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## Science Diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the South Caucasus\*

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### Abstract

Science diplomacy is a concept that has attracted much attention in twenty-first century more than ever before and the need for understanding it is growing. Because of many factors, the South Caucasus is an important region for Iran, including its geographical proximity and historical ties. The region is located between Iran, Russia and Turkey and Iran is the only country that has official political relations with all these states, but this does not mean that relations between Iran and the above-mentioned countries are in a favorable position. Considering the capacities for using science diplomacy in relations between Iran and the South Caucasus States, understanding an assessment of Iran's performance in this field is essential. This paper mainly seeks to examine the opportunities and challenges of applying science diplomacy as a tool in Iran's relations with South Caucasus countries and also tries to examine the roles of other foreign players in the field of science diplomacy in the region.

### Keywords

Iran, Science Diplomacy, South Caucasus, Republic of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia

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## **Introduction**

Considering the importance of science diplomacy in today's world as well as the position of the South Caucasus in Iran's foreign policy, this article attempts to study the approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards this branch of diplomacy specifically in the framework of Iran's relations with the South Caucasus independent states. In the first part of this paper, the concept of science diplomacy and its position in the field of international relations has been examined. The main question of the paper is about the opportunities and challenges for Iran in using science diplomacy as a tool in its relations with the countries of the South Caucasus, and the steps which have been taken by Iran in this region in the field of science diplomacy. The sub-questions of this paper are:

- How Iran's science diplomacy in its relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan has been shaped and what is its current status?
- How Iran's science diplomacy in its relations with Georgia has been shaped and what is its current status?
- How Iran's science diplomacy in its relations with Armenia has been shaped and what is its current status?

In order to answer the above questions, a brief overview of the relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran with each of South Caucasus countries is presented, and in the context of relations between Iran and each of these countries, science diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards each of them is studied. Meanwhile, the activities of Iran's rivals in the field of science diplomacy in the south Caucasus are examined.

## **Science Diplomacy**

Science diplomacy is a concept that has been raised much attention, more than ever, in the twenty-first century due to great advances in all fields of science and technology. Science diplomacy is the use of scientific interactions among nations to address the common problems facing humanity and to build constructive, knowledge-based international partnerships. (AAAS, 2010, 13) Science diplomacy is not new, but it has never been more important and its

importance will be growing. Many of the defining challenges of the 21st century—from climate change and food security, to poverty reduction and nuclear disarmament—have scientific dimensions. The tools, techniques, and tactics of foreign policy need to adapt to a world of increasing scientific and technical complexity. (AAAS, 2010, 5)

Drawing on historical and contemporary examples, science can contribute to foreign policy objectives in three dimensions:

- informing foreign policy objectives with scientific advice (science in diplomacy);
- facilitating international science cooperation (diplomacy for science);
- using science cooperation to improve international relations between countries (science for diplomacy) (AAAS, 2010, 5-6).

The above dimensions could be addressed as a level of practice of science diplomacy which has to do with visible interactions between issues of science and issues of diplomacy. The second level is the practice of research actors on the global level stage when such practice contributes to expressing the soft power of science. The second level is the one where the internationalization of research comes into the picture, in a diffuse but real manner, into the broad field of the diplomacy of influence. It should not be confused with international cooperation: as noted by Daryl Copeland, “by virtue of its direct relationship to government interests and objectives, science diplomacy differs from international scientific cooperation, which is sometimes commercially oriented and often without state participation” (Ruffini, 2017, 16).

Ruffini proposes a definition of science diplomacy of a country as: at the intersection of science and foreign policy, a country's science diplomacy refers to all practices in which actions of researchers and of diplomats interact. These practices may be directly related to the interests of governments: this the case when diplomats promote cooperation between scientists from different countries, whereas conversely international scientific relations facilitate the exercise of diplomacy or play an Avant – grade role for it, and finally when scientific expertise helps governments and their diplomats to prepare and

conduct international negotiations (Ruffini, 2017, 16). Science diplomacy is an efficient approach to build trust and bringing states closer, especially with hostile political cultures or political systems.

### **Iran and the South Caucasus Countries**

The South Caucasus, including the Republic of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, is an important region for Iran because of its geographical proximity and common history. Some of the important factors that raised the attention of Iran to this region are: Hostility of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan relations and the potential of instability in the region, West and especially United States efforts to expand their presence and influence in these countries, high sensitivity of Russia towards this region as a part of its 'Near Abroad', Turkey's efforts to deepen its influence in the region, approach of Republic of Azerbaijan as one of the Caspian Sea countries towards legal regime and political issues of the Sea, the potential of the Caucasus for connecting Iran to Europe, the interconnecting location of the South Caucasus between Iran and Russia in North-South Corridor, linguistic and ethnic links of the region with Iran and environmental problems.

