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SUREN TADEVOSYAN\*

## NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND REGIONAL RIVALRY: THE DYNAMICS OF IRAN-AZERBAIJAN ROLE CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS\*\*

**Abstract:** *This study utilizes role theory to analyze how contrasting National Role Conceptions (NRCs) shape the foreign policies of Iran and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. Iran's NRC as a "Defender of Islam" arises from its identity as a Shia Islamic republic committed to safeguarding Shia communities and promoting Islamic governance. In contrast, Azerbaijan's NRC as a "Secular Modernizer" is rooted in its post-Soviet emphasis on secular governance and alignment with Western institutions. The research explores how these divergent NRCs lead to role contestation, influencing each state's strategies.*

*By examining Iran's support for religious institutions, educational initiatives, media outreach, and cultural diplomacy, the study illustrates Iran's efforts to expand its ideological influence and challenge Azerbaijan's secular orientation. Azerbaijan counters with regulatory measures, state-controlled religious education, media management, and strategic alliances to reinforce its secular identity. This interplay highlights the crucial role of identity in shaping foreign policy beyond material considerations. The findings demonstrate the importance of NRCs in understanding state behavior in identity-driven conflicts, impacting regional dynamics and stability.*

**Keywords:** *Inter-state role conflict; National Role Conceptions (NRCs); Religious Protector; Secular Modernizer; Role theory.*

### Introduction

The behavior of states in international relations is often driven by a host of influences that stretch far beyond material analysis: historical narratives, domestic ideologies, and cultural self-conceptions. In regions like the South Caucasus, where these geopolitical rivalries are underscored by deep historical and ideological legacies, these elements are more influential in determining foreign policy strategies. From this viewpoint, role theory offers an efficient framework for explaining how states define their roles within the international system and how such defined roles influence their behaviors.

According to role theory, first introduced into International Relations by K. J. Holsti (1970), states assign roles to themselves reflective of their past experiences, cultural orientations, and political aspirations. These roles are neither rhetorical nor symbolic but frameworks from which a state acts

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outwardly and responds to challenges (Breuning, 2011). Iran's NRC as a "Defender of Islam," rooted in its revolutionary ideology and leadership in the Shia Muslim world, starkly contrasts with Azerbaijan's NRC as a "Secular Modernizer," grounded in its post-Soviet emphasis on secularism, modernization, and integration with Western-aligned institutions. The contrast between these roles creates tensions in the South Caucasus, a region where competing interests and ideologies are acutely contested.

This research is guided by the research question: How do the contrasting National Role Conceptions of Iran as a "Defender of Islam" and Azerbaijan as a "Secular Modernizer" shape their foreign policy behaviors and interactions in the South Caucasus? By addressing this question, the research contributes to understanding not only the drivers of these states' policies but also the broader implications for regional stability and international relations theory. While existing scholarship has extensively explored materialist explanations for state behavior, focusing on power politics, resources, and alliances, this paper emphasizes the importance of non-material factors, such as self-perception and ideological commitments. The novelty lies in applying role theory to the South Caucasus, a region often analyzed through the lens of great power competition or resource geopolitics, rather than the internal and external roles states assign to themselves.

Furthermore, the comparative focus on Iran and Azerbaijan adds an innovative dimension. Although the ideological rift between these states is well-documented, the ways in which their self-conceptions influence their strategies and generate friction remain underexplored. By dissecting the mechanisms through which NRCs shape foreign policy behaviors, this research aims to provide a richer understanding of the dynamics at play in the region.

These findings have their reverberations well beyond the South Caucasus, showing how the role contestation propelled by diverging self-conceptions may be escalatory in regions marked by overlapping spheres of influence. The NRCs of Iran and Azerbaijan place into perspective how those kinds of ideationally and historically embedded roles inform foreign policy decisions and challenge reductionist approaches for which material factors are given primacy. It would have relevance for policymakers or academics dealing with the resolution of identity-driven conflicts elsewhere, perhaps in the Middle East or Eastern Europe.

### **Theoretical framework**

Role theory explores the ways in which states perceive and enact their roles within the international system to shape foreign policy behaviors in ways that are not strongly congruent with material considerations. Born from the social sciences and then adopted into international relations by scholars such as K.J. Holsti, the theory postulates that states, like individuals, take on roles based on their experiences throughout history, cultural identity, and domestic context (1970). These roles, or National

Role Conceptions (NRCs), provide a cognitive framework through which states interpret their responsibilities, align their strategies, and define their interactions with others. Unlike pure interest-driven theories, the interplay of identity and self-perception is underlined in role theory to explain how such self-assigned roles influence state behavior in deep and often non-explicit ways (Breuning, 2011; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016; Chafetz, Abramson & Grillot, 1996; Harnisch, Role theory: operationalization of key concepts, 2011; Krotz, 2002; Shih, 1988; Walker, 1978).

NRCs are not static; they evolve as states try to manage internal transformations and external pressures (Harnisch, Role theory: operationalization of key concepts, 2011; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016; Kaarbo & Cantir, 2017). A state may project for itself a regional leader, a cultural bridge, a defender of ideological values, or even a protector of religious communities, and it is these modes of self-conceptualization that underpin its foreign policy choices. For example, a state that saw itself as a "mediator" would have an emphasis on diplomacy and conflict resolution, while a state viewing itself as a "guardian" of a religious or cultural identity would be concerned with the protection of cosigners abroad (Holsti, 1970). Often, such roles then express themselves in consistent behavior, in alliances, and in reinforcing narratives that inform a state's identity within the international system. Meanwhile, NRCs would prove to be dynamic, changing with domestic-level events like political or even economic crises (Kaarbo & Cantir, 2017), but also with outside influences such as international conflict or shifting alignments (Harnisch, Frank & Maull, 2011). The very tension between stability and adaptability underlines the very complex nature of NRCs and their impact on world politics.

Inter-state role conflict occurs when the NRCs of different states clash, particularly in regions where identities and interests overlap. In other words, it happens when state A's articulated foreign policy roles are not accepted by state B, and B, in return, attempts to pull state A in other role directions (Özdamar, 2024). Scholars have examined how role conflict can lead to role alter casting, a process where external factors, such as other states or institutions, assign specific roles to a state, encouraging behaviors aligned with those roles (Thies, 2010). Such contestation is not always overt; it can manifest in subtle forms of rivalry, ideological competition, or competing narratives about regional leadership. These conflicts arise not only from material power struggles but also from deeply rooted self-perceptions that drive states to act in ways that affirm their roles while challenging those of others (Thies, 2010). For example, a state that thinks of itself as a secular modernizer may see any efforts by others to exercise religious influence over its territory as a direct challenge to its identity, even though such an act is understood by another state as the fulfillment of its own NRC as a religious or cultural protector. These dynamics illustrate both that foreign policy is informed not just by pragmatic interests but also that it is a function of how states view themselves and would like to be viewed by others. Such interactions would

not only consider the recognition of material power but also an in-depth grasp of ideological and identity-driven dimensions to state behavior.

Contemporary role theory highlights the evolving, socially constructed nature of NRCs. Scholars like Harnisch (2011) and Thies (2010) argue that roles are continuously shaped through discourse, interaction, and adaptation to changing contexts. States define and legitimize their roles in relation to other actors, institutions, and non-state entities—demonstrating the interdependence of roles in the international system. A state's self-concept relies on external recognition; for example, regional leadership or mediation roles necessitate validation from others. Changes in global structures, domestic politics, or significant events often prompt states to reassess and adapt their roles.

NRCs are influenced by both internal factors (political culture, leadership, public opinion) and external pressures (responses from other states, geopolitical trends) (Grossman, Schortgen & Friedrichs, 2022). This duality ensures NRCs balance stability for policy continuity with flexibility to adapt to evolving realities. A traditionally neutral mediator, for instance, may adopt a more active role during regional instability, illustrating the fluidity of NRCs. These dynamics are particularly evident in identity-driven conflicts, where state roles are contested both internally and externally.

Role theory can make its most valuable contribution to understanding conflict and cooperation dynamics where diffuse and contested histories exist, like those in the South Caucasus. The intersection and clashes have been common features of states' NRCs in such a way as to spark competition and alliance formation. The complex entanglements of identity and policy evident from these regions point to the limits of any entirely material explanations and to how self-perception and ideological commitments may create drivers of foreign policy decisions. This is particularly useful in understanding the essential motives and bindings that drive state behaviors within contested regions and goes a long way toward offering a more inclusive framework to analyze regional dynamics and possible paths toward conflict resolution.

In other words, seen through the prism of the theory of role, identity is considered a critical driver in international relations because it affects how states act toward and look to others. This double process of self-perception and external validation of roles makes roles crucial in creating international order and disorder. The more important understanding of how states define their role for themselves and how these roles intersect or conflict with other roles is a way toward better analyses and more realistic strategies, especially in areas of hot contests where histories, ideologies, and interests continuously interact. Eventually, knowledge of these integrating aspects will help both scholars and policymakers make sense of the complexity in state behavior and the drivers of cooperation and conflict in the international system.

### **Iran's National Role Conception as the defender of Islam**

Their contrasting National Role Conceptions (NRCs) significantly shape the complex relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan. Iran, embracing its role as a "Defender of Islam," endeavors to promote its interpretation of Shia Islam and extend its ideological influence within Azerbaijani society. This effort directly challenges Azerbaijan's NRC as a "Secular Modernizer," leading to an interstate role conflict that influences foreign policy behaviors and regional dynamics in the South Caucasus.

Iran's NRC as a "Defender of Islam" is a fundamental pillar of its foreign policy, deeply rooted in its ideological identity as a Shia Islamic republic. This self-perception stems from Iran's historical and theological legacy as the epicenter of Shia Islam, positioning itself as the guardian and promoter of Shia communities worldwide (Wastnidge, 2020). The 1979 Islamic Revolution was a watershed moment that crystallized this role, as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini envisioned Iran not merely as a nation-state but as the vanguard of an Islamic resurgence (Bhagat, 1987). The revolution established a theocratic state grounded in Shia principles, with a mission to export the revolution's ideals and foster solidarity among Shia populations globally (Akhavi, 1983). This vision institutionalized Iran's NRC as both a spiritual leader and a political actor committed to reshaping regional and international orders in accordance with Islamic values.

The ideological underpinnings of Iran's Defender of Islam role are multifaceted, intertwining religious obligations with strategic objectives. Religiously, Iran perceives a spiritual and moral responsibility to safeguard Shia communities beyond its borders, reinforced by doctrines emphasizing the unity of the ummah (Islamic community) and the imperative to support oppressed Muslims worldwide (Vatanka, 2018). This sense of duty is not merely altruistic; it serves to bolster Iran's legitimacy and influence within the Islamic world (Vasilenko, 2021). Politically, the Defender of Islam role is a strategic tool to counter secularism, Western influence, and rival regional powers. By promoting Shia Islam, Iran seeks to expand its soft power, forge ideological alliances, and challenge the dominance of adversaries like Saudi Arabia and, to some extent, Turkey.

The South Caucasus holds particular significance for Iran's NRC due to its geographic proximity and historical ties to Shia Islam. Azerbaijan has a substantial Shia population—approximately 60-65%<sup>1</sup> of its citizens identify as Shia Muslims (Lindsey, 2024)—which provides a fertile ground for Iran's religious and cultural outreach. The historical legacy of Persian influence in the region, dating back to the Safavid Empire, reinforces Iran's interest and offers a conduit for reasserting its presence (Abisaab, 2004). The South Caucasus also serves as a strategic buffer zone, where Iran can assert influence to prevent the

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the Azerbaijan's population, approximately 95–98%, identifies as Muslim, with varying estimates of the division between Shia and Sunni Muslims. These figures are often debated due to the minimal distinction between Shia and Sunni identities in Azerbaijan, further complicated by Sufi influences. However, it is generally accepted that Shia Muslims form the majority.



encroachment of rival ideologies and powers that may threaten its security and regional aspirations. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened new avenues for Iran to engage with newly independent states, allowing it to promote its NRC in a region undergoing significant political and social transformation (Rocca, 2017).

Iran's engagement in Azerbaijan has been driven, among multiple factors, by an ideological imperative to promote Shia identity and counter secular models of governance that challenge its own theocratic paradigm (Wastnidge, 2020). To achieve this, Iran employs a multifaceted approach that includes religious and cultural diplomacy, educational initiatives, and strategic alliances (Constantin-Bercean, 2018). A key component is the funding and support of religious institutions. Iran provides financial assistance for the construction and renovation of mosques, such as the Imam Hussein Mosque in Nardaran, which serves as a hub for Shia religious activities and community gatherings. These institutions not only facilitate worship but also promote religious teachings aligned with Iranian interpretations of Shia Islam, thereby fostering pro-Iranian sentiments among local populations (Jödicke, 2017). By bolstering these religious centers, Iran enhances its soft power within Azerbaijan and reinforces its self-perception as the guardian of Shia communities. This approach leverages shared religious identity to cultivate solidarity and affinity toward Iran. However, the Azerbaijani government perceives these activities as potential avenues for foreign influence that threaten the nation's secular identity and social cohesion. In response, authorities have at times closed mosques associated with external funding and increased surveillance of religious activities to safeguard secularism and national security.

Educational programs are another avenue through which Iran extends its influence (Mozaffari & Akbar, 2022). Iranian seminaries in Qom and Mashhad offer scholarships to Azerbaijani students, immersing them in theological education that emphasizes Iran's revolutionary ideology and religious doctrines (Sakurai, 2015). Graduates often return to Azerbaijan as clerics or community leaders, potentially shaping religious discourse in ways that align with Iranian interests. For instance, the dissemination of concepts like Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which underpins Iran's political system, introduces ideological elements that may challenge Azerbaijan's secular governance (Mahmudlu, 2020). Cultural exchanges further reinforce Iran's NRC as a defender of Islam. Iran organizes cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and academic conferences that highlight shared historical and cultural ties, promoting Persian language and literature (Məhəmmədi, 2017). Events like Nowruz and Ashura celebrations emphasize common heritage and foster a sense of cultural affinity<sup>1</sup>. Additionally,

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural diplomacy represents a nuanced yet strategic dimension of Iran's outreach, aiming to deepen emotional and ideological connections with Azerbaijani Shia communities. Iran facilitates pilgrimages to revered holy sites such as Qom and Mashhad, offering logistical support, streamlined visa processes, and sometimes subsidized travel arrangements to encourage participation. These religious journeys, particularly during significant observances like

Iran utilizes media outreach, broadcasting programs in Azerbaijani that disseminate religious narratives and perspectives on regional issues. Channels such as Sahar TV aim to shape public opinion by presenting Iran as a defender of Islamic values against Western secularism (Mozaffari & Akbar, 2022). Politically, Iran engages in diplomatic efforts to assert its role. It advocates for the rights of Shia minorities in international forums and expresses concern over policies in neighboring countries that it perceives as oppressive towards Shia practices<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, Iran has expressed concerns over the treatment of Shia groups in Azerbaijan, such as the Muslim Unity Movement,<sup>2</sup> which the Azerbaijani government considers an illegal organization. This advocacy enhances Iran's image as a protector and legitimizes its involvement in regional affairs.

Iran's influence extends into the political sphere through alleged support for parties and movements advocating for greater incorporation of Islamic principles into Azerbaijani governance (Valiyev, 2017). The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (AIP), established in 1991, was a prominent example. Accused of receiving financial and logistical backing from Iran, the AIP promoted the integration of Shia Islamic values into political and social life, openly criticizing the Azerbaijani government's secular orientation and strategic cooperation with Western powers (Rubin, 2014). Despite its illegal status, the party continued to operate clandestinely, with its leaders and members facing periodic arrests and imprisonment. In 2011, AIP leader Movsum Samadov was arrested and sentenced to 12 years in prison on charges related to terrorism and attempting to seize power (USCIRF, 2024). Even though Samadov was released from prison in January 2023,<sup>3</sup> the AIP remains banned, and its activities are heavily restricted by Azerbaijani authorities. The government continues to monitor and suppress Islamist movements, particularly those perceived to have ties with Iran, due to concerns over national security and the preservation of the country's secular governance (Valiyev, 2017).

Iran's multifaceted strategy to exert religious and ideological influence in Azerbaijan exemplifies how a state's NRC can drive foreign policy behaviors that extend beyond conventional diplomacy. By

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Arba'een and Ashura, expose Azerbaijani pilgrims to Iranian religious practices, cultural norms, and ideological narratives. Beyond religious tourism, Iran organizes cultural exchanges, artistic exhibitions, and academic conferences that celebrate shared heritage and historical ties. Initiatives like the Iran-Azerbaijan Friendship Society and joint cultural festivals highlight linguistic, artistic, and literary commonalities.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Iran has voiced opposition to restrictions on religious freedoms in Azerbaijan. In 2011, Iranian officials criticized Azerbaijan's ban on the hijab in schools, framing their stance as a defense of human rights and religious liberty.

