2013), which was more than 76 million in 2013 (World Bank, 2020). It is firmly established that Iranian Azerbaijanis constitute the largest ethnic minority in Iran (Elling, 2013) which inevitably makes them an important factor in Iranian politics. Also, Iranian Azerbaijan has a long history of ethnic separatism.

The first attempts of secession in Iranian Azerbaijan via an organized movement occurred in 1945, long before the Islamic Republic was established (De Groot, 2017). The leader of the movement was Jafar Pishevari who was supported by the Soviet

Union. Despite the movement's failure, the threat of separatism in Iranian Azerbaijan and its possible revival became a concerning issue of national security for the Iranian political elites during the Pahlavi dynasty rule and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic (Zarifian, 2009). The fear of separatism among the Iranian authorities soared after the Republic of Azerbaijan had gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 (Valiyev, 2018; Shlapentokh, 2019). The main reason for that was the political values of the Republic of Azerbaijan, which were based on secularism and could be more attractive to Iranian Azerbaijanis than the clerical rule of Iranian ayatollahs (Valiyev, 2018).

Therefore, it was in Tehran's interests to have Azerbaijan engulfed in its own problems and deprived of a possibility to encourage Iranian Azerbaijanis for an uprising against the clerical rule in Tehran. Larrabee and Nader (2013) and Brenda Shaffer (2021) argue that for this reason, Iran did not side with Shiite Azerbaijan during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994) - a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region - and instead, opted to support Armenia. Julian Zarifian (2009) argues that Iran's support for Armenia was mainly a reaction to the Pan-Turkic statements of the Azerbaijani officials, especially then-President Abulfaz Elchibey who was urging for the unification of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijan. Moreover, Brenda Shaffer (2021) asserts that it was domestic concerns over a possible separatist uprising by the Azerbaijani community in Iran dictating Iran's policy toward Azerbaijan but not shared Shia identity. Shaffer's and Zarifian's arguments are complemented by Tomas de Waal's (2003) findings which show that Armenia would barely win the First Nagorno-Karabakh War if there was no support from Iran. Thus, by keeping Azerbaijan's territories under Armenian occupation, Iran aimed to distract and prevent the

Azerbaijani government from feeding separatist sentiments of Iranian Azerbaijanis (Shaffer, 2021).

Apparently, Iran undertook the measures of constraint not only against the Republic of Azerbaijan but also its own citizens of Azerbaijani (Turkic) origin. Iran's policy toward Iranian Azerbaijanis aims to restrict the penchant for their ethnic and cultural identity in order to weaken their separatist sentiments. There are reports by BBC News claiming that Iranian authorities had been implementing policies violating the cultural rights of Iranian Azerbaijanis and mocking their ethnic culture ("Azeris feel Iranian," 2010). These policies led to protests in Iranian Azerbaijan time-to-time. The protests ended up in harsh suppression and mass arrests of ethnic Azerbaijani activists ("Iran's Azeris protest," 2015).

Tehran's attitude toward Azerbaijanis living in Iran has not changed since the early 2000s, which can be exemplified by Iran's recent support for Armenia during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. It should be noted that munitions were being sent to Karabakh via Iran before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, too (Kucera, 2020). Throughout the war, Iran had been a major point for the transition of arms supplies to Armenia, which caused mass protests throughout the cities of Iranian Azerbaijan (Shaffer, 2021). Infuriated by Iran's policies, Iranian Azerbaijanis demanded the closure of Iran's border with Armenia to prevent Russian arms supply via Iranian territory ("Pro-Azerbaijani protestors," October 2020). During the war, Iranian Azerbaijanis frequently gathered near the Iranian-Azerbaijani border where the battles were going on to morally support the Azerbaijani soldiers (Shaffer, 2021). Another incidence paving the way for Iran's concerns over possible separatism was the poem read by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during the military parade in Baku

after the Azerbaijani victory which contained a narrative about the separation of Southern Azerbaijan (Iranian Azerbaijan) from Northern Azerbaijan (the Republic of Azerbaijan) by force. President Erdogan's statement assured the Iranian authorities that the possibility of separatism/irredentism indeed exists. Also, it was the first time after Azerbaijan's Pan-Turkist President Abulfaz Elchibey, another high-ranking official, made such a reference to the South Azerbaijan issue. Shortly after President Erdogan recited the poem, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif criticized him for this (Motamedi, 2020). The sensitivity of Tehran over the issue supports the argument that a possibility of a separatist uprising in Iranian Azerbaijan is one of the most concerning scenarios for Tehran. Especially now, the probability of an uprising increased as Azerbaijan restored control over Karabakh (former Nagorno-Karabakh) territory. Firstly, the problem that had been distracting the Azerbaijani governments for around 30 years has almost disappeared. Secondly, protesting Iranian Azerbaijanis demonstrated that they still value their ethnic identity. For these reasons, Iranian support of Armenia against Azerbaijan in order to counterbalance the latter may not be an effective way anymore (Shaffer, 2021).

Another major issue in Azerbaijan-Iran relations is the former's relations with NATO (Western countries) and Israel (Zarifian, 2009; Lindenstrauss & Celniker, 2012; Shlapentokh; 2019). Despite Azerbaijan not being a member of any military alliance, it has been participating in NATO's "Partnership for peace" program since 1994 (NATO, 2020). Moreover, Azerbaijan has been enjoying close relations with Turkey - a NATO member - since it has gained independence, and Turkey has been the most optimal connection to Western military infrastructure for Azerbaijan. Based on its balanced strategy, Azerbaijan has been interested in cooperation with the West and NATO, mainly for counterbalancing Russia and gaining economic prosperity (Shiriyev, 2019).

However, if Russia was somehow satisfied with the policies held by Heydar and Ilham Aliyevs, Iran was more irritated by Azerbaijan's cooperation with NATO and especially Turkey. The Islamic Republic warned Azerbaijani authorities that it would not tolerate if Azerbaijan decided to join NATO or invite American troops to get into the region ("Iran warns Azerbaijan," 1999). Later, the tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran increased due to the dispute over certain gas and oil fields in the Caspian Sea. As the crisis continued, Iran threatened and intercepted Azerbaijani oil exploration ships in the disputed waters ("Azerbaijan protests over," 2001), then violated Azerbaijani airspace ("Iran denies violating," 2001). For this reason, the United States and Turkey condemned Iran's actions, then Turkish planes showed up in Azerbaijan's capital Baku to constrain Iran from possible aggressive undertakings toward Azerbaijan (Arnold, 2001). Arguably, the reason for this support was Azerbaijan's strategically critical geolocation. Moreover, as a country rich in oil and gas, Azerbaijan could decrease Europe's dependence on Russian energy resources. Later, the situation worsened when, amid the increasing tensions between Iran and the United States, the Bush Administration included Iran into the list of countries labeled as "the axis of evil" ("Text of President," 2002) that infuriated Iranians. There were rumors that Azerbaijan would offer the United States its territory to attack Iran; although Azerbaijani authorities excluded such a possibility, Iran has remained suspicious (Zarifian, 2009).

In addition to Azerbaijan's cooperation with Turkey and NATO, another concerning point for Iran is Azerbaijan's close ties with Israel. Iran accused Azerbaijan of cooperating with Israeli intelligence agencies and assisting them in killing Iranian nuclear scientists in Iranian territory. As a rebuttal to Iran's accusations, Azerbaijan itself uncovered Iranian agents while they were trying to find the location of high-tech

equipment purchased from Israel (Souleimanov, Ehrmann, & Aliyev, 2014). Moreover, some groups related to Iran were arrested due to their attempts to attack the Israeli Embassy and Jewish centers in Azerbaijan in 2012 (Souleimanov et al., 2014). Additionally, Iran is convinced that Azerbaijan assists Israel's intelligence agency Mossad to conduct operations against Iran and may provide Israel a space to attack the Islamic Republic (Lindenstrauss & Celniker, 2012; Milani, 2016).

In conclusion, there are two important contributing factors for the Iranian regime to regard Azerbaijan as both a direct and indirect threats to its own sovereignty. The first is a possible contribution that Azerbaijan is able to make for a military attack against Iran. Iranian authorities understand that Israel is cooperating with Azerbaijan, where a Shia majority inhabits, and which borders Iran same as Syria - Iran's ally - borders Israel. The second factor is about the possibility of igniting separatism in Iranian Azerbaijan that can end up not only in the Iranian regime's overthrow but also in the collapse of the Iranian state. Based on this possibility, Azerbaijan's cooperation with Turkey is irritating to Iran due to the former's claims on the leadership of the Turkic world. Hence, allied with Turkey, Azerbaijan may be a stronger source of inspiration for Iranian Azerbaijanis to rise against Tehran's clerical rule. For these reasons, Iran assesses maintaining its influence in Azerbaijan as highly crucial for its national security. However, considering the importance and military support that Azerbaijan possesses, influencing Azerbaijan through hard power might be problematic for Iran. Therefore, Iran's inclination toward soft power projection in Azerbaijan is more realistic. Undoubtedly, the most powerful instrument that may ensure Iran with effective soft power in Azerbaijan is religion, i.e., Shia Islam, the instrumentalization of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

3.3 Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan

The previous chapter discussed geopolitical conditions which encourage Iran to use soft power in order to maintain its influence in Azerbaijan. This chapter discusses Iran's public diplomacy, which is aimed at the promotion of its soft power in Azerbaijan. It studies the methods, instruments, and mechanisms utilized by Iran. Finally, besides studying the soft power policy Iran pursues, this chapter showcases its implications and consequences in Azerbaijan. In doing so, some cases exemplifying Iran's influence through religious soft power will be summarized. The studied methods and cases will help develop a clearer sense of Iran's soft power.

In order to examine Iran's soft power in Azerbaijan, first, the role of Islamic religion within Azerbaijani society should be reassessed. According to Fuad Shahbazov (2021), unlike many other post-Soviet Muslim countries, Azerbaijan has not experienced a dramatic rise in religiosity in its territory. Swietochowski (2002) and Shahbazov (2021) relate the low level of religious tendency to the impact of ideas of prominent Azerbaijani philosopher Mirza Fatali Akhundzade (1812-1878), who propagated the idea of putting an end to sectarianism and attempted to bring religious moderation into the society. Moreover, Azerbaijanis were inclined toward an alternative option by mainly focusing on their national or ethnic identity, such as Turkic rather than religious origins. However, after Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991, certain radical religious groups emerged and the majority within these groups consisted of Iran-oriented Shiites. These Shiites mostly inhabit the southern regions of Azerbaijan and certain villages in the surroundings of Baku, such as Nardaran (Cornel, 2006; Shahbazov, 2021). It is important to note that pro-Iranian Shiites were not the only religious group. There were also Saudi and Kuwait-linked Salafi groups. In order to keep control over

such groups, then-President Heydar Aliyev decided to re-institutionalize Islam through the Board of Caucasus Muslims which was founded during the Czarist Russia in 1823 and existed in the Soviet era. Even so, foreign interference remained the main source of inspiration for religious groups, and specifically, Shiites embraced the values promoted by the Islamic Republic of Iran (Shahbazov, 2021). As in the cases of other countries, such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, etc., the Azerbaijani Shia community has become a mechanism for Iran's religious penetration (Cornell, 2006). In order to describe Iranian soft power activities in Azerbaijan in broader terms, it is necessary to examine Iranian involvement in education and three events which occurred in Azerbaijan between 2011-2018.

