

ԲԱՆԲԵՐ ԱՐԵՎԵԼԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԻՆՍՏԻՏՈՒՏԻ

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# BULLETIN

OF THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES

*VOLUME V      ISSUE - 2*

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YEREVAN  
2025



**BULLETIN**  
**OF THE INSTITUTE OF**  
**ORIENTAL STUDIES**

VOLUME V, ISSUE 2

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ՀԱՏՈՐ V, ՀԱՄԱՐ 2

ԵՐԵՎԱՆ

2025

**P. - ISSN 2738-2710**

**E. - ISSN 2738-2702**

**BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES (BIOS)**

Published by the decision of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Oriental Studies of NAS RA

**The periodical has been published since 1960. Until 2021 the journal was named “The Countries and Peoples of the Near and Middle East”**

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**BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES. V/2 -**

Yerevan: Institute of Oriental Studies of NAS RA, 2025

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Տպ. -ISSN 2738-2710

Էլ. - ISSN 2738-2702

**ԲԱՆԲԵՐ ԱՐԵՎԵԼԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԻՆՍՏԻՏՈՒՏԻ (ԲԱԻ)**

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Արևելագիտության ինստիտուտ, 2025

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# AN EXAMINATION OF THE MUŠKI TRIBE: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH INCLUDING PALEOGENOMICS

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DOI: 10.52837/27382702-2025.5.2-14

## Abstract

The northern regions of West Asia have been home to countless ethnocultural groups throughout history. Among the most mysterious are the Muški. A multidisciplinary approach, which for the first time exploits genetic data, has been used in the hope of identifying their cultural and linguistic affiliation. In the 8th century BCE, the Assyrians used “Muški” as a name for Phrygia, which led to subsequent theories suggesting the Muški must have origins in the Balkans, either as Phrygians or as a group closely related to them. However, these connections have proven to be groundless. The genetic data do not support an Early Iron Age migration from the Balkans to the Kharberd/Elaziğ region or the headwaters of Tigris River, where Muški are first attested in Assyrian sources of the 12th century BCE. On the other hand, there is preliminary evidence, which requires further confirmation, for a genetic marker moving from the Armenian Highlands and South Caucasus to the Anatolian Plain. This new evaluation supports a Muški connection to Armenians, with the Muški homeland located near the headwaters of Western Euphrates/Karasu river. Alternatively, it finds a connection to the ancient Kaška people, known allies of the Bronze Age Muški, equally plausible. Additionally, an analysis of the available linguistic evidence has similarly indicated that a Muški ethnolinguistic connection to Georgian is unlikely, although a connection between the names *Muški* and *Mtskhe* is plausible.

**Keywords:** Muški, archaeogenetics, paleogenomics, Muški homeland, Moschoi, Phrygia, Urartu, Assyria, Kaška, Iron Age Near East, grooved ware

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Received May 23, 2025, revised September 15, 2025, accepted October 20, 2025.

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## Introduction

Serving as a crossroads between the eastern and western worlds for millennia, Asia Minor, the Armenian Highlands, and the South Caucasus have been inhabited by countless ethnocultural groups since the dawn of civilization. While the ethnic and linguistic affiliations of many of these groups are well-established, there are still numerous groups that continue to evade classification. The Muški, a people who are variously believed to have resided everywhere from the Balkans<sup>1</sup> to eastern Georgia, are among the most mysterious of these still unidentified cultures. People called Muški variously were described as enemies of the Assyrian Empire, enemies of Assyria's main political rival, Urartu, and, at times, allied with both of these competing powers as well. A group (or perhaps groups) with variations of the name Muški were known in Antiquity to the Greeks, Romans, and Jews. The Muški are believed to have conquered part of the southern Armenian Highlands in the 12th century BCE, invaded Assyria twice, and, in the Iron Age, conquered Anatolia. Their king is widely thought to have served as the inspiration for one the most iconic of Greek myths, well-known to this day. Despite seemingly occupying a wide geographic area and being so militarily active, very little is known about the Muški. Their homeland has not been established, there is no scholarly consensus on what language they spoke, and convincing arguments have been made linking them to a number of other groups with more clear identities.

According to Assyrian records, the Muški, with their allies the Urumu and Kaška (or the Abešlu) attempted to invade Assyria from the north around 1165 BCE. These groups took control of Purulumzi (or Purukuzzi) and Alzi, usually placed near the confluence of the Euphrates and Arsianias (=Murat-su) rivers [13: 122; 58: 145], or in the vicinity of the source of the Tigris River [29: 147].<sup>2</sup> A few decades later, during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I, 20,000 Muški warriors were reported as having invaded Kadmuhi, in what is now southeastern Turkey. These Muški were

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Muški* is not directly attested in the Balkans. Only indirectly related terms like *Moesan* are mentioned in this region (see section 4.4.1).

<sup>2</sup> Harutyunyan 1985:147. These two different locations are due to potential localization of Alzi. We prefer a source located near the mouth of the Tigris River for Alzi (Harutyunyan 1985:19). This is where the related Armenian province *Aljnik* (Greek: *Arzanene*) was located.

retroactively coined *the Eastern Muški* [13: 115; 66].<sup>3</sup> After defeating the Muški, Tiglath-Pileser I resettled many of them in northern Syria.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, a group called the Muški were mentioned in Assyrian records as being present in modern southern and central Anatolia. This later Muški group was dubbed *the Western Muški* by modern scholars as their relationship to the earlier Muški is uncertain.

### **Methods and materials**

The methodology employed in this paper will consist of a combination of the available data derived from archaeology, linguistics, ancient records, and genetics to examine the validity and the probability of proposed theories regarding the Muški's origins and ethno-linguistic affiliation. The terms *Western Muški* and *Eastern Muški* will be used, but with the assumption that the so-called Western Muški originated from the Eastern Muški as there is no reason to believe that two distinct peoples called Muški emerged in West Asia during the Iron Age. However, it is possible the Western Muški had already shifted to speaking a different language by the time they were most active in recorded history.

### **Paleogenomic studies and Muški question**

Over the past decade, population genetics in general and paleogenomics in particular have become a tool used by researchers to study ancient migrations. One of the most complicated and controversial mysteries long puzzled linguists, historians, and archaeologists, the origin of the modern Indo-European peoples, has been convincingly explained by paleogenetics.

Even though the ultimate origin of Proto-Indo-Anatolian has not yet been resolved, the geographic extent of its possible homeland has narrowed substantially. Currently discussed theories place the homeland either to the south or to the north of the Caucasus Mountain range [42; 30; 44].<sup>4</sup> If the now extinct Anatolian branch, whose origin is not directly related to the subject of this study, is excluded, all other modern Indo-European languages can be derived from the language of the Yamnaya archaeological culture (3300-2700 BCE) located in Pontic-Caspian steppe.[42; 44] One group, descended from Yamnaya, migrated directly over the Caucasus

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<sup>3</sup> Diakonoff 1984:115. Another naming convention is the “old and new Muški” proposed by Wittke (2004).

<sup>4</sup> Lazaridis et al. 2022a, Heggarty et al. 2023 for south of the Caucasus and Lazaridis et al. 2025 for north of the Caucasus.

Mountains to the South Caucasus after 2500 BCE. This group plausibly spoke the Proto-Armenian language, and, upon mixing with locals, were ultimately responsible for the formation of the Armenian people [46: 165; 42: 11b; 57; 68; 64: 11]. Other groups settled throughout the Balkans, including Greece, leading to the establishment of the Mycenaean Greek culture [68]. Given the strong linguistic connection of Phrygian to Greek, it can be presumed that Phrygian speakers moved to Anatolia from the Balkans, although they did not leave behind a strong genetic imprint [42: 11c].

Genetic studies have also improved the understanding of Caucasian and other non-Indo-European linguistic groups.

Identifying DNA connected to the Muški could prove crucial to determining their linguistic and cultural affiliation. However, it is only possible to identify potential DNA associated with the Muški indirectly as there is no genomic data that can be securely linked to them. In addition to Bronze Age DNA from Anatolia, there are a number of ancient DNA samples dating to the Iron Age (1200-600 BCE) and Classical-era (600 BCE-400 CE) from different regions of Turkey. There is also a large number of DNA samples from Georgia (including the Meskheta region) and the Republic of Armenia, which have made it possible to reevaluate theories related to the Muški's origins and migrations.

### Etymologies and related onomastics

Igor M. Diakonoff partially ascribed the term *Muški* an Armenian origin, stating its root was some form of *muš/mus/mos/moš* (a word he did not etymologize) with the addition of the Classical Armenian *k'* plural suffix [13: 118, 195, note 87]. Armen Petrosyan, relying on Vladimir Toporov's proposal, considers it likely that the root *mus/muš* is derived from the Proto-Indo-European *\*mús*, meaning "mouse," with a semantic development referring to ancient Indo-European epics [52: 142]. On the other hand, the root *muš* is present in the Armenian word *mšak* < *\*muš-ak* (vineyard worker, farmer) and Georgian *mušaki/muša* (worker).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the word *mišak*, meaning "agriculturalist," also exists in Circassian. However, the possibility that *\*mušak*-derived words stem from an Eastern Iranian source makes an etymology connected to the Muški less likely [2: 332-333].

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<sup>5</sup> The drop of the final *-ki* is regular in Georgian. Compare *danaki* > *dana*, *agaraki* > *agara*. Gippert, Jost (1993: 64–65).

Hittite and Urartian texts mention a number of terms containing the root *muš*, including personal names, such as *Muššu* and *Mušu*, and geographic terms, like *Muša*.<sup>6</sup> The Hurrian word *muš-*, meaning “truth” or “just,” could ultimately be the origin of this root.[34: 39-40, 47] It is also possible a derivative form, *\*mušun*, could be the root of toponym *Mušunipa* (with a regular Anatolian *-ipa* ending), the name of the Hurrian deity *Mušuni/Mušni*,[1: 7] and the incomplete *Mušun-x* of the Lake Van basin. The presence of these names suggests the possibility that the root *mušun* (potentially of Hurrian origin and perhaps derived from the root *\*muš*), had an old presence in Anatolia and could also be the root of *Muški*. The Classical-era *Mysia* (Μυσία) in northwest Anatolia could be another derivative of this root.

Rostyslav Oreshko etymologized both the names *Muški* and *Phryges* from a Balkanic word *\*mus-k*, meaning “mule,” supposedly derived from “horse/donkey”[50: 77-128]. Assuming that Balkanic *\*musk* is related to the *Muški*, another explanation is the name of the country *Muska* began to be used to denote mules in the ancient languages of the Balkans and eastern Europe, such as Albanian *mušk/mušķë*, Romanian *mușcoiu* and Proto-Slavic *mǫskŭ* (\*mъskъ). This theory was suggested by Gustav Meyer, [50: 116-117]<sup>7</sup> although he linked the Balkanic mule-related wanderword to the land of Mysia. A derivation from the name of the land *Muska* seems to be more realistic when the final *-k* is taken into consideration. It should be noted that the first mules were bred in Anatolia, and one of the oldest DNA samples from a mule was found in Anatolia as well [26; 25: 4].

Assyrian inscriptions mention a type of tree called *GISmušku*. Wittke suggested that the name of the *Muški* could have derived from this tree name[67]. However, the inverse is also possible, and more likely, given the existence of another tree called *GISurumu*, known in the land of Nairi [6: 271]. Both of these arboreal terms could be derived from the ethnic names of the *Muški* and the *Urumu*, respectively.

In sum, determining an unambiguous etymology for a root as short as *\*muš* can be difficult, especially in a linguistically diverse environment.