Review of the foreign policy of Iran in the last quarter century shows that the countries of the South Caucasus have not found a proper place in the agenda of Iran's foreign policy in comparison with other neighboring regions. In general, Iran's activism in Caucasian relations has been concise. "Iran sees instability in the south Caucasus as a threat to its national security. Hence, it has tried to play a key role in consolidating regional stability and security through mediatory plans as exemplified by Iran's effort to resolve the Karabakh crisis" (Koolaei & Hafezian, 2010, 392). During the August 2008 war, Iran's activities were toward settling peace and after cease-fire, Iran emphasized on pursuing political talks between Russia and Georgia and avoiding war and conflict. The destiny of the Tehran Communiqué<sup>1</sup> is an obvious example of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Tehran Communiqué, also known as the Joint statement of the heads of state in Tehran is the joint communiqué mediated by Iranian President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and signed by the acting President of Republic of Azerbaijan, Yagub Mammadov and President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrossian

intents which do not welcome Iran's active role in crucial issues of the Caucasus, but this does not mean that all failures of Iran's foreign policy in the Caucasus have been due to the suppression of some regional and trans-regional powers. Undoubtedly the Caucasus was not a priority for Iran foreign diplomacy and the lack of concentration towards this region from Tehran was a basic cause of Iran's frustrations in the Caucasus. "The presence of Iran in the South Caucasus was generally limited. Except for the Armenia, where Tehran has close ties with it, relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia are far from ideal. While the capacity to expand relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan is significant" (Atai, 2013, 133-134) Relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan have grown after Hassan Rouhani's presidency, especially in the field of trade and transit.

### **South Caucasus Countries and the field of Science and Technology**

One the problems of the newly independent countries by the collapse of the Soviet Union including South Caucasus Republics was the backwardness in advanced science and technology in many areas as well as the lack of skilled labor forces and experts. On the other hand, some technical and basic sciences and some branches of humanities and art in these republics have a high level). In some cases, these countries have received support, especially from some Western powers. Such as the support provided by a number of Western countries to prevent the migration of scientific elites of Commonwealth of Independent States to some of their neighboring countries), for example from Armenia to the conflicting states of the aforementioned powers (Harutyunyan, 2017). Factors such as the geographical proximity and cultural affinities of these countries with Iran have created significant opportunities for science diplomacy of Iran, a tool in foreign policy which has been underestimated by Iran in this region.

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on May 7, 1992 with an intention to end the four-year-long hostilities between Armenia and Republic of Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Abasov, Ali; Khachaturian, Haroutiun, 2006, 90).

## **Iran - Republic of Azerbaijan Relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union**

Since the presidency of Heydar Aliyev, his foreign policy approach has been cautious in dealing with its powerful neighbors. To balance the foreign policy and balancing between the West, Russia, Turkey, and Iran has been a permanent priority for this country. From the viewpoint of this country's authority "Balanced Foreign Policy" is the only way for Baku to maintain its independence and sovereignty in a situation that geography has imposed on it. However, there have been some difficulties in the relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan (Alili, 2015, 2).

One of the most important issues in the Republic of Azerbaijan, especially in the field of foreign policy, has been the Nagorno - Karabakh war. During this war, Tehran succeeded in activating the shuttle diplomacy and using its good relations with the two sides of the conflict to make peace. But it was still a few hours since the signing of the agreement that the peaceful settlement was canceled by the Armenian forces attacking the city of Shusha (Yunanesian, 2017, 277). Not only the Tehran Communiqué has abandoned, but the shaky political power in the Republic of Azerbaijan has undergone another transformation.

The influence of the third parties on the relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan has repeatedly left negative consequences for the interests of Iran. Preventing the membership of Iranian companies in the consortium formed following the signing of Production Sharing Agreement on Republic of Azerbaijan oil sector known as "Contract of the Century" due to US pressure, Russia's agreement with the Republic of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan on the de facto division of the northern part of the Caspian Sea are examples of the adverse impact of the so-called third parties (Koolae and Alizadeh, 2017, 182). Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan relations have always been influenced by the strategic relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the United States, Turkey, and Israel, as well as two country's dispute over the legal regime of the Caspian Sea. Even linguistic and cultural links that are not intrinsically negative have been turned to negative factors in

the relations of two countries. In the government of Hassan Rouhani, there have been significant efforts to promote relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan.

### **Science Diplomacy and Iran – Republic of Azerbaijan Relations**

Scientific cooperation between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, despite the proper capacities and both countries' need to expand these relations, has not been sufficiently thriving. Of course, since the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, some efforts have been made in this direction and agreements were reached. A large number of cooperative agreements between universities and higher education institutions of Iran and Republic of Azerbaijan have been signed, and some universities of the two countries are also members of same transnational unions. For example, most of the universities in the Republic of Azerbaijan (23 universities) and 11 Iranian universities such as Allameh Tabataba'i University, Al-Zahra University, Tabriz University, Sahand Technical University, Mohaghegh Ardebili University, Marand Azad University, are members of the Union of Caucasian Universities.

In 1996, the Iranian room at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the State University of Baku was established, with the aim of expanding the academic and cultural relations between the higher education institutions of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as supporting the Persian language education centers of Republic of Azerbaijan. In November 1996, 22 Azerbaijani students were sent to Iran to study at Imam Khomeini International University in Qazvin, to study in the fields of literature, theology, medicine and law (Koolae, 2010, 95). A cultural agreement was signed by the two sides during President Khatami's visit to the Republic of Azerbaijan according to which both sides agreed to hold cultural weeks, cultural exchanges including books and films, Persian language classes and the exchange of professors and students. (Koolae and Hafezian, 2010, 403) In the field of medical science also two countries have a memorandum of cooperation which has been signed

between Tehran University of Medical Sciences and Azerbaijan Medical University (Qafqaz News and Analytical Website, 2013).