Mirfakhrabi and Bandpai (2017) argue that Iran's scientific and educational cooperation with other countries is a part of its cultural diplomacy. For example, the Islamic Republic allocates scholarships for foreign students desiring to study in Iran. Certainly, theology is one of the most-studied fields in Iran, and as it was discussed in the previous chapters, Iran developed its theological seminary situated in the city of Qom. Iran funds students from the countries with Shia communities to study in the Qom Seminary, and ultimately, attempts to project its soft power through them. In the case of Azerbaijan, Iran did two things: developing religious institutions in Azerbaijan and funding Azerbaijani students to study in Iran. In the first case, Iran sent theologians who were ethnically Azerbaijani (Turkic) and fluent in Azerbaijani in 1990-1991, and then they opened and funded religious schools called *madrasa* (educational institution) in Azerbaijan throughout the 1990s (Yunusov, 2004). These schools were mostly for teaching children to read the Qur'an and learn Arabic; however, besides engaging in educational activities, madrasas were spreading the literature praising and glorifying

Iran's theocratic regime, as well. In 2002, most of these madrasas, which had no proper authorization, and thus no official documents listing their quantity, were closed by the Azerbaijani government for being bankrolled by Iran and embracing Khomeinism (Shahbazov, 2021). It was one of the signs indicating that the Azerbaijani government came to the realization that Iran's religious activities were directed towards gaining influence among the population, especially among Shia communities. In the second case, Iran provided funding for Azerbaijani students wishing to study theology in the Qom Seminary (Yunusov, 2004; Cornell, 2006; Rubin, 2014). Presumably, Azerbaijani students educated in Iran's theological schools might become potential promoters of Iran's soft power among local Shia communities. It may be argued that the graduates of the Qom Seminary are indeed politically motivated, as the Seminary pursues Khomeinist doctrine, which is advocating for the politicization of Shia Islam (Smyth, 2012). In order to support this argument, the activities of pro-Iranian religious activists, such as leaders of pro-Iranian political parties and movements who studied theology at the Qom Seminary, will be discussed later.

For the less religious segment of the Azerbaijani population, other Iranian-linked cultural and religious institutions started operating in Azerbaijan. The Islamic Republic uses certain organizations such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization, the Hajj, and the Welfare Organization. These organizations are linked directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (Cornell, 2006).

It should be noted that Iran's soft power projection through involvement in education led to the institutionalization of religious tendencies in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. Fuad Shahbazov (2021) notes that the students who studied theology in Iran founded the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (the IPA) in 1991. Based on the reports by

Azerbaijan's security agencies, the party positioned itself as pro-Iranian and advocated for destroying Azerbaijan's current secular political regime. It is stated that the IPA's main objective was to establish a theocratic Iranian-style state model (Yunusov, 2004). The party was banned in Azerbaijan in 1995 when its members' espionage for Iran was exposed ("Acting leader of," 2021). It was claimed that the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan was being financed by Iran, and according to Azerbaijan's law "About political parties," № 17.2.3, in case a political party receives financial contributions from abroad, the party must be closed (The Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.). Although the party kept functioning illegally, periodically, the IPA leaders and their deputies, such as Movsum Samadov, who also graduated from the Qom Seminary, Ilham Aliyev (not President Aliyev) and their collaborators were sent to prison (Alizadeh, 2011; "Acting leader of," 2021). Thus, based on the observations of the IPA activists, it can be concluded that the Azerbaijani students educated at Iran's theological schools promoted the pro-Iranian agenda in Azerbaijan and attempted to infiltrate the country's political institutions. It once again shows that Iran's educational organizations are one of the great contributors to its soft power in Azerbaijan.

In order to win the hearts and the minds of the Azerbaijani people, Iran also tries to disseminate its Khomeinist ideology through popular cultural elements, such as TV channels, movies, series, books, etc. The Iranian government created the channel "Sahar TV," which broadcasts in Azerbaijani and targets the Azerbaijani public (Valiyev, 2018). It provides the users of this platform with a variety of programs that mostly focus on religious and political matters. Before the arrest of the IPA's former chairman Movsum Samadov, Sahar TV was offering its platform to him as a way to communicate with the Azerbaijani public (Yunusov 2012). This fact demonstrates that Iran holds its

activities in Azerbaijan in a well-structured way by effectively using mechanisms such as political parties, missionaries, and media.

Iranian TV series are not usually broadcasted in Azerbaijani TV channels; even so, they are distributed via digital copies in discs and the internet, and a popular Iranian series titled “Prophet Joseph” was widely broadcasted on Azerbaijani television in 2008. Movies and TV series played an important role in making Azerbaijan-Iran relations closer and counterbalance Iran’s good relations with Armenia in Azerbaijani public opinion. Iranian Ministry of Culture was/is the main organization promoting Iranian cinema in Azerbaijan (Ametbek, 2021). Iran is also engaged in spreading religious literature (Valiyev, 2018), including religious law and the history of Islam written by Iranian theologians. These books are perfectly translated into the Azerbaijani language and contain only pro-Iranian and Shia perspectives. For example, some books possess “He will come” inscription on the bottom of all pages, referring to Mahdism, which indicates the anticipated arrival of Holy Imam Mahdi.

Anar Valiyev (2018) argues that despite Iran holding proactive soft power policies in Azerbaijan, the prospects of these types of policies are not great because the Azerbaijani population is generally not radically religious. However, by briefly examining the history of certain events, serious reflections of Iranian soft power might be detected. There are three cases based on which it might be argued that even a small segment of the population may influence the socio-political atmosphere in a country. These are the murder of Rafiq Tagi (2011), the Nardaran events (2015) and the Ganja riot (2018). The three cases will clearly demonstrate in which ways people inspired by Iranian influence and its religious soft power are able to act.

Rafiq Tagi was an Azerbaijani writer who had negative views about Iran and its political regime, which he openly targeted in his publications. For criticizing Iran and Islam in his article titled “Europe and Us”, Iranian Marja Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani issued a *fatwa* (legal opinion in Islamic law issued by a cleric) calling for Tagi’s death (Rubin, 2014; Valiyev, 2018). Following that, he was jailed by the Azerbaijani police in the same year and was released four years later. In his final publication titled “Iran and the Inevitability of Globalization” (November 10, 2011), Tagi denounced Iran’s political system, directed personal criticism against then-President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and called the activities of the Iranian regime “barbaric” (Tağı, 2011). On November 19, he was stabbed by an unidentified assailant. Although Tagi was heavily wounded, he managed to give an interview to *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* before his death. In this final interview, Tagi was asked about possible suspects who could have organized his stabbing, and his answer was “religious radicals linked to Iran,” adding that he was stabbed in response to his harsh criticism of Iran in his latest publication (AzadliqRadiosu, 2011). It should be noted that after Rafiq Tagi’s death on November 23, a congratulation message was sent by Mohammad Javad Fazel Lankarani – the son of Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani – to the Azerbaijani people (“Fazil Lənkəraninin oğlu,” 2011).

Although it was not legally concluded if Rafiq Tagi was killed by pro-Iranian religious radicals, there is evidence that a marja’s fatwa – an element of Iranian soft power – was involved in the case. Moreover, it was remarkable that despite the absence of any official allegations against Iran from the Azerbaijani side, the Iranian Embassy in Azerbaijan hastened to falsify claims about possible Iranian involvement in the murder (“Sem udarov nojom,” 2011). The case was also discussed at the European Parliament,

where some Members of Parliament criticized and accused Iranian officials of not condemning the fatwa (European Parliament, 2011). Even if the murderer was not linked to Iran, warranting a fatwa calling for the annihilation of a human being showed the influence Iranian marja's might possess over Azerbaijani Shiites.

The next case demonstrating the influence of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan is the Nardaran events that occurred in 2015. Nardaran is a small village with a population of 8,000 people which is located in the vicinity of Azerbaijan's capital Baku. The population of Nardaran embraces Shia Islam and pro-Iranian values (Cornell, 2006; Yunusov 2012). These people are more persistent in the pursuit of Islamic laws in their daily lives in comparison with the rest of the population in other regions. For example, the consumption of pork and other forbidden-by-Islam products was prohibited in the territory of the village by locals, and most women wear Iranian-style chadors (Souleimanov, 2015). It is also noted that Nardaran is not only the hometown of the banned Islamic Party of Azerbaijan and Muslim Unity Movement - the latter being the main actor of the Nardaran events - but also a place from which male Azerbaijani Shiites travel to Syria to fight on the side of Iran and Assad ("Azərbaycanlıları Suriyaya kim," 2014; Souleimanov, 2015). Prior to the events, Nardaran had been isolating itself from the rest of Azerbaijan due to more radical religious perspectives of the local population, their sympathies toward Iran, and distaste for Azerbaijan's secular government. This self-isolation helped Nardaran be a shelter for religious movements until 2015.

In early November of 2015, the Azerbaijani police forces conducted an operation in Nardaran, stating that the operation aimed to eradicate the radical terrorist Muslim Unity Movement based in the village. Probably, one of the reasons for such an operation was an intention to culturally assimilate Nardaran into the religiously moderate part of

Azerbaijan. Consequently, four civilian residents of Nardaran and two policemen were killed during the operation (“Nardaran toqquşmasında,” 2015). Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev personally commemorated the police officers and stated that they were killed by a criminal group intending to change the constitutional order of Azerbaijan (Khalilova, 2015). Although it was stated by the Azerbaijani officials that the radicals were affiliated to groups linked to ISIL, it was not a convincing explanation as the population of Nardaran are Shiites whose ideology strictly contradicts Salafism (Yevstratov, 2015). Supposedly, this statement was made to avoid tensions in relations with Iran.

The breaking point of the Nardaran operation was the arrest of Taleh Bagirzade, the leader of the Muslim Unity Movement. Bagirzade studied theology in the Qom Seminary in Iran. He was elected as the leader of the Muslim Unity Movement, which aims to preserve cultural and religious values in Azerbaijan based on Shia Islam (Yevstratov, 2015). Moreover, Bagirzade often expressed his dislike of Azerbaijan’s current secular regime by calling it “a big prison” (Khalilova, 2015). It should be stated that Taleh Bagirzade was actively supporting the idea of inserting religious principles into the Azerbaijani Constitution (Yevstratov, 2015). Although he firmly refuted the allegations about organizing an attempt for a regime change, in his criticism against the regime and the government, he claims that the state officials: “...They fear because they can lose everything they have gathered” (“Taleh Bağırzadə kimdir,” 2013). This statement casts doubt upon his refusal to admit that his movement intended to orchestrate a regime change. Additionally, Bagirzade stated that the people of Nardaran believe neither in the Board of Caucasus Muslims nor in the State Committee for Religious Affairs – the former is in touch with state officials and the latter is a

government institution – insinuating the moral authority of Iranian clerics such as Ali Khamenei and Makarem Shirazi (Yevstratov, 2015). Apparently, it demonstrates Taleh Bagirzade’s ideological inclination toward the Iranian clerics and the political model they represent.