**Moschoi.** The root *mosch*, [μόσχ, *mosk<sup>h</sup>*] attested in various Greek and Roman sources, closely corresponds with cuneiform *Muški*. The cuneiform [u] was frequently used to represent the phonetic [o]. The suggestion that Greek *Moschoi* and Latin *Moschi* are derived from *Muški* is beyond a doubt given that in old Greek

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<sup>6</sup> Laman Hittite name finder. <https://laman.hittites.org/>; Proper names in Urartian texts <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ecut/cbd/qpn/onebigfile.html>

<sup>7</sup> Oreshko 2020:116-117. A similar, modern example is the turkey, which, in various European languages, derives its name from the countries Turkey and India.

the letter *chi* ( $\chi$ ) was pronounced as a velar aspirated stop  $k^h$ , which is close to the Armenian velar ejective stop  $k'$  ( $p$ ). Taking this into account, it is very likely that names containing the root *Mosch* in Antiquity are related to the name Muški, although this does not necessarily mean the peoples connected to the various lands called *Mosch*- spoke the same language(s) as the Muški.

In Strabo, the Moschian Mountains are referred to as *Moschike* (*Μοσχική*).<sup>8</sup> The Armenian form, *Mosk'ikean* (*Մոսքիկեան*), seems to be related to Strabo's *Moschike* with an additional Armenian *-ean* (*-եան*) suffix. This extra *-ike* suffix in Strabo, when attached to the stem *Mosch-*, could potentially be derived from the language of the Moschian people themselves. The suffix *-k-* has reflexes in many Indo-European languages but is particularly present in Balkanic ethnonyms. Armenian also has the *-ik* (*-իկ*) suffix for denoting an appurtenance [50: 114-115].<sup>9</sup>

According to Flavius Josephus, Mosoch (Meshech) was the founding father of the Mosocheni, which later became known as the Cappadocians [16]. In Genesis, this Meshech is a son of Japeth. A possibly different Meshech (known as Mash in Genesis) was mentioned as a son of Aram and brother of Hul in Genesis. Josephus stated Hul founded the Armenian nation. The correspondence of Meshech from Chronicles 1:17 to Mash from Genesis can be viewed as another indirect argument for the final cuneiform *-ki* (corresponding to *-ch* in Greek) functioning as a suffix. Another argument for the existence of the suffix *-ki* is the presence of both *Musa* and *Muska* in the same Luwian text. The final *-ka* in Hittite and Luwian texts could have been pronounced as *-k'a*, similar to *-ki* in Assyrian texts. There are other examples of the root *muš* without the ending particle. In a text dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Sarduri II, king of Urartu, listed the land of *Muša* as being located near modern Malatya [29: 146].<sup>10</sup> All this combined with the data presented in section 3.d strongly suggests the final *-ki* in Muški was a suffix.

**Personal names.** The Muški left no records of their language. The only personal name that has been concretely associated with them is *Mita*, who was the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Western) Muški king. *Mita*, who fought against the Assyrians, is usually assumed to be Midas of Phrygia, who is generally regarded as being the

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<sup>8</sup> Strabo *Geographia* XI,2.15, 12.4,14.1; XII.3.18.

<sup>9</sup> Oreshko 2020:114-115. Although *-ik* in Armenian is considered to be a loan of Iranian origin (the native form would be *-ik'*), it was almost certainly part of the Armenian vocabulary by Strabo's time.

<sup>10</sup> Harutyunyan 1985:146. This *Muša* should not be confused with the city name of Muš (=Muş) to the west of Lake Van, which also could be related to Muški. (Petrosyan 2002:142).

historical inspiration for the mythological king famous for his golden touch. The name Mita was recorded in Hittite texts as early as the 15th century BCE as the name of a rebel leader from Pahuwa, a land located near the Upper Euphrates [36: 261]. If the Phrygians emigrated to Asia Minor from Europe after 1200 BCE, as is commonly thought (and which is supported by paleogenomics), it is chronologically impossible for Mita to be a Phrygian name. Interestingly, one of the governors of Zikirtu, located near Lake Urmia in northern Iran, was named *Mitatti*. Another name, *Mitaki*, was also attested in Iron Age Iran [69: 94, 112]. Although both *Mita-ki* and *Mita-tti* are considered to be old Iranian names by Ran Zadok [70: 267-268], it cannot be ruled out that they were introduced to West Asia by the early Indo-Iranians who established the Kingdom of Mitanni. This possibility is further supported by theories explaining the name *Mitanni* (or the alternate form, *Maitani*) as stemming from the kingdom's legendary founding ruler's or tribe's name, *Mita/Maita* [12: 68]. The root *mita/maita* has been proposed to have an Indo-Iranian etymology, [17: 11]<sup>11</sup> which raises the possibility that Mita of Pahuwa had an Indo-Iranian background. However, the presence of similar names, such as *Muida* mentioned in an inscription found at Karmir Blur, Armenia, and dating to the Urartian-period, could mean that the name Mita was not exclusively derived from archaic Indo-Iranians, but could be affiliated with Etiuni as well [23: 58].

Although frequently borne by Luwian kings, and ascribed a Luwian origin, the name *Kurti* (sometimes translated as Gurdi) has also been considered a possible Muškian name [37: 200-202]<sup>12</sup> The name has been equated with the Phrygian name Gordius (or Gordias). Midas' father was named Gordias, although in some traditions they were not biologically related. Additionally, due to phonetic similarities, Kurti has been compared to the second part of the name Ara Kardos, a legendary Armenian king mentioned by Movsēs Xorenac'i [39: note 29].

The similarities of Mitanni and its earliest legendary kings *Maitta* and *Kirta* to *Mita* and *Kurti*, respectively, are noteworthy. This could suggest the presence of an Indo-Iranian adstrate amongst the Muški. This is especially worthy of consideration as Kosyan and Petrosyan identified Indo-Aryan names in Hayasa-Azzi

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<sup>11</sup> Fournet 2010:11. In the past, the name Mita was compared to a hypothetical Luwian word *mita*, supposedly meaning "servant." However, Hawkins demonstrated that the reading of this word as *mita* is inaccurate (Kosyan 2009: 91-92).

<sup>12</sup> Kosyan 2002:200-202. A Phrygian origin of Kurti was proposed by Simon (2023:157).

and Išuwa, lands that may have been home to, or been adjacent to, Muški populations[38; 53].<sup>13</sup>

### **The initial homeland of Muški**

The question of the initial Bronze Age homeland of the Muški is unsolved. Despite this uncertainty, the currently available genetic and epigraphic data puts important constraints on the possible geography of this homeland.

- The earliest mention of the Muški in the Upper Tigris dates to the rule of the Assyrian king Ninurta-apil-Ekur (1191-1179 BCE) [58: 149]. A homeland in the Balkans would require a lightspeed migration from the Balkans to the Upper Tigris around 1200 BCE, a period when the last Hittite king, Suppiliuluma II, was still ruling over the Plain of Anatolia. Not only is this an unrealistic scenario, but there is no single piece of genetic or archaeological evidence to indicate a migration from the Balkans that far east at the time.
- The Muški homeland was almost certainly not in Asia Minor, otherwise the Hittites would have left some reference to them.<sup>14</sup>
- Their homeland was not in the Sasun (=Sason) or Kharberd (=Elazığ) regions for the same reasons: the Assyrians and/or Hittites would have left some references to the Muški. Additionally, Assyrian sources claim that they were invaders to that region.

After excluding those regions, there is no other choice than to search toward regions east of Anatolia and north of the Alzi region. Indeed, looking closer at regions near the source of Euphrates, namely Karin (=Erzurum) and adjacent regions to the east and north of it, we can find a number of reasons to favor the northwestern

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<sup>13</sup> Kosyan 2009; Petrosyan 2018a. The name of the ethnic group Cyrti/Kyrti (Κύρτιοι) could be related to this personal name also.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Banyai proposes a homeland in Central Anatolia, in a region called the Halys bend. (Banyai 2024:35-37) He considers the Muški and Phrygians to be different groups, and links the grooved ware in Upper Euphrates to the Muški. Even though both of these proposals are plausible, Banyai's argument for grooved ware's original homeland is weak. His proposals are based on a few shards of grooved ware found in the Central Anatolia region and the assumption that there are no older examples elsewhere. However, Guido Guarducci reports older dates of grooved ware in the Erzurum region, South Caucasus, and northwestern Iran (Guarducci 2019:518-519). It is worth noting that archaeology alone is likely to be insufficient for deducing the Muški homeland.

region of historic Armenia (=northeastern Turkey) as the initial Bronze Age homeland of the Muški.

- a) *Mita*, the only name securely linked to the Muški, was first attested in Pahhuwa, near the sources of the Euphrates. The toponym *Muša* also was attested in the Upper Euphrates region.
- b) Veli Sevin suggested the Kharberd (Elazığ) ceramic ware's distinctiveness from the previous ceramic styles found in the region was indicative of a new population, one from the South Caucasus, settling in the Kharberd (Elazığ) region at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE [61: 87-97].<sup>15</sup> Sevin argued that the large amount of this pottery found in Elazığ could indicate a 50% increase in population. Citing C.A. Burney, Sevin said this pottery, dubbed "grooved ware," may have been associated with the movement of the Muški as they migrated westward from a homeland in the South Caucasus (he mentioned that while this pottery came style originated in eastern Georgia, it was also found in the Erzurum-Kars region, located between the South Caucasus and Elazığ). Although it is more likely the Muški homeland was in the vicinity of the Upper Euphrates rather than the South Caucasus, a migration from the latter would almost certainly cause a domino effect, triggering migrations from the Erzurum-Sarikamish region also. Sevin's theory was subsequently criticized for connecting this "grooved ware" solely to the Muški. The same pottery appeared in regions associated with other polities, such as Nairi [14: 116f; 24: 442].<sup>16</sup> Its initial provenance from the South Caucasus also was questioned.[24: 409-412] Despite these criticisms, this pottery originating in the Armenian Highlands and the fact that Muški tribes appeared during the same period in regions where this pottery was produced, can hardly be disputed. For this same reason, the initial Muški homeland cannot be placed further north into the Greater Caucasus since grooved ware does not originate from Bronze Age Caucasus-based pottery traditions, such as Colchian or Dolmen cultures.
- c) In Assyrian texts, the Muški's allies, the Urumu and the Kaška, were called "troops of the Hatti land" (suggesting they either came from Cappadocia or

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<sup>15</sup> Sevin 1991:87-97. According to Pavel Avetisyan, during the 13th-12th centuries BCE, the populations of some regions of present-day Armenia (Aragats, Sevan) abruptly decreased. It is possible the new 'grooved' pottery that appeared in the Alzi region at the beginning of the Iron Age could have originated from the territory of present-day Armenia (Petrosyan 2018b:141).

<sup>16</sup> Erdem 2012:116f. Guarducci 2019:442. Grooved ware is also known as Nairi ware or Nairi-grooved ware.

- nearby regions under Hittite suzerainty), however, the Muški were not given this qualifier.[52: 166; 54: 133] This could indicate that the Muški did not invade Assyria from the west, but rather invaded from areas to the north or east that were not under the Hittite yoke.
- d) Assuming the *-ki* is a suffix, then a search of similar endings in ancient toponyms could point to the Muški homeland. Diakonoff mentioned another toponym with the same ending: *Tumiški* (Greek: Tomisa), located in Tsop'k'/Sophene (Elazığ/Eğil region) [13: 173 note 29]. There are at least two other ethnonyms with similar endings, *Šaški* and *Ardaraki*, the names of tribes mentioned in texts related to the Urartian campaign in Diaukhi[29: 70]. *Šašilu*, a land and a city in the same region, while phonetically having the same root as *Šaški*, features a possible Hattian/Kaşkian suffix, *-ilu/-ili* [63: 171].<sup>17</sup> Assuming that *-ki* in *Šaški* functioned as a suffix, it could serve the same purpose in *Muški* and *Ardaraki*<sup>18</sup> as well. Diaukhi was located near modern Erzurum and Olti, which overlaps with the possible Muški homeland. This increases the probability that the final *-ki* in *Muški* belonged to a language spoken in the northwestern regions of the Armenian Highland (modern northeast Turkey). Whatever linguistic group was using the final *-ki*, its presence in the aforementioned region is another argument for the Muški's initial homeland located in Erzurum region.
- e) Urartian sources mention a land called *Muškini* (or "land of the Muški," *-ni* functioning as a possessive suffix in Urartian) twice during the reign of Rusa, son of Argišti, in the 7th century BCE. Nikolai Harutyunyan and Aram Kosyan proposed a location for *Muškini* in the Upper Euphrates, [29: 147; 40: 23] but the most widely accepted contemporary view is that it referred to Phrygia in central Anatolia. However, this theory is not without problems as the two inscriptions do not offer insight into the geographic location of the Urartian-era *Muškini*. While one inscription is incomplete, the other comprises a list of eight enemy countries from where the king Rusa deported men and women. Those countries, listed in order, are:

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<sup>17</sup> Singer 2007:171. Abeš(i)lu could also contain this *-ilu* suffix. The Abeš Mountains, in the source of Halys River, could be derived from this ethnonym. (Hakobyan et al. 1986: Volume 1;8).