<sup>2</sup> The Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) is an unregistered religious organization in Azerbaijan, established in 2015. Its members identify as non-violent, conservative Shiites advocating for a greater role of Islam in Azerbaijan's predominantly secular society. The movement's founder, Taleh Bagirzade, is an Iran-educated Azerbaijani Shiite scholar known for his vocal criticism of state religious bodies and government policies, including the ban on headscarves in schools.

<sup>3</sup> Given the ongoing governmental restrictions and the lack of official recognition, the AIP does not function as a legal political entity within Azerbaijan. Its influence and activities are significantly limited, operating, if at all, in a covert manner to avoid detection and suppression by state authorities.

leveraging support for religious institutions, educational initiatives, media outreach, political engagement, and cultural diplomacy, Iran endeavors to promote its interpretation of Shia Islam and expand its ideological footprint within Azerbaijani society.

However, Iran's Defender of Islam role faces significant challenges and backlash. Neighboring governments often perceive its actions as interference in their domestic affairs or attempts to export revolutionary ideology. Azerbaijan, committed to a secular national identity, views Iran's religious outreach with suspicion. The Azerbaijani government has taken measures to limit Iranian influence by regulating religious activities, restricting foreign-trained clerics, and promoting state-sanctioned interpretations of Islam<sup>1</sup>.

Turkey's growing influence in the South Caucasus, particularly its support for Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, challenges Iran's traditional sphere of influence. Turkey's promotion of a secular yet culturally Islamic model presents an alternative that appeals to Azerbaijan, reinforcing its own NRC as a "Secular Modernizer." Moreover, Iran has always had to manage its relationships with, and, at times, confront Russia and Western powers, balancing its ideological pursuits with pragmatic considerations to avoid isolation or conflict. Economic constraints also limit Iran's ability to project power. International sanctions related to its nuclear program have strained the economy, reducing resources available for foreign initiatives. This limitation affects Iran's capacity to sustain long-term projects and diminishes its attractiveness as a partner compared to wealthier rivals.

In response to these challenges, Iran calibrates its actions to maintain influence without provoking severe backlash. It emphasizes cultural and religious commonalities while avoiding overt political intervention. This nuanced approach reflects an understanding of the delicate balance required to advance its NRC as a defender of Islam in a complex regional environment.

### **Azerbaijan's National Role Conception as a secular modernizer**

Azerbaijan's National Role Conception (NRC) as a secular modernizer is a foundational pillar of its post-Soviet identity and nation-building strategy. Rooted in a historical commitment to secularism and propelled by ambitious modernization efforts, this role emphasizes the establishment of a progressive state characterized by secular governance, economic development, and strategic global alignment. By embracing these principles, Azerbaijan seeks to assert itself as an autonomous and forward-looking nation capable of leading regional development in the South Caucasus. This NRC not only shapes domestic policies but also informs foreign engagements.

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<sup>1</sup> Tensions have occasionally escalated, such as the 2012 and 2023 arrests of individuals accused of spying for Iran and plotting to overthrow the government. Regional rivalries further complicate Iran's efforts.

The foundations of Azerbaijan's secular modernizer role are deeply entrenched in its experience under Soviet rule from 1920 to 1991 (Yunusov 2004, 89). During this period, the Soviet regime systematically promoted secularism as a state ideology, suppressing religious institutions and practices to establish atheism as the official doctrine (Ergun & Çitak, 2020). Islam, which had been a significant component of Azerbaijani cultural and social identity, was relegated to the private sphere. This systemic secularization ingrained secular values within Azerbaijani society and governance, creating a populace accustomed to secular public life and institutions. The Soviet legacy left an indelible mark on Azerbaijan's national identity, providing a foundation upon which to build a modern secular state after independence.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan faced the critical task of redefining its national identity amidst regional upheaval and newfound sovereignty (Cornell 2011, 60-61). Under the leadership of the former President Heydar Aliyev, the country prioritized maintaining secular governance as a unifying and stabilizing force in a diverse society comprising various ethnic and religious groups (Yunusov 2004, 104-108). Aliyev leveraged his extensive experience within the Communist Party and Soviet administrative structures to ensure continuity in secular policies (Cornell 2011, 81-84). By affirming secularism, Azerbaijan sought to distinguish itself from neighboring countries with theocratic or Islamist regimes, particularly Iran, and to assert its independence (Valiyev, 2017). This deliberate continuation of secular governance served both as a domestic strategy for unity and as a statement of Azerbaijan's commitment to modern statehood, forming an integral component of its NRC as a Secular Modernizer. Central to Azerbaijan's pursuit of modernization is the strategic utilization of its abundant energy resources to drive economic development and enhance geopolitical standing. Endowed with significant oil and natural gas reserves in the Caspian Sea basin, Azerbaijan recognized the potential to transform its economy and assert itself on the global stage (Shaffer, 2009; Cornell, Tsereteli, & Socor, 2005). The government designed a strategic agenda to attract foreign investment, modernize its energy sector, and integrate the national economy into global markets<sup>1</sup>.

Azerbaijan's secular nationalism extends beyond its domestic sphere, profoundly shaping its foreign policy and interactions with external actors. By positioning itself as a secular modernizer, Azerbaijan seeks to align with nations and institutions that reflect its values of secular governance, modernization, and national sovereignty. This strategic orientation guides its alliances and diplomatic efforts, reinforcing

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<sup>1</sup> A significant initiative was the development of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, completed in 2006, which facilitates the transport of oil from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. This project symbolized Azerbaijan's strategic alignment with Western interests and its commitment to diversifying energy export routes, bypassing traditional regional powers like Russia and Iran. By collaborating with major international energy companies, Azerbaijan reinforced its image as a reliable and progressive energy partner. The BTC pipeline not only contributed significantly to the national economy but also elevated Azerbaijan's profile internationally, demonstrating its capacity to undertake complex, multinational projects.

its NRC and enhancing its standing in the international community. A cornerstone of Azerbaijan's foreign policy is its robust strategic alliance with Turkey, epitomizing the synergy of shared secular and nationalist values. Rooted in deep cultural and linguistic ties—both nations share Turkic heritage and a common language base—this partnership is often encapsulated by the phrase "One Nation, Two States." Turkey's model of secularism, established under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has significantly influenced Azerbaijan's own secular trajectory (Soltanov, 2016). This strategic partnership manifests in extensive cooperation across political, economic, and military domains. Joint military exercises, defense agreements, and intelligence sharing enhance Azerbaijan's security capabilities and align its military practices with those of a fellow secular nation (Avatkov, 2022). The collaboration was particularly evident during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Turkish support played a crucial role in Azerbaijan's military successes<sup>1</sup> (Hovsepyan & Tonoyan, 2024).

Economically, collaborative projects like the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) facilitate the export of Azerbaijani gas to European markets via Turkey, further integrating Azerbaijan into global energy networks and reducing dependence on routes controlled by regional competitors. Such initiatives bolster Azerbaijan's economy and solidify its role as a key energy provider, advancing its modernization agenda and reinforcing its NRC.

Central to Azerbaijan's foreign engagements is its strategic relationship with Western countries and Israel, reinforcing its National Role Conception (NRC) as a "secular modernizer." By cultivating ties with the United States, European nations, and particularly Israel, Azerbaijan aims to enhance its security, diversify foreign relations, and access advanced technology and investment. The partnership with Israel is especially significant; despite being a Muslim-majority country, Azerbaijan has developed cooperation with Israel in areas such as defense, intelligence sharing, and energy. According to different estimates, between 2016 and 2020, Israel supplied nearly 70% of Azerbaijan's military arsenal, providing advanced weaponry that significantly enhanced Azerbaijan's military capabilities. This collaboration has included the exchange of military technology and intelligence sharing, contributing to Azerbaijan's strategic defense initiatives. At the same time, Azerbaijan is a major supplier of oil to Israel, accounting for approximately 40% of Israel's oil imports. This energy partnership underscores the mutual economic benefits derived from their bilateral relations. This pragmatic approach reflects Azerbaijan's prioritization of secular modernization objectives over religious affiliations. However, these alliances have drawn criticism from neighboring Iran, which views Azerbaijan's ties with Israel with suspicion, perceiving them as a strategic threat (Cohen & Lev, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> During the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Turkey provided Azerbaijan with significant military support, including advanced weaponry such as drones, and facilitated the deployment of Syrian mercenaries to the conflict zone. This has helped Azerbaijan fully annex and gradually ethnically cleanse Nagorno-Karabakh.

The effectiveness of Iran's strategies to exert religious and ideological influence in Azerbaijan varies across different segments of Azerbaijani society. In rural areas and among conservative Shia communities—particularly on the Absheron Peninsula in the southern regions bordering Iran—there is a greater resonance with Iranian outreach (Valiyev, 2017). Economic hardships, historical ties, and socio-cultural affinities make these groups more receptive to Iranian support and messaging. For instance, in villages like Nardaran, heightened religious observance and occasional clashes with authorities over religious freedoms have been observed, reflecting the impact of Iranian ideological influence. These communities may view Iran as a protector of Shia Islam and a source of spiritual and material support, aligning with Iran's NRC as a Defender of Islam (Vatanka, 2018). Conversely, urban populations and younger generations tend to prioritize economic modernization, global integration, and the secular values promoted by the Azerbaijani government. Cities like Baku and Ganja exemplify the tangible benefits of Azerbaijan's secular modernization model, including improved infrastructure, educational opportunities, and international investment. These developments diminish the appeal of Iran's theocratic system for many Azerbaijanis, who associate progress and prosperity with secular governance and Western engagement. The government's proactive measures to promote secularism and regulate religious activities further constrain Iran's reach, reflecting Azerbaijan's commitment to its NRC as the secular modernizer.

Azerbaijan has implemented stringent laws and regulations to assert control over the religious sphere and limit foreign influence, thereby reinforcing its secular identity. The Law on Freedom of Religious Belief (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Beliefs, 1992), first adopted in 1992 and amended multiple times, requires all religious communities to register with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations. This registration process grants the government oversight of religious institutions, enabling it to monitor activities, funding sources, and adherence to national laws. Unregistered religious activities are prohibited, and participation in such activities can result in administrative penalties or criminal charges. The government also restricts the involvement of foreign nationals in religious services and regulates the importation of religious literature<sup>1</sup>. Amendments in 2015 increased penalties for unauthorized religious activities and expanded the state's ability to suspend or dissolve organizations deemed a threat to national security. By controlling the establishment

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<sup>1</sup> To further curb foreign ideological influence, Azerbaijan restricts its citizens from pursuing religious education abroad without official permission. The government recognizes that foreign-trained clerics may introduce interpretations of Islam that challenge the state's secular policies. In response, it promotes domestic religious education through institutions like the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology, established in 2018 under the State Committee. This institution offers programs aligned with national values, emphasizing a moderate interpretation of Islam compatible with secular governance. By fostering a homegrown clergy educated within a state-supervised framework, Azerbaijan seeks to ensure that religious teachings support national unity and loyalty to the state. Scholarships and incentives encourage students to study locally, reducing the allure of foreign institutions that may propagate alternative ideologies. Additionally, the government oversees the content of religious literature and educational materials, requiring approval for imported texts and prohibiting publications that promote what the government considers extremism or undermine secularism.

and operation of religious entities, Azerbaijan aims to prevent the dissemination of teachings that conflict with its secular values or could incite social discord (Yunusov, 2004). These measures are enforced through regular inspections, surveillance, and collaboration with law enforcement agencies (Ergun & Çitak, 2020).

Understanding the influential role of media in shaping public opinion, Azerbaijan closely monitors foreign broadcasts and online content that could challenge its secular narrative. The National Television and Radio Council regulate media operations, and the government has blocked access to foreign websites and television channels deemed subversive or threatening to national security. For instance, Azerbaijani authorities have restricted Iranian state media content when it was perceived to promote religious extremism or interfere in domestic affairs. State-controlled media play a significant role in reinforcing Azerbaijan's NRC as the secular modernizer. Public broadcasting services emphasize themes of modernization, economic development, cultural heritage, and national unity. Programming often highlights the government's achievements, infrastructure projects, and international partnerships, projecting an image of progress and stability. By promoting secularism and discouraging religious radicalism, the media supports efforts to counteract Iran's ideological messaging.

## **Conclusion**

This study has analyzed contrasting National Role Conceptions (NRCs) of Iran and Azerbaijan—the "Defender of Islam" and the "Secular Modernizer," respectively—and examined how these self-perceptions shape their foreign policy behaviors and interactions in the South Caucasus. By employing role theory as the analytical framework, the research has illuminated the identity-driven dimensions of their interstate relations, moving beyond traditional materialist explanations. The findings reveal that the interstate role conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan is deeply rooted in their divergent identities, historical trajectories, and ideological commitments, which manifest in their foreign policies and regional strategies.

From a theoretical standpoint, role theory posits that states, akin to individuals, adopt roles based on their self-perceptions and the expectations of others, which in turn influence their behavior and interactions on the international stage. Iran's NRC as a "Defender of Islam" stems from its revolutionary ideology and commitment to safeguarding Shia communities and promoting Islamic governance. This role is deeply intertwined with its national identity, historical experiences, and ideological aspirations. Conversely, Azerbaijan's NRC as a "secular modernizer" emerges from its post-Soviet nation-building efforts, emphasizing secularism, economic development, and alignment with Western institutions. This role reflects Azerbaijan's desire to assert its sovereignty, modernize its society, and differentiate itself from neighboring states with theocratic systems.

The interstate role conflict unfolds as these NRCs clash in both ideological and practical arenas. Iran employs a multifaceted strategy to extend its ideological influence in Azerbaijan, supporting religious institutions, offering educational initiatives, engaging in media outreach, and conducting cultural diplomacy. These actions aim to promote its interpretation of Shia Islam and challenge Azerbaijan's secular orientation, aligning with Iran's self-assigned mission to protect and lead Shia communities. Azerbaijan, perceiving these efforts as threats to its sovereignty and secular identity, implements regulatory measures, promotes state-sanctioned religious education, manages media narratives, and strengthens strategic alliances with countries that support its modernization agenda.

The role conflict arises because the NRCs of Iran and Azerbaijan are inherently oppositional. Iran's pursuit of ideological influence aligns with its commitment to religious solidarity and regional influence, while Azerbaijan's resistance is driven by its dedication to secular governance and national sovereignty. The overlapping cultural and religious ties between the two countries amplify this conflict, as Iran's actions are perceived not merely as external interventions but as intrusions into Azerbaijan's internal affairs and identity. This tension is further exacerbated by historical legacies and the proximity of the two nations, which facilitate both interaction and friction.

Understanding why and how this interstate role conflict takes place requires an appreciation of the historical and ideological underpinnings of each state's NRC. Iran's identity as a "defender of Islam" is deeply rooted in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which redefined its national identity and foreign policy objectives. The revolution established a theocratic state with a mission to export its revolutionary ideals and foster solidarity among Shia communities worldwide. This ideological foundation drives Iran's foreign policy behaviors and its efforts to influence Shia populations in neighboring countries.

Azerbaijan's identity as a "secular modernizer" is shaped by its experience under Soviet rule and its subsequent endeavors to build a modern, independent nation-state. The legacy of systemic secularization during the Soviet era ingrained secular values within Azerbaijani society and governance. Post-independence, Azerbaijan sought to maintain secularism as a unifying and stabilizing force, distinguishing itself from neighbors like Iran and asserting its sovereignty. This commitment to secularism is not merely a domestic policy but a core aspect of Azerbaijan's national identity and its approach to international relations.

The interstate role conflict unfolds through specific mechanisms. Iran's support for religious institutions and clerical training in Azerbaijan aims to build ideological affinity and expand its soft power. By investing in mosques, religious centers, and educational programs, Iran seeks to promote its theological perspectives and reinforce communal ties with Azerbaijani Shia communities. Media outreach and cultural diplomacy further enable Iran to shape narratives and promote shared heritage, positioning itself as a natural ally and protector.



Azerbaijan counters these efforts by regulating religious activities, promoting state-controlled religious education, and leveraging media to reinforce its secular identity. The government implements stringent laws to monitor and control religious institutions, restricts foreign-trained clerics, and oversees the importation of religious literature. Strategic alliances with countries like Turkey, Israel, and Western institutions strengthen Azerbaijan's position and provide additional means to resist Iran's influence. These alliances reflect Azerbaijan's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, prioritizing national interests and modernization objectives over religious or ideological considerations.