After Bagirzade’s imprisonment, mass riots began in Nardaran and the Southern parts of Azerbaijan. Fuad Shahbazov (2021) notes that the riot in Nardaran was organized by radical Shia adherents affiliated with Muslim Unity Movement. The protestors demanded Bagirzade’s immediate release while many of them were detained (Yevstratov, 2015).

The Nardaran events occupied Azerbaijan's agenda for a couple of months. It needs to be noted that before the riots in Nardaran, Azerbaijani security organizations were not allowed to enter the village by the locals, and there were madrasas operating in Nardaran. Reportedly, the Nardaran society was actively under Iranian influence (International Crisis Group, 2008). Despite the Azerbaijani security forces taking control of the village, this influence is still present. Finally, the Nardaran events once again showcased the extent of Iran’s soft power influence in Azerbaijan. Although the Iranian government did not demonstrate direct support for the participants in the riots, which is a characteristic behavior for soft power projection, some Iranian officials and clerics expressed their concerns over the mistreatment of Shiites in Azerbaijan (Souleimanov, 2015). As in the case of Rafiq Tagi, Iran’s religious soft power worked in a restrained way without giving any official statements about the events, which is a feature enabling the Iranian government to undercover its policies in Azerbaijan. Therefore, it is hard to predict what would happen if a religious warrant calling for certain massive undertakings comes from Iran’s top clerics.

Another mass riot happened in Ganja - Azerbaijan's second-largest city - two years later, in July of 2018. An assassination attempt took place against Ganja's mayor Elmar Valiyev, heavily wounding him. The police arrested Yunis Safarov as the person behind the assassination attempt, who had lived for eight months in Iran's city of Qom ("Yunis səfərovun işgəncə," 2018). Azerbaijani Ministry of Interior stated that Yunis Safarov was affiliated with religious militant groups and wanted to establish Islamic rule in Azerbaijan; however, alternative points of view expressed that Safarov aimed to have revenge on Ganja's mayor Valiyev due to his disrespect of sacred attributes of religion (Reuters Staff, 2018). In both cases, the factor of religion was present. According to some reports, Elmar Valiyev banned Shia gatherings that were going to take place on the occasion of religious mourning day (Ashura) and made derogatory statements about Shiite Imams (Medjid, 2018). Following Safarov's imprisonment, a riot occurred. There were reports that during the riot, religious slogans were being resonated, but it was not clear that the riot was organized by the adherents of radical Shiism. Nevertheless, some changes have been made to the Azerbaijani Constitution prohibiting people from studying religion abroad and conducting or participating in mass religious events (Shahbazov, 2021). Admittedly, religious motives in the riot were present, and considering Ganja's predominantly Shiite population and Yunis Safarov's eight months stay in the city of Qom, the influence of Iran can be presumed.

Zaur Shiriyev (2017) notes that according to the report by Azerbaijani security services, Iran's influence in Azerbaijan's regions has been rising recently. Some Azerbaijani MPs raised concerns about the conduct of Ashura celebrations and the imposition of religious practices on children by their parents, such as participation in religious events and wearing hijabs. Azerbaijani Parliament member Zahid Oruc

believes that the radicalization of children may drive them to become kamikazes in the future (Shiriyev, 2017). Earlier, the Azerbaijani government banned wearing hijabs for children at schools. Then, the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs proposed legislation prohibiting Azerbaijani kids from participating in Ashura events (Shiriyev, 2017). However, as it was published on Ayatollah Khamenei's official website, the Islamic Republic's supreme leader told Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev: "This year's glorious ceremony in the month of Muharram was an example of the solid faith among the Azerbaijani people" ("We must solemnly," 2017). This reaction demonstrated that Iran is interested in promoting more freedom for Shia religious practices in Azerbaijan. The importance of a certain level of religious freedom, such as permitting religious gatherings and participating in religious events, helps Iran to maintain networks connecting religious people, unifying them under the umbrella of Iran's soft power.

Clearly, Azerbaijan's secular political establishment perceives Iran's rising influence in the country as a threat to the regime. For example, news portal *Haqqin.az* – close to the Azerbaijani government – made numerous reports underscoring the risk of rising Iranian influence through religious pilgrimage. According to the report, those who organize pilgrimages to sacred places for Azerbaijanis, such as Iran's Mashhad and Qom or Iraq's Najaf and Karbala, are people who studied in Iran. It once again indicates the contribution of religious education to Iran's soft power policies. It is mentioned that during these trips, the detention of pro-Iranian theologians by the Azerbaijani government, such as Taleh Bagirzade and Movsum Samadov, were being criticized by Iranian clerics. Generally, anti-Azerbaijani and pro-Iranian propaganda is held throughout the pilgrimage process (Mammadov, 2017). It also needs to be noted that the

security of pilgrims is provided by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Mammadov, 2017). In another Haqqin.az article, Iran's intentions to create an Islamic Republic of Azerbaijan are discussed (Husseinoglu, 2015). It is mentioned that Azerbaijani Shiites easily fall under the influence of Iran due to their religious attitudes and this influence may lead to a wide range of uprisings in Azerbaijan. Consequently, the Azerbaijani society may experience the creation of the "Islamic Republic of Azerbaijan" (Husseinoglu, 2015). Although under the circumstances, this possibility does not seem to be realistic, it reflects that the Azerbaijani government is concerned about Iran's networks within the Azerbaijani Shia community.

According to the literature, the Azerbaijani political elite is conscious of Iran's increasing influence within Azerbaijani society. The main factor of this influence is politicized Shia Islam (Khomeinism), and the arrests of pro-Iranian missionaries and fundamentalists are responses in the context of Azerbaijan's domestic policy. It has become established that certain policies, such as dissemination of religious literature and allocation of scholarships for theology students, may lead to violent outcomes, such as murders and mass riots. This argument is showcased by the three incidents referred to in this chapter. It should be noted that all fore mentioned cases happened via indirect – through independent ayatollahs and without direct orders from the members of Iran's political elite – Iranian involvement. However, in case Iran's top clerics and authorities would be hostile to the Republic of Azerbaijan and openly call for a regime change in Azerbaijan, it is possible to think that the events might have developed differently at those times. As for now, after the Second Karabakh War of late 2020, the balance of power in the region has changed. Therefore, Iranian soft power may undergo a transformation and change the way it is being projected.

CHAPTER 4

IRANIAN SOFT POWER OBJECTIVES

Before discussing how Iran does project its soft power in Azerbaijan, it is essential to highlight the factors which create conditions for Iran to do so. There are reasons deriving from different dimensions, which can be defined within the Islamic Republic's broad foreign policy direction.

Iran defines itself as an Islamic Republic; its foreign policy may seem to be founded on religious activism. However, Ambassador Nasibli (personal communication, July 12, 2021) argues that this perception is false, and Iran's foreign policy is based on pragmatic reasoning, which may be exemplified by Iran's close relations with Armenia. The current state of Armenia-Iran relations, which has been developing since 1991, contradicts Iran's image of "Defender of Shiism/Islam" because Armenia is in hostile relations with Azerbaijan, a country with a Shia majority population (N. Nasibli, personal communication, July 12, 2021). Ahmad Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021) asserts that in the first years of the Islamic Republic, Iranian foreign policy was actually based on religious principles. However, as time elapsed, new western-educated persons with a more secular mindset were becoming in charge of governmental positions. Thus, Iranian foreign policy preserved its religious appearance while rationally pursuing its geopolitical interests in actuality (A. Obali, personal communication, July 17, 2021). Zaur Gasimov (personal communication, July 25, 2021) also supports these arguments by further stating that if Iran's foreign policy were based strictly on religious norms, it wouldn't support the secularist Assad regime in Syria and cooperate with forces alien to Shia ideology, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan

(Tanzeem, 2021). It is also important to note that the Islamic Republic closely cooperates with the People's Republic of China ("Iran-China 25," March 27, 2021) by ignoring the accusations against China of its mistreatment of Uighur Muslims. On this ground, it can be argued that the general discourse of Iranian foreign policy barely takes religion – Shia Islam, its official ideology – as a guiding principle in foreign policy implementations. Iran's policy discourse toward Azerbaijan also matches its general foreign policy framework. Hence, the fact that Azerbaijan has a population with a Shia majority matters little when it comes to the realization of the Islamic Republic's geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus region.

4.1 Iran's Azerbaijan policy

Nasib Nasibli (personal communication, July 12, 2021) asserts that generally, the Islamic Republic's Azerbaijan policy does not depend on the heads of governments and it should be analyzed not through an actor-specified lens but via a systemic level of analysis. In other words, the replacement of people in charge of foreign policy in these countries can barely change the plight of Azerbaijan-Iran relations. So, Iran's view of the Republic of Azerbaijan is constructed according to its geopolitical interests and possible threats coming from this country. Ahmad Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021) argues that the Islamic Republic had always been prepared and had an "Azerbaijan policy" plan even before the Soviet Union's collapse in 1990 because it saw the danger during the Pishavari movement in 1945. Although Masiagha Mahammadi (personal communication, July 26, 2021) states that Iranian politicians were confused about the final outcome of the socio-political processes going on within the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, it does not contradict Obali's argument, as many could not

predict the USSR's dissolution and it doesn't lead to the conclusion that Iran had no emergency policy for Azerbaijan. According to Ahmad Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021), Iran's active engagement in its Azerbaijan policy started after January 20, 1990 when the Soviet troops entered Baku and shot several civilians dead. After this event, the Islamic Republic realized that Azerbaijan could not exist within the Soviet Union anymore and began outlining its Azerbaijan policy.

Arif Keskin (personal communication, August 2, 2021) defines Iran's Azerbaijan policy as "contradictory" because on the one hand, it regards the Republic of Azerbaijan as a Shia country. On the other hand, it sees Azerbaijan's Turkic identity as a threat to itself. Dr. Nazim Jafarsoy (personal communication, July 1, 2021) explains this contradiction by arguing that there are two groups within the Iranian political elite advocating for different approaches toward Azerbaijan. While one group supports a direct confrontation and instrumentalization of hard power tools, the other group supports softer approach toward Azerbaijan. Apparently, the Islamic Republic does not frequently utilize hard power tools, such as military and financial instruments in its Azerbaijan policy, although some examples, such as the Caspian dispute could be seen during the 1990s.

The Caspian dispute is the dispute over the legal status of the Caspian Sea between five countries having its shoreline: Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Before these four post-Soviet countries became independent, Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic had signed two agreements (in 1921 and 1940) which embedded free access to the Caspian Sea and equal use of its resources by the two countries. After the fall of Soviet Union, newly independent countries (especially Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan) expressed that the Caspian Sea should be regarded as a sea

and divided according to international maritime law. These positions mostly stemmed from Azerbaijan's and Kazakhstan's contracts with international energy corporations (Terzioğlu, 2008). Consequently, the dispute over certain oil and gas fields in the Caspian made Azerbaijan-Iran relations strained time to time the cases of which were mentioned in the previous chapters.