<sup>18</sup> The root *šaš-* is well attested in Hittite toponyms: *Šašša*, *Šašana*, *Šaššita* etc. The personal name *Ardara* is attested during the late Nairi period. (Šamši-Adad V 1 iii 48).

*Assyria* (south of Urartu)

*Targuni* (location unknown, but if this is identical to Tariu, then it was northwest of Urartu)

*Etiuni* (northeast of Urartu)

*Tabla* =Tabal (west of Urartu, near Cilicia)

*Qainaru* (unknown)

*Hatti* (west of Urartu)

*Muškini* - ?

*Siluquni* (east of Urartu)

All the above-mentioned countries are beyond, or on the periphery of, the lands controlled by Urartu. Geographically they are listed in a zigzagging manner, making it virtually impossible to imagine that a king with his army was moving in such a manner during a military campaign. Based on the list, it is not possible to know the direction in which Muškini was located and its connection to Phrygia is speculative.

- f) And finally, an initial homeland in the Erzurum region, close to the modern Georgian border, could be reflected by the Moschoi/Moschi, mentioned in texts by Greek and Roman writers, such as Herodotus, Strabo, Pliny the Elder and others. Herodotus placed the Moschoi in the Pontic regions of the XIX satrapy of the Achaemenids,<sup>19</sup> while Strabo placed the Moschike Mountains between Colchis, Armenia, and Iberia, which was the Arsiani Range (=Yalnızçam Mountains). Ptolemy considered the Moschike mountains to be part of Armenia [31: 245 note 75A, 331]. According to Yeremyan, ancient Moschike was a larger place than modern Meskheta in Georgia, and that it included the Ardahan and Artvin regions [31: 303-304]. After the bulk of the Muški moved southward, along the Euphrates, other remnant groups could have used the Olti, Tortum, and Chorokh rivers to move to the Black Sea coast, while others could have settled near the headwaters of the Kur River, where they left toponyms.

### **Proposed linguistic connections**

#### ***Armenian***

Herodotus stated that the Phrygians originally came from Macedonia and settled in what is now central Turkey [13: 110]. It is usually thought this settlement took place in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, with the Phrygians filling a power vacuum left

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<sup>19</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* III.94, VII.78.

by the fall of the Hittite Empire. Herodotus also said that Armenians had been “colonists from Phrygia.” Diakonoff, using Herodotus’ statement regarding the shared origins of Phrygians and Armenians, and the fact that the Assyrians conflated the Phrygians with the Muški, asserted that the Muški were speakers of Proto-Armenian, and were either Phrygians, or a closely related group who followed them from the Balkans eastward toward Armenia [13: 115ff].

Modern research suggests that much of Diakonoff’s theory linking Armenians to Phrygians and Muški is untenable. Petrosyan, in his monograph, presented eleven weak points of Diakonoff’s theory [54: 133-134]. Genetic studies have determined the majority of the Armenian ethnogenesis was completed by 1200 BCE and Proto-Armenians were present in the Armenian Highlands since the Middle Bronze Age [27: 931-936; 45; 68; 32: 18-20]. This suggests that even if the Muški were from the Balkans (which is virtually impossible), they could not have contributed to the Armenian gene pool as their entrance was too late and there are no Balkan-origin markers in Armenians dating to the period in question [42: Suppl.text3: 280; 32: 18-20]. Diakonoff’s theory is not supported by modern linguistic evidence either: although Armenian, Greek, and Phrygian all belong to the Indo-European language family,<sup>20</sup> the Phrygian language is now believed to be much more closely related to Greek than it is to Armenian [9: 69-80; 49]. Archaeologically, there is no evidence of the western (“Phrygian”) ceramic ware east of the site of Kaman-Kalehöyük in Kırşehir Province in Early Iron Age [40: 28-29]. The known geographic extent of this ceramic ware indicates it cannot be associated with Armenian-speakers.

Despite these issues, Diakonoff’s proposed Armenian-Muški connection could be accurate if the Muški’s migratory route was not from the west to the east, but rather the east to the west. Based on the archaeological and ancient records, Kosyan does not rule out the possibility that the Muški, or at least the Eastern Muški, could be speakers of Armenian, or of a closely related, although now extinct, language [36: 261-262].

*From Trialeti-Vanadzor Culture to the west.* A number of arguments exist in support of an Armenian-Muški connection. Armenians are well-attested during the Classical-era in regions where the Eastern Muški were active in the preceding Iron Age. The *-ki* suffix in *Muški* can be the reflex of Armenian plural suffix *-k*’. The possibility of a *mosk*’ > *moc*’ shift (see section 4.2.1 for details) could support that the Muškian language had the same sound changes apparent in Armenian.

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<sup>20</sup> For the position of Armenian in the Indo-European family see Martirosyan 2013.

There is evidence of “grooved ware” (see section 3 for details) reaching Kharberd/Elazığ by approximately 1200 BCE. The origin of “grooved ware” is still debated. However, a few things are now well known. First the grooved ware of the Erzurum region is typologically close to that found in the South Caucasus region [24: 440-441]. The oldest cases of this pottery are found among the Late Bronze Age Transcaucasian ceramic ware, originally found in eastern Georgia and Armenia, which spread throughout much of modern Armenia and as far west as Erzurum by the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE [61: 96-97; 54: 14; 24: 451]. The Transcaucasian Late Bronze Age culture responsible for this ceramic ware is now known as the Lchashen-Metsamor Culture, which both archaeological evidence and recent genetic studies strongly hint at having been an Indo-European culture, and linked to Armenian-speakers specifically [42: 11b. Supp. Data1 267-268, 280; 43; 57; 68; 64:11]. Even if we take into consideration alternative theories that posit Proto-Armenian a local autochthonous origin [45; 30; 32] then the arguments below are still partly valid, though supporting other Indo-European linguistic connection of Muški. (see section 4.5)

Lchashen-Metsamor Culture, which descended from the Trialeti-Vanadzor Culture, was known as Etiuni in Urartian sources. While the Armenic connection to these cultures has solid genetic, linguistic and archaeological support, it is possible that a subset of those from Trialeti-Vanadzor Culture’s western periphery developed a unique Muški identity, which was distinct from the primary Etiuni (=Armenian) identity, although linguistically connected to them. It should be noted that numerous ancient sources make a distinction between Armenians and Moschoi/Moschi. According to Tacitus, the Moschi, who were loyal to Rome, raided Armenia in the 1st century CE.<sup>21</sup> However, these differences in political alignment and cultural identity are not necessarily a hindrance to an Armenian-Muški ethnolinguistic connection. It is possible that the groups were related linguistically but had their own distinct identities, dialects, and political affiliations. There are precedents for such a dynamic, when two closely related peoples develop hostile relations with one another, such as the Iranian Medes and Persians or the Greek Athenians and Spartans, respectively.

Interestingly, the medieval Armenian historian Movsēs Xorenac‘i wrote that the mythological Armenian patriarch, Aram, made his cousin/general, Mšak [Məšak] governor of Cappadocia [52: 43-44]. According to Xorenac‘i, Mšak founded the city of Mazhak (Greek: Mazaca) and named it after himself. Some

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<sup>21</sup> Tacitus *Annals* XIII, v. V.

sources suggest that Mazaca (=Kayseri) was the Muški capital city. In addition to the phonetic similarities of the names Mšak and Muški, the name Aram could correspond with the name of the Muški's allies, the Urumu [52: 166]. However, while the Muški are known to have lived in what is now central Turkey, the Assyrians and Urartians never mentioned the Urumu as inhabiting this region.

Incidentally Somekhi, the Georgian exonym for Armenians, has been proposed to be derived from Muški, translating the name as *so-mekhi*, meaning “the country of the Mekhi,” a name supposedly originating from Muški [7: 16]. However, this proposal has a number of phonetic issues. It is possible that the Georgian name for Armenians is derived from a poorly attested *\*som(e)* root with an addition of -x- suffix (see section 4.2.1 for the -x- suffix).

Ancient DNA has added some support for a possible connection of the Muški with Armenic tribes. The Y DNA haplogroup I2 has a European origin. Its subclade, I2a2b-Y16419, appeared in Middle Bronze Age Armenia and Georgia, and is associated with the Trialeti-Vanadzor Culture [42; 65]. The Trialeti-Vanadzor Culture formed as a mixture of new Steppe pastoralists from the Pontic Caspian region north of the Caucasus and the local Kura-Araxes Culture. Based on the current data, Proto-Armenian was spoken by the people of Trialeti-Vanadzor Culture. The lineage I2-Y16419 expanded in the Middle Bronze Age and was prevalent in the later Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age Lchashen-Metsamor Culture. This haplotype gradually moved to the west and was present in the Anatolian Plateau by the time of the Romans. Three ancient DNA samples from southern Europe<sup>22</sup> suggest an additional dispersal of this haplotype by the time of the Roman Imperial-era, a phenomenon that affected many Anatolian haplotypes [43]. While it is likely that I2-Y16419 was introduced to Anatolia by Armenians inhabiting Lesser Armenia, they may not have been its sole bearers. It cannot be ruled out that the Muški could also be connected to the westward migration of this haplotype. The presence of I2-Y16419 Achaemenid-era Skhalta (located in the Khulo district of Georgia's Adjara region), [64]<sup>23</sup> where Armenians are not known to have had a presence in Antiquity while Moschoi were attested nearby, raises the possibility that the Moschoi/Muški also bore this haplotype. Based on this limited

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<sup>22</sup> <https://discover.familytreedna.com/y-dna/I-SK1270/tree> From the Roman city Viminacium (ID: I15524) in what is now eastern Serbia and from El Castillon (ID: I3575) in post Roman-era Spain. Another from Classic era Sardinia (Ringbauer et al. 2025: SuppTable3, ID: I22091) which is marked as an outlier from Caucasus.

<sup>23</sup> Skourtanioti et al., 2025 Supplemental Tables S1; ID SKH002.

data, it is possible that the Muški could have been the bearers of I2-Y17419 and, therefore, had ancestry from the Indo-European Trialeti-Vanadzor Culture.

### **Georgian**

Some scholars have linked the Muški to Kartvelians, especially Georgians [48: 105-109]. The most frequent argument is that modern Georgian-speaking Meskhetians supposedly preserved the name of the Muški/Moschoi. Another line of reasoning is based around linking the Kaška with Kartvelians, and the known association of the Muški with the Kaška [11].

The linkage of the Muški to the Kaška seems plausible (see section 4.3), but the theory that the Kaška were a Kartvelian tribe is unproven and not supported by the current (albeit, admittedly, scant) genetic data from northern Anatolia. The usual argument in support of a Moschoi and Meschoi (Μέσχοι) connection is the apparent similarity of the two terms. However, they only appear similar in Romanized Greek transliteration where the letter *chi* ( $\chi$ ) is used to render two different phonemes: *k*<sup>h</sup> and *x*. A closer examination of their phonetic pronunciations shows discrepancies. Meschi (>Meskheti) is pronounced as *mesx*, which is distinct from *mosk<sup>h</sup>/mosk*<sup>h</sup> (the cuneiform reading of Muški). Diakonoff expressed scepticism that the two roots were related. Giorgi Melikishvili suggested the term *mesx* must have been loaned into Kartvelian languages from a foreign source. Others have suggested that *mesx* traces its origin to the Colchian language [13; 48; 33].<sup>24</sup> However, this latter suggestion is unverifiable due to the absence of Colchian texts.