The Islamic Republic of Iran has announced its readiness to expand cooperation with the Republic of Azerbaijan in various fields, including establishment of science and technology parks in the Republic of Azerbaijan (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2017) In education sector representation of Almustafa international university in Republic of Azerbaijan, in recent years, has supported 7 schools in 6 cities of the Republic of Azerbaijan with some tuition programs and has reached the principled agreement for the establishing 7 schools and gained support for establishment of Imam Zaman seminary. This university informed Republic of Azerbaijan authority about its readiness to conduct short courses for professors and do it best to promote the educational level of Islamic seminaries of this country. Also, this representation has succeeded to introduce textbooks for the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Quran, hadith, jurisprudence, beliefs and Islamic ethics, as well as obtaining a print permit from the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The representation of Almustafa University in the Republic of Azerbaijan has also been active in the field of educational affairs inside the regulations and laws of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Almustafa International University, 2014).

While in Iran, the market of institutions for sending students to CIS, including the Republic of Azerbaijan is thriving, but Iran has not become an attractive destination for students from the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran's academic status and the capacities of its universities has not been properly introduced to the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Based on data from the ministry of science, research and technology of Iran, in 2016-2017 academic year Only 64 students from the Republic of Azerbaijan have been studying in Iran. It is obvious that the number is very small, on the other hand, as it has been mentioned the number of Iranian students in the Republic of Azerbaijan is notable. For example, Mohammad Baqer Bahrami, Iranian foremost ambassador in Baku (2009-2012) says, in 2012 there were around 2700 Iranian students in the Republic of Azerbaijan (Bahrami, 2016). In 2015-



2016 academic year more than 268 Iranian students were studying in Azerbaijan Medical University (Irna.ir, 2015), this number will be more meaningful when it be noted that the ministry of Health and Medical Education of Iran is not accrediting the degrees issued by medical universities of Republic of Azerbaijan as like as many other universities in neighboring countries and others. It should be noted that the only university of the Republic of Azerbaijan which its worldwide ranking is under 5000 is Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. There are 2 other universities which their ranks are between 5000 and 10000, and the ranking of Azerbaijan Medical University is 10010. The Ranking of 8 universities of Iran are under 1000 and the ranking of 135 universities of Iran are under 5000 and the ranking of 212 Iranian universities are under 10000, and the ranking of Tehran University of Medical Sciences is 566 (webometrics, 2018).

Considering the existing realities, such as the differences in lifestyle in the post-Soviet republics with Iran, Iran's lack of a coherent strategy and program to attract foreign students and lack of wide tendency between youth of Republic of Azerbaijan to continue their education in Iran due to various reasons, it does not seem that Iran can easily or in short term period turn to a destination for numerous students of Republic of Azerbaijan. It should also be noted that affairs related to student education and student communication are only one part of science diplomacy and science diplomacy should not be reduced to this issue.

### **The rivals' activities in the Republic of Azerbaijan**

Iran has strong rivals in the field of science diplomacy in CIS especially in its neighboring region, the South Caucasus, including the Republic of Azerbaijan. Rivals which each of them have specific plans and programs in their science diplomacy approach. Russia, who played a key role in introducing the new educational system and establishing universities in the Republic of Azerbaijan with two centuries of domination over the Caucasus and its language turned to the second language of people of the Republic of

Azerbaijan, still is an important actor. There are a large number of Russian higher education institutions in Baku which including branches of 5 Russian Universities (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2018). Russia hopes to enhance its cooperation in social and educational fields at the bilateral and regional levels with the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The United States as one of the leading countries in the field of soft power and diplomacy has also been a prominent actor in the former Soviet Union republics, including in the Republic of Azerbaijan. One example is American corners under supervision of US embassy: The American Corner Program, which includes a flagship Baku American Center at the Azerbaijan University of Languages and regional 'American Corners' in Ganja, Kurdemir, Khachmaz, and Salyan is an excellent resource for Azerbaijanis looking to improve their English, access information about the United States (U.S. Embassy, Baku, 2017). The American University of Baku was established in January 1995 as a collaborative effort of the Azerbaijan-America Society and the Texas International Education Consortium (TIEC) (American University of Baku, 1997).

One of the active regional powers in the South Caucasus is Turkey. Turkey's restrictions in hard power and security issues have pushed the country into efforts to use soft power in the region. (Jackson, 2011, 89) The goal of Turkish politicians who began and developed Turkish educational activities in the Turkic speaking Republics was to nurture a new generation that would familiar with Turkish culture and interested in the Turkish language to pave the way to bring these countries closer to Turkey. Educational co-operation between Turkey and the Turkic speaking countries began in two ways through the provision of scholarships for students to study in Turkey. Student scholarships began to be covered under the "Great Student Exchange Project" (Akcali & Demir, 2012, 12-13). In addition to student enrollment, Turkey hosted numerous programs and seminars for training the diplomats, bureaucrats, officials, and bankers from Turkic Speaking Republics (Akcali & Demir, 2012, 13-15). In fact, the Republic of Azerbaijan is at the top of the list of countries which their citizens go to Turkey to continue their study (Study in

Turkey, 2016). After the coup of 15 July 2016, Baku joined the Turkish government in suppressing Gülen's supporters and closing educational institutions affiliated with the movement. (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2016). Prior to the serious discrepancies between the Turkish government and Fethullah Gulen, Gulen's educational institutions were considered as one of the capable instruments of Turkey's soft power in foreign countries, especially in neighboring regions including the Caucasus.