Dr. Araz Aslanli (personal communication, July 3, 2021) links some murders (without naming them) during the signature of an oil contract – the Contract of the Century – between Western powers, Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan in 1994 (The Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020) to Iran's hard power projection because the Islamic Republic could not become a signatory to this agreement. However, the interests of such powers as Russia, the United States, and Turkey in the South Caucasus restrict Iran's ability to use hard power instruments against Azerbaijan (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 3, 2021). Thus, the Islamic Republic gives more preference to soft rather than hard power projection in its Azerbaijan policy.

Soft power is projected in order to gain or preserve influence through attraction. However, it is important to ask “why?” Why is it necessary for Iran to keep its influence in the Republic of Azerbaijan?

4.2 The reasons for and aims of Iran's soft power projection

Former Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan Arthur Lenk (personal communication, July 7, 2021) states that a senior Azerbaijani official – he refused to give names – told him Iran considers Azerbaijan to be a threat due to the latter's secularist form of government. The reason why this secularism is so alarming to the Islamic Republic, the senior official

explains with the factor of Iranian Azerbaijan. As mentioned above, the secularist political regime in the Republic of Azerbaijan can be a point of attraction for ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran. Ambassador Lenk says that it is impossible to stop this cultural exchange between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijanis due to the long land border between Iran and Azerbaijan (personal communication, July 7, 2021). Nasib Nasibli (personal communication, July 12, 2021) also underscores the importance of religion for the Islamic Republic, which is crucial in order to ensure the integrity of various ethnicities in Iran. He contends that without a viable ideology, it is hard to constrain Iran's ethnic minorities to form irredentist undertakings, considering the fact that Persians populate only the central part of Iran while the rest of the country is inhabited by other ethnicities, such as Azerbaijanis, Kurds, the Baluch, and others. Eventually, it can be asserted that secularism of the Republic of Azerbaijan is a factor that doesn't serve the Islamic Republic's interests.

Furthermore, Dr. Zaur Gasimov (personal communication, July 25, 2021) regards the role of secularism from an ideological (not demographic) perspective and states that Iran's concerns about secularism stem from the association of the latter with the Western presence close to its borders. He relates Iran's irritation of Azerbaijan's conduct of Eurovision song contest in Baku (2012) as seen as an affront to the Islamic Republic's dislike of the West's secular values. Thus, the strict secularist policy of the Azerbaijani government and a long history of secularist lifestyle in Azerbaijan inherited from the Soviet Union necessitates the Islamic Republic to defensively project – religious and cultural – soft power in Azerbaijan. Therefore, secularism of the Republic of Azerbaijan poses a twofold threat to Iran: demographic which encourages irredentism/separatism among Iranian Azerbaijanis, and ideological which grants access

to South Caucasus for Iran's regional and ideological rivals, such as Turkey, Israel, the U.S., and the EU. It is important to note that Turkey is an actual factor in both these threats as due to its Turkic identity, it can be a possible source of motivation for irredentism in Iranian Azerbaijan. Also, Turkey is a NATO member and represents Western influence against Russian and Iranian ones.

Ahmad Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021) and Arif Keskin (personal communication, August 2, 2021) believe that the main aim of Iran's religious soft power projection in Azerbaijan is to put religious identity – Shia Islam – prior to ethnic – Turkic – identity among the population. By doing so, Iran can simultaneously defy the rise of ethnic nationalism within the country and weaken the positions of secularism and Western influence in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Moreover, in case religion becomes prevalent among Azerbaijan's Shia community, Iran will gain leverage over the Azerbaijani government and can pressurize it when necessary (S. Jafarli, personal communication, July 3, 2021; A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 3, 2021; E. Kelbizadeh, personal communication, 2021). In addition to these points, Masiagha Mohammadi (personal communication, July 27, 2021) argues that the Islamic Republic's tactical aim is to pressurize the Azerbaijani government through religious soft power; however, its long-term strategic aim is to lay the groundwork for an Islamic regime in Azerbaijan, even if it appears undoable for now. It is necessary to note that the Islamic Republic does not trust any foreign power, including Russia, and desires to dominate in the region solely by itself. However, at this point, Russia's dominance is more preferable for Iran rather than Turkey's or the US' (M. Mohammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021).

To conclude, Azerbaijan's embracement of secularism is perceived as an existential threat to the survival of the Islamic Republic. Being the opposite of clerical rule, secularism imperils the central column for stability and integrity of the Islamic regime in Iran: religion. Thus, in order to prevent ideological failure, which can entail ethnic separatism or irredentism, Iran chooses to strengthen the position of its ideology – Shia Islam – within the Republic of Azerbaijan. As the use of hard power instruments is limited, religious and other forms of soft power are put in action to achieve this goal.

CHAPTER 5

THE DIMENSIONS OF IRANIAN SOFT POWER

After examining the main factors necessitating Iranian soft power, the dimensions through which it is projected will be examined in this chapter. There are two prime dimensions: religious and non-religious. Firstly, Iran's religious soft power and its ways of projection will be explored, then other forms of Iranian soft power, such as cultural and historical aspects, will be discussed. It is important to note that this chapter aims to fill the gap in the literature and provide the reader with newly collected data about the ways the Islamic Republic projects soft power.

5.1 Iran's religious soft power

The period describing when and how Shia Islam has become the driving force in Iranian politics and an instrument of foreign influence has already been discussed. Iran's religious soft power begins from its image; hence the status of defender of the faith is very important to the Islamic Republic. Iran posits itself not only as the protector of Iranian Shia Muslims but also Muslims in the region and around the world, no matter which branch of Islam they are affiliated to. Even so, based on its official ideology, the Islamic Republic is mainly engaged in the penetration of Shia communities in the neighboring countries (A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 3, 2021). For example, Iran's cooperation with Shia communities in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon indicates the importance of Shia Islam as an instrument of foreign influence (N. Nasibli, personal communication, July 12, 2021). Obviously, Iran's religious soft power is relevant to be projected among Shia communities in the Republic of Azerbaijan as well.

In terms of religious affiliation, Azerbaijan's population consists mostly of Shiites that undoubtedly makes the country a target of Iran's religious soft power as stated earlier. During the Soviet rule, public practicing of religion had been banned for almost seven decades. Consequently, a strong tendency of "back to Islam" emerged in most post-Soviet states. Thirst for religious liberties in the newly independent states created an opportunity for Iran after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 (Z. Alizadeh, personal communication, July 2, 2021). Despite the official Soviet atheism had made some Azerbaijanis less religious, the prohibition of religious practices radicalized those who remained interested in religion (A. Obali, personal communication, July 17, 2021; Masiagha Mohammadi, personal communication, July 26, 2021). By taking the opportunity to re-establish its influence in the South Caucasus after almost 300 years, Iran began using its religious soft power in Azerbaijan. There were and are various instruments of it while some of them existed within a certain time frame, the others are currently used too. Among these instruments are agents of Iranian soft power.

Admittedly, the main agents of Iran's religious soft power are high-ranking clerics who can issue religiously legal decrees – a fatwa – which carry orders of religious, social and political significance: marjas. These people may appear backward; however, in actuality, most of them are fluent in foreign languages and knowledgeable about modernity (N. Nasibli, personal communication, July 12, 2021). According to Arif Keskin (personal communication, August 2, 2021), this religious status has significant influence within Shiism as by emulating marja, one should fulfill all his orders at all costs. Even so, most of the interviewed experts focus not on the existence of marjas within the Shia hierarchy, but on the absence of clerics with such status in the Republic

of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani Shiites had no choice but to emulate marjas who are based in Iran and to a lesser extent in Iraq (E. Kelbizadeh, personal communication, July 22, 2021; Zaur Gasimov, personal communication, July 24, 2021; Arif Keskin, personal communication, August 3, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that Azerbaijani Shiites fall under the influence of Iranian and Iraqi clerics whose fatwas are mandatory to them. As it was discussed earlier, the difference between Iranian and Iraqi clerics is that, unlike the latter, the former are Khomeinists, and their fatwas can be political too. This kind of religious hierarchy, existing only in the Shia branch of Islam, grants a privilege of direct orders to Iran's soft power agents. A good example of this – albeit aforementioned – is the murder of Rafiq Tagi

Moreover, marjas instrumentalize financial resources in the process of penetration of Shia communities. According to Elnur Kelbizadeh, some marjas living in Iran and Iraq have their official representatives in the Republic of Azerbaijan. These representatives, along with Iran-linked centers, collect religious taxes called *Khums* (one-fifth of annual income) and *Zakat* (the amount is relative and situational) from the religious segment of the Azerbaijani population. Usually, the money gathered from religious taxes should be transferred to Iran, and this is the practice in other countries where similar Iran-linked organizations operate. However, Iranian marjas have issued a fatwa stating that the gathered taxes from religious Azerbaijanis must be distributed among poorer Azerbaijanis. The reason for the fatwa was stated to be the bad economic conditions of Azerbaijani Shiites due to the state of war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It should be mentioned that the recipients of this money can only be religious people. Although the collected money flows from the rich to the poor, the latter receive it in the name of marjas or Iran-linked religious centers, unaware of the actual donors.

Consequently, this financial chain strengthens Iran's image among the population and creates the perception of its generosity (E. Kelbizadeh, personal communication, July 22, 2021). The described case is telling about the presence of economic factors within the framework of Iran's religious soft power. However, in order to specify to what extent do economic benefits shape Azerbaijani Shiites' religious and pro-Iranian attitudes, more data is necessary, and is unavailable for now.

Other agents of Iran's religious soft power are lower-ranking religious authorities, namely *mullahs*. In Azerbaijan, mullahs – people knowledgeable about religious laws and the Arabic language – are ordinarily engaged in conducting funerals and religious ceremonies. In addition to that, some experts state that mullahs have also been active in the promotion of pro-Iranian values in Azerbaijan (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 3, 2021; M. Mohammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021). In the first years of Azerbaijan's independence, Iranian mullahs were operating in Azerbaijani mosques when there were no religiously educated people in Azerbaijan at that time. Later, they were replaced with Azerbaijani mullahs educated in Iran (M. Mohammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021). Since Azerbaijan has gained its independence, Iranian-linked mullahs have been trying to highlight Azerbaijan's socio-economic problems (more apparent during the first decade of independence), as being predominantly political in nature. Based on his personal observations, Dr. Araz Aslanli (personal communication, July 3, 2021) states that whenever Azerbaijan-Iran relations were strained, mullahs' rhetoric became critical of the Azerbaijani government at funerals ceremonies. Indeed, the critique was mainly about social and economic problems the reasons of which, according to mullahs, were irreligiousness and secularism of the Azerbaijani government.