The geopolitical context of the South Caucasus, characterized by complex historical legacies and competing regional interests, further intensifies this role conflict. The region serves as a strategic buffer zone and a contested arena for influence among regional powers. Azerbaijan's energy resources and strategic location make it a significant player, while Iran's historical ties and regional ambitions drive its engagement. The clash of NRCs contributes to a complex mix of alliances, rivalries, and tensions that influence security, economic development, and cultural interactions in the region.

Theoretically, this case study illustrates how role theory enhances our understanding of interstate conflicts driven by identity and ideology. It demonstrates that when states adopt roles with conflicting goals and perceptions, role contestation becomes a central feature of their interactions. The conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan is not solely about power or resources but about the fundamental ways in which each state defines itself and perceives its place in the regional and international order. Role theory emphasizes the performative and adaptive nature of these roles, showing how states continuously reinterpret and enact their identities in response to domestic and external pressures.

The implications of this conflict are significant for regional dynamics and international relations. It affects not only the bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan but also the broader stability of the South Caucasus. The identity-driven dimensions of the conflict underscore the limitations of approaches that focus solely on material interests or power dynamics. Addressing conflict requires a nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural, and ideological factors that shape state behaviors.

In conclusion, the interstate role conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan exemplifies how National Role Conceptions rooted in identity and ideology profoundly influence foreign policy and regional interactions. By applying role theory, this study provides a nuanced analysis of the factors driving the conflict, highlighting the centrality of self-perception and identity in international relations. The findings underscore the need for approaches that consider the complexity of identity, ideology, and geopolitical interests. For policymakers and scholars, recognizing the identity-driven aspects of such conflicts is essential for developing strategies that address underlying issues and contribute to regional stability.

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**AGENDA FOR STUDYING THE CAUSES OF THE 44-DAY NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR  
WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF NEOCLASSICAL REALISM: A METHODOLOGICAL  
INTRODUCTION\*\***

***Abstract:** This article aims to contribute to the agenda of the study of the causes of the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war based on theses of theories of International Relations and their conceptions. The article is part of a planned comprehensive study, and it tries to prove that when exploring the roots of the 44-day war within the framework of political Realism of International Relations theory, the most relevant approach is Neoclassical Realism. The study of the causes of the 44-day war through the lenses of theories of International Relations is a more systemic approach to the object of inquiry, which directs the thinking of a scholar to a framework of more comprehensive and logically interrelated variables. It is worth mentioning that this article does not concentrate on the reasons for the 44-day war per se. The article argues that though Structural Realism (among IR realist theories) is very important to focus on the structure and dynamics of the international system (both global and South-Caucasian regional levels), it does not overwhelmingly address the reasons for the 44-day war. Those reasons should be looked for in the foreign policy strategies of the actors in the South Caucasus, as well as in the perception of the regional structure and dynamics by the Armenian elites and their ability to mobilize resources according to those perceptions. The variables are part of the ontology of neoclassical realism.*

***Keywords:** Theories of International Relations; Neoclassical Realism; 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war; distribution of capabilities; balance of power; mobilization of resources.*

### **Introduction**

After the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war, the vision of the security-political preferences of the Republic of Armenia has become a focal point in public and political discourse: Where is the country heading now, and/or where should it go? Since this question has become actual following the 44-day war, it shows that we are dealing with evident and fateful mistakes. Therefore, it is imperative to study the causes of the war with academic depth and a scientific basis to identify the mistakes made and better clarify the vision for the security-political preferences of Armenia. This introductory article aims to contribute to forming a research agenda for studying the causes of the 44-day war. Specifically, forming

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the research agenda is supposed to identify and discuss the variables (and justify their relevance) that would enable practical researchers to examine the causes of the 44-day war's outbreak scientifically and comprehensively. Identifying these variables will provide a conceptual basis for studying the causes of the war. By examining the explanatory capacities of the Realist theory of International Relations, we indirectly develop the thesis that a systematic and substantiated study of the causes of the 44-day war requires reliance on the academic tools of International Relations research, which include theories and conceptual frameworks in the field of International Relations.

The hypothesis and central idea of the article is that if the study of the causes of the 44-day war is conducted within Realist theory, Neoclassical Realism's ontology as a branch of Realist theory is the most appropriate theoretical framework to be chosen. To substantiate this line of reasoning, the article first argues that Structural Realism, as a direction within the Realist School, is insufficient on its own to address the causes of the 44-day war fully. This is because the war's outbreak cannot solely be attributed to changes in the distribution of power (balance of power) in the South Caucasus. Second, the article argues that the shift in the distribution of power led to a critical tipping point for the outbreak of war due to either a failure to adequately perceive the change or a lack of resource mobilization in response to it. These latter factors, which are variables within the ontology of Neoclassical Realism, are essential to understanding the causes of war.

The local academic publications related to the topic of this article focus on the dynamics of the geopolitical architecture of the South Caucasus through the lens of various theories, directions, and concepts in International Relations. Some publications explore the theoretical interpretation of factors influencing different directions of Armenia's foreign policy. For instance, Narek Sukiasyan has extensively studied the Russian orientation of Armenia's foreign policy, interpreting it based on the principles of various theories of International Relations (Sukiasyan 2020, 61–72; Sukiasyan, 2022). Other works address the theoretical understanding of the regional policies of external actors in the region. For example, Anna Gevorgyan reflects on the concept of "Prudent Realism" in the context of Iran's South Caucasus policy, attempting to uncover the underlying framework of Iran's interests in the region (Gevorgyan 2023, 7–32). Levon Hovsepian employs the principles of positivist Liberalism and Constructivism to study the causes of Turkey's increasingly aggressive foreign policy, particularly focusing on the internal motivations for changes in Turkey's South Caucasus policies (Hovsepian 2018, 33–48). These and other publications undoubtedly touch upon factors and variables that have influenced the outbreak of the 44-day war.

The topic of the causes of the 44-day war has begun to gain scientific interpretation by local researchers. For instance, Erik Davtyan has examined the decision-making process behind launching a war against Nagorno-Karabakh, focusing on Azerbaijan's perceptions of the international community's

response (Davtyan 2024, 26–36). Philip Gamaghelyan and Sergey Rumyantsev direct the research focus on uncovering the causes of the war toward the narrative strategies of Armenian and Azerbaijani political and intellectual elites, as well as the processes of narrative and myth formation within Armenian and Azerbaijani societies (Gamaghelyan & Rumyantsev 2021, 320–336). Arman Grigoryan addresses the causes of the war from the perspective of the impact of revolutionary laws on conflict management, specifically in the context of leadership that came to power through revolutionary means (Grigoryan 2024, 372–406).

The scientific novelty of this article lies in the fact that, for the first time, albeit not in-depth, it addresses the question of the relevance and capacity of competing International Relations theories to comprehensively address the causes of the 44-day war. At this stage, the focus is on comparing the ontologies of theories within the domain of Political Realism, specifically Structural Realism and Neoclassical Realism, as one of the most popular and easily comprehensible theoretical approaches.

#### **The necessity of application and conceptualization of theories and conceptions in studying the 44-day war**

The outbreak of war, the conditions leading to it, and its prevention are foundational issues in the discipline of International Relations. While International Relations theory primarily focuses on the conditions and causes of major wars (Gleditsch 1995, 584; Sagan & Waltz 2002, 4; Mandelbaum 1998, 20),<sup>1</sup> many approaches and concepts developed over decades for understanding the dynamics of large-scale conflicts are also applicable to studying wars between smaller states, such as the 44-day war. These approaches and concepts are relevant to analyzing the causes of the 44-day war, at the very least because there is broad agreement among both the Armenian and international academic and analytical communities that the war's outbreak was an organic part of not only regional but also global geopolitical developments (Jovic'-Lazić' 2021, 227–231; Avdaliani 2022, 1–17; Grigoryan, 2021).<sup>2</sup> This alignment

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<sup>1</sup> Although there is no unequivocal or universally accepted definition of "major wars" (or "general wars") within the academic community, the concept has been widely debated. For instance, Nils Petter Gleditsch, a researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, discusses this issue by referencing a statement made by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter in a 1992 speech. Carter claimed that "at present, 35 major wars are taking place worldwide," defining "major war" as a conflict with at least 1,000 casualties. Despite the lack of consensus on a precise definition, there is a general understanding that "major wars" are those involving two or more key actors in international politics. Kenneth Waltz, one of the most prominent theorists in International Relations, approaches the issue from the opposite perspective, defining peace as the absence of war among the world's most powerful states. Meanwhile, Michael Mandelbaum, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, describes major wars as conflicts initiated by the most powerful states, characterized by the deployment of significant resources and arsenals.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Ana Jović-Lazić, a senior researcher at the Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade, develops the argument in her study on the causes of the 44-day war that, although ensuring its presence in the South Caucasus is of critical importance for Russia, the country chose not to counter Turkey's expanding influence in the region. This decision was made in exchange for cooperation or non-competition with Turkey in addressing its priorities on other fronts. For more on the impact of global balance shifts on the geopolitical

highlights the value of employing International Relations theories to contextualize and understand the war's dynamics.

### **The important but insufficient ability of Structural Realism to explain the causes of the 44-day war**

As a dominant direction in the theoretical framework of International Relations, Realism argues that wars emerge because of changes in the balance of power (Sheehan, 1996). This change can occur either due to a significant increase (or decrease) in the military capacity of one (or more) of the system's key actors or as a consequence of the failure of diplomacy (when the balance of interests between actors cannot be maintained through diplomatic means). However, while Structural Realism provides a useful lens for understanding these shifts, it solely is not enough to fully explain the specific dynamics and causes of the 44-day war.

Beyond the two conditions mentioned earlier, the factors of miscalculation and/or misperception are highly emphasized in literature as crucial in the outbreak of war. Abshire (former head of the Center for Strategic and International Studies) and Dickson criticized the tendency of defense planners and intelligence analysts to overlook the role of miscalculation and misperception in predicting wars (Abshire & Dickson 1983, 114). At the same time, the importance of considering these factors in the broader, more objective, and systematic context of the factors influencing the outbreak of war is highlighted. For example, Jack Levy, analyzing the literature on misperception, concludes that conceptualizing the factor of misperception is crucial for completing the theory of war. However, he also acknowledges that the claim that miscalculation or misperception could independently and autonomously trigger the outbreak of war requires substantial justification (Levy 1983, 99).

Nevertheless, considering that miscalculations or misperceptions, as causes of war, are not systematic but rather accidental phenomena, it is more pertinent to focus on the systematic causes of war - specifically, the changes in the balance of power. The concept of the balance of power (and the dynamics of its formation and disruption) is, at first glance, most comprehensible within the framework of Structural Realism. This orthodox approach fundamentally posits that Structural Realism identifies the structure of the international system—particularly the distribution of power among its units, their alignments, and the content of the power balance itself—as the primary determinant of war or peace (Waltz 1979, 102–129).<sup>1</sup> If we consider that the 44-day war was a consequence of disruptions in the

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architecture of the South Caucasus, see, for example, Avdaliani (2022, 1–17). For studies by domestic analysts see Grigoryan Tigran (2021, *The Multilayered Causes of the War*).

<sup>1</sup> In his foundational work, Kenneth Waltz, the founder of the Structural Realism school, argues that among the three characteristics defining the international system—organizing principle, the functional nature of units, and the distribution of capabilities—it is the third that dictates state behavior, as the first two are stable and immutable.



balance of power, not only in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations but also at a macro-regional level (primarily due to Turkey's significant rise and Russia's relative decline), as well as at a global level, given the ongoing reshaping of the world order, it becomes evident that the ontology of Structural Realism is crucial for understanding the causes of the 44-day war. Reiterating once more, Structural Realism views state behavior as a response to the power configurations (balance of power) within the international system and their changes (Waltz 1979, 79-101).

When examining Azerbaijan's initiation of the 44-day war through this lens, the following observations can be made:

- Azerbaijan initiated the war because it had achieved military superiority over Armenia. This shift in bilateral power balance made Azerbaijan confident in its ability to prevail militarily (Iskandaryan et al., 2024, 189-197).
- Azerbaijan initiated the war because of the increased influence of its strategic ally, Turkey, in the South Caucasus, which coincided with the relative decline of Armenia's strategic ally, Russia. This was manifested in Turkey's substantial military support to Azerbaijan (Hovsepyan & Tonoyan 2024, 622-655).
- The weakening of Russian influence or the rise of Turkish influence (a shift in the regional balance) was a consequence of broader systemic changes at the global level.

These changes can be summarized as follows: The unipolarity of the international system, which characterized the early 2000s, began to be challenged by key actors in global politics, particularly China and Russia. China's challenge materialized through significant expansion in military power, alongside increasing economic and cultural influence in various regions globally. Russia's challenge occurred primarily within its neighboring regions (post-Soviet space), where it sought to expand its military influence (Mearsheimer, 2024). The attempt to expand Russia's military influence, often in the absence of equivalent economic and cultural foundations, frequently led to adverse effects, effectively weakening its position in certain regions, including the South Caucasus. This dynamic created an opening for Azerbaijan to launch the 44-day war. It is important to substantiate the argument that the weakening of Russia's influence (a shift in the regional power balance) played a crucial role in the initiation of the 44-day war. Within some political and analytical circles in Armenia, the thesis that the war was a result of a Russo-Turkish or Russo-Turkish-Azerbaijani agreement is frequently discussed. Without delving into the validity of this perspective due to a lack of conclusive evidence, it is important to highlight the

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Regarding the organizing principle, Waltz asserts that international systems have always been, are, and will remain anarchic. Under conditions of anarchy, states become functionally similar actors, as their primary concern becomes survival. The principle guiding their behavior to ensure survival is self-help and self-interest. This fundamental feature of the international system creates an environment where the distribution of capabilities among states becomes the key factor influencing their actions and interactions.

following arguments. Even if we accept that the war was initiated with Russia's acquiescence, it must also be acknowledged that this acquiescence was likely achieved under Turkish and Azerbaijani pressures. Years earlier, Russia might have been able to resist such pressures, but by the eve of the war, this was no longer possible. This aspect is noteworthy because no power willingly shares its sphere of influence with another. From the perspective of Political Realism, this is an axiomatic truth. The South Caucasus is a region that Russia considers part of its vital interest zone. Any weakening of its influence there could lead to unpredictable and dangerous developments for Moscow. If we consider the thesis that Russia's acquiescence to the 44-day war was a deliberate strategic trade-off rather than a demonstration of incapacity, this interpretation will fall beyond the explanatory reach of Structural Realism. Addressing this possibility would require further analytical frameworks, which we will explore in subsequent analyses.

The ontology of Structural Realism plays a crucial role in explaining shifts in the balance of power. Therefore, the comprehensive and detailed study of the global reconfiguration of the international system and the dynamics of the regional system is indispensable for understanding both the causes of the 44-day war and the ongoing dangerous developments. Structural Realism provides essential insights into how power dynamics at multiple levels—global, regional, and bilateral—interact to shape state behavior, illustrating its significant explanatory capacity while highlighting areas that may necessitate complementary theoretical tools.

### **The necessary but insufficient explanatory power of Structural Realism: the need to examine war causes from the perspective of Neoclassical Realism**

Despite the aforementioned, the following critical question remains open: what role did internal factors play in the disruption of the Armenian-Azerbaijani balance of power, and how significant were they? This question can be reframed as follows:

1. Would Azerbaijan have initiated the war even under favorable transformations in international and regional systems if it had understood that breaking through the Armenian side's defense (the defense concept) was impossible or that it would face a devastating counterstrike from the Armenian side (the deterrence concept)?

2. To what extent did the Armenian (Republic of Armenia and Artsakh) authorities, military-political leadership, and foreign policy officials accurately comprehend the dynamics of international and macro-regional systems, changes in the balance of power, and the capabilities of their military, political, economic, and social potential?

These questions, in our view, are of critical importance, as the answers to them determine why the 44-day war was initiated specifically during that period (autumn of 2020) and unfolded on such a scale, or whether the war could have been avoided altogether<sup>1</sup>.

The discussion of these practical questions can be framed within the following broader theoretical inquiries:

1. What is the significance of internal factors in shaping a state's foreign policy behavior?
2. What determines the differences in a state's foreign policy behavior, given the consistent constraints and pressures imposed by the international system?