The oldest mention of the root *mesch* [*mesx*] is dated to the 4th-5th century CE [4: 420; 33: 43 note 5]. It can be said with a high degree of certainty that *mesch* is the Greek transcription of the Georgian term *mc*<sup>h</sup>*x(e)*- [*mæc*<sup>h</sup>*x(e)*-],<sup>25</sup> as the Greek alphabet lacks a letter for aspirated alveolar affricate [*c*<sup>h</sup>] and instead the letter sigma

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<sup>24</sup> Diakonoff 1984; Melikishvili 1959 105 note 231; Kavtaradze 2001:45 note 9. Melikishvili says that the term *mesx* is of foreign origin and was introduced into Georgian in a later period. This could be somewhat similar to how the term Ararat (instead of the older Urartu) was resurrected in Armenian texts during the Christian-era.

<sup>25</sup> Another possibility is that *mesx* was derived from the Biblical *Mesech*. The possible replacement of the term *mosk<sup>h</sup>* by *mesx* may have occurred during the spread of Christianity, when theologians were trying to link Biblical terms to familiar, contemporary geographic and ethnic terms. The *k<sup>h</sup>>x* shift in Koine Greek (where the letter chi ( $\chi$ ) was pronounced as *k<sup>h</sup>*), changed to [*x*] in the Early Medieval period. After the creation of the Georgian alphabet in the 5th century CE, monks translated Greek texts into Georgian, which could have caused the appearance of the new term *mesx* in Georgia. However, this theory cannot explain the Georgian root *mc*<sup>h</sup>*x*e-.

was used, while the letter epsilon represents the mid central vowel [ə]. Thus, the root *mc'xe* needs to be examined more closely.

*Mosk'* and *Mc'xe*. A number of Georgian terms are derived from *mc'xe*: *Mc'xet'a*, the ancient capital of Caucasian Iberia, *Samc'xe* (=the land of *Mc'xe*), and the name of the patriarch, *Mc'xet'os*. This shows the importance of this root. It is clear, however, that the two terms *mosk'* and *mc'xe* are quite distinct. They only share a single phoneme out of four overall. Given that these are the primary roots, in contrast to *mesx*, which appears late and almost certainly is derived from one of them, it is possible that:

- a) The two terms are unrelated: they have different origins and only one phoneme in common. However, since they were used to denote a similar place, this theory has its weaknesses. Additionally, the use of *Mosok* for Georgia by Northeast Caucasians remains unexplained in this scenario.
- b) Two terms are related and one of them is derived from the other. Given that the form *mosk'* (Muški) was attested in the early Iron Age, it must be the initial form, while the form *mc'xe* must be derived from *mosk'*.
  - Based on known regional sound change laws, the emergence of aspirated alveolar affricate [c'] can be explained as a result of *sk'>c'* shift (a change well-attested in Armenian). An intermediate stage is not directly attested; however, Hewsens suggested that the modern town of Posof in Turkey is derived from an unattested form *\*Moc'ovi* via the Georgian *P'oc'ovi* [5: 138, 209; 31: 135].
  - Next the appearance of *-x* can be explained by an addition of a suffix similar to those found in neighboring toponyms like *Odzra-xe*, *Java-x* (Urat. *Zabahae*), and possibly *Boł-xa* in the Olti region of Turkey [28: 726].<sup>26</sup> It is possible the *-x* suffix comes from the Muškian language itself or that it was added by its neighbors. The resulting intermediate form is attested in the Laz language, where Meskheti is known as *Moc'x-iw*. [31: 135]<sup>27</sup>
  - And finally, the loss of the [o] in *moc'x* can be due to an accent shift to the last added vowel *e*, resulting in the known form: *mc'xe*.

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<sup>26</sup> Hakobyan et al. 1986: Volume 1, 726. *Bołberd* in the same region meaning “fortress of *Boł*” indicates that the root is the *Boł* (Hakobyan et al. 1986: Volume 1, 725).

<sup>27</sup> Hewsens 1992:135. Another example of such a shift can be seen in the name of the village *Turc'x(i)* from *\*Turšk'*. The village, located near Akhalkalaki, is also known as *Turs* (Hakobyan et al. 1986: Volume 5, 146).

The existence of these sound changes is a strong indication that the initial Moschoi community underwent a linguistic shift most probably during Late Antiquity. Imagining the inverse (i.e. a development from *mc'xe>mosk'*) is practically impossible. This suggests that the name continuity argument for the Georgian origins of Moschoi is untenable.

*Moschoi and Colchians.* Another proposed argument is Hecataeus Miletus' (Frag. 288) reference to the Moschoi as a Colchian tribe. However, this is not sufficient for identifying the linguistic affiliation of the Moschoi. Ancient sources report significant linguistic diversity in Colchis. In just one city, Dioscourias, between 70 to 300 languages were spoken and 130 translators operated, according to Greek and Roman sources [59: 14]. Thus, the Moschoi being associated with Colchis does not guarantee they had the same linguistic affiliation as the Colchians. Nevertheless, it could indicate the Anatolian Moschoi migrated from the more eastern regions where Uartian-era *Qulha* or Greek-era Colchis were located. It is worth noting that the Greeks differentiated between Iberians and Colchians. Hecataeus Miletus' connection of the Moschoi with Colchians contradicts the theory that the Moschoi was an Iberian tribe. Hecataeus Miletus claimed that the Moschoi inhabited a region near Matiene, which, based on his later description, was firmly within Anatolia and not near the Caucasus. It is probable that these Moschoi were related to the Western Muški. In any case, ancient sources' claims regarding the origins of ethnic groups should be treated with caution. For instance, Herodotus stated that the Colchians had an Egyptian origin given their dark skin, a view that was never taken seriously by modern researchers. Another example is that many Caucasian ethnic groups were linked to Scythians or given other dubious origins in ancient texts.

*Genetic data.* According to the current genetic data, the homeland of the Kartvelian languages might be within the borders of modern Georgia [19]. Kartvelian people exhibit excessive genetic affinity to Caucasian hunter-gatherers [18: 7, 10]. Any Kartvelian migration or a chain of migrations to Anatolia would have left a specific genetic trace related to Caucasian hunter-gatherers. Ancient DNA samples from Anatolia dated to the Iron Age and Antiquity have not revealed any evidence of a significant increase in Caucasian hunter-gather ancestry, with the exception of one outlier from Hellenistic-era Samsun [42].

The ancient DNA from the Meskhети region in Georgia is not particularly supportive of a Kartvelian connection either. Genetic evidence indicates a migration from the south to the north in the direction of Meskhети (as discussed in section 3)

instead of expected migration from north to south. The presence of haplogroups R1a, Q2, and J1-P58 in Late Antiquity Akhaltsikhe, Georgia, suggests the presence of non-local migrants [65].<sup>28</sup> Even though R1a and Q2 are almost certainly not related to the Muški (they are Indo-Iranian haplotypes), their presence nevertheless suggests a migration from the south. The same is true for the J1-P58 and probably G2a2a1. Genome-wide DNA for Meskhetian Georgians is available. The results have shown modern Meskhetians have significantly more Anatolian-related genetic ancestry than other Kartvelian groups [18: 8, 10].

Irrespective of the initial identity of the Muški, it is beyond a doubt that a branch of them moved north and became part of Georgian ethnicity, playing an important role in the ethnogenesis of the Georgian nation. This is reflected in the founding myth of the Georgian nation, which features Mc‘xet‘os, son of Kartlos.

*Anatolian-Georgian connections.* The Muški have been proposed as a source for Anatolian influence in eastern Georgia.<sup>29</sup> Giorgi L. Kavtaradze suggested a possible Phrygian endonym, *Vrekun*, and theorized a connection to *Virk‘*, the medieval Armenian name for Caucasian Iberia [33: 48]. According to Kavtaradze, the Muški were Georgian-speakers who inhabited Cappadocia. They were subsequently conquered by the Phrygians, who had migrated from the Balkans alongside Armenians. After mixing, the Phrygian self-appellation, *Vrekun*, was reapplied by the Armenians to the Muški, the latter of whom resettled in Georgia. Kavtaradze further supported this by saying eastern Georgians were known to Northeast Caucasians as *Mosok/Masek/Mosoch*, [33: 44 note 8] with the implication being these names could ultimately be connected to Muški. It should be noted, however, that *Vrekun* has recently been rejected as a Phrygian self-appellation [62: 157].

Despite these theories, the migration from the Anatolian Plain to eastern Georgia is not supported by the ancient genetic data from Caucasian Iberia. Levantine and Anatolian related ancestry appeared in eastern Georgia only during the Hellenistic and Late Antiquity periods, which is too late to support Kavtaradze’s theory [65: 6 figure 3c]. Assuming that some of those Anatolian/Levantine shifted

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<sup>28</sup> Skourtanioti et al. 2025: Supplementary Tables S1.

<sup>29</sup> Compare the Hittite gods Arma, Santa, Atis, and Kibela, and the ancient gods of Georgian Iberia: Armazi, Zadeni, Gatsi, and Ga. (Kavtaradze 2001:44 note 7; Gordeziani and Tatishvili. 2016:267-272.) However, at least some of these Iberian gods may have other origins, i.e. Armazi from Ahura Mazda (or Ormazd) of the Iranian Zoroastrian religion (Lang 1986).

samples were from the northeastern regions of Anatolia (near the Kur River headwaters), it can be hypothesized that they can be related to a Muški/Moschoi migration from the headwaters of Kur River to eastern Georgia. If true, this could offer an explanation for why some Northeast Caucasians refer to Georgians as *Mosok*.

### ***Kaška***

A number of scholars have linked the Muški with the Kaška tribal confederation, which dwelt in northern Anatolia [21: 179]. The main arguments for these proposals are the known migrations of the Kaška during the same period that the Muški appeared in Assyrian inscriptions. The other argument is the possibility of a Kaškian linguistic connection to the final *-ki* in Muški. According to Itamar Singer, Kaškian toponyms featured a *-ska* suffix [63: 170]. Kosyan mentions that Kaškian personal names had the *-ki/-kki* ending.[38: 94]<sup>30</sup> Another theory is that Kaškian toponyms featured a *-ka* suffix.[11: 151 note 3] Such Kaškian toponyms include *Tatiška*, *Duduška*, *Munišga*, *Karikurišga*, *Zianteška*, and of course, the name *Kaška* itself. Additionally, a number of names omitting the final *-š-* include: *Išmirika*, *Tarukka* and possibly *Nerik*. It is worth noting that in Luwian inscriptions the form *Muska* existed with a similar *-ska/ka* ending.

There is no consensus regarding the Kaškian language's classification and various theories have ascribed non-Indo-European and Indo-European affiliations based on the small number of onomastics associated with them. The current scant genetic data from ancient northern Anatolia (Bronze Age Amasya and Classical-era Samsun) supports the suggestion that the Kaška could be a group related to local Hattic people, although a dense sampling of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Anatolia is needed to have a more solid opinion. Hattian and Kaškian related toponyms are well attested in the northwestern parts of the Armenian Highlands in the proposed Muški homeland. This, and the presence of Kaškian terms in the Muš region,[56: 142-145] increases the probability that the Muški were a Kaškian group living in the northeastern regions of Anatolia, who migrated south in the Early Iron Age.

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<sup>30</sup> Kosyan 2009:94. The linguistic features, such as personal names ending with *-ki/-kki* and toponyms ending with *-ka*, that have been attributed to Kaškian are suspiciously close to Paleo-Balkan languages and the Armenian plural *-k'*. Further research into the Kaškian language is necessary, including an examination of possible contacts with Paleo-Balkan speakers (see section 4.5).

### *Phrygians*

It is widely recognized that references to the (Western) Muški in 8th-7th centuries BCE Assyrian sources refer to Phrygia. Accordingly, it would be logical to link the Muški with Phrygians. Konstanin Kopanias went further, proposing a Phrygian affiliation for the Eastern Muški also. Kopanias adds that “Phrygian” was the general term, while Muški was their endonym. He additionally suggests that the Phrygians/Muški were not from the Balkans, but were indigenous to Asia Minor, and could perhaps be connected to the land of *Maša* [35: 222, 215, 220-222].