In recent years, Israeli authorities have been considered science diplomacy as a capable tool to achieve their goals in foreign policy. On the other hand, Republic of Azerbaijan also is saying welcome to enhance its relations with Israel, especially in high technology, agriculture knowledge and technology, communications and computer technology which are related with science diplomacy (Musayev & Gut, 2017).) Cooperation with Israel for Baku has made it possible to acquire and purchase new military technologies. It should be noted that for various reasons, including sanctions which have been targeted this country as a result of Nagorno Karabakh war, to prepare those technologies and weaponries from Western countries is difficult for the Republic of Azerbaijan (Souleimanov, Ehrmann & Aliyev, 2014, 478-480).

In the EU's view, helping to reform the educational system of the Republic of Azerbaijan in order to bring it into line with the standards of this union and to support student exchange programs could play a major role to prepare the context for democratic development, stability and economic competitiveness in the country. Therefore, EU countries offer many opportunities for participation of citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan in programs such as Erasmus Mundus (European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument, 2013, 23).

The Role of some Arab States of the Persian Gulf in supporting Salafism in the Republic of Azerbaijan is also could be considered as their using of soft power via their religious activities which could be included inside their science diplomacy. By 2003, 65 new Salafi-controlled mosques had been established in the Republic of Azerbaijan. One of the largest Salafi mosques in the country is the Abu Bakr mosque. Built-in 1997 in Baku by the Azeri branch of the

Kuwaiti Society Revival of Islamic Heritage, Abu Bakr became one of the most successful mosques in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Imam of the Abu Bakr mosque is a graduated from a leading center for the study and export of Salafism (Valiyev, 2005, Pages 8-9). There are reports that, in the 1990s, several northern Azerbaijani towns were converted to Salafism by Saudi organizations. One such organization was the Salafi Congregation, heavily sponsored by Saudis and other [Persian] Gulf States citizens. This congregation continues to have great influence in northern Azerbaijan, especially among the Sunni minorities (Souleimanov & Ehrmann, 2013, 114). In recent years, following the presence of a number of Azerbaijani citizens in the Takfiri militant groups in Syria and Iraq, the authority of the Republic of Azerbaijan has taken some new measures to restrict Salafist propaganda activities in the country.

### **Iran - Armenia Relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union**

Based on usual expression of Iranian and Armenian officials, the relations between two countries have always been considered friendly, credible, and promising (Shargh Daily, 2017, 1 and 6), which, of course, were not limited to diplomatic compliments and relied on a number of experiences and realities in relations between the two countries. Iran has established friendly relations with Armenia. In fact, Armenia is the only country among the Iranian neighbors, with which Iran has close ties and relations. Despite having close relations with the United States and European countries, Armenia has refused to vote against Iran in international organizations and has not approved the sanctions imposed on Iran over the nuclear issue (Atai, 2013, 120).

Iranian–Armenian economic relations took shape in the four areas of gas, electricity, trade, and industry. A small part of Iran exports to Armenia is oil products but on the other hand, Iran's gas exports to Armenia represent the main axis of bilateral economic ties, which is of strategic importance. That is because this provides Armenia's energy security. The pipeline diameter is 700 millimeters (28 in). The initial capacity of the pipeline is 1.1 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas per year, which will be increased up to 2.3 bcm by 2019. The contract

was signed for 20 years. For each cubic meter of the Iranian gas, Armenia is supposed to return 3 kwh of electric energy to Iran (Socor, 2009). The project for construction of the gas pipeline makes Armenia an electricity exporter in the Caucasus region and could lead to enhance energy security for Armenia and supports its economic growth. Iranian–Armenian cooperation on electricity supplies can be categorized into two areas: the creation of power plants and Iran–Armenia–Georgia trilateral cooperation. According to the Armenian Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, a 400/500 kilovolt (kV) power transmission line between Armenia and Georgia, and a 400 kV power transmission line between Armenia and Iran will start operating in 2018<sup>1</sup>(Grigoryan, 2016). By the starts of Iran's third high-voltage power line, it will be resulted to tripling the gas imports of and electricity exports by the Armenian side (Manvelyan, 2017). Officials and experts believe that hydropower is a sector with great potential for growth. The groundbreaking for a hydropower plant on the Aras River, which flows along the Iranian-Armenian border, took place in 2012, but the freezing of Iran's international financial assets stopped further work (Abrahamyan, 2016). Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, during his visit to Armenia, emphasized the construction of joint Hydraulic power plants (Energy News Agency, 2014). Hayk Harutyunyan, Armenian deputy energy infrastructures, and natural resources minister, said that Armenian and Iran are looking for a new investor for the construction of the plant (Arka News Agency, 2018).