These theoretical inquiries fall outside the research domain of Structural Realism. This is precisely where the need arises to draw on the ontology of Neoclassical Realism. Followers of this direction of Realism, while accepting the Structural Realist premise that state behavior is a response to the dictates of the international system, also argue that the nature of this response depends on the internal factors of the state (Rose 1998, 144-172). According to the prominent representative of this direction, Gideon Rose, the nature of the state's response to the international system's demands and whether this response aligns with the state's interests depends on two key factors: first, the way the system's demands are perceived by the leader and elite; and second, the degree of ability to mobilize resources to respond to these demands (Rose 1998, 158-165). Notably, in this sense, Structural Realism and Neoclassical Realism do not contradict each other. According to Brian Rathbun, Neoclassical Realism is the organic continuation of Structural Realism. While Structural Realism is a theory of international politics, Neoclassical Realism is a theory of foreign policy (Rathbun 2008, 294-321). We find it necessary to emphasize once again that foreign policy is, indeed, a response to the signals of the international system. In this regard, one cannot disagree with the claims made by Structural Realist theorists Kenneth Waltz and John

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<sup>1</sup> The issue holds significant public resonance and sensitivity in Armenia, sparking endless political and analytical debates. For example, the first president of the Republic of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, claims that the war would have occurred regardless of circumstances if territorial concessions were not made (Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Speech at the ANC Congress, March 28, 2017). On the other hand, the third president, Serzh Sargsyan, argues that the war could have been avoided if the negotiation process inherited by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in May 2018 had been preserved and continued. Sargsyan links this to the importance of maintaining the chief negotiator's role. In an interview on February 15, 2021, he specifically stated, "Based on geopolitical realities and the belief that if the chief negotiator changes, the negotiation process will undergo changes that will be fateful for our country... I agreed to be elected Prime Minister for this very reason" (Serzh Sargsyan, February 15, 2021). For a detailed understanding of Nikol Pashinyan's stance on the inevitability of the 44-day war, refer to his article "The Origins of the 44-Day War" (Nikol Pashinyan, The Origins of the 44-Day War). Some public and political figures or analysts assert that the war could have been prevented through proper diplomacy, military policy, and governance in other areas. For instance, Vartan Oskanian, at the scientific-practical conference "The Imperative of International Recognition of the Republic of Artsakh" on February 24, 2023, expressed the view that there was a genuine opportunity to prevent the war (Vartan Oskanian, The Imperative of International Recognition of the Republic of Artsakh). Addressing the cost of preventing the war, which would have entailed territorial concessions, Nikol Pashinyan stated from the National Assembly tribune on April 13, 2022: "Today, people ask, 'Could you have prevented the war?' We could have prevented the war, which would have resulted in the same situation we have now, of course, without victims" (Nikol Pashinyan, We Could Have Prevented the War).

Mearsheimer that even the behavior of the most powerful states is planned, shaped, and manifested based on the constraints of the international system.<sup>1</sup> However, it is impossible to disagree with the idea that a state may respond differently to uniform pressure from the system, a circumstance that is one of the central ideas of Neoclassical Realism (Talliaferro 2000/01, 128-161). Thus, the structure of the international system, the global balance of power, and its dynamics are independent variables, while the state's response is a dependent variable, and the two key factors underlying this response—the state's perception of the structure and dynamics of the system and its ability to mobilize resources—are intermediate variables (Rathbun 2008, 311-318).

Why do we give preference to Neoclassical Realism in investigating the causes of the 44-day war? It is Neoclassical Realism that directs our research focus on a detailed examination of the foreign policy actions of the states involved in the war and the motivations underlying these actions, which is undoubtedly a highly complex and intensive research task. However, we wish to emphasize that one of the important issues of this work is raising this question. We consider it important because we disagree with the circulating notion that the 44-day war would have broken out regardless of everything. We have a strong belief that, with the correct understanding of international and regional realities, proper articulation of national-state interests, and appropriate mobilization of available military, diplomatic, socio-economic, and other resources (without prematurely developing the thesis that the realities were correctly understood but the Armenian military potential was deliberately weakened, or inaction occurred), the war could have been prevented. Proving this belief is not the objective of this article. Our task is to clarify why it is important to direct the research focus on a detailed discussion of the foreign policy actions of the states involved in the war and the motivation behind these actions. Especially since public and political discourse contains numerous statements about the difficulties the current Armenian authorities face in correctly understanding the international situation (Ter-Petrosyan, 2021).

The research perspective of Neoclassical Realism includes not only the foreign policy actions of the state (economic sanctions, military operations, declarations, etc.) but also foreign policy strategies (long-

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Waltz's famous proposition states that, under the anarchic nature of the international system, the behavior of all states is inevitably reactive, meaning it is a response to external stimuli (literally "consequential," implying that it is the result of anarchy that all states act on the principle of self-help) (Waltz 1979, 79-129). Similarly, John Mearsheimer, in his well-known work on the political relations of states, develops the central thesis that states seek dominance over one another, with the ultimate goal being unilateral hegemony. This argument again anchors in the nature of the international system, citing his well-known five principles: (1) the system is anarchic, (2) states possess substantial military power, (3) states are uncertain about each other's intentions, (4) states are rational actors, and (5) the principal concern and goal of states is survival (Mearsheimer 2001, 29-46). Thus, according to Mearsheimer, the nature of the international system is shaped by the realities these principles represent, meaning even a powerful state bases its behavior on the dictates of the international system. Therefore, both factions of Structural Realism, Defensive Realism of Kenneth Waltz and Offensive Realism of John Mearsheimer, posit that states' behavior is the reaction to the decisive causes of the structure of the international system: the differences between propositions of Offensive and Defensive factions lie in the kinds of those reactions.

term military, economic, and diplomatic preparations for military action, etc.). In this sense, the first task is to uncover the fundamental cause of the 44-day war—the change in the balance of power in the South Caucasus and the strategies of external actors in this change, which requires directing the research focus, among other things, to the following issues:

- What strategy did Turkey adopt to alter the balance of power in the South Caucasus in its favor?
- What strategy did Russia adopt to maintain the balance of power in the South Caucasus in its favor?
- What strategy did the West (the term is conditional) adopt to alter the balance of power in the South Caucasus to the detriment of Russia and Iran?
- What strategy did Iran adopt to prevent the alteration of the balance of power in the South Caucasus to its detriment?
- What strategy did Azerbaijan adopt to alter the Armenian-Azerbaijani balance of power in its favor?
- What strategy did the Republics of Armenia and Artsakh adopt to prevent the alteration of the Armenian-Azerbaijani balance of power in favor of Azerbaijan?

These issues are undoubtedly substantial and multifaceted, each of which is a topic for separate and extensive research. The content of the aforementioned strategies includes arms acquisition, army modernization, economic projects, diplomatic strategies, propaganda, and so on. Therefore, for domestic professional and political thought, there exists a large and broad research agenda, capable of revealing the processes that led to a large-scale war. Secondly, it is necessary to identify the critical point at which the described change in the balance of power in the South Caucasus led directly to the 44-day war. This research question also involves examining and, if possible, confirming or refuting the assumptions circulating in public, political, and journalistic circles, including, among others, the following:<sup>1</sup>

1. It was possible that the change in the balance of power in the South Caucasus, which occurred as a result of the implementation of the strategies of the aforementioned actors, might not have led to war, but instead altered the Armenian-Azerbaijani status quo through diplomatic means. In other words, the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiation process could have reached a new stage, which could have been less favorable to Armenia but still substantially brought the political resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue closer. Public figures or experts supporting this assumption pointed to the high legitimacy of the ruling political force in Armenia since the spring of 2018 (Oskanyan, 2023).
2. It was possible to prevent or delay large-scale military actions by Azerbaijan if the Armenian authorities had made the necessary diplomatic efforts to continue the negotiation process based on the Madrid Principles within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs

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<sup>1</sup> We prefer to primarily focus on the thesis related to the capabilities of preventing the war. It is well-known that in opposition public and political circles, the thesis is widely circulated that the current Armenian authorities had all the possible means to prevent the war, to end it quickly, or to avoid defeat, but deliberately chose not to use these opportunities (Jamalyan, 2024).

of Armenia, Vartan Oskanian, stated at the "The Imperative of International Recognition of the Republic of Artsakh" scientific-practical conference that any war can be prevented using correct diplomacy. Regarding the outbreak of the 44-day war, he accused the current Armenian leadership of inaction in addressing the rupture in the negotiation process (Oskanyan, 2023).

3. It was possible to prevent or delay the 44-day war if the correct and effective approaches were applied in the organization of military affairs, acquisition of armaments, and development of the defense industry, through which the imbalance in the military strength between Armenia and Azerbaijan would not have become so significant.<sup>1</sup>

4. It was possible to prevent or delay the 44-day war if the Armenian leadership had worked effectively within the framework of allied and partner countries, including by involving Diaspora organizations.<sup>2</sup>

### **Conclusion**

All the questions we have raised, encompassing both strategic and tactical dimensions, align with the ontology of Neoclassical Realism. This framework examines how states perceive and interpret challenges posed by the international system and assesses their capacity to develop and deploy appropriate responses. In other words, for specialists researching the causes of the 44-day war, it is crucial to uncover the impact of changes in the global balance of power on the South Caucasian subsystem, the way this influence was perceived by Armenia's leaders and elites (primarily by Prime Minister Pashinyan and his political team), and the ability to utilize Armenia's military, political, diplomatic, and economic capabilities in preventing the war. Thus, Neoclassical Realism, which examines both the constraints imposed by the international system on a state's behavior and issues

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<sup>1</sup> In the chapter "Exit on Land, Predetermined Air" of the monograph "Storm in the Caucasus" (authors: Armenian military expert Leonid Nersisyan and British expert Mark Kazalet), the authors point out that the strategic defeat of the Armenian side was linked to granting Azerbaijan the opportunity to achieve air superiority (Nersisyan & Kazalet 2021, 63-73). For example, Vasili Kashin, a researcher at the Institute of the Far East of the Russian Academy of Sciences, emphasizes that Azerbaijan's military purchases in the period leading up to the 44-day war were much more targeted and deliberate than those of Armenia. According to him, the Azerbaijanis "...didn't waste money; they carefully considered all the modern trends in military affairs, bought what was needed, and studied the experience of war in the Middle East...". Military affairs theorist and journalist Mikhail Khodaryonok draws attention to the fact that the air defense system of Artsakh was designed to counterattack helicopters and strike aircraft, "whereas in the sky, they were facing relatively small drones" (Aksenov, Why Azerbaijan Won the War in Karabakh?). Russian military expert Pavel Felgenhauer considers the absence of mobile artillery as a key reason for Armenia's defeat (the enemy's drones suppressed Armenia's slow-moving artillery) (News.am, Russian Military Expert Highlights the Main Cause of Armenia's Defeat in the 44-Day War).

<sup>2</sup> International relations expert Hermine Mkhitarian, for example, argues in certain sections of her monograph that after coming to power in 2018, the government led by Nikol Pashinyan significantly worsened Armenia's relations with Russia, the United States, Europe, Georgia, Iran, and China, which had a negative impact on Armenia's ability to prevent the 44-day war, particularly in terms of receiving support from these actors or exerting influence on Azerbaijan. According to the author, during the period from July to September 2020, when Azerbaijan was intensively preparing for military actions and actively conducting diplomatic and propaganda preparations, Armenian diplomacy was effectively inactive (Mkhitarian 2022, 69-84; 99-103).

related to its perception and ability to respond, is more relevant within the framework of Realist theory in international relations when addressing the causes of the 44-day war. However, while it is relevant, it is not without explanatory shortcomings, and we are hopeful that in subsequent sections, we will discuss the necessity of combining it with other theories.

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**TURKEY'S RETURN TO HARD POWER: CONCEPT OF THE "PRECIOUS LONELINESS"\*\***

**Abstract:** *The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to significant changes in the international system, bringing about several new realities. Among these were the reshaping of the geopolitical landscape, shifts in military-political power, the need for fresh relations with Russia, and the formation of three new states in Turkey's immediate neighborhood—challenges that required a clear and thoughtful response from Turkey's foreign policy. When the Justice and Development Party assumed power in Turkey in 2002, public diplomacy and soft power became essential elements of Turkey's foreign policy. As a result of several geopolitical developments and changes in Turkey's immediate neighborhood and the Middle East, hard power has reemerged as a key element in Turkey's foreign policy since the 2010s.*

*This article explores the reintegration of hard power into Turkey's foreign policy, focusing specifically on Ahmet Davutoğlu and İbrahim Kalın, along with their respective approaches of "Zero Problems with Neighbors" and "Precious Loneliness." It aims to highlight that Turkey's foreign policy is a multifaceted and complex process, where various governmental institutions contribute and compete to influence the formulation and execution of foreign policy. In addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other entities, such as the Ministry of National Defense and the National Intelligence Organization, are playing increasingly important roles in shaping the country's foreign policy.*

**Keywords:** *Turkey; Foreign Policy; Public Diplomacy; Soft Power; Ahmet Davutoğlu; İbrahim Kalın.*

**Introduction**

In the early years of the Justice and Development Party's government in Turkey, the foreign policy vision developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, based on his book *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*, brought some successes by strengthening the country's reputation as a reliable partner, especially in the West. In addition to the new foreign policy, Turkey enhanced its reputation in the West due to the reforms introduced by the party (Patton, 2006) and the government's democratic approach to internal political developments in Turkey (Insel, 2003). The foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party, based on Davutoğlu's theory, has been regarded as a true combination of Eastern identity and Western values.

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In December 2010, a self-immolation during a demonstration in Tunisia is widely viewed as the event that sparked the Arab Spring. Among other factors, this event posed significant challenges for Turkish foreign policy. Interestingly, Turkey did not have a unified position on the consequences in the Middle East resulting from the Arab Spring. It is widely interpreted that, during the early stages of the Arab Spring, Turkey supported the revolutionary processes in Yemen and Egypt but took a more reserved stance on the antigovernment protests in Syria and Libya (Sumer, 2013). The key to the failure of Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East was the wrong strategy of Turkey's foreign policy towards the ongoing processes in Egypt. Turkey actively engaged in the political processes of Egypt starting in 2011, and many believed this was an attempt to interfere in the country's internal affairs (Khalifa 2017, 104).

The crises Turkey faced with key countries from various regions, coupled with tense relations with Middle Eastern nations, revealed the shortcomings of the foreign policy developed by Davutoğlu, where public diplomacy and soft power played a pivotal role.

From the outset of the Arab Spring, it became evident that Davutoğlu's policy of "zero problems with neighbors" led to more challenges instead of contributing to their resolution. As a result, Turkey was compelled to reshape its foreign policy toward the Middle East and find an alternative to the policy of "zero problems with neighbors." The push for an alternative foreign policy in the Middle East led to a broader shift, contributing to the transformation of Turkey's entire foreign policy, with its beginnings often marked in 2013.

### **New theoretical approach to Turkish foreign policy: "precious loneliness"**

The transformation of Turkish foreign policy was directly influenced by the major shifts in the Middle East caused by the Arab Spring. Ibrahim Kalın, as the foreign policy advisor to the Turkish Prime Minister, played a crucial role in this transformation. It is worth noting that Davutoğlu's policy was underpinned by a thorough theoretical framework in his "Strategic Depth" (Davutoğlu, 2001), while the alternative to this policy emerged from a single note by Kalın on the "X" platform. Reflecting on the criticism of the Turkish foreign policy that Turkey has no partners and support in the international arena, especially in the Middle East, Kalın argued. "The claim of Turkey's loneliness in the Middle East was untrue, but if this was the claim, then I should say this is a 'precious' loneliness." (Kalın, 2013). The term "precious loneliness," coined by Kalın, quickly became a key expression for describing the emerging logic of Turkish foreign policy. Explaining the term that he used, Kalın noted, "At some point in history there comes a time where you stand by the truth all alone when the world keeps silent against coups and slaughters. You do not give up your principles and values because your allies and other countries do not stand by you. This is not being alone but presenting an honorable stance. I used

‘precious loneliness’ also as taking the risk of being alone for the sake of defending the values one deems right. Once you are left with such a choice, the right move is to stick to your principles, which are correct both for your national interests and the international policy. If this places you in a different position than the rest, this is a ‘value-centered loneliness,’ and this actually is a precious loneliness.” (Kalin, 2013).

Notably, Kalın is a figure whose name is directly associated with Davutoğlu and his foreign policy approach, and he also played a key role in advocating for the use of soft power and public diplomacy in Turkish foreign policy. Kalın presented his ideas on Turkish public diplomacy and soft power in the article "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey" (Kalin, 2011), which was published when he was the head of the Public Diplomacy Coordination Board under the Prime Ministry. Furthermore, in 2011, Kalın recognized Turkey as a significant soft power, emphasizing that the key sources of Turkey's soft power include its young population, long historical connections, rich cultural ties, and a flourishing economy (Kalin 2011, 19). Nonetheless, the subsequent events made it evident that Kalın’s strategy in Turkish foreign policy contributed more to the reemergence of hard power than to strengthening the role of soft power and public diplomacy.