However, the most realistic scenario, which is supported by ancient DNA, is that the Phrygians moved from the Balkans,[68] while the first mentioned Eastern Muški were not speakers of the Phrygian language, as it is virtually impossible that the Phrygians were native to Anatolia or that they came from the east. As for *Maša*, a land mentioned in Hittite texts, it is very likely to be connected with the name *Maeonia*, another name of Lydia during the Classical-era [10: 438].

There are two explanations for why the name *Muški* was applied to Phrygia starting in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The first is that the Muški were conflated with the Phrygians due to the former establishing themselves as a ruling class over the latter, (which could explain the Mita/Midas connection),[37: 200-202]<sup>31</sup> causing the Assyrians to refer to both peoples by the same name. Known examples of country names deriving from a ruling class who spoke a language unrelated to the main language of the land are Bulgaria and France. A further possibility, which is not mutually exclusive to the previously mentioned explanation, is that the Muški settled en masse in Phrygian territory in central Anatolia. It has been proposed that the Western Muški were Eastern Muški who had migrated first to the Neo-Hittite states of Tabal and Que in Cilicia due to pressure from the Urartians, and subsequently settled in Cappadocia [61: 97; 66; 51: 870]. Alternatively, the Western Muški could have separated from the Eastern Muški in the Early Iron Age during their initial expansion. The presence of “grooved ware” in Gordion during the Early Iron Age, and the possibility that the Anatolian great king Hartapu's inscription mentioning Muški was written in 12th century BCE, as proposed by some scholars, raises the possibility that the Muški settled in plain Anatolia earlier than the Sargon's references to them [24: 389; 3].

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<sup>31</sup> Kosyan 2002:200-202. Some Neo-Hittite states may also have had a Muški ruling class, such as Atuna, which had a king who bore the name Kurti.

It should be noted that Greeks differentiated between the Moschoi and the Phrygians. This could support that *Muški* was a Near Eastern exonym applied to Phrygia but not specifically related to Phrygians nor their endonym. This also could mean that the Muški who settled in Anatolia did not shift to the Phrygian language but preserved their initial language or began to speak another, non-Phrygian language, with Luwian being the best candidate.

*Moesi and Mysia.* Finally, the term *Moesi*, attested in the Balkans, is not a strong argument for linking the Muški to the Balkans, geographically. Recent research related to Moesi/Moesan has shown that this term, which is derived from Mysia [Μυσία Musia], appeared in ancient texts only after the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and was only applied to this region by the Romans during the Roman Imperial-era, possibly for political reasons.[8: 407ff].

Assuming that Moesia originated from an Anatolian source, it is quite plausible that Mysia's name is related to Muški. Both apparently derive from the same *mus/mos* root, which could have the same origin. It is also possible the Mysians were a group descended from the Muški who shifted to Phrygian as their primary language and lost their name's final *-ki*. Mysia can be linked to the *Musa* of Luwian inscriptions.

### ***Paleo-Balkanic***

Petrosyan developed a theory suggesting that the Muški were Phrygians and that they may have contributed to the ethnic background of the Urartian elite. Citing Homer, Petrosyan said it was possible the Phrygians migrated to Asia Minor earlier than the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and that they perhaps originated in the Pontic region rather than the Balkans. According to Petrosyan's theory, over the centuries, some of the Muški lost their language but retained the Greek-like names borne by the Urartian kings Minua, Argišti,<sup>32</sup> Sarduri, and possibly Rusa, and featured in toponyms of the Armenian Highlands, such as Tauros, Arnos, Artos, and Grgros.[55:

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<sup>32</sup> The name Argišti is of particular interest. One proposed etymology derives this name from Proto-Indo-European *\*h<sub>2</sub>erǵ-* (white, shining). Armenian derivations of this same root, recorded in the Armenian Highlands since at least the Iron Age (i.e. Arcaškun, Arciani), are satem, while Argišti, according to this etymology, is centum. Argišti bears an apparent close phonetic similarity to Greek *argestes* (ἀργέστης), derived from this same Proto-Indo-European root.

408]<sup>33</sup> Petrosyan also said the Muški (if they were related to Phrygians) could also have constituted part of the population of the Late Bronze Age Hittite satellites Hayasa-Azzi and Pahhuwa, noting the similarities of the names of the Hayasan king Karanni to Ancient Macedonian Karanos, as well as the names of Mita of Pahhuwa and Midas of Phrygia [55: 408].

Currently, there is no genetic evidence of any substantial or significant migration from the Balkans to eastern Anatolia or the eastern Pontic regions in the Bronze Age. It is possible that the Balkanic-like names in the ancient Armenian Highlands, present since at least the Late Bronze Age, could have another source: they could have come from the language of a non-Armenic Indo-European tribe that migrated alongside the Proto-Armenians through the Caucasus during the Middle Bronze Age. This hypothetical unknown Balkanic language, whether spoken by the Muški or a different group, would have been linguistically closer to Greek or Phrygian than Armenian, but would have influenced Armenian from a very early stage. The haplogroup I2a2b, found in abundance in the Bronze Age South Caucasus, could be a marker of such a Balkanic presence. Another explanation for the presence of Balkanic terms in West Asia could be the migration of the Sea Peoples, who settled along the eastern Mediterranean coast around 1200 BCE. Ancient DNA has confirmed the European origins of the Philistines [15]. However, the Sea Peoples had little lasting impact on the genetics of the Levant and it is difficult to imagine that the Muški, attested in the Alzi region, deep in the mountains of inner-West Asia, could be derived from those migrants. Additionally, some Balkanic names recorded in the Armenian Highlands, such as Karanni, predate the Sea Peoples migration by more than a century.

Another possibility is , as yet undetected, a maritime coastal migration from the Balkans eastward along the Pontic coast. However, more ancient DNA from northern Anatolia and the Pontic region is needed to determine the likelihood of a hypothetical maritime migration, especially since there is a complete lack of archaeological evidence supporting its occurrence.

### **Discussion**

The origins of the Muški, their spread, and ultimate fate, is a complex matter. Information connected to them is scant and ethnic groups with whom they interacted are diverse. Regions where they settled cover a large geography and have had a

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<sup>33</sup> Petrosyan 2019:407. It is worth noting that theories regarding a Urartian-Balkanic connection are not new, having been proposed by Carl Ferdinand Friedrich Lehmann-Haupt and Paul Kretschmer in the first half of the 20th century.

number of different political affiliations. Nevertheless, despite this complexity, recent genetic discoveries can help to offer insight into the background of the Muški.

The Muški's Bronze Age origins were in West Asia, in the Armenian Highlands. Their homeland was in all likelihood near the source of the Euphrates (=Karasu). From their homeland, the Muški migrated to the south in the Early Iron Age (after 1200 BCE). Either during the 12th century BCE or somewhat later, another group of Muški moved to the west, to the plain of Anatolia, and gave their name to the Phrygian kingdom. Retrospectively, this later group became known as the Western Muški. The Muški who remained in their homeland in the Upper Euphrates region apparently developed a distinct identity. In the 7th century BCE, they came under attack by the Urartians, which probably forced them to move north toward the headwaters of the Kur River. Those Northern Muški were the Moschians of Classical sources. Continuous conflicts with the Arsacids apparently resulted in their further migrations to the north and the northeast into the Georgian sphere of influence. During this period, their name underwent significant sound changes, probably due to a linguistic shift, with the old term *Moschi* gradually disappearing from the ancient sources, and the appearance of the new terms: *Mc'xe* and *Mesx*.

The Muški left their impact on Armenians, Georgians, and Cappadocians, leaving a legacy in the form of the founding father legends of these nations. Even more remarkable is the possibility that they transferred their name to the Phrygian kingdom, which created long-lasting confusion about their origins and initial linguistic affiliation. It is plausible that the Muški were involved in breeding and trading mules. The Paleo-Balkan term *\*musk*, meaning “mule,” could be derived from their name.

Currently there is no ancient DNA from the hypothetical Muški homeland and Early Iron Age grooved ware burials that were plausibly associated with them. However, based on the aforementioned reconstruction of their migrations, there are haplotypes and genetic events that could be linked to the Muški. Firstly, the male Y DNA I2-Y16419, which moved from historic Armenia and South Caucasus to Anatolia, as well as the possibility that the spread of Anatolian farmers' rich ancestry to eastern Georgia in Late Antiquity period was partly mediated by the Muški. It should be cautioned that those conclusions are based on indirect evidence, while the true diversity of Muški gene pool was almost certainly higher and not restricted to just one haplotype. While the true linguistic identity of the Muški remains undetermined, some theories are more probable than others. A Phrygian origin of the Muški is unrealistic, while theories linking the Muški to Armenic or Kaška groups are more plausible. A Georgian connection is hindered by a significant

linguistic obstacle, making it less likely, while a Paleo-Balkan affiliation requires more investigation. As genetic research gets further refined and new archaeological discoveries are made, it seems very possible more information about the Muški will be uncovered.

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**Մուշկի ցեղախմբի ուսումնասիրություն. բազմազգիտակարգ մոտեցում՝  
ներառյալ հնագենետիկան**

**Հիմնաբառեր** - Մուշքեր, Մուշկի, հնագենետիկա, մուշքերի հայրենիք, մոսխեր, Փոյուզիա, Ուրարտու, Ասորեստան, Կասկա, երկաթե դարի Մերձավոր Արևելք, ակոսավոր խեցեղեն

**Արամ Պալյան  
Մեր Պելտեկյան**

**Ամփոփում**

Պատմության ընթացքում Արևմտյան Ասիայի հյուսիսը եղել է բազմաթիվ էթնիկ խմբերի հայրենիք: Դրանցից ամենաառեղծվածայիններից են մուշքերը: Նրանց մշակութային և լեզվական պատկանելությունը պարզելու համար կիրառվել է բազմազգիտակարգ մոտեցում, ներառյալ առաջին անգամ օգտագործվել են գենետիկական տվյալներ: Մ.թ.ա. 8-րդ դարում ասորեստանցիները «մուշկի» անվանումը կիրառել են Փոյուզիայի համար, ինչի հետևանքով առաջարկվել են տեսություններ, ըստ որի մուշքերը պետք է ունենային բալկանյան ծագում՝ որպես փոյուզիացիներ կամ նրանց հետ սերտ կապված մի այլ խումբ: Սակայն այդ տեսությունները հիմնավոր ապացույցներ չունեն: Գենետիկական տվյալները չեն հաստատում վաղ երկաթի դարում Բալկաններից դեպի Խարբերդ/Էլազըղ ու Տիգրիս գետի ակունքների շրջան միգրացիան, որտեղ մուշքերը առաջին անգամ հիշատակվում են ասորեստանյան աղբյուրներում մ.թ.ա. 12-րդ դարում: Մյուս կողմից, կան նախնական տվյալներ, որը պահանջում է հետագա հաստատում, որ գենետիկական մարկեր է տեղաշարժվել Հայկական լեռնաշխարհից ու Հարավային Կովկասից դեպի Անատոլիական դաշտավայր: Այս նոր իրողությունը հիմնավոր է դարձնում մուշքերի կապը հայերի հետ, որի դեպքում մուշքերի հայրենիքը գտնվում էր Արևմտյան Եփրատ/Կարասու գետի ակունքների մոտ: Միննույն ժամանակ, հավասարապես հավանական է դառնում կապը հին Կասկա ցեղերի հետ, որոնք հայտնի են որպես բրոնզե դարի մուշքերի դաշնակիցներ: Բացի այդ, առկա լեզվական տվյալների վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ մուշքերի վրացական էթնոլեզվական պատկանելությունը անհրատեսական է, թեև մուշկի և Սցիսթե անունների միջև կապը հավանական է:

# UNITY WITHOUT POWER-SHARING: SYRIA'S STANCE ON KURDISH FEDERALISM

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DOI: 10.52837/27382702-2025.5.2-46

## Abstract

Since the establishment of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1946, successive regimes have systematically denied the Kurdish population its fundamental national rights. The outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 sparked a renewed Kurdish political awakening, as Kurdish-majority regions in northern Syria transitioned from initial caution to assertive political and military mobilization. Rejecting President Bashar al-Assad's (2000–2024) limited reform proposals and centralist vision, Kurdish political actors, backed by the United States, established a de facto autonomous administration in 2013, structured around three self-governing cantons. This development significantly altered the trajectory of the Syrian conflict and expanded the scope of foreign intervention, particularly by Turkey. Despite facing considerable territorial, demographic, and infrastructural losses, Kurdish-led forces, in coordination with international allies, successfully resisted existential threats, most notably from ISIS. The ousting of President al-Assad in December 2024 and the subsequent peace agreement between Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Commander Mazloum Abdi and interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa in March 2025 further underscored the Syrian state's enduring opposition to Kurdish aspirations for de jure autonomy. This article examines how the Syrian civil war (2011–2024) reshaped the Kurdish national movement, analyzing the interplay between Kurdish political mobilization, state fragmentation, and regional constraints that limited the realization of Kurdish autonomy within Syria's political landscape. Through historical and political analysis, the study argues that the Kurdish struggle under al-Assad's regime laid a critical foundation for future claims to broaden national rights. The experience of de facto sovereignty, despite its limitations, provides a crucial framework for advancing Kurdish political agency within a reconfigured, post-conflict Syrian state.