Armenia, as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), enjoys tariff-free exports to the EAEU markets. Simultaneously, Armenia has access to the EU GSP+ system and is able to export goods categorized under 6,400 tariff lines to the EU with zero or reduced tariff (Poghosyan, 2017). It seems those

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<sup>1</sup> Armenia is giving a new boost to the works of laying a new high-voltage power transmission line network between Armenia and Iran, the former Soviet Country's Ministry of Energy Infrastructures and Natural Resources announced on Friday June 22, 2018. Construction works for the 279 kilometers-long 400 kv air power transmission line from Gegharkunik region of Armenia till Iranian side have now fully resumed with Iranian SUNIR company as the main contract. The project is estimated to cost 107.9 million Euros. The project is implemented within the scope of the Armenia-Iran agreement on exchanging natural gas for electricity (Xinhua, 2018).

characteristics have raised Iran's interest to enhance its economic cooperation with Armenia. On December 15, 2017, the Meghri Free Economic Zone (FEZ) was officially launched in Syunik region of Armenia, near the Armenia - Iran border. The Prime Minister of Armenia Karen Karapetyan, Minister of Economic Development and Investments, Suren Karayan, Artashes Tumanyan, Armenian Ambassador to Iran, Seyed Kazem Sajjadi, Iranian Ambassador to Armenia, Davoud Garshasbi, Governor of Julfa and delegation from Aras Free Economic Zone, participated in the ceremony (Poghosyan, 2017). It should be noted that, despite the bilateral friendly relations, especially in the political sphere, trade turnover is rather low, making only 5% of Armenia's foreign trade. The exploitation of free economic zones will allow Armenia-Iran trade turnover several times (Manvelyan, 2017). Iranian Minister of Energy, and Iranian head of Joint Economic Commission of Iran and Armenia after the end of the 15th meeting said "we hope the negotiation between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) will produce good results in the future. I'm confident that Armenia's role and the friendly ties between our two countries will contribute to the development of relations with EAEU" (Iran Front Page, 2018).

Iran and Armenia, along with numerous cultural ties, are religiously different. Armenia is considered to be the only non-Muslim neighbor of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the oldest Christian country in the world (Proença, and Contreras, 2017). Armenian Iranians, who constitute the largest religious minority in Iran, have experienced a different religious coexistence in Iran compared to their counterparts in the Middle East. Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Shavarsh Kocharyan said at a seminar on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the two countries' relations at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of the University of Tehran "Iranian Armenians have been successful in preserving their rituals and beliefs, and this has been the result of Iranian tolerance and culture" (Center of Central Eurasian Studies, 2012).

### **Science Diplomacy and Iran – Armenia Relations**

The tendency to establish scientific relations between Iran and Armenia, as like as other South Caucasian countries dates back to the first years of CIS

countries independence. In this framework, the law of the Cultural, Scientific and Educational Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Government of the Republic of Armenia has been drafted on October 28, 1994 in 20 articles and after approval by the Iranian Parliament on November 5, 1996, it has been confirmed on November 27, 1996, by the Guardian Council (Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1996).

Iran and Armenia, in pursuit of scientific diplomacy, have benefited from favorable factors such as geographical and cultural proximity, bilateral visa-free regime and positive political will and mutual trust, and, in the field of documents, agreements and understandings there are many opportunities. Meanwhile, the Iranian Armenian community also facilitates these relations as a potential bridge between the two countries, but at the same time, the achievements in this area are not notable. It seems factors such as the weak economy of Armenia, lack of Iranians acquaintance with Armenian and Russian languages, the persistence of the Iranians' attitude to the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States as the heirs of the Soviet Union, which, in terms of scientific and technological standards, considers them non-international and isolated, the tendency of the elite students and researchers and the faculty members of top universities of Iran to the universities and scientific institutions of the West as a priority for continuing education or for defining and conducting joint research projects, standing on visits and travels of the officials of both sides and signing memoranda without incentives and executive guarantees, lack of continuous pursuing and serious implementation of the memorandums, along with some other reasons, have resulted to the situation in which the achievements of scientific relations, and especially the science diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in relation with Armenia, are far less than expected.

As like as the Republic of Azerbaijan the main part of which could be called science diplomacy between Iran and Armenia have been realizing in the study of Iranian students in this country. Similar to other Southern Caucasian

countries, the number of Armenian students who are studying in Iran is very small. In a 2016-2017 academic year only 6 Armenian students were studying in Iran, 2 Ph.D. students, 3 Master's degree students, and 1 Bachelor student. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of the Islamic Republic of Iran until September 2016, the number of Armenian graduates (from Iranian universities) was only 10. Mohammad Farhad Koleini, foremost Iranian Ambassador to Armenia (2000-2006) who some of the most important agreements focused on cooperation in science and academia between Iran and Armenia have been signed during his mission to Armenia, evaluates the level of inter-university cooperation during that period acceptable.

As Koleini mentions during the period of his mission (2000-2006), around 3700 Iranian students have studied in engineering, music, Iranology, and medicine in Armenia. He considers the notable presence of Iranian students in Armenia as a positive point in the scientific relationship between the two countries. The geographic proximity of Iran and Armenia, the lower costs of living and studying in Armenia in comparison with the West and the cultural affinities of the two countries, are the main factors which attracting Iranian students to study in Armenia. (Koleini, 2016).