### **Comparing the foreign policy visions of Ahmet Davutoğlu and İbrahim Kalın**

It should be emphasized that Kalın’s views on the potential of Turkish public diplomacy and soft power differed significantly from Davutoğlu’s vision. According to Ahmet Davutoğlu, the coexistence of diverse peoples with differing value systems, cultures, and religions in the Ottoman Empire allowed Turkey to serve as a bridge for these peoples and, to a certain degree, to play the role of a pioneer advocating for their interests abroad, while Kalın holds a different view: “Turkey has acquired a negative image due to past mistakes and was prevented from conducting effective public diplomacy... Turkey’s new narrative is more than creating a new image. Rather, it reflects the new identity which the country wants to embrace to overcome its past mistakes and chart a new course for its social and political future” (Kalin 2011, 12). Additionally, he contends that changing the negative image of Turkey is not something that can happen overnight: “For instance, reshaping the Turkish-Ottoman image, or updating it in accordance with today’s realities is a difficult task. Despite the many efforts of the two-century-long experience of modernization, the new communication tools that globalization provides, the presence of almost five million Turks living in Europe, and all the efforts Turkey has made to join the EU, the images of the Turk, Ottoman, Muslim, and Middle Easterners in many European countries are still shaped by perceptions inherited from the Middle Ages” (Kalin 2011, 17). Here is another interesting example of how Kalın describes the negative image of Turks: “In some circles abroad, Turkey is

presented as a country invading Cyprus, murdering Armenians, and executing military operations in neighboring territories in the name of fighting against the PKK” (Kalin 2011, 16).

For the reasons mentioned above, which Kalin discusses in his article, he proposes putting more effort into creating a new identity for Turkey, rather than focusing on its image. The main takeaway from his arguments is that instead of confronting the factors that shaped Turkey’s negative image internationally, Kalin recommends reframing them from an alternative perspective and playing a role in altering global perceptions of Turkey.

Interestingly, at the time Ibrahim Kalin wrote his article, Ahmet Davutoğlu was the Foreign Minister of Turkey, and his theory still dominated Turkish foreign policy. While Kalin and Davutoğlu shared many common views on Turkish public diplomacy and soft power, notable differences also began to surface. The 2013 note on the "X" platform, rather than the article discussed above, was the crucial element that altered the direction of Turkish foreign policy.

### **Reflections on "precious loneliness": diverging views of criticism and endorsement**

The term "precious loneliness," coined by Kalin, has gained significant attention in the Turkish press. Only three weeks after that note, a columnist linked to the Turkish Republican People's Party, the main opposition party in Turkish politics, criticized the foreign policy of Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party, noting that Turkey, which once played a pivotal role in Syria, no longer had an ambassador in Damascus. Highlighting that Turkey is no longer seen as a country with a decisive role in the region, even by its neighbors, he argued that Turkey had abandoned its traditional "peace at home, peace in the world" policy, eroded its soft power, and diminished the strengths of its foreign policy (Kara, 2013).

However, the concept of "precious loneliness" was also met with severe criticism from the main opposition party. One of the prominent figures shaping the foreign policy of the Turkish Republican People's Party, Osman Korutürk—who had previously served as Turkey's ambassador to Tehran, Oslo, Berlin, and Paris and later entered Parliament from Istanbul in 2011 after leaving the foreign service—described Kalin’s policy as nonsense (Konuralp, 2013). While it faced criticism, it also garnered some support. In particular, another columnist published an article in the Turkish media analyzing the Turkish government's stance on Syria, Egypt, and Iran, and voiced complete solidarity with Kalin’s vision for the new Turkish foreign policy (Acet, 2013).

From the outset, the term "precious loneliness" was used in Turkish media to characterize Turkey's foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. However, this perspective shifted significantly due to a major internal event in modern Turkey. The protests at Istanbul’s Gezi Park and the government's violent crackdown on these protests in 2013 sparked strong criticism of the Turkish government,

particularly from the West. As a result of this criticism, some parts of the Turkish public felt aggrieved, and the "precious loneliness" policy emerged as the most effective response to it (Gürcanlı, 2013).

As discussions around the term grew within the public, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), though not officially, responded to Kalın's vision. In particular, a leak in the Turkish media revealed the MFA's stance on the matter. It was claimed that the MFA remained committed to Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy and that Kalın's "precious loneliness" was merely a reflection of his personal views (Ergan, 2013). From our perspective, even if unofficially, the term had already become a key principle guiding the shift in Turkish foreign policy at that point. These discussions, coupled with the effort to find the most suitable formulation of Turkish foreign policy that would encompass all the internal and external developments of the time, ran parallel to the increasing criticism of Prime Minister Davutoğlu and his foreign policy stance. In October 2014, Tarhan Erdem, who had previously served as Minister of Industry and Technology in Bülent Ecevit's government, published an article (Erdem, 2014) that rocked the Turkish media, criticizing Prime Minister Davutoğlu's rhetoric in internal political discussions. The criticism was further extended by Baskın Oran, a prominent scholar and politician, with a focus on Davutoğlu's foreign policy. Oran summed up Davutoğlu's role in one phrase, claiming that while he was once the best, he is now worse than ever. Oran stated that, aside from Bulgaria and Georgia, Turkey has issues with every neighbor, specifically pointing to Turkey-Armenia relations and claiming that Turkey had discarded the normalization protocols signed with Armenia (Oran, 2014). Oran's article seemed to signal the end of the wave of criticism directed at Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" policy and Davutoğlu's approach to foreign policy.

### **Reintegration of hard power into Turkey's foreign policy**

The incident on November 24, 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 aircraft near the Turkish-Syrian border, can be seen as a turning point, overshadowing Turkey's public diplomacy and soft power in favor of a move toward hard power. From this point on, the reintegration of Turkey's hard power in its foreign policy became evident through several actions, particularly in Syria. In pursuit of its stated goals in Syria, Turkey carried out and implemented various military operations, such as Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. Moreover, a report by the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA), a non-profit institute, noted the clear absence of Turkish public diplomacy during Operation Euphrates Shield, which should have been employed to counter various groups spreading anti-Turkish propaganda (Yeşiltaş, Seren & Özçelik 2017, 43).

Thus, Turkey's foreign policy, initially based on soft power and public diplomacy under the AKP government and influenced by Davutoğlu's policy, shifted toward the concept of "precious loneliness" as formulated by Kalın, where hard power became more central.

Moreover, the reintegration of hard power into Turkish foreign policy resulted in several tangible consequences on the ground. The involvement of the Turkish army and military structures in the country's internal political processes has been evident since the 1960 military coup, with the failed coup attempt of 2016 being the most recent illustration. At different points in the history of the republic, the Turkish army's involvement in political processes has been shaped by conflicts with civilian authorities, with these contradictions often erupting in violence. After the 2016 failed coup attempt, the Turkish military was gradually brought fully under the control of the president and civilian leadership. Alongside this process, Turkey's approach to international relations became more rigid, with a renewed emphasis on hard power in foreign policy. Consequently, the Turkish military and intelligence became engaged in foreign policy processes, but under the complete supervision and guidance of the Turkish government. Notably, Turkey boosted its military presence overseas by setting up operations in multiple countries. It became increasingly common for the Turkish military to be directly or indirectly involved in military operations abroad. Particularly significant to the militarization of Turkish foreign policy are the military operations carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces in the Middle East and its role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Mehmetcik & Çelik, 26).

### **New foreign policy actors driving Turkey's hard power**

Developing and executing foreign policy in Turkey has always been a complex, multi-layered process, shaped by numerous actors. At the same time, Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has maintained undisputed authority over foreign policy, a legacy that traces back to the Ottoman Empire. Despite the Ottoman Empire's reservations about establishing diplomatic relations with other states and using diplomacy as a tool, particularly from its formative years through its 16th-century peak, it is clear that the Empire left a notable legacy in diplomacy and engagement with the outside world. Beginning in the second part of the 19th century, the Hariciye Nezâreti, or Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emerged as one of the most powerful organs of the Empire. While different leaders of the Turkish Republic have held varying views and approaches toward the MFA and its elite, the Ministry, rooted in Ottoman traditions, has consistently been regarded as the most respected bureaucratic institution in Turkey. The MFA was the primary institution responsible for shaping and executing the country's foreign policy. However, this trend changed dramatically at the beginning of the 2010s.

Starting in the second half of the 2010s, when hard power gained greater significance in Turkey's foreign policy, the responsibility for decision-making and implementing foreign policy transitioned from

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the country's defense and security institutions. As part of this shift, the Turkish Ministry of National Defense (Milli Savunma Bakanlığı, MSB) and the National Intelligence Organization (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MİT) assumed a notably active role. Turkey's advancement in defense capabilities and notable progress in the military industry have allowed the country to adopt a more ambitious foreign policy. In addition, it was clear that the development of the defense industry and the calculated use of military force aim to secure Turkey's standing in an evolving regional landscape, where soft power by itself is no longer enough (Karşıyaka & Karşıyaka 2017, 153-155). Sinem Adar claims. "Since 2016, Turkish foreign policy has markedly shifted from soft power policies of the early 2010s towards a hard power approach manifesting at numerous fronts. These include unilateral military incursions into Northern Syria in 2016, 2018, and 2019. ... Türkiye's new military bases in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), including in Qatar, underline this hard power shift" (Adar 2020, 10).

Turkey's evolving foreign policy went hand in hand with the growing influence of the MIT, which progressively became integral to both the development and execution of foreign policy. As a consequence of these developments, Hakan Fidan, who has led the organization since 2013 and is considered one of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's closest confidants, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2023. In line with this, by the decree of the President of Turkey, Ibrahim Kalın took charge of MIT. While discussing this appointment, John Hatzadony and Spyridon Plakoudas argued, "The appointment of Ibrahim Kalın as the new head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization marks another significant transition in the landscape of Turkish intelligence and foreign policy since 2010. ... Kalın's deep involvement in diplomatic and advisory roles suggests a possible emphasis on integrating intelligence findings more directly into foreign policy decision-making. This could result in a more proactive and strategic use of intelligence in shaping Turkey's international relations, especially in its dealings with neighboring regions and global powers" (Hatzadony & Plakoudas 2024, 13).

The current policy of the Republic of Turkey, shaped by these processes, can be regarded as a collective product of various governmental structures, where the MIT, the MSB, and the MFA occupy crucial and decisive positions.

## **Conclusion**

After the formation of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, its foreign policy was deeply shaped by the Ottoman Empire's legacy in international relations and its perception of how to engage with the external world. This understanding was centered around what we now recognize as hard power. After the end of the Second World War, for those guiding Turkey's foreign policy, the country's integration into the Western world order and the international systems it established became a top priority. Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Turkey's neighbor and Great Power, the USSR,



changes occurred not only in the international system but also within Turkey's foreign policy, creating both challenges and opportunities. In the post-Cold War era, the terms "soft power" and "public diplomacy" gained significant traction in the discourse of international relations. Over time, these concepts started to influence Turkey's foreign policy, which had once been regarded as one of the strongest examples of hard power. Following the rise of the Justice and Development Party to power in Turkey in 2002, the foreign policy landscape became more favorable for the implementation of public diplomacy and soft power. The ideological framework for Turkey's public diplomacy and soft power under the AKP government was rooted in the ideas and theories of Ahmet Davutođlu, with his policy serving as a key influence.

Turkey's foreign policy, focused on public diplomacy and soft power, did not fulfill the objectives the country had pursued in the Middle East and other regions since 2010, thus necessitating the creation of an alternative strategy to Davutođlu's vision. This alternative policy, known as precious loneliness, signified not only a shift back to hard power in Turkey's foreign policy but also a re-emphasis on the foreign policy principles and ideas inherited from the Ottoman Empire.

It should be noted that the transition in Turkey's foreign policy from soft power and public diplomacy to hard power does not signify the complete loss of soft power or its potential benefits. As Turkey expands its ambitions in international relations and across different regions, it is diversifying its foreign policy approach, leveraging not only public diplomacy and soft power but also being willing to employ hard power when needed, thus manifesting a power that is commonly referred to as smart power.

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VILEN MNATSAKANYAN\*

## RECONSIDERING THE CONCEPT OF THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST: PATTERNS OF REGIONAL AND SUBREGIONAL DEVELOPMENT DYNAMIC\*\*

**Abstract:** *The Greater Middle East region is one of the main trend makers both in the context of geopolitical processes and in terms of geo-economic and regional shifts in the global economic situation. Rapid economic growth and high involvement in major geopolitical processes make the study of the regional aspect of this issue extremely relevant. The author analyzes the economic, demographic, and logistical aspects of the formation of this region and its current state, as well as the perception of a group of these countries as a separate region by both external players and internal actors. The author concludes that by all the identified criteria, the region is extremely heterogeneous; therefore, both in terms of academic study and in the issue of foreign policy formation, more attention should be paid to sub-regional processes and transformations, which can lead to the development of more effective approaches to understanding the ways of productive communication with the countries of the region.*

**Keywords:** *Greater Middle East; regional cooperation; sub-regional cooperation; demographics; population; geopolitics.*

### Introduction

The Greater Middle East region remains a hub of substantial geopolitical and economic activity, driven by its strategic energy resources, critical trade routes, and burgeoning emerging markets. Its diverse interpretations of borders underscore not only the region's geographic and cultural richness but also its pivotal economic significance. The evolving dynamics of the Greater Middle East—characterized by strong economic growth, shifting political alliances, and emerging security concerns—highlight its expanding role as a critical player in global trade and investment. By encompassing a broader region that includes the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, this concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of economies and the potential for diversified economic relationships. The region's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, coupled with its wealth of energy and natural resources, positions it as a key gateway for trade and commerce. Additionally, its emerging markets offer fertile ground for investment and innovation, enabling stronger integration into the global economy. The Greater Middle East's geoeconomic role is further enhanced by its ability to

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serve as a bridge between major economic blocks, fostering connectivity, regional cooperation, and expanded market access. By leveraging these dynamics, the region has the potential to solidify its position as a cornerstone of international economic and geopolitical strategy.

Along with the vision of the Greater Middle East, with its significant geopolitical, economic, and cultural importance, the concept of this region demands a nuanced and comprehensive understanding. While its broad characterization is widely acknowledged, a more precise definition is crucial for effective research and analysis. To fully grasp the complexities of the region, it is necessary to clearly delineate its geographical and substantive attributes, addressing key questions: What exactly defines this region? What are its boundaries? And, perhaps most importantly, what are the critical trends that shape its development?

Furthermore, exploring the Greater Middle East is not only of theoretical interest but also has profound practical significance. In the realm of foreign policy, understanding the dynamics within and between its constituent sub-regions is essential for crafting effective strategies. This understanding can influence how countries in the region respond to external political, economic, and diplomatic signals. Equally important is recognizing whether these responses are unified across the region or whether distinct sub-regional contexts produce divergent reactions and priorities. A clear understanding of these patterns is indispensable for shaping and refining foreign policy initiatives aimed at the region.

### **Some aspects of the term “Greater Middle East”**

Defining the geographical boundaries of the Greater Middle East is a complex and multifaceted endeavor, as its delineation varies depending on the context in which it is applied. The boundaries of this region are interpreted in different ways in academic, geopolitical, and cultural discourses, reflecting its diversity and complexity. However, physical boundaries are only one aspect of defining the region. Political, historical, and cultural factors also play an important role, complicating the precise boundaries of the Greater Middle East. These aspects highlight the close interconnectedness of the peoples and states of the region, as well as their importance to global economics, politics, and security.

The concept of the "Middle East" is historically rooted in a European perspective, which has significantly shaped Western perceptions and classifications of the region. The term was first popularized in 1902 by Alfred Thayer Mahan, an influential American naval strategist, in his article on strategic issues related to India and the Indian Ocean (Adelson, 1995). Mahan used the term to describe a geographic region of great strategic importance for shipping and trade routes, particularly to India, then a key British colony. His definition of the “Middle East” encompassed the area from the Ottoman Empire in the west to the western borders of India, including the Persian Gulf and other key areas of maritime and commercial control. This understanding of the Middle East reflects the Eurocentric view

that dominated geopolitical thinking in the early 20th century. It highlights that the colonial powers viewed the region primarily through the prism of their strategic and economic interests. This perspective influenced not only how the Middle East was perceived and portrayed in Western discourse, but also the formation of its borders and political structures, especially after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the end of World War I.

A statistical framework commonly used to define the region is the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) classification, as reflected in World Bank studies. According to this definition, MENA encompasses 21 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (World Bank, 2003). This definition does not clearly reflect the real economic component of the region; in particular, it excludes such important countries as Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, despite their obvious religious, cultural, political, and economic connections with the Middle East.