**Keywords:** *Kurds, Syria, SDF, federalism, sovereignty, security.*

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Received September 3, 2025, revised October 28, 2025, accepted November 18, 2025

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## **Introduction**

Since the formation of the modern Syrian state in the aftermath of post-colonial restructuring, the Kurdish question has remained a deeply contested and unresolved dimension of Syrian politics. Despite representing one of the largest stateless ethnic groups in the Middle East, the Kurdish population in Syria has been systematically denied recognition, political rights, and cultural autonomy. Successive regimes have consistently pursued a policy of Arabization toward the Kurds, trying to replace them in a Sunni environment. This entrenched policy of marginalization began to unravel with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, which precipitated the fragmentation of state authority and created unprecedented opportunities for non-state actors to assert territorial and political control. Within this volatile landscape, Kurdish political and military actors in northern Syria, inspired by the PKK and having close ties with this movement, which originated in Turkey, proclaimed an autonomous administration in 2013.

This development, later institutionalized as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), represented a significant rupture in the historical denial of Kurdish agency and constituted a pivotal moment in the broader struggle for self-determination. However, the establishment of de facto autonomy was not solely a product of internal dynamics. It was also facilitated by shifting international alignments, most notably the tactical partnership between Syrian Kurdish forces and the United States under the Obama administration, forged in the context of the global campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS). This alliance temporarily elevated the geopolitical relevance of the Kurdish question in Syria. However, over time, the Kurdish project became entangled in the broader complexities of the Syrian conflict, including regional rivalries, Turkish military interventions, the fluctuating commitments of external powers, and intra-opposition political competition. Between Syrian Kurdish forces and the Syrian government, there were cold and tense relations, but no war or military struggle. This article examines the tendencies of historical continuity of the Syrian state's refusal to recognize Kurdish autonomy and traces the emergence and evolution of the Kurdish self-governance project since 2013. It places particular emphasis on the security challenges confronting the autonomous administration and the fluctuating role of U.S. foreign policy under the Obama and Trump administrations. By situating these developments, the article aims

to offer a nuanced analysis of how local aspirations for autonomy intersect with, and are shaped by, broader geopolitical forces.

### **Demography as Policy: Ethnic Reconfiguration and the Syrian State's Approach to the Kurds**

The Kurdish population in Syria has historically been concentrated in three geographically non-contiguous enclaves along the Turkish border: Upper Jazirah (al-Jazira), Jarablus, and Kurd Dagh (Jabal al-Akrad). The main urban centers in these areas are Qamishli in the Upper Jazirah, Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) in the Jarablus region, and Afrin in the Kurd Dagh. Additionally, sizeable Kurdish communities have long been established in major cities such as Aleppo and Damascus. Some Kurdish tribes of Upper Jazirah have, moreover, maintained relations with their kin in Tur Abdin, Turkey, and in Iraq's Dohuk Province through marriage, commerce, and shared ethnic affiliations. Historically, the Kurd Dagh and Jarablus areas have been more disconnected from wider Kurdish activity than the Upper Jazirah region [26]. During the French Mandate period (1920s–1930s), Upper Jazirah became a significant hub of Kurdish politics. This was primarily due to the influx of Kurdish tribal chiefs and intellectuals fleeing repression in the newly established Republic of Turkey.

In exile under the French Mandate, Kurdish intellectuals in the Levant enjoyed relative freedoms of speech and organization, which supported their cultural revival efforts. Jordi Tejel's research provides a nuanced analysis of interwar nationalism and highlights the instrumental role of colonial powers in shaping minority politics across the Middle East [12:839]. Following Syria's independence from France in 1946, the Kurdish population, one of the country's most significant ethnic minorities, continued to experience systematic marginalization and the denial of fundamental national rights. Despite their significant demographic presence, Kurds in Syria have been denied fundamental social, cultural, and political rights: to travel abroad (which requires a passport), to own property; to enter into legally recognized marriage, to benefit from healthcare and food subsidies; to participate in elections; and to hold office (whether elected or as civil servants) [25]. In 1962, shortly before the Ba'athist coup of 1963, the Syrian authorities conducted a special census in the al-Hasakeh province, a predominantly Kurdish region. As a result, approximately 120,000 Kurds were arbitrarily stripped of their citizenship. The government justified this action by claiming these individuals were not "genuine" Syrians, alleging they had illegally entered the country from neighbouring states,

notably Turkey and Iraq [25]. Following this policy, the Syrian state categorized Kurds into three main legal classifications: Syrian Kurds (citizens), foreign Kurds (classified as non-citizens or *ajanib*), and “concealed” Kurds (*maktoumeen*), those who were neither registered nor recognized in any official capacity, despite being born and raised in Syria [20]. After the Ba'athist party came to power in 1963, it proved hostile towards Kurds because of Arab nationalistic ideology [6]. The Syrian government's land reform policy furthered the Arabization of the region. Beginning in the 1960s, the Syrian government sought to alter the demographics of the Hasakeh region and beyond through the settlement of Bedouin tribes.

Arabization entailed the creation of an “Arab Belt” along the Turkish border [21]. The 1958 decree outlawed the publication of materials in Kurdish, and even private schools were barred from teaching that language. The regime replaced Kurdish names of towns and villages with Arabic ones; for example, the Kurdish town of Kobane was renamed Ayn al-Arab [22:26]. Between 1973 and 1975, the Syrian government initiated the establishment of 41 new villages in regions previously inhabited by Kurdish populations, relocating Arab settlers into these areas. The state provided new Arab residents with land allocations, agricultural subsidies, fertilisers, and access to government loans to facilitate the establishment of stable livelihoods. In contrast, existing Kurdish villages were systematically neglected, particularly in terms of infrastructure and public services [2:23]. This policy of demographic engineering, intensified tensions between the incoming Arab population and the displaced or marginalized Kurdish communities. The period witnessed growing resentment, resource-based competition, and rising ethnic tensions, laying the groundwork for long-term socio-political friction in northeastern Syria.

### **Reconfiguring Kurdish Politics in Syria: Pre-and Post-Arab Spring Dynamics**

As discussed earlier, the Syrian state has not granted official recognition to the Kurdish population as a distinct ethno-religious minority. Instead, Kurds were generally classified as part of the broader Sunni Muslim majority, a categorization that effectively marginalized their national identity and excluded them from the legal and cultural protections afforded to other recognized minorities, such as Syria's Christian denominations. Nevertheless, during the presidency of Hafez al-Assad

(1971–2000), the Syrian government pursued a policy of double standards regarding the Kurdish issue, strategically using the "Kurdish card" to serve state interests. In the late 1970s, Turkey began constructing dams along the Euphrates River, significantly threatening Syria's water security. Despite Damascus's efforts to counter these developments, it failed to halt Turkey's project. In this complex geopolitical context, President al-Assad began leveraging the Kurdish issue as a tool of regional pressure. From the 1980s onward, Syria provided support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a means of pressuring Ankara. This policy enabled al-Assad to gain favour among segments of the Syrian Kurdish population, while simultaneously aiming to suppress domestic Kurdish dissent. Between the 1980s and 1990s, several thousand Syrian Kurds are reported to have joined the PKK. Syria's support for the group persisted until the rapprochement with Turkey in 1998 [27:4]. This fact is essential and helps explain how the Democratic Union Party (PYD) emerged as the predominant Kurdish political party in Syria soon after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. The signature of the Adana agreement in 1998 formalized Syria's abandonment of its support for the PKK [28]. The empowerment of Iraqi Kurds following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 gradually drove Ankara, Damascus, and Tehran closer to the shared threat of Kurdish separatism in Turkey, Syria, and Iran [28]. The 2004 Kurdish uprising marked the first significant Kurdish mobilization against the regime. It began in March 2004 after a football match in Qamishli between a Kurdish team and an Arab team from Deir ez-Zor. Political slogans by Kurdish fans led to clashes, prompting security forces to open fire and kill at least seven Kurds. Mass funerals the next day turned into widespread protests demanding national and cultural rights, quickly spreading to Kurdish regions and major cities like Damascus and Aleppo. The government responded with a violent crackdown, arresting over 2,000, mainly students and activists. By the end of the unrest, around 30 Kurds had been killed. The uprising exposed deep-seated Kurdish grievances and is widely seen as a precursor to the broader Kurdish movement that emerged during the Syrian civil war after 2011 [2:28].

Before the "Arab Spring" events, some 300,000 Kurds, approximately 15 per cent of the estimated two million Kurds, continued to remain stateless, lacking fundamental rights. When the 2011 uprising broke out, the Syrian Kurds and Kurdish parties were of two minds about whether to join or not to join the anti-government position for fear of repression. Fifteen pro-Kurdish parties existed in the country at that time. Most of these parties, which sought formal equality between Kurds and Arabs, traced their origins back to the first Kurdish political party in Syria, the PDK (Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurd li Sûriyê), founded in 1957. Consequently, the sense of

nationalist mobilization among the Syrian Kurds remained much lower in comparison to the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran throughout the 20th century [27:1].

Nevertheless, Kurdish demonstrations remained relatively limited in size and scope. Much like other Kurdish populations across the Middle East, Syrian Kurds were politically fragmented. From the very outset of the uprising, Kurdish political forces reacted in varying ways, broadly categorized into three main groups: 1. Kurdistan Workers' Party, 2. traditional Kurdish parties, and 3. the Kurdish youth-led coordinating committees along with the Kurdish 'Future Movement.' [7]

Young Kurds have been involved in the Syrian revolution since its inception, calling for freedom and the fall of the regime, and subsequently forming an umbrella body, the Union of Coordinating Committees for the Kurdish Youth. [7]. Young Kurdish activists primarily used social media tools everywhere. A few demonstrations in the Kurdish regions, mainly in Kamishli and Hasakeh, followed the same logic as the revolution [7].

On the other hand, there were Kurdish voices, both within tribal structures and urban communities, who opposed separatist aspirations. Many Kurds, both before the 2011 events, have opposed the separatist aspirations, favouring peaceful and democratic efforts to achieve rights and recognition within a unified Syrian framework [20]. Nevertheless, the Kurdish movement soon began to develop its own agenda. The National Movement of Kurdish Parties of Syria, a coalition of Syria's 12 Kurdish parties, boycotted a Syrian opposition summit in Antalya on 31 May 2011 because of Turkey's anti-Kurdish aspirations [23]. Over time, the Kurdish movement began to act independently, refusing to cooperate with the Syrian opposition and rebel groups. A few Kurdish parties made an exception. Among them was the "Future Movement" of Meshaal Tammo, who had just been released after three-and-a-half years in prison for dissent. In August 2011, a coalition of Syrian opposition groups formed the Syrian National Council (SNC) under Turkey's umbrella. "Future Movement" was among the few Kurdish parties joining the SNC. The Kurdish cooperation with the SNC and other conflict sides failed as the majority of the Syrian oppositional groups did not share the separatist aspirations of the Kurds. Factually, the Syrian Kurds were encouraged by the successful experience of the Iraqi Kurds, who retained their autonomous status in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. The Kurds in Syria were full of hope to create their autonomy, which they initially called "Rojava", which in the Kurdish language

means "West", denoting the western region part of what they consider "Big Kurdistan" [19].