Seyed Ali Saghaeyan, foremost Iranian ambassador to Armenia (2009-2012) refers to decisions which have been taken to organize the study of Iranian students in Armenia during his mission and the decision of Iran to prevent its students at the undergraduate degree from studying in Armenia. A policy that was pursued more or less for all post-Soviet republics including Southern Caucasian neighbors of Iran, Because of the low quality of the facilities and education of these countries' universities, especially for undergraduate students. One the important issues related to the study of Iranian students in the South Caucasus countries is the problem of medical students, Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education does not accredit degrees of medical universities of South Caucasus countries, including Armenia. (Saghaeyan, 2016)

Armenia has 17 state universities, of which 13 are in Yerevan. It has 4 military institutes operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Defense. A police academy was established in 2017. 7 intergovernmental universities



(branches of foreign universities) are active in Armenia. There are 5 international private universities in the country and 33 Armenian private universities in Armenia. (University Directory Worldwide, 2018) According to webometrics 2018 ranking, 2 Armenian universities ranked below 5000 worldwide and 4 ranked between 5000 and 10000 (webometrics, 2018). In spite of this low ranking, Armenia has a good situation in some fields of science and its scientific capacities should not be overlooked. Mohammad Raeisi, former Iranian Ambassador to Armenia (2012-2015) mentions that Armenia has distinguished scholars and strong seats in the field of Oriental studies and Iranology, and it is possible to enhance fruitful scientific relations with this country in these fields (Raeisi, 2016).

Vardan S. Voskanyan, head of chair of the Iranian Studies at the faculty of Iranian Studies at the State University of Yerevan believes that there are disciplines in Armenia in which Iranian students can study and Iranian scientists and researchers can also pursue scientific communication with the faculty members and departments of those disciplines within the framework of science diplomacy. "The field of Iranian studies in Armenia is important and outstanding. We have other disciplines that are very advanced in Armenia, especially in the field of chemistry and geology, as well as in the field of physics, which Armenia is one of the most advanced Eastern European countries in this field. Similarly, in the field of mathematics and IT Armenia is an advanced country. Undoubtedly, we can establish a scientific bridge between Iran and Armenia. A bridge that will not only connects Iran and Armenia but also will play the role of a juncture between Iran and the members of the Eurasian Economic Union" (Voskanyan, 2017).

### **The rivals' activities in Armenia**

Armenia is a country where over two-thirds of its population resides outside its borders. Given its widespread internationalization, the scientific activities of a number of international powers in this country are notable. As expected, Russia is the most active country in the academic field in Armenia. Between

all CIS, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan by hosting 8 branches of Russian Higher Educational Institutions have the most numerous Russian Higher Educational Institutions in their countries. Those institutions are: Armenian Institute of Tourism - Branch of the Russian International Academy of Tourism, Yerevan Branch of the International Business Academy, Yerevan Branch of Moscow State University of Service, Russian-Armenian (Slavic) University of GOU VPO, Yerevan Branch of Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Information Technology, Yerevan Branch of Moscow New Law Institute (Republic of Armenia), Yerevan Branch of GOU VPO Russian State Professional Teachers Training University and Yerevan Branch of St. Petersburg Institute of Foreign Economic Relations, Economics and Law (Republic of Armenia). (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2018)

There is French university active in Armenia: Foundation Université Française en Arménie and a branch of Ukrainian University: Ternopil National Economic University Scientific-Educational Centre in Yerevan. European Regional Educational Academy established in Armenia in 2001. The American University of Armenia is an international private university which is active in Armenia. British School of Business Armenia (BSB Armenia) is an associate university of the global London School of Commerce (LSC) Group of Colleges, located in Yerevan. The activities of the publishing branches of some of the world's top universities in Armenia can be seen as examples of the application of science diplomacy in these countries. For example, Oxford University Press since 2006 has opened its branch in Yerevan. (Armenian News Agency, 2006)

China is a country whose relations with Armenia have been growing during recent years. Between the 38 agreements, 5 protocols and 11 memorandums signed between the two countries until August 2018, 23 cases are somehow associated with scientific and technological cooperation (Foreign Ministry of Armenia, 2018). Armenia – China Relations have been gotten more pragmatic aspects in recent years, and a notable number of memorandums of agreements

with a focus on economic - technical cooperation suggests the scientific attachments of this type of cooperation.

### **Iran - Georgia Relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union**

Georgia has always been part of the scene of the geopolitical equations of the Caucasus and the Black Sea. Georgia is the gate of Europe and the Caucasus via its long coastal territory along the Black Sea. Due to the relatively small territory as like as other Southern Caucasian countries, the principle of “engagement” has always been the main axis of Georgia's foreign policy. From the geo-economic viewpoint, Georgia is the main source of access to the Black Sea, close to its neighbors' oil resources, a geopolitical bridge connecting the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. Georgia has been the factor of security balance between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan by playing a role in the equations of the east-west and somewhat South-North Corridors. Along with Its balancing function between the regional powers this country has been the context of the strategic struggle of Russia, Europe, and America (Koleini, 2012, 19).

Tbilisi was the center for Iranian studies and Persian language teaching in the Soviet Union. Apart from cultural affinities between Georgia and Iran, more than half a million Muslims live in the country. The Sunnis live in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. The Shias live in east Georgia and their numbers exceed the Sunni population in the country (Koolae and Hafezian, 2010, 404). The absence of common borders between Iran and Georgia can explain why bilateral relations remain limited. After the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia in 2003, the Iranian Foreign Ministry stated that no state had to intervene in Georgia’s internal affairs (Sarıkaya, 2011, page 12). President Khatami congratulated the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, on his election, though conservatives in Iran did not welcome these developments in Georgia (Shargh Daily, 2004, 5). After the August 2008 military attack of Russia on Georgia, relations with regional powers for guaranteeing security and realizing vital interests of Georgia came on the agenda. As a result, the goal of

Georgia's diplomacy after the 2008 crisis was to create an appropriate balance of power in the region and to diversify its foreign policy, which included increasing its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Of course, Georgia has considered US sensitivities in this field and that Georgia's relations with Iran are coordinated with the US at some level; it is likely that the US is informed about the steps about to be taken (Nodia, 2011, 3, 8).