Besides funeral ceremonies, mosques have also been natural centers of activity for mullahs. Before the construction of new mosques in Azerbaijan, pro-Iranian mullahs were renting apartments, turning them into mosques and promoting religious values. It was a tactic to revive the religious awareness of secular Azerbaijanis. Shahin Jafarli (personal communication, July 3, 2021) states that one of his family members was also attending spiritual teachings in apartment-mosques and later became a religious person. According to Mr. Jafarli, this policy implemented by Iran-linked mullahs worked effectively by inducing Azerbaijanis' interest in religion. Currently, there are little to no apartment-mosques, due to the more considerable number of mosques in Azerbaijan at this point. It should be noted that Iran was one of those countries which was subsidizing the construction of mosques in Azerbaijan (A. Obali, personal communication, July 17, 2021). Afterwards, the mullahs who had previously preached in apartment-mosques, started operating in newly opened mosques. There, they were encouraging the youth to study in Iran's religious schools located in Qom and Qazvin cities. Some of them were being sent to Iran. After completing their education, those young people returned to Azerbaijan where they presided mosques and promoted pro-Iranian views (M. Mahammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021; Z. Gasimov, personal communication, July 24, 2021). Arif Keskin (personal communication, August 2, 2021) holds the view that the mosques' role in promoting the Iranian model of Shiism is crucial and multifunctional. Mosques are mullahs' propaganda locations and centers for observing popular moods. Moreover, mosques could also be unnoticeably used as the base for people's mobilization for uprisings.

Thus, the agents – marjas, their representatives and Iran-linked mullahs – of Iran's religious soft power and mosques are essential factors that should be taken into

consideration. By instrumentalizing these factors, the Islamic Republic is performing two tasks simultaneously: it increases the population's religious awareness, and presents Islamic and Iranian values as inseparable. Consequently, Azerbaijani Shiites learn Islam from Iranian agents, at Iranian schools and perceive Iranian marja's decrees as their religious, social and political imperatives.

The next factors of Iran's religious soft power are Ashura commemorations and spiritual pilgrimages. Ashura is commemorated on the tenth day of the Muharram month in the Islamic calendar. In Shia Islam, this day is considered particularly important and experienced as a mourning day. Shiites remember Imam Hussain's (Hussain ibn Ali) struggle against the oppressive ruler (Yazid ibn Muaviyya) and mourn for his tragic death in the city of Karbala on that day. Annually on this day, people gather into crowds and hold mourning ceremonies, sometimes show their grief by self-flagellation.

According to Elnur Kelbizadeh (personal communication, July 22, 2021), persons educated in Iran are actively participating in the organization of Ashura commemorations. During these occasions, pro-Iranian Azerbaijanis imitate Iranian clerics in aspects of their dress, mannerism and speech. They also glorify the clerical regime in Iran and call Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei "my master." Arif Keskin (personal communication, August 3, 2021) draws attention to the spiritual meaning of Ashura commemorations and its well-known slogan "Everywhere is Karbala, every day is Ashura." He argues that Karbala, Ashura, and shahadat (martyrdom) are the basis of Shia Islam. Every year, multitudes familiarize themselves with the demonstrated rituals and chant slogans at these commemorations, which encourage them to become more radical in their religious views. Moreover, Ashura reminds people of the importance of being ready for an uprising against oppressive rulers, even at the cost of death

(martyrdom), like Imam Hussain (A. Keskin, personal communication, August 3, 2021). Unsurprisingly, the Azerbaijani government is frequently seen as an oppressive and unjust rule by pro-Iranian Azerbaijanis. Thus, Ashura's importance for Iran's religious soft power is paramount; these commemorations provoke grief, anger, and compassion in the Azerbaijanis' minds, which are positively associated with Iran and negatively with the secular Azerbaijani government.

While Ashura is an event in Azerbaijan, a religious pilgrimage for Shia Muslims is centered in Iran's and Iraq's territories. Along with the absence of marjas, Azerbaijan does not also have sacred places the religious significance of which would equal Mashhad in Iran (Imam Reza Shrine), and Karbala in Iraq (Imam Hussein Shrine) which makes Azerbaijan's position weaker in terms of pilgrimage centers (Z. Qasimov, personal communication, July 24, 2021). Moreover, as discussed earlier, the pilgrimage to Iraqi city Karbala is also organized by Iran-linked agencies. Thus, pursuing their religious sentiments, Azerbaijani Shiites can visit Shia sacred places only in Iran or through Iran, as no other alternatives exist. The Republic of Azerbaijan has very little to offer when it comes to attending holy cities, and the Islamic Republic is the only country that is able to fill this gap. This situation puts Azerbaijani Shiites under the influence of Iran's religious soft power which is, arguably, the most powerful instrument to promote the Islamic Republic's values. One vivid consequence of this soft power is the Nardaran events, which have already been discussed (Z. Alizadeh, personal communication, July 2, 2021; S. Jafarli, personal communication, July 3, 2021).

Another example is the reaction of some religious Azerbaijanis to the murder of Iranian general Qassem Souleimani, who was liked by mostly pro-Iranian Shiites in Iraq, Azerbaijan, and other countries with Shia communities. Masiagha Mohammadi

(personal communication, July 27, 2021) relates the grief and anger expressed by some Azerbaijani Shiites and their anti-American sentiments right after Qassem Souleimani's killing (2020) to the influence of Iran's religious soft power. These events highlight the influence Iran possesses over the religious segment of the Azerbaijani population.

Another interesting example of Iran's soft power is disseminating religious values among Azerbaijani ethnicities inhabiting other countries. There is an Azerbaijani community in Georgia – a South Caucasian country and a neighbor to Azerbaijan – who live in a region called Borchali. Borchali borders Azerbaijan's Qazakh district, which creates a high volume of interaction between the people living in these regions. They both speak Azerbaijani and possess lots of cultural similarities, which creates a possibility to influence one community via the other. For this reason, the Islamic Republic is actively projecting its soft power in Georgia's Borchali region as well (A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 3, 2021; A. Obali, personal communication, July 17, 2021). Mr. Obali believes that the aim of organizing Ashura commemoration among Georgian Azerbaijanis does not differ from that of Azerbaijan. Similar to its strategic aims in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic's priority in Borchali is to weaken Azerbaijanis' Turkic identity and prioritize religious – Shiite – identity. By doing so, Iran also diminishes separatist and irredentist risks in Iranian Azerbaijan. If the Azerbaijani communities outside Iran put their religious identity first, it will discourage Iranian Azerbaijanis from protesting the Islamic regime (Obali, personal communication, July 17, July 2021). Dr. Araz Aslanli (personal communication, July 3, 2021) argues that Shia Islam is the most powerful and often used instrument of Iranian soft power, as it can mobilize people instantaneously, massively, and violently.

These are the reflections of Iran's religious soft power in action; however, the Islamic Republic also utilizes other instruments of soft power, which are discussed further.

5.2 Iran's non-religious soft power in Azerbaijan

Besides religion, Azerbaijan and Iran share two other common factors: history and culture. The two countries had been existing as a unitary state for centuries until the Russian conquest of the South Caucasus as a result of two Russo-Persian wars in 1806-1813 and 1826-1828, as discussed earlier. The Iranian political establishment regards Azerbaijan as its historical territory and considers that the real Azerbaijan is Iranian Azerbaijan, not the Republic of Azerbaijan. For this reason, in state-run media outlets, Iranians mostly call the Republic of Azerbaijan "official Baku" by trying to minimize the use of the name of "Azerbaijan" (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; Z. Alizadeh, personal communication, July 2, 2021). Iranian political elite believes that the official name "Azerbaijan" was firstly used in 1918, and the Republic of Azerbaijan is actually Northern Iran (A. Keskin, personal communication, August 3, 2021). Based on this perception, Iranian policy aims to prove the historical commonality and integrity of Iran and Azerbaijan.

Arguably, common history is a conducive factor to Iran's soft power projection in Azerbaijan (Z. Alizadeh, personal communication, July 2, 2021). Dr. Zaur Gasimov (personal communication, July 24, 2021) also argues that the common history of Azerbaijan and Iran has engendered numerous cultural similarities in both countries' languages, customs, and cuisine, which are equally important bases for Iranian soft power. Currently, the Islamic Republic finances organizations which are engaged in

arranging events and meetings to make Azerbaijanis more familiar with Persian culture, such as Islamic Relations and Culture Organization. These kinds of organizations are led by people who are merely under the obedience of the supreme leader of Iran that indicates their paramount importance. The main aim of these institutions is to convince people of the striking resemblance between Iranian and Azerbaijani cultures and alienate them from Turkey (M. Mohammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021).

Moreover, for the same reason, these organizations and Iran-linked people often remember the Safavid Empire – the territory of which consisted of Iran's and Azerbaijan's modern territories – and its wars with the Ottoman Empire. The former is associated with Azerbaijani-Iranian integrity, while the latter with Turkey. The peculiar focus of this comparison is placed on the battle of Chaldiran (1514), which took place between the two Empires. The narrative of the heroism of Safavi ruler Shah Ismail Khatai, who made Shiism an official ideology for the first time, and his moral prevalence over Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Selim is promoted by Iranian soft power agents in order to remind Azerbaijanis of the necessity to reject affinity between Azerbaijan and Turkey, its history and culture (N. Nasibli, personal communication, July 12, 2021).

There are two main reasons for this strategy: Turkey's secularism and closeness to Western values and its Turkic identity, which is a national security issue for the Islamic Republic due to the danger of ethnic separatism in Iranian Azerbaijan. Thus, Iran's efforts to make the Azerbaijani people aware of historical and cultural commonalities and to gain attraction based on that is yet another soft power policy of the Islamic Republic. A more recent historical case that is used as an argument benefiting the Islamic Republic is Iran's role in the First Karabakh War.

Generally, the Islamic Republic's role in First Karabakh remains unclear, as it cannot be proven whether Iran supported Azerbaijan or Armenia. However, pro-Iranian organizations and Shiites in Azerbaijan often come up with narratives about Iran's support for Azerbaijan. For instance, it is stated that during the war Iran rescued 4,000 Azerbaijanis living in Zangilan – a previously occupied district bordering with Iran – from the Armenian Armed Forces and prevented a massacre. According to the narrative, Iranian troops at the border with Azerbaijan fired at the Armenian Forces to stop their advancement toward the civilian population and constructed a bridge on the Aras River to evacuate Azerbaijanis to Iran. This narrative has been approved by the advisor of Azerbaijan's President, Hikmat Hajiyev (Sahar Azerichannel, 2020). Araz Aslanli (personal communication, July 3, 2021) and Masiagha Mahammadi (personal communication, July 27, 2021) agree that this story has a genuine basis, and it is promoted within the Iranian soft power policy. Dr. Aslanli argues that for the Islamic Republic, it was necessary to save the Azerbaijani Shiites to preserve the status of defender of the faith and to appease Iranian Azerbaijanis that the Islamic Republic protects their natives (A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 3, 2021). Furthermore, it is also stated that there is another narrative promoted by pro-Iranian agents, which is about the presence of Iran's military advisors on Azerbaijan's side during the First Karabakh War. The authenticity of this narrative is neither approved nor disapproved by the Azerbaijani officials (M. Mahammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021)

Iranian aid to Azerbaijani refugees is a well-known story, too. It is important to note that as a result of the First Karabakh War, there were around 600,000 displaced people from Azerbaijan's occupied territories (State Committee for Affairs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.). In the early 1990s,

the Azerbaijani government could not afford to meet the financial needs of so many refugees. IRI has institutional mechanisms for situations in which foreign aid is required, such as Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF) and Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS), etc. (Şahin & Seyedi Asl, 2020). The Islamic Republic was providing the Azerbaijani refugee camps with food and other resources for basic needs mainly via IKRF, which is also a narrative serving Iran's soft power in Azerbaijan (A. Obali, personal communication, July 17, 2021; M. Mohammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021). It must be noted that along with facilities for basic needs, Iranian agencies were also disseminating the portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and religious literature (Ametbek, 2021). Although these discourses about Iranian aid cannot be falsified, pro-Iranian organizations and agents merely focus on aid provided to Azerbaijan while ignoring overshadowed nuances during the First Karabakh War, which will be discussed later.