A significant shift in the Kurdish movement occurred after Saleh Muslim, the head of the Democratic Union Party, returned to Syria in April 2011. He served jail time in Syria for illegal political activity before fleeing in 2010 and seeking refuge in Iraq [1]. The PYD aimed to mobilize the active Kurdish population, including women. The Democratic Union Party, well-organized, trained, and armed, became the dominant Kurdish power in Syria. The party has been the most reluctant to confront the regime. The PYD's armed branch, the People's Defence Corps (YPG), was trained by the PKK at its headquarters in northern Iraq's Qandil mountain range. According to the International Crisis Group report, the PKK sent 1,000 armed fighters to establish the PYD's military wing, the YPG [22:26]. It is noteworthy that the Syrian government decided to rely on PYD/YPG as a local proxy rather than attack the Kurdish areas itself. The PYD joined and assumed a leading role in the moderate opposition group, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, formed in June 2011 and comprising leftist Arabs and Kurds who called for regime change while remaining opposed to foreign intervention. On 7 October 2011, charismatic leader Meshaal Tammo's assassination provoked Kurdish protesters. Tammo's funeral turned into a mass rally with more than 50,000 demonstrators calling for the fall of Assad's regime. Security forces opened fire on the crowd [15]. In October 2011, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) was formed under the patronage of the President of the Kurdish Regional Government, Masoud Barzani. The KNC was composed of 15 local parties opposed to both the Assad regime and the PKK. Later, Barzani attempted to reconcile the two sides. On 11 July 2012, just before the Syrian army began to withdraw from Kurdish areas, Barzani mediated a power-sharing accord between the two leading groups. Known as the "Erbil Declaration," it stipulated that they would jointly govern Syria's Kurdish regions during the transition. It established the Supreme Kurdish Committee [22:4]. Barzani sought to strengthen the Kurds' position amid security challenges, while maintaining his influence in the Syrian mosaic<sup>1</sup>. Later, he exited the scene, leaving it to PYD.

Thus, the first stage of the Kurdish national movement in Syria came to a close by the summer of 2012. Even before the complete withdrawal of Syrian regime

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<sup>1</sup>According to the agreement, first, the PYD and the KNC will stop fighting each other. Second, the PYD will henceforth focus exclusively on the Kurdish issue inside Syria, not across the border in Turkey. Third, the newly unified Syrian Kurds will expel Syrian government officials and security forces from their area [17].

forces from Kurdish-majority areas, Kurdish political actors believed they were sufficiently prepared to assert control over their own regions. In June 2012, the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) publicly called on Kurdish groups to join the uprising; however, Kurdish factions declined the invitation for political, historical, and strategic reasons. The FSA, composed primarily of Sunni Arab opposition forces, espoused a pan-Syrian nationalist agenda centered on the overthrow of the Assad regime, yet offered no credible commitment to Kurdish national or cultural rights. In contrast, the dominant Kurdish party, the PYD, prioritized a political program focused on self-governance, cultural recognition, and eventual autonomy. These objectives were largely unacknowledged or dismissed by mainstream Arab opposition groups, which contributed to deep Kurdish skepticism toward cooperation. This mistrust was further compounded by historical grievances, particularly the legacy of Arab nationalist policies and state-led Arabization campaigns under the Ba'ath regime, which had systematically marginalized Kurdish identity and rights. As such, Kurdish leaders questioned whether the Arab opposition would prove any more inclusive or democratic in a post-Assad Syria. Instead of aligning with the broader rebellion, the PYD and its military wing, the People's Protection Units, concentrated their efforts on securing Kurdish-majority areas and establishing local administrative structures. They viewed the power vacuum resulting from the regime's retreat as a strategic opportunity to create a de facto autonomous zone, one that could eventually serve as the foundation for broader Kurdish political aspirations within or beyond Syria's borders.

In July 2012, the Syrian government withdrew from the Kurdish enclaves in Afrin, Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), and Qamishli while maintaining several security and military bases and administrative offices. There was a non-formal agreement between the Syrian regime and PYD. The regime has never targeted PYD-led areas. The two sides did not engage in direct combat [17]. Ankara accused Damascus of handing over areas to the PKK "terrorists." On November 12, 2013, Kurdish groups in Syria announced the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, a semi-autonomous region divided into three zones.

The establishment of the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria began in 2013 amid the chaos of the Syrian civil war, as the Kurdish Democratic Union Party and its armed wing, the YPG, took control of Kurdish-majority areas in the northeast and northwest of the country. This self-administration, commonly known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, implemented

decentralized governance structures, promoted gender equality, and provided public services despite ongoing conflict. However, the fragile stability of the Kurdish autonomous region was repeatedly challenged by external forces, most notably Turkey. Relations between the Kurdish autonomous administration and Turkey have been deeply hostile and conflict-ridden. Turkey viewed the Syrian Kurdish-led administration, particularly the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which it designates as a terrorist organization. Consequently, Ankara has launched multiple military operations in northern Syria aimed at curbing Kurdish autonomy and influence. Major Turkish incursions include Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018), which targeted Afrin, and Operation Peace Spring (2019), focusing on the border region near Kobane and Tal Abyad. These repeated interventions have resulted in significant territorial losses for Kurdish forces, aimed at curbing Kurdish influence and prevent the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish-controlled zone. The Turkish involvement complicated the political and security dynamics of the region, presenting ongoing challenges to the stability and future of the Kurdish autonomous administration.

Despite numerous challenges, the Kurdish-led administration managed to maintain de facto control over significant parts of northeastern Syria. During the fight against ISIS, whose territorial expansion in Syria and Iraq was declared in 2014, the Kurdish forces collaborated intermittently with both the Syrian government and international actors, particularly the U.S.-led coalition. These instances of cooperation with the Assad regime were tactical, limited, and driven by shared security concerns, rather than any formal alliance or ideological alignment. The coordination was rooted in pragmatism and mutual survival in specific battlefronts, such as Hasakah and parts of Deir ez-Zor. However, no official agreement or alliance was ever established between the Syrian government and the Kurdish administration. Both parties remained fundamentally at odds, especially over Kurdish autonomy. Following the territorial defeat of ISIS, frictions resurfaced, particularly concerning the control and governance of oil-rich regions, highlighting the persistent political divergence between the Kurdish administration and the central government in Damascus. President Bashar al-Assad has explicitly rejected federalism and separatist arrangements for Kurdish regions in Syria, asserting that "Most Kurds want to live in a unified Syria, under a central system," and warning that the establishment of separate entities contradicts the country's unity and territorial integrity [18]. Although there were moments of limited coordination, Damascus never recognized the Autonomous Administration of North and East

Syria or supported the idea of Kurdish self-rule. Assad repeatedly emphasized that Syria would remain a centralized state and rejected any moves that could lead to decentralization or separatism. Geographically, Syria is too small to be a federal state. It is probably smaller than most of the Russian Federation's republics. Socially speaking, a federation needs social constituencies which cannot live with each other," said al-Assad in an interview conducted by SANA [18].

The Syrian regime appears intent on reasserting its authority over the Kurdish self-administered regions in northeastern Syria by proposing limited constitutional reforms, most notably, the inclusion of a clause addressing local governance. However, it continues to categorically reject Kurdish demands for a federal system. As a concrete step in this direction, President Bashar al-Assad issued a decree scheduling local elections for September 16, 2018, thereby reaffirming the state's position that the Kurdish question must be addressed strictly within the framework of a unified and sovereign Syria [16]. While exclusionary attitudes toward the Kurds persist within segments of Syria's Sunni Arab majority, the conflict has also opened new avenues for pragmatic cross-ethnic cooperation. In contrast to the regime's centralized approach, the shared experience of political marginalization and armed struggle has, in some cases, fostered collaboration between Kurdish forces and Arab tribal actors. A prominent example is the cooperation between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the *al-Ghad al-Suri* movement, led by opposition figure Ahmad al-Jarba. Arab military units played an important role in supporting the SDF during military operations, particularly in the fight against ISIS, highlighting a strategic convergence between Arab and Kurdish factions within the fragmented Syrian opposition landscape [1]. Further evidence of cross-ethnic political engagement is evident in the November 2021 meeting of Arab and Kurdish tribal leaders in the Jazira region. Participants expressed support for the Autonomous Administration project, describing it as an inclusive and viable model capable of addressing the crises facing both Syria and the broader Middle East. They characterized it as a rare and positive case of locally rooted, pluralistic governance [4].

However, throughout the Syrian crisis and up until the change of power, the Kurdish elite consistently rejected al-Assad's proposals and refused to make any concessions. Following the ousting of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the newly established Syrian authorities have consistently and unequivocally rejected proposals for Kurdish autonomy, reaffirming their commitment to the preservation

of Syria's territorial integrity and centralized governance. The US-backed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has had to navigate complex regional and international dynamics. Faced with shifting U.S. policy under the Trump administration, escalating Turkish threats, and a rapidly changing Syrian political landscape, Kurdish actors were forced to reassess and adapt their approaches to both resistance and political negotiation.

On March 10, 2025, a historic agreement was signed between the commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, Mazloun Abdi, and Syria's interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, marking a pivotal step in post-conflict reconciliation and state reconstruction. The agreement, signed in Damascus, outlined the integration of Kurdish military and administrative institutions into the Syrian state's framework and guaranteed the Kurds' constitutional rights, citizenship, and cultural recognition. Key components included a nationwide ceasefire, joint administration of strategic assets such as oil fields and border crossings, and a commitment to pluralistic governance [10]. This accord reflects a significant shift from fragmented governance in northeast Syria toward centralized coordination, yet it retains local autonomy within a broader national framework. The Kurds' motivation for entering the agreement stemmed from a combination of strategic pragmatism, security concerns, and the opportunity to gain legal recognition as an essential component of the Syrian policy. Notably, even after the agreement was signed, Kurdish representatives continued to advocate for the establishment of a "decentralized democratic state." In response, Syrian Interim President Ahmad al-Shara issued a statement declaring: "We clearly reject any attempt to impose partition or to create separatist cantons under the guise of federalism or self-autonomy without national consensus. The unity of Syria's territory and its people is a red line" [3]. At the end of April 2025, the Syrian presidency released an official statement rejecting renewed Kurdish demands for a decentralized or federal system of governance. The statement warned against "attempts to impose a separatist reality or to establish separate entities under the guise of federalism... without national consensus." It went on to condemn "the recent activities and declarations" of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), characterizing them as efforts to advance federalist ambitions that pose a threat to Syria's territorial integrity [24].

The internal Kurdish political process in Syria has not only shaped the country's post-conflict dynamics but also produced broader regional repercussions. Most notably, on May 12, 2025, after more than four decades of armed struggle in Turkey (1984–2025), the Kurdistan Workers' Party officially laid down its arms [29]. The Kurdish reconciliation with the Islamist government in Syria did not occur

in isolation. Instead, it appears to be closely connected to the broader transformation of Kurdish political strategies in the region, particularly those unfolding in Syria. The shifting balance of power, the Kurdish leadership's engagement in negotiations, and the redefinition of political goals within Syria likely influenced the PKK's decision to recalibrate its approach in Turkey. In this context, the Syrian Kurdish experience arguably served as both a reference point and a catalyst for broader Kurdish political reconfigurations across the region.