In general, in the relations between Iran and Georgia, economic aspects have been kept their priority over the other aspects. Meanwhile, exporting Iran's gas to Georgia was one of the main issues and prospects for the economic relations between the two countries, because, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia faced many problems in its fuel consumption. On January 22, 2006, Russian gas exports to Georgia has temporarily suspended and for two weeks till the resumption of Russian gas export to Georgia, Iran provided Georgia's required gas, by swapping it through the Republic of Azerbaijan (Mottaki, 2012). In that occasion despite major pressure from Moscow, Iran supplied energy at a low price to Georgia. The Georgian political elite did not forget this and learned a useful lesson of political realism: Iran, which has the world's second largest gas reserves after Russia, is eager to find a new customer for energy exports and to expand its economic ties, even at the expense of straining relations with Russia (Kakachia, 2011). In general, since the of Georgia's independence, a series of barriers, including the lack of necessary infrastructure, economic problems, and the opposition of third parties, including the United States, have prevented the increase of Tehran-Tbilisi relations, especially in the energy sector.

### **Science Diplomacy and Iran – Georgia Relations**

Georgia, which became independent by the collapse of the Soviet Union, was similar to its counterparts as an heir of the Soviet education and academic system, but as a result of reforms that began in 2005, Georgia's graduate education system turned from a state-funded centralist system into a more complex and multi-faceted system. Private universities established in this country and they gained an ever-increasing role in the educational structure.

According to the EU estimates, the extent and speed of changes in Georgia's educational system have given it a privileged position in comparison with other countries in the region (EACEA, 2012, 9). Nevertheless, Georgia still has a long way to get to the top academic levels in the international sphere. According to the webometrics database ranking of 2018, 1 Georgian universities' rank is below 2000, and 1 is 2001 and 2 others are below 5000 and 5 between 5000 and 10000 (webometrics, 2018). However, these data and rankings do not mean that there is no capacity for academic relations between Iran and Georgia. Considering the historical ties and cultural relations, the two countries have started to open Iranian rooms at the G. Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies, Institute of Asia and Africa of the State University of Tbilisi, the University of Kutaisi and Caucasus International University, as well as the compilation of the Georgian-Persian Dictionary. The Tbilisi State University has two seats for Iranian studies and Persian language and literature. The Asia-Africa Institute of Tbilisi accepts foreign Ph.D. students every year in the field of Iranian studies. The Asia-Africa Institute is an active center which is collaborating with prestigious universities and research centers, for example, it held a conference in the field of Iranian Studies in 2005 with the collaboration of the Sorbonne University of France. The Persian language is taught at the level of university education at the International Teaching University of Georgia, the Faculty of Literature of the University of Kutaisi, the Department of Philosophy and Theology of the Political Science faculty of the University of Tbilisi, as well as the Institute of Manuscripts of Georgian National Academy of Sciences. In some schools in Tbilisi, the Persian language is also taught (Koolae, 2010, 94). The University of Georgia, established in 2002, also has an Oriental, Persian and Iranian Studies program.

It is obvious that in the range of Iranian activities in the field of science diplomacy in the relationship with Georgia, the majority of these activities have been focused on the relationships of one or more specific institutions or organizations, and overall it has been so limited throughout the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that has never been able to shape a notable

scientific and technologic relations between the two countries. In fact, in a significant part of the years after Georgia's independence, Tehran and Tbilisi's scientific cooperation has remained limited at the level of the signing of some memorandums and cooperation agreements, and there is little evidence of practical implementation of these agreements in practice.

One of the actions which have taken with the aim to promote the scientific relations between Iran and Georgia was launching Persian Literary Olympiad in Georgia in spring 2011, which was titled "Literary Award of Khayyam"<sup>1</sup> for selected students of this field by the Islamic Republic of Iran Cultural Advisory in Tbilisi and in collaboration with the Persian Language Department of Tbilisi State University. At the Olympiad, students from Tbilisi State University, Kutaisi State University, and Iliya State University participated (Caucasus Studies Institute, 2011). Saadi Foundation is also active in Holding Persian language courses for foreign students, including Georgian learners. For example, in August 2016 the graduation courses of Persian language and literature for 30 students of universities of Turkey, Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia has hosted by Tabriz University. It has held by cooperation of Saadi Foundation and the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (Saadi Foundation, 2016). It should be noted that many of Iranian universities and scientific institutions have signed memorandum and agreements with their Georgian counterparts. The most apparent result of these activities has been occurred by holding joint seminars.