There are other soft power elements that may require attention. Initially, Iran wanted to increase its attraction through prominent Iranian Azerbaijanis. Nasib Nasibli (personal communication, July 12, 2021) states that the Islamic Republic embraced the idea of getting the Azerbaijani public's favor through ethnic Iranian Azerbaijani Javad Heyat, a prominent surgeon and writer. However, this initiative backfired. Instead of promoting Iranian values, the appearance of such people as Javad Heyat increased interaction between the Azerbaijanis of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijanis. Consequently, Iran realized that projection of soft power through Iranian Azerbaijanis in the Republic of Azerbaijan is not a viable way and quickly reversed this strategy in the early 1990s (N. Nasibli, personal communication, July 12, 2021).

One more soft power element is medical tourism. In comparison with Azerbaijan, Iran offers more advanced and cheaper medical services. In particular, Azerbaijanis living in the Southern region of the country cross the Iranian border and seek medical attention in Iran's provinces (Z. Gasimov, personal communication, July 24, 2021). An Iranian Embassy official in Azerbaijan reported that during the period of temporary visa requirement, 80% of Azerbaijani nationals who applied for the visa indicated that their purpose of visit is to seek medical service in Iran. The embassy official believes that based on this percentage, it may be argued that around 800,000 Azerbaijanis visit Iran for health issues (Khudiyeva, 2014). Masiagha Mohammadi (personal communication, July 27, 2021) also underscores the importance of medical tourism. However, he asserts that this tendency was more intense in the early 2000s, it has since waned.

Ultimately, it can be argued that the Islamic Republic did and does utilize various instruments for its soft power projection in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Broadly, these instruments can be categorized as religious and non-religious, although it can be concluded that religious soft power is more effective and viable. However, despite possessing numerous soft power instruments in its arsenal, Iranian soft power is being limited by certain factors.

5.3 The limits of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan

The reference to the limits of Iranian soft power reflects the intention to describe the factors which hinder the Islamic Republic from projecting its soft power and lessen its attraction among Azerbaijanis. Arguably, the first factor which is limiting Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan is the irreligiousness of the majority of the Azerbaijani population.

Only about 20% of Azerbaijanis consider religion “very important” in their lives, and the attendance of mosques in Azerbaijan is among the lowest compared to Turkey, Iraq, and Iran (Pew Research Center, 2018). Based on this, Dr. Nazim Jafasoy argues Iran’s religious soft power cannot address the majority of the Azerbaijani population but only marginal groups. Therefore, the Islamic Republic’s religious soft power can influence a few religious communities (personal communication, July 1, 2021). Additionally, Saudi Arabia and Turkey try to disseminate their versions of Islam: Salafism and Hanafism or Sufism, respectively. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Azerbaijani bureau reports that the Azerbaijani government holds policies conducive to converting Azerbaijanis into Sunni Muslims (“Azərbaycan sünni ölkəsinəmi,” 2017). Eventually, the rising influence of Sunni Islam in Azerbaijan complicates Iran’s religious soft power projection via Shiism. (A. Keskin, personal communication, August 3, 2021).

The next factor is Iran’s certain policies which are disapproved by the Azerbaijani public. Firstly, it is Iran’s position during the First Karabakh War. As mentioned above, Iran tries to draw public attention to its positive role while ignoring other aspects of this issue. Experts argue that despite these efforts, there is a negative perception of Iran’s role in the First Karabakh War in general, as Iran pursued mostly a pro-Armenian stance during the conflict (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; A. Obali, personal communication, July 17, 2021). For example, the city of Shusha – an ideologically and strategically important city in Karabakh – was occupied by the Armenian Armed Forces during the meeting between Azerbaijani and Armenian Presidents in Tehran via Iranian mediation. This historical fact is not forgotten. Ahmad Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021) considers the meeting was organized by Iran to deceive Azerbaijan and help Armenia invade Shusha, while Zardusht Alizadeh

(personal communication, July 2, 2021) argues that the main role in the occupation was played by Russia, which was dissatisfied with the Iranian mediation. Russia wanted to maintain a dominant role in this conflict. Although there is a disagreement among experts on the Islamic Republic's role in the occupation of Shusha, both agree that all narratives about it damaged Iran's prestige among Azerbaijanis.

The last factor is the actions taken by the Azerbaijani government in order to limit the influence of Iranian soft power. As it was discussed before, Azerbaijani authorities resolutely suppressed riots in Nardaran (2016) and Ganja (2018), arrested pro-Iranian protesters and political activists, such as Taleh Bagirzade, Movsum Samadov and Alikram Aliyev, etc. Moreover, Arif Keskin (personal communication, August 3, 2021) states that in the last 2-3 years, the Azerbaijani government strengthened its control over the mosques in Azerbaijan and replaced theologians educated in the Islamic Republic of Iran with the people close to the government. Hence, the Azerbaijani government acknowledges that it is concerned about Iranian influence in Azerbaijan and confronts it in all possible ways

In conclusion, there are different factors restricting Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan. However, the Islamic Republic continued projecting its religious and non-religious soft power until 2020. On September 27, 2020, the war broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Karabakh and lasted till November 10, 2020. As a result of this war, the Republic of Azerbaijan had restored control over most of its occupied territories in Karabakh which changed the balance of power in the South Caucasus and Azerbaijan-Iran relations.

CHAPTER 6

THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR AND THE SHIFTING BALANCE OF POWER

The Second Karabakh War which is also known as the 44-Day war (September 27, 2020 – November 10, 2020) has changed the status quo of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which had been frozen for 27 years. As a result of this war, the Republic of Azerbaijan has re-gained control over most of its territories in Karabakh. Moreover, after de-facto victory, Lachin, Kalbajar, and Aghdam districts were also handed over to Azerbaijan according to the trilateral Russian-mediated statement (President of Russia, 2020). The statement also envisioned the deployment of Russian Peacekeeping Forces on the parts of Karabakh, which are not under Azerbaijani control, for five years. It is important to note that the southern occupied districts of Azerbaijan, i.e., Fuzuli, Jabrayil, and Zangilan form a borderline with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The liberation of these territories, along with other factors, such as Iran's position during the war, have impacted Iran's influence in the region and the perception of Iran by the Azerbaijani public. This chapter describes the multiple facades of this impact and its influence on Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan. After analyzing the state of Iranian soft power, power equilibrium between Azerbaijan and Iran will be revisited.

6.1 The new balance of power in the region after the war

The Second Karabakh War has not only altered the power relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also affected the influence of other states engaged in this region. Azerbaijan's de-facto victory over Armenia has strengthened not only the former's position but also some third countries' as well. Despite the war was going on in Russia's

near abroad (a term used to describe former Soviet territories), it has significantly increased Turkey's engagement in the region. Besides Russian peacekeeping forces, a joint Russian-Turkish monitoring center has been established in Azerbaijan's recently liberated Aghdam district ("Turkish-Russian joint," 2021). The role of the monitoring center is limited in comparison with the Russian peacekeepers; however, it has solidified Turkish influence in the region through military presence, albeit nominal. This can be considered an unprecedented recent development, as the last time Turkish (Ottoman) army – the Islamic Army of the Caucasus – was in Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan Democratic Republic) in 1918, then led by Nuri (Killigil) Pasha.

Another unprecedented occurrence was the change of traditional policies of regional countries. Dr. Nazim Jafarsoy (personal communication, July 1, 2021) argues that along with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, there have always been three regional actors in South Caucasus: Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Traditionally, we tend to think that, in terms of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan was being supported by Turkey, while Armenia was being backed by Russia and Iran. However, the processes going on during the war and the post-war situation demonstrated a different tendency. This time, Russia and Turkey were in communication at high-ranking levels at the time of the military actions and in their aftermath ("Erdogan spoke with Putin," 2020; "Putin, Erdogan discuss," 2021). Whereas the Islamic Republic was sidelined, and its plan to end the war was not taken consideration neither by fighting sides nor by Russia and Turkey (Duz & Ahishali, 2020; N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; A. Keskin, August 3, 2021).

In addition to Turkey's rising influence in the region, the 44-Day War has increased Iran's archenemy Israel's positive perception in Azerbaijan as well (A.

Aslanli, personal communication, July 2, 2021; Shahin Jafarli, personal communication, July 3, 2021). The Israeli flag was waving in public places along with the Azerbaijani and Turkish ones during the war. Arthur Lenk (personal communication, July 12, 2021) relates it to the Islamic Republic's irresolute position during the war and Israel's commitment to its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. Admittedly, Israel was arming Azerbaijan, and its military technology, specifically drones, was being effectively used in the battlefield against Armenia (Melman, 2020; Kubovish, 2021). Hence, at the cost of military cooperation with Azerbaijan, Israel has gained a more positive image in this country than it had before. As discussed above, the empowerment of Israel's position in the South Caucasus – Iran's northern borders – is an alarming development for the Islamic Republic (S. Jafali, personal communication, July 2, 2021).

It should be noted that unlike Turkey's and Israel's positions, the Islamic Republic's actions were not perceived positively in Azerbaijan. This negative perception derived from certain instances related to the Islamic Republic's supposed support for Armenia. First, there were reports indicating that Iran was sending Russian military equipment to Armenia via its territory. Tehran has officially rejected this accusation ("Iran denies shipping," 2020), and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev also claimed that Iran has closed its territories for arms supplies to Armenia (A Haber, 2020). However, photos of trucks carrying military equipment taken at the Armenian-Iranian border circulated in social media. Zardusht Alizadeh (personal communication, July 2, 2021) believes that Iran was initially playing a transitory role, and it was transferring Russian weapons to Armenia because of Russian pressure. However, mass protests in Iranian Azerbaijan demanding to stop the aid eventually led to the closure of borders. Ahmad

Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021) asserts that the weapon delivery was continuing during nights for some time, but later it was completely stopped.

Second, the Islamic Republic's decision to deploy troops in the areas close to Azerbaijani border ("Iran troops deployed," 2020) amid the military actions engendered a perception indicating the Islamic Republic's dissatisfaction with the progress of the conflict. Journalist Shahin Jafarli (personal communication, July 3, 2021) believes that Ilham Aliyev's statement in which he said: "If there is foreign aggression, the aggressors will deal with Turkish F-16s", was a warning directed to Iran (Haber Global, 2020). Since Azerbaijan was the winning side, Tehran's suspicious moves cautioned the Azerbaijani political rulers and caused public irritation in Azerbaijan. Dr. Araz Aslanli and Dr. Nazim Jafarsoy argue that the reason for such policy was Iran's satisfaction with the pre-war status quo in Karabakh and its inability to change the course of the war for its own benefit (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 3, 2021). Consequently, Iran's stance lacked clearance and concreteness.