In 2003, International Monetary Fund (IMF) economists Hamid Reza Davoudi and George T. Abed defined the MENA region as follows: “The MENA region includes the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa—Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen—as well as the Islamic State of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, the West Bank, and Gaza.” The authors emphasize that the “24 MENA countries (...) are grouped together for analytical purposes only” (Abed & Davoudi, 2003). Despite the claim that the countries of the region “face common challenges and have cultural ties that distinguish them from neighboring economies” such as Israel and Turkey, the authors acknowledge significant religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity within the region, highlighting the presence of non-Arab nations such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, where Arabic is not the primary language. This illustrates the limitations of the MENA framework, as it struggles to encompass the full range of political, economic, and cultural factors that shape the region. However, the definition excludes Turkey, despite its significant influence on the political, economic, and military processes of the region. Turkey is actively involved in conflicts in the Middle East and is also strengthening economic ties with many MENA countries, making it an important regional player. A similar situation is observed with Israel, which, despite political differences, is an important economic and technological partner for several countries in the region.

According to the regional classification of UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region includes 19 countries. At the same time, this classification is focused on epidemiological analysis and HIV/AIDS programs and considers countries through the prism of common socio-economic and health challenges characteristic of the region, excluding Israel, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (UNAIDS, 2023).

Similarly, the MENA region, as defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), includes 18 countries, excluding several nations that play critical roles in regional migration dynamics, such as Israel, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (UNHCR, 2010). These countries are pivotal sources of migration and serve as transit hubs for refugees, influencing the socio-economic and humanitarian landscape of the region. The exclusion of these countries from the UNHCR's MENA definition has been criticized, as it overlooks the significant role, they play in regional migration patterns and their broader impact on regional stability.

The traditional division of the region into categories like the “Middle East” and “Near East” reflects a deeply Eurocentric perspective. From a Western cultural standpoint, such terms can be seen as an attempt to organize the world according to a framework that aligns with European geographic and strategic interests, often disregarding the internal complexity and diversity of cultures, religions, and political systems in the region. As Osman Nuri Özalp argues in his article “Where is the Middle East? The definition and classification problem of the Middle East as a regional subsystem in international relations,” these terms are products of 19th-century Western imperialism (Özalp, 2011).

Over time, the term “Middle East” has evolved into a modern political concept that has entered international relations discourse, becoming widely adopted by the countries of the region themselves. In the post-Cold War era, and particularly after the events of September 11, 2001, new terms such as “Greater Middle East,” “Broader Middle East,” and “Islamic Middle East” emerged. These new definitions, especially those formulated by the United States in the context of the democratization of the Islamic world, are of particular importance for Turkey, which is considered a model country in the region.

Another alternative to the Eurocentric term “Middle East” is the designation “West Asia.” This geographic term refers to the western part of Asia and is increasingly preferred in academic and analytical contexts due to its neutrality and precision. Unlike the term “Middle East,” “West Asia” avoids the colonial connotations often associated with the former, offering a more geographically accurate and inclusive classification. Interestingly, the definition of “West Asia” varies depending on the context in which it is used. For instance, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) includes countries such as Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan in its 2015 Industrial Development Yearbook, reflecting their geographic location in the western part of Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union (UNIDO, 2015). However, countries like Turkey and Israel, traditionally associated with the Middle East, are not included in this classification by UNIDO, likely due to their distinct political, economic, and institutional interactions with Europe and the West. This reflects a broader trend of defining regions based on industrial, economic, or geopolitical criteria, rather than purely cultural or historical factors.

In the context of defining the region in the framework of geopolitical and economic aspects, the prominent definition comes from Adam Garfinkle of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, who characterizes the Greater Middle East as a region that extends beyond the traditional Middle East to include the countries of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia (Garfinkle, 1999). This broader definition captures a geographically expansive and interconnected area of nations that share economic, energy, and security concerns, making it a pivotal region in global economic and political discourse. This definition is significant because it highlights how economic dynamics in the region are not confined to the Middle East alone but stretch across multiple regions with growing interdependencies.

Another interpretation of the Greater Middle East in the context of geopolitical dynamics emerged in the early 21st century, often associated with the "New Middle East" concept introduced by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2006 (Al Tamimi, 2013). Rice's vision of a restructured region was characterized by what she called "constructive chaos," which suggested that instability and conflict could serve to realign political forces and foster democratic governance.

While this idea has been widely debated and criticized, it led to the framing of what is known as the "Great Middle East Project." This term was used to describe the U.S. and Western-led efforts to reshape the political dynamics of the region. The concept of the "New Middle East" was intended to replace the earlier and broader "Greater Middle East" term, which had been introduced by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2004, during a G-8 Summit (Wittes, 2004). The Greater Middle East under Bush's vision included not only the traditional Middle Eastern countries but also other Asian countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The "New Middle East" project, however, was marked by instability and met with skepticism as it sought to impose changes through strategic realignment and the use of chaos. As Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya of Global Research notes (Nazemroaya, 2014), the United States and Israel expected Lebanon to be a pivotal pressure point in realigning the entire region, but the result was not as planned. The geopolitical and economic consequences of this vision continue to shape regional policies today, revealing the inherent risks of pursuing instability as a means of political transformation.

Further adding to the complexity, former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski referred to the Greater Middle East as the "Global Balkans," emphasizing its strategic significance as a critical region for Eurasia's stability and as a geopolitical focal point (Brzezinski, 1998). Brzezinski highlighted the "political awakening" in the region, suggesting that these changes signal a shift toward a multipolar world order that is reshaping the global balance of power. This evolution in the region offers new opportunities and challenges for countries like Armenia, which may need to rethink its foreign economic policy.



In conclusion, the concept of the Greater Middle East remains fluid and contested, shaped by historical, geopolitical, and cultural factors that complicate its precise definition. While frameworks like MENA and the "Greater Middle East" initiative highlight the region's strategic importance, they also reveal significant gaps in capturing its diversity, particularly regarding countries like Turkey, Israel, and Iran. Understanding these complexities is crucial for crafting effective foreign policies and addressing the region's interconnected challenges in security, economics, and diplomacy.

### **National self-perception within regional contexts: motivations and strategic visions**

In addition to external actors in world politics and economics, it is also important to consider the self-determination of regional players in the context of the vision of the borders of the Greater Middle East region, since it is this aspect that will allow us to better understand the motivation for the actions and strategic plans of these countries.

For Iran, the Greater Middle East is not only a geopolitical space but also a key arena for the implementation of cultural, strategic, and ideological goals. In this context, Iran seeks to strengthen its influence in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf, considering them as important elements of its strategy. Iran actively supports various political and armed groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis, not only to strengthen its regional power but also to position itself as a leader of resistance to Western interference and Israeli expansion. Iran also views Afghanistan as an important part of its geopolitical influence, especially given its ethnic and cultural ties with the Tajiks and other Shia groups, which allows it to strengthen its presence in Central Asia. Iran's influence also extends to Pakistan, where the country maintains close relations with the Shia minority and is involved in a strategic partnership with Pakistani military and political forces. Iran thus sees the region as a space where its ideological and cultural affinity with its neighboring Muslim countries allows it not only to expand its influence but also to counter strategic competitors such as the United States and Israel (Akbarzadeh & Azizi, 2024).

Saudi Arabia sees the Greater Middle East as a key arena for its strategic influence and development. As part of Vision 2030, the country seeks to strengthen its position as an economic and political leader in the region by diversifying its economy, reducing its dependence on oil, and developing high-tech industries. Saudi Arabia is actively working to improve relations with neighboring countries, including Iran and Qatar, in order to stabilize the region. At the same time, it continues to maintain its traditional leadership in the Islamic world, actively participating in Arab and Muslim issues. The country also sees itself as a mediator in regional conflicts, seeking to act as a peacemaker, for example, in the conflict in Yemen and the negotiations on Sudan. However, Saudi Arabia faces challenges such as the need to balance its interests with the UAE, as well as tensions with Iran, which

leaves open the question of the future stability and security of the region (Jakobs, 2023).

For Turkey, the Greater Middle East is seen as a natural area of influence, which is due to the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire. This perspective extends beyond the traditional Middle East, including the Balkans, with Turkey positioning itself as a central power capable of promoting peacemaking in the region. Recent reconciliation efforts with countries such as Syria, Egypt, the UAE, Israel, and Saudi Arabia reflect Turkey's desire to reassert its influence and stabilize the region, which is important for both its national interests and its broader geopolitical strategy. For Turkey, the Middle East remains a vital sphere of influence, and the country seeks to reassert its leadership role as it did during the Ottoman Empire. Turkey also views Pakistan as part of the region, given its strategic location vis-à-vis Iran, as well as shared security and counter-extremism interests. Turkey actively pursues ties with Pakistan, viewing it as an important partner in the context of regional security and geopolitical balances. Turkey also includes the Central Asian countries in its sphere of influence, as these states are of Turkic origin and share cultural and historical ties. Engaging with these countries, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, allows Turkey to strengthen its role as an important player in the Eurasian region and develop cooperation in various areas, from economics to security (Çevik, 2024).

For Israel, the Greater Middle East is primarily defined by security issues and the changing forces in the region. Israel views the region as a place filled with existential threats, especially from Iran and its allies. The focus is on securing borders, countering Iranian expansion, and ensuring regional stability through military power and strategic alliances. Israel sees itself as an important player in reshaping the region, especially through cooperation with Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE to counter common threats. While the Palestinian issue remains important, Israel tends to take a more gradual approach to resolving it. Ultimately, the Middle East for Israel is a region of both challenges and opportunities, where security and military alliances are critical to the country's survival and influence (Yadlin & Golov, 2024)

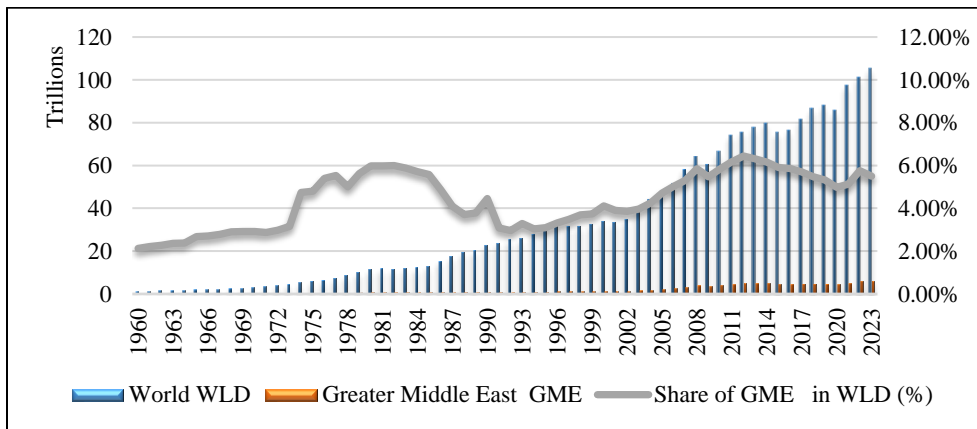
Thus, it can be argued that the concept of the "Greater Middle East" remains ambiguous and polysemantic, as its perception varies depending on the approaches of international organizations, academic circles, and individual regional players. In the context of international politics, for example, the United States and the European Union often view this term as an area covering the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, while countries such as Iran, Turkey, and the Arab states may interpret it in a narrower or, conversely, broader sense. This leads to the fact that there are many versions and interpretations of this concept, each of which carries historical, cultural, and political connotations. The basis for understanding this region is most often a Eurocentric concept, which is based on the geopolitical interests of the West and its ideas about the strategic importance of these territories. Such a concept, to a certain extent, limits the perception of the region, not considering, for example, the

influence of Asian and Central Asian countries, as well as the role of religious and cultural ties that exist between the states of the region and its neighbors. In this study, a more extensive definition of the "Greater Middle East" will be used, which includes not only the traditional Middle East but also the countries of North Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Cyprus, and Israel. This definition is based on a combination of geographical, cultural, political, and religious factors, which allows for a more complete consideration of the interaction and interdependence of various actors in the region. This approach allows not only to expand the boundaries of the region but also to identify new mechanisms and drivers of its development, which play a key role in modern geopolitical processes.

**Economies of the countries of the Greater Middle East**

The Greater Middle East has increasingly become a crucial player in the global economy. Its economic importance has grown significantly over recent decades, which is evident from its rising share of global GDP. In 1960, the region accounted for just 2.13% of the world’s total GDP. By 2023, however, this share had increased to 5.5% (Figure 1), marking a substantial growth of 3.37 percentage points over the course of more than 60 years. This increase reflects the growing integration of the Greater Middle East into global economic frameworks and its expanding role in global trade, finance, and resource markets. The driving force behind this economic expansion has been primarily the region’s rich natural resources, particularly oil and gas, which have historically played a dominant role in shaping its economic landscape. Oil-exporting countries within the Middle East have witnessed substantial economic growth, with revenues from energy exports fueling infrastructure development, industrialization, and diversification efforts.

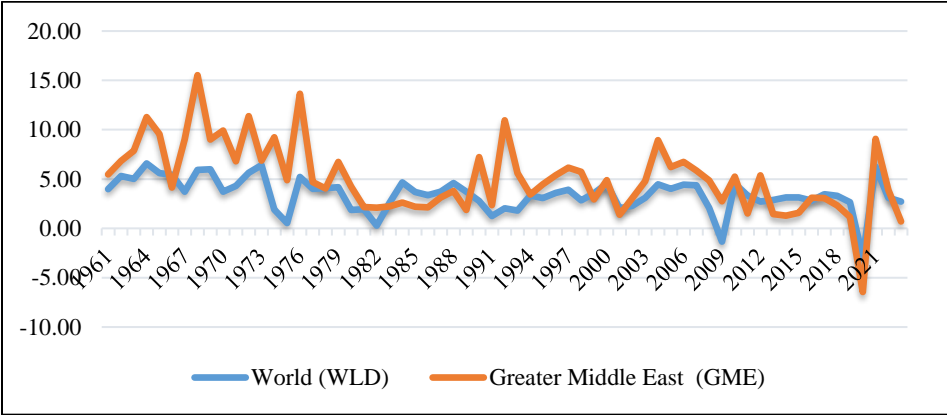
*Figure 1. GDP of the world and Greater Middle East countries (Trillions USD) and share of Greater Middle East countries in World GDP (%), 1960-2023 (World Bank Open Data)*



The average economic growth of the Greater Middle East region from 1961 to 2023 has consistently outpaced the global average, reflecting the region’s growing influence in the world economy (Figure 2).

Over the past six decades, the region has experienced significant economic expansion, largely driven by its vast energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas. The revenue generated from oil exports has been a primary engine of growth, propelling the economies of key players like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and others in the region. This growth has allowed the region to increase its contribution to global GDP, as discussed earlier. However, this growth trajectory is not without its challenges. The heavy reliance on oil production has created a structural vulnerability in the region’s economy. While oil has been the driving force behind economic expansion, it has also made the region susceptible to fluctuations in global oil prices. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exposed these vulnerabilities, as the region’s economic decline was sharper than the global average. In many countries, the pandemic led to significant disruptions in trade, a slowdown in demand for oil, and a sharp drop in oil prices, all of which severely impacted the region's economic performance.

Figure 2. World’s and Greater Middle East countries’ average economic growth (%), 1961-2023 (World Bank Open Data)



Despite the noticeable changes in the share of GDP of the GME countries in the world economy, it is necessary to note the different levels of contribution of individual regions. One of the drivers of economic development of most countries in the region has become the raw material base (oil and gas), but the division of countries on this basis into 2 groups, oil exporters and non-exporters, is not acceptable since it does not consider the political system, cultural, historical, and religious characteristics of the countries. Therefore, it is important to analyze the total contribution of countries grouped by regions based on the stated principles.

*GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council)*

The Arab Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain) play a key role in the economy of the Greater Middle East and have a formed economic and political union in the person of the GCC. Their share in the region's GDP began to grow in the 1970s thanks to the oil boom, which allowed them to become global economic centers. The gradual diversification of their economies

through infrastructure, finance, tourism and technology has allowed the Gulf countries to strengthen their positions. Today, they are the region's main investment donors and trade hubs, playing a leading role in global energy markets and economic development.

*Mashreq (Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq)*

The Mashreq economies, despite their historical and cultural importance, are experiencing structural difficulties. Conflicts, political instability and a lack of reforms have led to a decline in their share of regional GDP. Iraq remains an important player due to its oil resources, but its economy is vulnerable to instability. Egypt, the region's largest economy, has shown slow but steady growth due to investment in infrastructure and industry. Overall, the Mashreq remains a vulnerable link requiring reforms to stabilize the economy.

*Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya)*

The Maghreb countries also have an economic and political union, the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), and occupy a moderate position in the regional economy. Algeria and Libya rely on oil and gas exports, which makes them dependent on world energy prices. At the same time, Morocco and Tunisia are developing agriculture, tourism, and industry. Despite its potential, the Maghreb faces problems of regional integration, political instability, internal disagreements (e.g., the Western Sahara issue from the point of view of Morocco and Algeria), and economic difficulties. Reform and cooperation can make the region more competitive, using its geographical location as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East.

*Turkey*

Turkey is one of the leading economies of the Greater Middle East, occupying a stable and growing share of GDP. Its strategic location and industrial base allow it to serve as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. The country is actively investing in infrastructure, export-oriented industries and technology. Turkey is also increasing its geopolitical influence, which emphasizes its role as a regional leader. Turkey's economic resilience confirms its ability to maintain stable growth even in the face of external challenges. Iran's economic potential remains untapped due to sanctions and internal problems. With rich oil and gas reserves, the country could play a key role in the regional economy, but its share in the region's GDP remains stable but low. Restrictions on trade and investment are holding back growth, making the economy dependent on domestic resources. The lifting of sanctions and reforms will allow Iran to regain its position and join global markets, which will affect the economic structure of the entire region.

*Israel*

Israel has demonstrated rapid growth in economic share due to its focus on high technology and innovation. Despite its small size and complex geopolitical environment, the country is a leader in

scientific and technological development in the region. Innovative industries such as information technology, the defense industry, and aggrotech provide Israel with stable growth and global competitiveness. Israel serves as an example of how investment in science and knowledge can become the basis for economic success.

#### *Cyprus*

Cyprus plays a minor role in the regional economy due to the small size of its economy. The country focuses on tourism, shipping, and financial services, taking advantage of its strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, its contribution to the GDP of the Greater Middle East remains small and stable. Cyprus maintains its role as a trade and financial hub, providing a link between Europe and the Middle East.

#### *Other regions (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Yemen)*

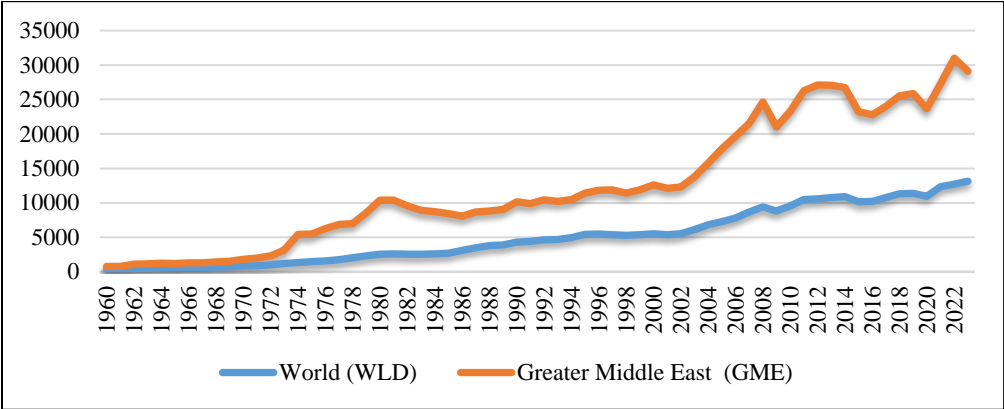
The economies of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Yemen have the smallest share of the region's GDP. These countries face military conflicts, political instability, poverty, and weak economic bases. Pakistan, for example, has potential due to its strategic location and population size but faces economic crises and a lack of investment. Afghanistan suffers from chronic instability and reliance on international aid. Sudan and Yemen suffer from protracted wars and economic collapse, making them the least developed regions. These countries remain peripheral players, unable to realize their potential without significant reforms, stabilization, and international support.

The economic structure of the Greater Middle East is characterized by a significant concentration of growth in the GCC countries, Turkey, and Israel. At the same time, the Maghreb, Mashreq, Iran, and the “other region” countries face structural development problems and political instability. Key trends include:

- The economic dominance of the GCC, secured by resource wealth and diversification.
- The successful modernization of Turkey and the innovative development of Israel.
- Iran's limited potential and the economic difficulties of the Mashreq and Maghreb.
- Marginalization of peripheral countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Sudan.

Another important indicator of the region's economic performance is GDP per capita. The average GDP per capita in the Greater Middle East has demonstrated a remarkable upward trajectory over the past several decades, reflecting the region's growing economic importance. In 1960, the average GDP per capita in the region was approximately 328.47 USD, while the global average stood at 450 USD. This suggests that, in the early years, the region's wealth was significantly lower than the global average. However, by 2023, the situation had dramatically changed. The region's average GDP per capita had risen to 15,546.42 USD, while the global average reached 13,138.33 USD (Figure 3).

Figure 3. GDP per capita (USD), average of the world and average of the Greater Middle East Countries, 1960-2023 (World Bank Open Data)



This substantial increase of more than 15 times over the period, far outpacing the global average, highlights the significant economic growth that has occurred in the region, largely driven by the oil and gas sector. Oil wealth, alongside efforts to diversify economies into sectors such as finance, construction, tourism, and services, has propelled the region's rise in economic stature. Despite this impressive growth, it is crucial to acknowledge the disparity within the region itself. While countries like Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE have seen their GDP per capita soar, placing them among the highest in the world, other countries in the region, especially those affected by conflict or political instability, still lag. For example, nations such as Yemen and Iraq continue to struggle with lower GDP per capita levels, impacted by ongoing unrest, conflict, and underdeveloped infrastructures. The increase in GDP per capita within the Greater Middle East region signifies not only the wealth generated by oil exports but also the effects of diversification efforts and modernization initiatives. However, it also points to the uneven distribution of wealth, as the region's prosperity is concentrated in a few key nations, raising important questions about the need for policies that promote broader economic growth and stability.

The presented data shows how uneven the level of economic development is in the countries of the Greater Middle East. The leader in GDP per capita in 2022 is Qatar with an impressive figure of 87,480.4 USD, which is almost 7 times higher than the world average (12,730.2 USD). This success is explained by huge revenues from oil and gas, a small population, and efficient resource management. Qatar is followed by the Gulf countries such as the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain. Their economic position is also based on resources and active diversification of economies. Among the countries outside the GCC, Israel and Cyprus stand out. Israel shows a high level due to advanced technologies, the export of knowledge-intensive products, and attracting foreign investment. Cyprus, taking advantage of its status as an EU member, relies on tourism and the service sector, which helps maintain income at a fairly high level. Turkey occupies a special place. Even though its economy remains

one of the largest in the region, the level of GDP per capita is still slightly below the world average. This is due to domestic economic problems: high inflation, the devaluation of the lira, and an unstable political situation. However, thanks to its strong industry and advantageous geographic location, Turkey still has potential for growth. In comparison, the rest of the region lags significantly behind. The countries of North Africa—Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, as well as the Mashreq states, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq—are experiencing serious economic difficulties. The situation is even more difficult in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Sudan, where GDP per capita figures are extremely low. The reasons are obvious: wars, political instability, weak economic diversification, high dependence on agriculture, poor infrastructure, and rapid population growth. All this seriously hinders their development. Thus, a clear pattern can be seen in the grouping of countries in the region by GDP per capita. The Gulf States remain the leaders, with their success largely based on their rich natural resources and active diversification of their economies. They are joined by Israel and Cyprus, which demonstrate sustainable development thanks to technological progress and integration into global markets. Turkey occupies an intermediate position, remaining below the global average but retaining the potential for growth due to industry and trade. At the same time, the countries of North Africa, the Mashreq, as well as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sudan are at the opposite pole, where economic indicators remain low due to structural problems, political instability, and limited resources. These differences emphasize that the economic position of the countries of the region is determined by their natural resources, political stability, and successful integration into global economic processes.

### **Demographic aspect of differences within the region**

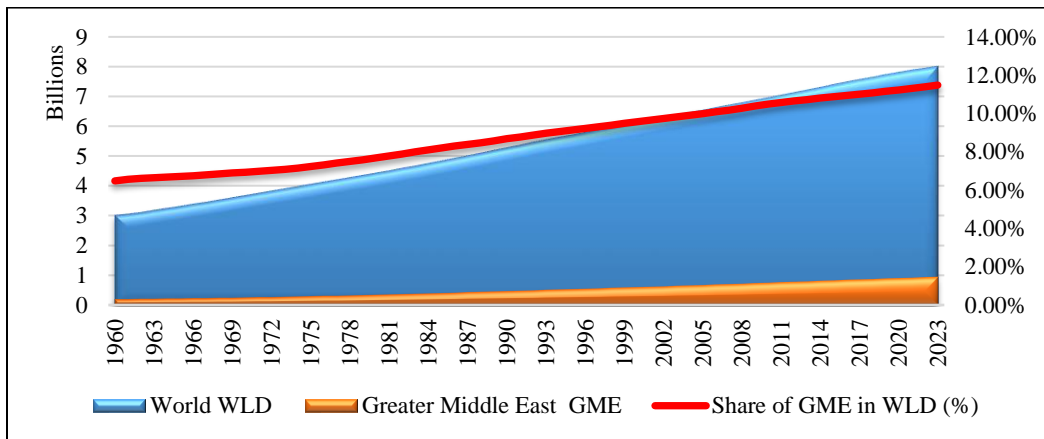
Another important indicator of economic opportunity is the demographic landscape. A region's population size, growth rate, age distribution, and urbanization trends play a crucial role in shaping its economic potential. Youthful and growing populations, in particular, create opportunities for workforce expansion, innovation, and consumer market development. The demographic trajectory of the Greater Middle East over the last six decades illustrates the region's rising significance in the global context. Between 1960 and 2023, the region's share of the global population increased markedly from 6.48% to 11.48% (Figure 4). This growth underscores a profound shift in the region's demographic weight, with far-reaching economic implications. The substantial population growth presents opportunities to capitalize on an expanding consumer market, positioning the region as an attractive destination for investment in sectors such as technology, healthcare, education, and consumer goods. Urbanization accompanying this growth drives demand for infrastructure development, creating additional avenues for economic engagement. Moreover, the region's enlarging labor force provides a comparative advantage in industries requiring abundant manpower, with the potential to transition into higher-value sectors through



investments in education and workforce development.

However, demographic expansion also poses challenges. Rapid population growth necessitates increased investment in social infrastructure, including education, healthcare, and housing, to sustain equitable development. Structural issues, such as disparities in economic development across countries in the region and rising unemployment rates in certain areas, highlight the need for robust labor market policies and governance reforms. In addition to economic implications, the demographic shift enhances the region’s geopolitical influence. A larger population base increases its representation and bargaining power in international forums, enabling greater participation in shaping global trade and political alliances.

Figure 4. World and the Greater Middle East countries’ population (billions of people) and share of GME in world population (%), 1960-2023 (World Bank Open Data)



The population of the Greater Middle East is distributed extremely unevenly, creating significant demographic and economic differences between countries. Several groups of countries can be distinguished by population size. Sparsely populated countries with populations of up to 5 million people include Cyprus, Mauritania, Palestine, and Lebanon, as well as Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain. Medium-populated countries with populations of 6 to 20 million people include the UAE, Israel, Jordan, Tunisia, and Libya. Countries with populations of 21 to 50 million people include Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Morocco, Afghanistan, Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan. Large countries with populations of over 50 million people include Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. The share of sparsely populated countries in the total population of the region is 3.2%, medium-populated countries - 5.4%, countries with a population of 21 to 50 million people - 34.1%, and large countries - 57.3%. This distribution demonstrates significant differences in the scale of demographic potential, which directly affects the economic role of countries in the region. At the same time, the dynamics of population growth are also uneven. Some countries, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Egypt, demonstrate growth due to high natural increase. At the same time, the

Gulf states are actively increasing their population due to the influx of migrants. The structure of migration flows in the region varies: from Pakistan, Egypt, and Afghanistan, mainly low-skilled labor comes to the Gulf countries, while highly skilled specialists are sent to the same countries from Lebanon and Jordan. Refugees from Syria and Palestine most often find refuge in Turkey, which becomes a transit point on the way to the European Union. Thus, the region's population not only varies in size but is also subject to different growth factors, which shape its economic and social dynamics.

An analysis of population density dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa since 1960 reveals significant differences between regions with high population density and areas with low population density, due to both natural-geographical and socio-economic factors. This heterogeneity is particularly noticeable when comparing countries with large but sparsely populated desert areas and states where limited territorial resources are combined with rapid demographic growth and urbanization processes. Countries with low population density, such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria, and Oman, are characterized by the presence of large territories, most of which are desert or semi-desert zones, which limits the possibilities for settlement and economic activity. In these countries, the population is concentrated in certain, more favorable regions for life, such as coastal zones, oases, or large cities. Nevertheless, even in conditions of relatively low density, population growth has been observed in recent decades, which in the future may increase pressure on resources and infrastructure. At the same time, countries with smaller territories and historically high population concentrations show a steady trend towards further growth in density, due to the population boom of the 20th century and active urbanization processes. Notable examples are Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories, where population density reaches extremely high values. In Egypt, the population is traditionally concentrated in the Nile Valley and Delta, which leads to significant pressure on these areas in the context of continuing population growth. In Lebanon, high population concentrations are characteristic of urbanized regions such as Beirut and its suburbs, where migration and urbanization processes exacerbate the uneven distribution of resources. Israel and the Palestinian Territories, especially the Gaza Strip, are among the most densely populated areas in the world, which creates significant socio-economic and political challenges, aggravated by limited land resources and demographic growth. The Maghreb countries, including Tunisia and Morocco, show a similar trend: despite the presence of large unpopulated areas, population density increases significantly in coastal and economically developed areas as a result of internal migration and rapid urban growth. This contrasts with neighboring Algeria and Libya, where large areas remain underdeveloped despite overall population growth. Of particular note are the resource-rich Gulf States, such as the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, where population density growth is due not only to natural growth but also to a significant influx of labor migrants against the backdrop of economic growth and urbanization. These processes are contributing to the formation of new demographic structures characterized by high

population concentrations in certain urban centers. Thus, the dynamics of population density in the region since 1960 reflect profound socioeconomic and demographic transformations that intensify the contrast between densely populated and sparsely populated areas. High population density in countries with limited land resources and intensive urbanization creates significant challenges related to resource management, infrastructure development, and ecological balance. In contrast, countries with low population density face the need to effectively develop their territory and create conditions for sustainable growth. These trends require a comprehensive approach to solving emerging problems and long-term planning aimed at balanced development of the region.

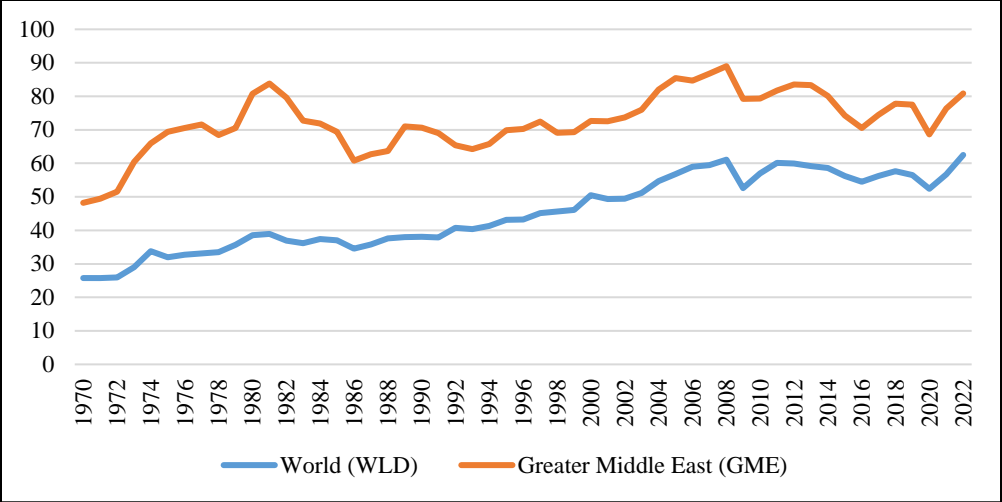
Migration processes play a key role in shaping the socio-economic and political landscape of the region. These processes can be divided into several types: emigration from the countries of the region, labor migration, internal migration, and the movement of refugees through transit countries. North Africa has traditionally been one of the major migrant-donor regions, with a noticeable population flow to Europe and the GCC countries. For example, Saudi Arabia, where about a million Egyptians lived in 2020, is an important migration destination. At the same time, countries such as Egypt receive huge volumes of international remittances, which have become even more significant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Labor migration remains a key aspect, especially in the GCC countries. States such as the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar, where the share of migrants in the total population is 70-80%, are significantly dependent on foreign labor in construction, services, and other sectors. This creates complex migration challenges related to the protection of migrants' rights, especially in the context of these countries' increasing role on the global stage. Particular attention should be paid to internal migration processes and displacement within the region. For example, a significant number of Egyptians are resettled in other countries in North Africa and the Middle East, including internal displacement caused by socio-economic crises or climate change. For example, in the context of Palestinian migration, many displaced persons have found refuge in Egypt. Climate change also has a significant impact on migration in the region, although there are differences in the approaches of countries. Poorer states such as Libya, Algeria, and Morocco face a lack of resources to adapt to climate change, which is already leading to internal displacement caused by droughts and wildfires. In contrast, GCC countries are actively investing in infrastructure and climate change adaptation projects. Such differences in approaches create an additional incentive for migration to the Gulf countries, in addition to traditional labor migration. Against this background, similar interaction between the countries of the region can be identified, which allows them to be divided into groups. The GCC countries play the role of the main migration centers-recipients, while North Africa, the countries of the Fertile Crescent, Afghanistan, and Pakistan remain large donors of labor and refugees. Egypt, Morocco, and other countries of North Africa and Turkey also play the role of transit points through which migrants and refugees move to Europe or the Gulf countries.