During the visit of Iranian Minister of Science, Research and Technology to Georgia, he announced that Tehran is ready to expand its scientific and academic cooperation, including collaboration between research centers with Tbilisi. Farhadi emphasized that to conduct a joint project of Iranian professors with Georgian counterparts and the presence of seats of Persian languages in Georgia could be the basis for more effective cooperation between the two countries. Farhadi also announced that Iran will award 15 scholarships to Georgian students and noted that the exchange of students and professors and the development of Iranian studies are Tehran's other proposals for the development of scientific

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<sup>1</sup> Omar Khayyam (May 18, 1048 - December 4, 1131) was a Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet.

relations with Tbilisi. Iranian Minister of Science and his Georgian counterpart, Aleksandre Jejelava, discussed the establishment and expansion of relations between centers and science and technology parks, the establishment of joint university courses and the implementation of projects in cooperation with one of the universities in Iran and Georgia (Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of Iran, 2017). Common membership of some of the Iranian universities and their Georgian counterparts in some international organizations such as the Union of Caucasian Universities is an opportunity for enhancing their cooperation. Benefiting Iran and Georgia from Bilateral visa-free regime is also a positive factor which could pave the way for enhancing science diplomacy in bilateral relations.

The activities undertaken in the field of scientific and academic exchanges between Iran and Georgia have been so far from providing a platform for the actual and real use of science diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy for the Islamic Republic of Iran. One of the evidence of this situation is the low number of Georgian students studying in Iran, which is even less relevant than other South Caucasian students in Iran, which itself also, as it mentioned before, is very low. As Hossein Aminian, foremost Iranian Ambassador to Georgia (2002-2006) mentions, although the tendency of Georgian students to continue their study is to western countries and good facilities are also allocated to them, but there are Georgian students who want to keep their study in Iran, particularly in Persian language and literature that Iran should support them by proper grants and facilities (Aminian, 2016).

In reviewing Iran's relations with the South Caucasus countries in general and Georgia in particular, it can be claimed that apart from the international constraints mentioned before, Iran has basically not taken a serious move towards the use of science diplomacy as a tool in its interactions with the region. In particular, in the relations between Iran and Georgia, we see that the cooperation and interaction of the two countries in the field of science and technology, even in comparison with similar cooperation with the other two countries of the South Caucasus region, is at a lower level and far from ideal conditions.

**The rivals' activities in Georgia**

While Russia traditionally has the most access for scientific presence in the countries which Moscow calls them the near abroad, including the South Caucasus countries, however, in the case of Georgia, the challenging nature of relations between Moscow and Tbilisi has been changed the situation. Georgia's divergences from the commonwealth of independent states from the beginning, the occurrence of Rose revolution in 2003, and the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia have resulted to the weaker presence of Russia in Georgia in comparison with its presence and activities in the other two countries of the region. It is obvious in the number of Russian universities' branch in Georgia. Branch of Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Information Technology which is accredited by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia is the sole active Russian university in Tbilisi (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2018).

As it mentioned before, the United States is also keen on using the tool of public diplomacy and science diplomacy to increase its influence in the periphery of Russia. One of the most important parts of the US science diplomacy in Georgia is the allocation of various grants and programs, including Alumni Grants (PAS), Book Translation Program (PAS), Museum Marketing Project Grant, Democracy Commission Small Grants Program (PAS), English Language Training for Media in Georgia and Media Educational Program. In addition, the United States has also considered a graduate exchange program for Georgia, which, after educating people who have been admitted during this period, it supports them to use the skills that they have been learned or, in other words, helps them to find jobs. Currently, 10 "American Corners" are active in Georgia. American Corners are small, American-style libraries located within a local partner organization, usually a library. Access to American Corners and their collections is free and open to all interested citizens of Georgia. (US Embassy, Tbilisi, 2018)

Turkey, another actor in the South Caucasus, has taken important steps in scientific and academic relations with Georgia. Currently, approximately 500 Turkish students are studying in Georgia, and the Turkish government, on the



other hand, is also giving grants to 50 to 60 Georgian students annually to study at Turkey's universities. Together with academic activities, Turkish cultural centers are also active in the embassy and its consulates in Georgia are active in promoting Turkish culture in this country (Republic of Turkey Embassy in Georgia, 2016).

Israel is another actor who has developed its activities in Georgia in recent years in various fields, such as science diplomacy. Georgia and Israel enjoy solid relations and cooperation in numerous fields. Israel was one of the first countries to offer aid to Georgia after the Tbilisi flood in 2015. The Jerusalem Biblical Zoo offered Georgia help in searching for escaped animals and supplied equipment for the task. The zoo also helped Tbilisi reconstruct its wildlife park (agenda.ge, 2017). The support has been done by the high technology equipment of Israel.

## **Conclusion**

The use of science diplomacy to facilitate foreign relations has not been seriously addressed in Iran's foreign policy agenda until now. It can be said that the exploitation of the country's scientific and technical capacities to achieve the goals of foreign policy and the realization of national interests in relations with the South Caucasus countries has also been neglected. Therefore, it is a necessity that the capacity of science diplomacy in Iran's foreign policy is taken into account more seriously. Iran and the Southern Caucasus countries are enjoying many capacities to enhance their scientific relations in the framework of science diplomacy. Increasing this kind of cooperation can help to promote peace and stability in the region, and will help the people and the South Caucasian countries. The benefits of this kind of cooperation will also be effective in improving the lives of the people of this region. By using science diplomacy as a peaceful and humanitarian approach in the field of diplomacy, which is itself a tool for communicating and promoting peace and stability, Iran can add more positive results to its long-term history of activities in the Caucasus.

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