Third, Masiagha Mohammadi (personal communication, July 27, 2021) states many Iranian experts believe that the Islamic Republic should have had more active diplomatic role in this unexpected war. By sticking to diplomatic neutrality and issuing blurred statements, Iran could fulfill neither Azerbaijan's expectations nor Armenia's. The Islamic Republic stated that it supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity while also insisting that this conflict does not have military solution. However, Azerbaijanis were in an anticipation of Tehran's full support at least in a form of religious solidarity. For these reasons, it can be argued that the Second Karabakh War was a strategic failure on the part of Iran (M. Mohammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021), because the

war made Iran's opponents stronger and its attraction in Azerbaijan weaker. Dr. Zaur Gasimov (personal communication, July 24, 2021) argues that in the context of geopolitics, the Islamic Republic's only gain can be considered the US and French (Western powers) exclusion from the war and post-war peace settlement process. However, from the perspective of Iranian interests, to what extent Turkish and Israeli influence is more preferable in comparison to the one of French and US is also questionable.

The Second Karabakh War entails more developments which also oppose the Islamic Republic's interests in the region. One of them is the project known as the Zangezur corridor. The Russian brokered trilateral statement envisages to unblock transport communications between Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenian territory (President of Russia, 2020). It is important to note that Nakhchivan possesses short land border with Turkey, which means the corridor will establish a direct land route between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Since becoming independence, in order to reach Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan was obliged to use Iranian territory. By crossing Iran, Baku-Nakhchivan-Baku route operates through two checkpoints: Bilasuvar-Julfa and Astara-Julfa. Azerbaijan and Iran agreed to keep the checkpoints open round the clock in 2018 (The State Customs Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2018). It is also important to note that Nakhchivan's electricity, gas, and oil needs are also provided by the Islamic Republic (Lotfi et al., 2016). Ambassador Arthur Lenk (personal communication, July 7, 2021) considers that Azerbaijan's dependence on Iran over Nakhchivan has been giving the Islamic Republic an opportunity to put pressure on Azerbaijan by threatening to block the road (if necessary). Ambassador Nasib Nasibli (personal communication, July 12, 2021) and Elnur Kelbizadeh (personal

communication, July 22, 2021) argue that in case this corridor initiative is realized, Azerbaijan's dependence on Iran will considerably decrease. In its video report titled "Why the war in Karabakh was a failure for Iran", an Iranian government-linked news agency "Tasnim" also indicated that the Zangezur corridor poses numerous geopolitical threats for the Islamic Republic. Supposedly, the corridor will alleviate the transportation between Turkey, Azerbaijan and other Turkic Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan, which is undesirable for Iran (Tasnim New Agency, 2020).

The next development is an agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Turkey in the city of Shusha on June 15, 2021. The agreement is titled as "Shusha Declaration," which envisages to boost cooperation between the two countries not only in military and economic fields but also in the area of joint security between the two countries. According to the declaration, if there is any kind of threat to Azerbaijan and/or Turkey they "will hold joint consultations and, in order to eliminate this threat or acts of aggression" ("Shusha Declaration on," 2021). Ahmad Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021) argues that the Shusha Declaration, along with strengthening Turkish influence in Azerbaijan, will also restrict Iran's abilities to project hard power against Azerbaijan. For instance, if Iran decides to threaten Azerbaijan militarily, this initiative may lead to a confrontation with Turkey, which can be much more costly for Tehran. Thus, the declaration will play an important role for constraining Tehran.

Consequently, it can be argued that the new of balance of power in the region has shattered Iran's position in the region. The Islamic Republic's ability to dominate in the South Caucasus and pressurize Azerbaijan through hard power instruments have been reduced by factors which were mentioned above. Turkish-Russian military presence leaves no room for Iran's hard power projection against Azerbaijan. Hence, the Islamic

Republic possesses no instrument to influence the region but soft power (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021). However, the Second Karabakh War gave rise to other factors affecting Iranian soft power as well. One of the most considerable factors was the processes leading to socio-political tendencies in Iranian Azerbaijan.

6.2 Iranian Azerbaijan during and after the Second Karabakh War

Dr. Nazim Jafarsoy (personal communication, July 1, 2021) and Arif Keskin (personal communication, August 3, 2021) argue that before the war, the Iranian political establishment was mocking the unification of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijan by contending that the former is not even able to solve its prior problem – the Karabakh issue. The 44-Day War has become a counterargument to this thought, and inspired Iranian Azerbaijanis to a higher level of solidarity with the Republic of Azerbaijan (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; A. Keskin, personal communication, August 3, 2021). During the war, Iranian Azerbaijanis were actively defending Azerbaijan's cause in Iran. There were mass protests organized by Iranian Azerbaijani activists urging the Islamic Republic to cut the Russian military aid to Armenia and support Azerbaijan. Ahmad Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021) states that his own channel, "GunAz TV" was receiving lots of messages from Azerbaijanis of Iran containing photos of strategic locations in Armenian-controlled parts of Karabakh bordering Iran. The photos were intended to be sent to Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense in order assist it to better orientate its military strategy. Mr. Obali believes that Azerbaijan's military successes were causing great joy in Iranian Azerbaijan and a high sense of unity between the two Azerbaijani communities. This sense of unity was stemming from newly gained self-confidence in the power of

Republic of Azerbaijan. In the perception of Iranian Azerbaijanis, this war has proven that the Republic of Azerbaijan is a diplomatically and militarily powerful county, which has numerous powerful allies, such as Turkey and Israel, and capable armed forces (A. Obali, personal communication, July 17, 2021).

Arif Keskin argues that the Azerbaijani government has also realized the value and strategic importance of Iranian Azerbaijan. According to Keskin, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Khudaferin bridge – a bridge in previously occupied Jabrayil district connecting Azerbaijan and Iran's provinces, inhabited by Iranian Azerbaijanis – was a message of solidarity to Iranian Azerbaijanis ("President Ilham Aliyev and," 2020). As a result of the Second Karabakh War, Iranian Azerbaijan's importance to the Republic of Azerbaijan has increased. Certainly, the Iranian side did not appreciate this solidarity, as can be seen in insertion of Iranian flag and the portrait of the Islamic Republics' founder Ruhollah Khomeini on the Iranian side of the Iran-Azerbaijan border (Arif Keskin, personal communication, August 3, 2021). Ahmad Obali (personal communication, July 17, 2021) is confident that the war has significantly empowered Iranian Azerbaijanis consciousness about their ethnic identity that has always been perceived as a worse-case scenario for Iran. The Islamic Republic's long-term policy of prioritizing religious identity over ethnic identity among both Azerbaijani communities – in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan – has thus been damaged to a serious extent. Obviously, this development along with geopolitical transformation of the region will have a negative impact on the effectiveness and policy discourse of Iran's soft power in Azerbaijan. It is important to analyze what kind of impact is present and where it may lead to.

6.3 The prospects of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan

Iran's soft power – both religious and non-religious – has been affected by the new balance of power in the South Caucasus as a result of the Second Karabakh War. Masiagha Mohammadi (personal communication, July 27, 2021) argues that Iran's soft power and its abilities to project it onto Azerbaijan have considerably waned. There has not been a single new event that would be linked to the Islamic Republic's soft power in action in Azerbaijan since then. Iran's regional rivals, such as Turkey and Israel have increased their prestige in Azerbaijan while Iran has been perceived as a pro-Armenian country by the Azerbaijani public (M. Mohammadi, personal communication, July 27, 2021; A. Keskin, personal communication, August 3, 2021). Moreover, the influence of Iran's religious soft power aiming to weaken national identity to the advantage of religious identity has turned out to be significantly overrated, that can be exemplified by the unity of almost all segments of Azerbaijani population during the 44-Day War. There were no internal disagreements between religious and other segments of the Azerbaijani population during the war. Consequently, the war has even prioritized national – Azerbaijani – identity of Azerbaijanis of all ethnicities in the Republic of Azerbaijan and even Iran's Azerbaijani community (E. Kelbizadeh, personal communication, July 22, 2021). Azerbaijan has become a harder target for the Iranian soft power projection. In sum, the experts agree that the Second Karabakh War has been harmful and engendered numerous limitations for Iran's soft power projection in Azerbaijan.

It is argued that Iran will spend more efforts to compensate for its damaged prestige during the war (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 2, 2021). The Islamic Republic is aware that the current

situation and the new status quo in the region do not serve its best interests. Arif Keskin (personal communication, August 3, 2021) believes that the war, the overestimation of its soft power in Azerbaijan, and the current situation in the region were so unexpected that the Iranian political elites still do not have a concrete strategy for their counteractive policy. Masiagha Mahammadi (personal communication, July 27, 2021) goes so far as to state that the achievements of Iran's soft power policy in Azerbaijan have been nullified by their undecisive policy during the war and there is no clear way how to restore this damage and proceed further. On the other hand, Zaur Gasimov (personal communication, July 24, 2021) believes that Iran will continue working with Shia communities in Azerbaijan and focus mostly on its religious soft power again. Nazim Jafarsoy (personal communication, July 1, 2021) and Araz Aslanli (personal communication, July 2, 2021) hold the view that the Islamic Republic may construct a new soft power policy as well. Arguably, the new policy will be related to the Karabakh issue which is a sensitive one for the Azerbaijani people. The first example of such soft power policy is Iran's special attention to Azerbaijani martyrs. The Islamic Republic wanted to assure the Azerbaijani public that the fallen Azerbaijani soldiers were strong believers in Shia Islam. Pro-Iranian social media pages in Azerbaijan shared numerous photos and videos of Azerbaijani soldiers praising Imam Hussain and Imam Ali, and holding their symbols. By doing so, the Islamic Republic aims to associate the Karabakh issue with a religious cause and instead of a national one (A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 2, 2021).

Another case indicating Iran's intention to promote Shiism via Karabakh-related issues was its attention to Major General Polad Hashimov's memory. Polad Hashimov, who was killed during the skirmishes at Armenian-Azerbaijani the border on July of

2021, is seen (and officially is) as a national hero by the Azerbaijani people. On April 29, 2021, the Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan visited Polad Hashimov's house, met his family members, and granted the medal of Qassem Souleimani to the Hashimov family ("İran səfiri şəhid," 2021). Aslanli and Jafarsoy interpret this move as an example of Iran's new soft power policy direction. They believe that the narratives about Iran's support for Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War will increase in volume and the Islamic Republic will actively get engaged in the restoration of Karabakh's infrastructure to improve its image (N. Jafarsoy, personal communication, July 1, 2021; A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 2, 2021).