The demographic dynamics of the Greater Middle East play a pivotal role in shaping regional and subregional development patterns. The rapid population growth and urbanization trends present both opportunities for economic growth, such as expanding labor forces and consumer markets, and challenges, including the need for substantial investments in infrastructure and social services. Moreover, the uneven distribution of populations across the region, with varying levels of urbanization and development, underscores the complexity of addressing socioeconomic disparities. Migration patterns, influenced by labor demands and geopolitical factors, further complicate the region's development dynamics, highlighting the need for nuanced policies to manage these demographic shifts and promote sustainable regional growth.

### **Trade and logistics**

Another crucial indicator of economic opportunity is the trade dynamics. The patterns of imports and exports, along with trade partnerships, reflect a region's economic connectivity and growth prospects. Strong trade relations with diverse markets can open up new avenues for investment and development, while dependency on limited markets or products can expose vulnerabilities. Additionally, trade policies, logistical infrastructure, and the ability to adapt to global market trends play a vital role in determining the region's potential for economic expansion. Thus, understanding the trade landscape is essential for identifying opportunities for growth and diversification. Trade as a percentage of GDP is a crucial indicator for understanding the economic importance of a region, as it reflects the extent to which a country or region is integrated into the global economy through trade activities. In the case of the Greater Middle East, the growing share of trade in GDP highlights the region's increasing reliance on and contribution to international trade networks. In 1970, the average trade-to-GDP ratio in the Greater Middle East stood at 48.2%, a figure already indicative of substantial trade activity. By 2022, this ratio had risen to 80.9% (Figure 5), underscoring a significant expansion in the region's trade volume relative to its economic output. This growth demonstrates not only the region's enhanced role in global trade but also its diversification into various economic sectors, including energy, manufacturing, and services.

*Figure 5. Trade (% of GDP), average of the world and average of the Greater Middle East, 1970-2022 (World Bank Open Data)*



Moreover, the trade-to-GDP ratio in the Greater Middle East has increased at a faster pace than the global average over the same period. This trend signifies the region’s growing importance as a trade hub and its strategic position in global supply chains. Factors such as abundant natural resources, investments in infrastructure, and proactive trade agreements have contributed to this remarkable growth. The rapid development of ports, free zones, and logistical corridors has further solidified the region's status as a critical nexus for global commerce. Understanding the trade-to-GDP ratio is essential for grasping the economic dynamics of the Greater Middle East. A high and growing ratio suggests an open economy that is well-positioned to leverage globalization for economic growth. It also highlights the interdependence of the region’s economies with global markets, making trade a vital component of their economic resilience and development. Consequently, the rising trade-to-GDP ratio in the Greater Middle East underscores its expanding economic influence and underscores the necessity for strategies to enhance cooperation with this pivotal region.

In the context of export and import, it’s important to also consider the effects of logistical systems and initiatives of the region. The Greater Middle East plays a key role in global logistics due to its strategic location connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa. It is therefore worth noting that logistics routes are developing in both a regional and international context. Regional logistics routes include seaports, railways, pipelines, and air corridors, ensuring the transportation of goods both within the region and beyond. Within the region, transport hubs are actively developing. For example, Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are implementing multimodal hub projects combining seaports, airports, and land routes. Oil and gas pipelines play a significant role, connecting key exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. Egypt is a key hub due to the Suez Canal, which remains one of the main routes for trade between Europe and Asia. Turkey connects Eastern Europe and the Caucasus with the Middle East, actively developing rail and road routes. The region is also integrated into global logistics chains. The Suez Canal carries up to 12% of global cargo turnover, linking the Mediterranean

and Red Seas. Key routes of the Belt and Road Initiative, which connect China and Europe, pass through the countries of the region. Turkey plays an important role in the Middle Corridor, which links Central Asia and Europe. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which links India, Iran, Russia, and Europe, is becoming increasingly important. Iran provides access to the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, making it an important link in this chain. The region's logistics also depend on the migration of goods and services between the Gulf countries and South Asia. India, Oman, and the UAE are actively developing sea and air corridors for the mutual exchange of products. However, the region's logistics face challenges, including political instability, military conflicts, and sanctions. These factors put pressure on the sustainability of routes, but the countries of the region are actively investing in infrastructure modernization to strengthen their positions in the global logistics system. Thus, the logistics routes of the Greater Middle East provide important links both within the region and with external markets, highlighting its role as a global transport hub.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results of the entire analysis, it should be noted that despite the fact that the Greater Middle East region has registered high rates of economic growth both in terms of the entire economy and in terms of GDP per capita, the region's economic development is uneven: on the one hand, this is due to the issue of development sources, since a number of countries in the region have the opportunity to develop through energy exports, while others do not have such an opportunity, and on the other hand, it is also due to the structure of these economies and their foreign economic cooperation within the region. It is important to note that the GDP per capita indicator is also affected by the population level in the countries of the region, which in turn is distributed extremely unevenly: in some countries, both the population and the population density are extremely high, while in others there is a decline.

It is also important to note the perception of the region as an integral actor in foreign policy and economic processes. External players, both countries and international organizations, such as the UN and its structures, perceive the region differently, depending on the goals and visions of these players. If the UN structures the involvement of these countries in certain global processes, such as the fight against HIV or poverty, is important, then for individual world players the issue is more about plans for geopolitical influence and questions of choosing mechanisms for establishing relations with these countries.

In the context of self-perception of the countries of the Greater Middle East region as an integral region, it is also necessary to note significant differences: based on the level of development, political plans and strategies, as well as geographical location and cultural and religious aspects, countries within the region see the borders of the region differently.

Thus, it can be established that the Greater Middle East region is extremely heterogeneous in terms of the level of development, volumes and rates of population change, foreign economic relations and involvement in integration processes. In this context, studying the entire region within the framework of common metrics and methods may not give the desired result: both in the context of academic research and practical development of foreign policy, it is important to consider sub-regional processes and developments for a more effective understanding of this region.

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## **Workshop “Synthesis of Islam and Nationalism in Armenia’s neighboring countries (Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and Georgia): transformations of identity and politics”**

On June 7, 2024, the Institute of Oriental Studies of the National Academy, NAS RA, organized an international workshop on “Synthesis of Islam and Nationalism in Armenia’s neighboring countries (Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia): transformations of identity and politics.” The workshop is held in the framework of the “Supporting Leading Research” project № 21AG-6A081 of the Higher Education and Science Committee of the MESCS RA.

The research group members and invited speakers discussed issues concerning the synthesis, coexistence, and interaction of Islam and nationalism within the political, social, and cultural systems of Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In recent decades, four neighbors of Armenia – Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – have faced deep socio-political transformations that have intensified the convergence of religion and nationalism and the rise of conservatism. These realities shaped public discourse, promoting political and ideological currents typical of right and left populism, extremism, anti-Westernism, and a backlash against multiculturalism.

The research project aims to investigate the internal political and geopolitical reasons for the convergence of religion and nationalism in the countries bordering Armenia, to examine the factors that feed these processes, their political and socio-cultural manifestations, and their consequences. Using a comparative research method, the research team practices the latest technological solutions created by artificial intelligence and digital humanities. By combining humanities research methods and the opportunities provided by information technologies, the project research group analyzes the internal political developments and the transformation of the public discourse in the neighboring countries of Armenia.

The group presented the research project's midterm findings at the workshop, including articles published in and accepted by high-impact international scientific journals. Additionally, the research group outlined its upcoming plans, focusing on the procedures for organizing the admission of postgraduate students into the program and conducting field research. The project's website ([www.islam-nationalism.org](http://www.islam-nationalism.org)) and its tools and structure were presented.

In his report, “Political manifestations of Islamic Nationalism and Conservatism during the AKP’s era”, Vahram Ter-Matevosyan noted that an analysis of school curricula in Turkey shows that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has used the education system from the top to bottom since 2012 to gradually Islamize social relations and public spaces, implement social engineering, and rediscover and expand conservative social values and traditions.

The Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Presidency of Religious Affairs have been instrumental and ongoing in replacing the Kemalist basis of Turkey's

national identity with an Islamic one. Despite all this, the goal of the AKP's educational policy has not been to end secular/secular order but rather to maximize the Islamic content in a comprehensive reorganization of the educational system and to provide opportunities for development and self-expression for believers. These social groups have been perceived as marginalized for decades.

In his report, "The Rabia of reis: symbols of Islamic Nationalism in contemporary Turkey", Varuzhan Geghamyan mentioned that political symbols remain crucial in contemporary Turkish political culture. They perform several key functions in government communication, public mobilization, and ideological struggle. In recent years, the ruling elite has created several dominant symbols that reflect the core values and ideological currents the AKP party professes and ensure the legitimacy of President R.T. Erdogan's power. The report refers to five main symbols (rabia, reis, Aksaray, Çamlıca Mosque, Democracy, and National Unity Day).

In the report, entitled "The consequences of Soviet Ethnic Federalism and Islam in South Caucasus developments", Elaheh Koolae noted that after the collapse of the USSR, an ideological vacuum emerged in the post-Soviet space, resulting in increased external religious and cultural influences. The speaker emphasized the Iranian experience. She noted that Iran was remarkably unified with Azerbaijan through shared historical, religious, and cultural ties. While Iran sought to foster cultural cooperation, these efforts were often perceived as hostile by Azerbaijani authorities. The speaker emphasized Iran's intention to pursue deep cultural ties with Azerbaijan was not politically motivated.

In his speech, "The Discourse of Cultural Iran as an endeavor to synthesize Islam and Nationalism", Vardan Voskanyan explored the ideological context of "cultural Iran", highlighting the role of Islam, and examined the process and trends of the "culturalization" of Islam. In this context, religion comprises a fundamental element of cultural Iran. His concept of "cultural Iran" positions the country within a distinct value framework, both domestically and internationally, emphasizing Iran's civilizational significance and, by extension, its strategic importance in the global and regional scene.

In his speech, "Can History Open the crossroads of peace? Towards a multy-perspective approach (opportunities and obstacles)", Ali Kalirad outlined Iran's approaches to the security architecture of the South Caucasus and discussed the actions undertaken within the framework of the "Crossroads of Peace" project initiated by the Armenian authorities. He also addressed the new geopolitical realities that emerged in the region after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. The speaker also provided a historical overview of Armenia-Iran relations and detailed Iran's red-line policy on issues related to Armenia.

During the report titled "Iran and Armenia: a model of peaceful neighborhood and coexistence of Islam and Christianity", Morteza Moghadam Alkami presented the transformations in the relations between the two countries after the collapse of the USSR, where the religious factor did not pose an obstacle, but the two peoples aimed to recognize each other and cooperate in a cultural context, also

based on historical experience. The speaker presented the varying perceptions of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue across different segments of Iranian society, particularly in the Iranian Azerbaijan province, where Turkic-speaking Iranians reside. He referenced the late spiritual leader of the province, Ayatollah Muhammad Ali Hashemi, who tragically passed away in a helicopter accident, highlighting his strong support for Armenia-Iran friendship and cooperation. The discussion also addressed the widespread support within Iranian society, including the Turkic-speaking regions, for peace in the area and the future of Armenia-Iran relations. The conversation then shifted to the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Armenian Consulate in the Iranian Azerbaijan province.

In her report entitled “The interaction of Islam and Nationalism in Georgia: transformations of Sunni Muslim communities,” Araks Pashayan outlined the spread of Islam and the transformations of Islam in Georgia, with a particular focus on the Russian Empire and Soviet periods during which Islamic affairs departments gained institutional significances. It was highlighted that following the collapse of the USSR, a national and Islamic revival occurred within Georgia’s Muslim communities, especially in Adjara. The presentation also addressed state-community relations, the Georgian authorities' policies toward ethno-religious and religious minorities, and the interplay between national and religious spheres in Adjara. Additionally, the speaker examined the perceptions and attitudes of the majority population towards Muslim Georgians. The ideological dominance of Georgian nationalism, its influence, and the challenges Muslims face were also discussed. Furthermore, the speaker covered the Sunni community in Tbilisi, the Juma Mosque, the evolution of Sunni radical-Salafi sentiments in the Pankisi Gorge, and the challenges that religious radicalism poses to the state.

In her report titled “Shiite Islam in Georgia: the unveiling of the identity traits”, Nazeli Navasardyan presented issues related to the demographic statistics and primary areas of residence of the Muslim population of Shiites in Georgia. The report included discussions on mosques, religious schools, and religious institutions in regions with significant Shiite communities. The "Borchali" discourse was also explored, highlighting its ideological and political dimensions. The speaker emphasized that the Shiite population of Georgia is, in general, loyal to the Georgian authorities, which, in turn, is trying to implement social and educational reforms in the mentioned regions, has developed a clear set of tools for working with minorities, including the Muslim population, making the processes within the communities controllable. The impact of external factors in the Shiite regions of Georgia and the resulting transformations in religious perceptions and identity were touched upon. The various influences of Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan on the Islamic communities of Georgia and the new realities that have emerged as a development were presented.

In her report titled “Creating the image of the enemy: The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the dehumanization of Armenians in Ilham Aliyev’s official speeches”, Naira Sahakyan examined the

process of the construction of the "image of the enemy" and the dehumanization of Armenians in the speeches of Ilham Aliyev from 2016 to 2020. The research showed that in his speeches addressed to an external audience, Aliyev presents Armenia and Armenians as aggressors and violators of international law without identifying explicit dehumanizing expressions. The situation is different in speeches addressed to Azerbaijanis. When Aliyev speaks to his internal audience, he very often uses expressions such as "savages," "beings devoid of reason," "hyenas," etc. This is a clear manifestation of dehumanization. The leading discursive practice used by Aliyev to dehumanize Armenians has three main components: the identification of Armenians as the sole threat to Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis, the portrayal of Armenians as inhuman and barbaric, and the emphasis on Azerbaijan's superiority in eliminating the threat posed by Armenians. The combination of these three leads to the legitimization and implementation of genocidal actions against Armenians.

In their report titled "Azerbaijan's Islamic diplomacy in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020: the role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation", Araks Pashayan and Nazeli Navasardyan touched upon the Islamic direction of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, noting that for the first time they put the term "Azerbaijan's Islamic Diplomacy" into scientific circulation, which is directly related to the close cooperation between international Islamic organizations, in particular, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation-Azerbaijan. The speakers noted that after the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan wanted to receive the support of the Islamic world in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Membership in the OIC, as well as the unconditional support of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, helped to form an Islamic agenda against Armenia with sharp accents. Azerbaijan exploited several issues sensitive to the Islamic world, including the issue of mosques, periodically drawing the attention of the Islamic world to the issue of the "destruction" of Azerbaijani historical and cultural monuments by Armenians, turning the OIC into a tool. The OIC is a club where the idea of Islamic solidarity and voting against Armenia guides member states. Despite the steps taken against Armenia's reputation, the OIC cannot harm the Arab direction of Armenia's foreign policy in a broad sense.

At the conclusion part of the workshop, it was emphasized that over the past decades and particularly in the four years adjacent to Armenia, Islam, and nationalism have emerged as two central ideological pillars shaping the political, social, educational, and economic systems in Turkey, Iran, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. These systems are transforming rapidly, significantly altering identity and public relations paradigms. The speaker concluded that without addressing the issues above and current trends, conducting a comprehensive study or thoroughly assessing the dynamics and prospects of the complex religious and political processes unfolding in Armenia's neighboring countries would be impossible.

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