Nasib Nasibli asserts that due to the change in the balance of power between Azerbaijan and Iran, as a result of which the former gained an upper hand, the official rhetoric of the latter will soften. Ambassador Nasibli is certain that while Iran will have to change its tactic and be more polite with Azerbaijan, its policy toward Iranian Azerbaijanis will get tougher as they were an important factor constraining Iran from maintaining a desirable status quo and implementing resolute policies toward Azerbaijan (N. Nasibli, personal communication, July 17, 2021). Moreover, the empowerment of national – Azerbaijani – identity among Iranian Azerbaijanis created an opportunity for the Republic of Azerbaijan to utilize its own soft power against Iran as a counterweight to the latter's religious soft power. In other words, if there is a Shia community in Azerbaijan, which can cooperate with Iran, there is also an Azerbaijani community in Iran, which can neutralize Iranian soft power. Although it is improbable that Azerbaijan will try to provoke Iranian Azerbaijanis, because it does not want to make its relations with Iran strained. However, other countries, such as Turkey and Israel may take this

opportunity and to play with the idea of instrumentalizing Iranian Azerbaijani nationalism to keep Iran in check (A. Aslanli, personal communication, July 2, 2021).

Currently, it can be argued that the Islamic Republic's soft power abilities in Azerbaijan are in crisis. However, as it was previously discussed, Azerbaijan is extremely important for Iran. The Islamic Republic can widen its sphere of influence through Azerbaijan, yet get threatened by merely its existence under the name "Azerbaijan." Thus, Iran is not going to leave this region and will certainly continue outlining policies to keep its influence in here. Soft power remains the most effective way of doing so, according to interviewed experts. By choosing the Karabakh issue as the new tool for its soft power, the Islamic Republic will probably keep projecting religious soft power onto the Azerbaijani Shia community and seek new soft power policies.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a more powerful state than Azerbaijan in terms of military, economic and demographic resources. Generally, the equilibrium of power will remain favoring Iran for long time. Zardusht Alizadeh (personal communication, July 2, 2021) states that even in terms of ideology, Iran's Shia Islam is much more powerful than the autocratic secularism of Azerbaijan. However, the new regional balance of power by which Turkey and Israel have become more powerful actors, has restricted Iran's ability for hard power maneuvers. Eventually, Iranian hard power which had no great perspectives earlier either, has become a practically useless tool against Azerbaijan. At the same time, Iran's soft power has been weakened mostly by the emergence of a new sense unity between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijan as a result of the Second Karabakh War. Consequently, the power equilibrium in Azerbaijan-Iran relations has bent down toward Azerbaijan.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This thesis examines Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan and the impact of the Second Karabakh on Iran's soft power in the context of Azerbaijan-Iran relations. First of all, it was established that Iran's Azerbaijan policy is primarily based on pragmatic calculations, despite a strong emphasis on the factor of religion. Azerbaijan is the source of various threat perceptions for Iran and the only way for the Islamic Republic to counter them is to gain leverage against Azerbaijan. Iran has limited abilities to utilize hard power in relation to Azerbaijan due to factors such as Turkish, Russian, and Western influence in the South Caucasus. Moreover, it would be hard for Tehran to afford a direct military attack against another country with a majority Muslim population, especially a Shia one. In case of an attack, Tehran's self-declared status as the defender of Muslims could be damaged and endangered. Furthermore, ethnic Azerbaijanis inhabiting Iran may confront the government if the latter decides to treat the Republic of Azerbaijan with hostility.

Accordingly, the use of soft power is more beneficial for Tehran, considering the religious, historical, and cultural commonalities Iran and Azerbaijan share. Iran has two main objectives in projecting soft power onto Azerbaijan, the first of which is a long-term goal to raise and empower the religious awareness of the Azerbaijani population. Special focus of this goal is attenuate Azerbaijanis' inclination toward national identity and empower their Shiite self-identification. In the future, the successful implementation of this goal can create more opportunities for Tehran to cooperate with Shia communities in Azerbaijan. The second objective is to maintain its influence on certain

marginal groups and segments of Azerbaijanis in order to exert domestic influence on the Azerbaijani government. Thus, soft power policy toward Azerbaijan is favorable for Iran both in the long and short terms.

While this thesis analyzed both religious and non-religious soft power, it is clearly established that religious soft power is preferred by Tehran. As mentioned in Chapter 2, religion is a major force that can be instrumentalized to influence public opinion. In the case of Azerbaijan, if non-religious soft power is projected through already existing factors such as culture, medicine, and mostly non-tangible instruments, religious soft power policy is being outlined and implemented via investments involving major financial and human resources. These resources are agents of different levels, such as marjas and mullahs; places and events entailing major gatherings, such as mosques, commemorations, pilgrimages, etc. Certainly, religious soft power is utilized by Iranian policymakers to a greater extent than non-religious forms of soft power which was an expectation since the beginning of the research.

It needs to be noted that Iranian soft power in all of its forms face limitations. For example, relatively major part of Azerbaijanis does not consider religion important, which decreases the probability of being affected by it while making political choices. Moreover, there is a general perception of IRI as “an Armenian ally” during the First Karabakh War among the Azerbaijani population, which causes significant damage to Iran’s attempts to produce attraction for itself. Although Tehran tries counter this perception through narratives about “Iranian aid to Azerbaijan,” its prospects for success do not seem great. It can be argued that the same perception is putting roots in Azerbaijanis’ minds about Iran’s behavior during the Second Karabakh War, too. Furthermore, another important limitation is the policies undertaken by the Azerbaijani

government to put restrictions, such as the removal of Iranian-trained preachers from mosques. In sum, the limits of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan include both a priori and government-imposed factors.

Finally, Chapter 6 discussed how the Iranian soft power was affected by Second Karabakh War. The anticipation was that Iran experienced geopolitical weakening in power relations with Azerbaijan due to the latter's gains. This hypothesis was confirmed by the research. First, Iran's regional opponents have strengthened their military presence and prestige. Second, Azerbaijan's alliance with Turkey rose to a new level. Third, Azerbaijan received unprecedented support from Iranian Azerbaijani activists during the war. It was hypothesized that Iran will use its soft power more actively to counter its losses in the power balance with Azerbaijan. However, unexpected findings suggest that Iran's soft power did not ramp up either. The thesis presents expert views which almost unanimously argue that Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan has waned since the war. Generally, some reasons for that were the absence of concrete diplomatic support to Azerbaijan, statements about Tehran's aid to Armenia, and the embracement of Azerbaijani identity by the people of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijanis.

Undoubtedly, the Islamic Republic will continue projecting soft power onto Shia communities in Azerbaijan; however, it will not only be restoration power balance in relations with Azerbaijan but also new policies to empower its exhausted soft power potential. Such policies can take the form of participation in the reconstruction process of Karabakh's infrastructure and generation of more narratives about "Iranian aid to Azerbaijan" during both Karabakh wars. Apparently, special attention to martyrs, their religiousness and families are reflections of IRI's new policy to restore its soft power

influence and renovate its strategies. In terms of material resources, Iran is still more powerful than Azerbaijan. However, the power equilibrium has changed in Azerbaijan's favor causing Iran's soft and hard power maneuvers to become more limited.

It must be noted that the relations between Azerbaijan and Iran are complex and soft power is only one dimension of them. Certainly, Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan can fully explain neither the whole Iranian policy toward Azerbaijan, nor Azerbaijan-Iran relations, but it does reveal an important aspect of it, which is the contribution of this thesis. This study aimed to discover covert elements of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan and link these elements to the Second Karabakh War, thereby making a contribution to the efforts of those interested in studying Azerbaijan-Iran relations. Thus, it is recommended to take into consideration Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan while analyzing the relationship between the two countries by focusing on factors, such as Shia Islam, Iranian Azerbaijanis, the two Karabakh wars, and Azerbaijan's relations with Turkey, Israel and Russia.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

- Dr. Nazim Jafarsoy – Associate Professor at Azerbaijan State University of Economics.
- Mr. Zardusht Alizadeh – policy analyst, former politician and one of the founders of Popular Front of Azerbaijan (political party).
- Dr. Araz Aslanli – chairman and founder of Caucasian Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies.
- Mr. Shahin Jafarli – journalist and contributor to Baku Research Institute.
- Mr. Arthur Lenk – former Ambassador of Israel to Azerbaijan (2005-2009).
- Prof. Dr. Nasib Nasibli – former Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Islamic Republic of Iran (1992-1994) and former MP of Azerbaijan (2005-2010).
- Mr. Ahmad Obali – Iranian Azerbaijani political activist, and founder and owner of “GunAz TV” channel.
- Dr. Elnur Kelbizadeh – researcher at Azerbaijan National Academy of Science and former employee of State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan.
- Dr. Zaur Gasimov – researcher at the Department for Eastern European History, Institute for History of the University of Bonn.
- Dr. Masiagha Mahammadi – senior advisor on Iran’s domestic and foreign policy, and Azerbaijan-Iran relations at the Center of Analysis of International Relations.
- Dr. Arif Keskin – researcher, specialized in Iran’s foreign and domestic policy.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLES OF QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

1. What are the elements and components of Iranian soft power in Azerbaijan? How does IRI project soft power in Azerbaijan?
2. What role does/did religion (Shia Islam) play in Iran's soft power overtures in Azerbaijan?
3. What kind of aims does Iran pursue by projecting its soft power in Azerbaijan and what it has already achieved or could not achieve?
4. Can you name cases directly or indirectly reflecting Iran's soft power maneuvers in Azerbaijan?
5. How would you categorize Iran's soft power policies in Azerbaijan in accordance with instrumentalization and timing? (Which methods Iran uses(d)? Can its soft power projection be split into specific time periods?)
6. Do you think Iran may change its soft power policies in Azerbaijan in post-war (after the Second Karabakh War) period? If yes, what kind of alterations do you already see or/and expect to see?

APPENDIX C

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Evrak Tarih ve Sayısı: 25.06.2021-18914

T.C.
BOĞAZİÇİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL VE BEŞERİ BİLİMLER YÜKSEK LİSANS VE DOKTORA TEZLERİ ETİK İNCELEME
KOMİSYONU
TOPLANTI TUTANAĞI

Toplantı Sayısı : 18
Toplantı Tarihi : 17.06.2021
Toplantı Saati : 13:00
Toplantı Yeri : Zoom Sanal Toplantı
Bulunanlar : Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Yasemin Sohtorik İlkmen, Prof. Dr. Ebru Kaya, Prof. Dr. Fatma Nevra Seggie
Bulunmayanlar :

Anar İmanzade

Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler

Sayın Araştırmacı,
"Iranian Soft Power in Azerbaijan and the Second Karabakh War" başlıklı projeniz ile ilgili olarak yaptığınız SBB-EAK 2021/40 sayılı başvuru komisyonumuz tarafından 17 Haziran 2021 tarihli toplantıda incelenmiş ve uygun bulunmuştur.

Bu karar tüm üyelerin toplantıya çevrimiçi olarak katılımı ve oybirliği ile alınmıştır. COVID-19 önlemleri kapsamında kurul üyelerinden ıslak imza alınamadığı için bu onay mektubu üye ve raportör olarak Ebru Kaya tarafından bütün üyeler adına e-imzalanmıştır.

Saygılarımızla, bilgilerinizi rica ederiz.

Prof. Dr. Ebru KAYA
ÜYE

e-imzalıdır
Prof. Dr. Ebru KAYA
Raportör

SOBETİK 18 17.06.2021

Bu belge 5070 sayılı Elektronik İmza Kanununun 5. Maddesi gereğince güvenli elektronik imza ile imzalanmıştır.

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