### **Conclusion remarks**

One of the most consequential developments in the Kurdish struggle in Syria since the outbreak of the civil war was the establishment of Kurdish self-administration in 2013. This milestone marked a transformative shift in Kurdish political agency and territorial governance, culminating decades of Syrian Kurdish efforts to assert national rights and political identity within a historically restrictive state system. The emergence of Kurdish self-rule in northeastern Syria was closely intertwined with the dynamics of the Syrian conflict, during which Kurdish political and military forces-backed by the United States-became pivotal actors in both local governance and regional security. Simultaneously, the Kurdish movement in Syria, ideologically aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, faced escalating external pressures. These included sustained Turkish military interventions in northern Syria and persistent confrontations with hostile Sunni jihadist groups, most notably ISIS. While Kurdish forces succeeded in reshaping Syria's internal balance of power and elevating the Kurdish question to the regional and international agenda, these gains remained structurally fragile, constrained by shifting geopolitical alignments and a predominantly negative regional consensus toward Kurdish political aspirations among neighboring states. The agreement with Islamist government of Syria in March 2025 represented a significant loss of autonomy and strategic leverage for the Kurdish movement. On one hand, this setback reflected sustained pressure from Turkey on the Kurdish movement, both within Turkey and across Syria. On the other hand, it was linked to a decline in U.S. support for Kurdish armed groups-particularly under the Trump administration-amid shifting regional power dynamics following Syria's regime change in December 2024.

Equally constraining was the entrenched opposition of the Syrian state and the broader Arab Sunni political milieu to Kurdish autonomy or federal

arrangements, reflecting deep-seated ideological resistance to territorial decentralization. Despite these formidable challenges, the Kurdish self-administration project in Syria established a durable framework for articulating and partially institutionalizing Kurdish national rights. As such, it constitutes a significant political experiment with implications that extend beyond Syria, contributing to broader debates on minority governance, state sovereignty, and regional order in the Middle East.

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**Միասնությունն առանց իշխանության բաժանման. Սիրիայի  
դիրքորոշումը քրդական ֆեդերալիզմի վերաբերյալ**

**Արաքս Փաշայան**

**Հիմնաբառեր.** քրդեր, Սիրիա, SDF, ֆեդերալիզմ, ինքնիշխանություն, անվտանգություն:

**Ամփոփում**

1946 թվականին Սիրիայի Արաբական Հանրապետության հռչակումից ի վեր միմյանց հաջորդած վարչակարգերը համակարգված կերպով մերժել են քրդական բնակչության հիմնարար ազգային իրավունքները: 2011 թվականին Արաբական գարունը խթան դարձավ քրդական քաղաքական նոր զարթոնքի համար: Հյուսիսային Սիրիայի քրդաբնակ շրջանները զգուշավոր դիրքավորումից անցում կատարեցին ավելի վճռական քաղաքական և ռազմական մոբիլիզացիայի: Մերժելով նախագահ Բաշար ալ-Ասադի (2000–2024) սահմանափակ բարեփոխումների առաջարկներն ու կենտրոնացման տեսլականը՝ քրդական քաղաքական ուժերը, Միացյալ Նահանգների աջակցությամբ, 2013 թվականին երեք ինքնակառավարվող կանտոններում ստեղծեցին դե ֆակտո ինքնավար վարչակազմ: Այս զարգացումը էականորեն փոխեց սիրիական հակամարտության ընթացքը և ընդլայնեց արտաքին միջամտության շրջանակը, մասնավորապես՝ Թուրքիայի կողմից: Չնայած զգալի տարածքային, ժողովրդագրական և ենթակառուցվածքային կորուստներին՝ քրդական ուժերը միջազգային դաշնակիցների հետ համագործակցությամբ հաջողությամբ դիմակայեցին գոյաբանական սպառնալիքներին, հատկապես՝ «Իսլամական պետության» (ԻՊ) վտանգին: 2024 թվականի դեկտեմբերին նախագահ ալ-Ասադի տապալումը և 2025 թվականի մարտին Սիրիայի ժողովրդավարական ուժերի հրամանատար Մազլում Աբդիի ու ժամանակավոր նախագահ Ահմադ ալ-Շարաայի միջև կնքված խաղաղության համաձայնագիրը ևս ի ցույց դրեց քրդերի՝ դե յուրե

ինքնավարության ձգտումների նկատմամբ սիրիական պետության մերժողական մոտեցումը:

Հողվածն ուսումնասիրում է, թե ինչպես է սիրիական քաղաքացիական պատերազմը (2011–2024) վերափոխել քրդական ազգային շարժումը՝ վերլուծելով քրդական քաղաքական մոբիլիզացիայի, պետության մասնատման և տարածաշրջանային սահմանափակումների փոխազդեցությունը, որոնք խոչընդոտել են Սիրիայի քաղաքական դաշտում քրդական ինքնավարության լիարժեք իրագործմանը: Պատմական և քաղաքական վերլուծության միջոցով հողվածը ցույց է տալիս, թե ինչպես է ալ-Ասադի վարչակարգի պայմաններում քրդական պայքարը ձևավորել ապագայում ավելի լայն ազգային իրավունքների համար կարևոր հիմք: Դե ֆակտո ինքնիշխանության փորձառությունը, իր սահմանափակումներով հանդերձ, վերաձևվող Սիրիայում էական գործոն է քրդերի քաղաքական առաջխաղացման համար:

# FROM NEGOTIATION TO INTIFADA: UNDERSTANDING THE COLLAPSE OF THE CAMP DAVID SUMMIT 2000 AND THE AL-AQSA INTIFADA

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DOI: 10.52837/27382702-2025.5.2-65

## Abstract

The year 2000 marked a turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Camp David Summit, convened in July by U.S. President Bill Clinton, brought together Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat in an attempt to resolve the core issues of the conflict. This article aims to analyze the 2000 Camp David Summit and the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The article examines the political and structural circumstances that hindered the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It shows that Camp David's failure ended the Oslo peace process and contributed to political radicalization, mistrust, and instability in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Several peace initiatives during this period aimed to advance a two-state solution through territorial compromises and security guarantees. The article analyzes their specificities and limitations, which were unacceptable both to the Palestinian and Israeli sides. The breakdown of negotiations and the absence of regulatory mechanisms deepened mistrust between the parties and creating the basis for recurring violence and instability.

**Keywords:** *Israel, Palestine, Al-Aqsa Intifada, Camp David Summit, Road Map, Geneva Initiative*

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Received July 24, 2025, December 1, 2025, accepted December 24, 2025

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## **Introduction**

This article examines why the Camp David summit failed to produce a peace agreement and how this failure contributed to the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, with its wider consequences, including the collapse of the Oslo peace process, the radicalization of Palestinian society, the return of militarized confrontation, and the long-term erosion of trust between the parties.

The failure of the 2000 Camp David summit and the subsequent Al-Aqsa Intifada reveal an important analytical framework for understanding recent developments in the modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly the relationship between the Abraham Accords (2020) and the Gaza War of October 7, 2023. This historical analysis reveals a recurring cycle in the Middle East diplomacy according to peace initiatives that fail to address foundational grievances often precipitate renewed violence and further destabilization. The sequence of Camp David to the Intifada formed a paradigm that continues to influence Israeli-Palestinian relations, showing how the failure of the 2000 negotiations led to the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada and, years later, to the signing of the Abraham Accords an agreement that bypassed Palestinian interests and contributed to the structural and political conditions that ultimately culminated in the Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing Gaza War.

This recurring cycle manifests through a number of interrelated dynamics that testify to the structural limitations of exclusionary peace processes. First, the impact of marginalization: The issues discussed at Camp David, in particular the status of Jerusalem, the right of return for refugees, and the recognition of full sovereignty, were severely neglected, leading to a deep sense of political neglect and historical injustice. The Abraham Accords also pushed Palestinian interests to the sidelines by focusing on broader regional geopolitical changes, which deepened feelings of abandonment and intensified existing frustrations. In both instances sidelining Palestinian agency not only weakened the legitimacy of the agreements but also contributed to the conditions that fostered renewed cycles of conflict.

This research is based on two theoretical approaches to understand the reasons for the failure of the 2000 Camp David peace talks and the Al-Aqsa Intifada: Conflict Transformation Theory, advanced by the scholar Lederach and Constructivism, developed by Alexander Wendt. These approaches help to examine both the negotiations' political structure and the deeper emotional and symbolic elements that influenced public and political responses.

Conflict Transformation theory suggests that long-standing conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not merely about political disagreements. They are deeply rooted in issues such as power imbalances, and historical injustices. Lederach notes that real peace involves not only signing agreements but also changing the systems and relationships that have generated and sustained conflict over time [28: 24].

At the same time, constructivism emphasizes that ignoring identity, memory, and symbolic meaning in negotiations can lead to a loss of trust, even when some issues may seem close to resolution. At Camp David, negotiators essentially treated the issues as bargaining chips or matters for political compromise. However, from a constructivist perspective, the issue of Jerusalem, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and the establishment of a state were deeply symbolic and presented as historical justice for a people deprived since 1948 [52: 225]. Israel had offered limited or vague solutions to these issues, creating a sense that Palestinian identity and historical experience were being ignored, and the failure of Camp David in this regard led to war. The Camp David talks failed because they addressed the core issue from a narrow perspective. The Palestinians were offered a state with limited control over territory, borders, water, and movement, terms that reinforced, rather than resolved, a sense of ongoing occupation and inequality. The demands of the people were not part of the process, and many Palestinian concerns, such as the right of return or the status of Jerusalem, were ignored.

The first section of the article examines the Camp David summit as a turning point in Israeli-Palestinian relations. It analyzes the proposals made during the negotiations, focusing on the contentious issues of Jerusalem, refugee return, territorial and security settlements.

The second section examines the origins, causes and course of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. It examines the failure of the negotiations, the deterioration of Palestinian socio-economic conditions, and the expansion of Israeli settlements. The chapter examines the international response and attempts to establish a ceasefire.

The third section presents an analysis of regional and international conflict resolution initiatives. It examines the significance of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which called for Israel to normalize relations with Arab states in return for withdrawing to the 1967 borders and addressing the refugee issue. It also examines the 2003 Middle East Quartet peace roadmap, proposing a step-by-step plan for establishing a Palestinian state.

The fourth section highlights how regional interference and deep internal Palestinian divisions created structural conditions that undermined the peace process

and contributed to the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. It shows that external support for militant groups, combined with the absence of a unified Palestinian leadership and ideological cohesion, made negotiated compromises nearly impossible to achieve or sustain.

The dynamics and consequences of the Camp David Summit and the Al-Aqsa Intifada highlight key paradigms that continue to shape the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today. These events illustrate that peace efforts are unlikely to succeed when they overlook the deeper causes of the conflict such as the questions of identity, competing historical narratives, unequal power relations, and the exclusion of Palestinian voices from meaningful decision-making. The repeated failure of negotiations and the return to violence highlight the limitations of peace processes that primarily focus on technical or territorial issues. Instead, the approaches that recognize the emotional and symbolic weight of core issues lie at the heart of Palestinian collective identity. Examining past diplomatic breakdowns helps explain why today's efforts often face the same obstacles. Furthermore, future peace frameworks must include perspectives that address both the political realities and the human dimensions of the conflict drawing on insights from conflict transformation theory and constructivist thinking to offer more inclusive and lasting solutions.

In conclusion, this article reveals how these events marked a significant turning point in Israeli-Palestinian relations, indicating the collapse of the Oslo peace process. The conflict entered a new phase, culminating in the 2007 Hamas takeover of Gaza, which began a chain of conflict with Israel that has resulted in a series of military operations with Israel and this transition has shaped the current unresolved and unstable situation.

### **Historical context**

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War led to the creation of the state of Israel and the displacement of approximately 750,000 Palestinians.

This phase of the conflict created an important geopolitical reality, dividing the historical territory of Palestine into three parts: Israel, the West Bank under Jordanian control, and the Gaza Strip under Egyptian control.

The occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem by Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War changed the geography of the Arab-Israeli conflict. UN Security Council Resolution 242 called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories and advocated the "land for peace" doctrine, but its implementation remained incomplete for decades [48].

The First Intifada was a mass uprising by the Palestinian population against Israeli control. It broke out in 1987 and included civil disobedience, economic boycotts, and social mobilization, capturing international attention and laying the groundwork for the 1993 Oslo peace process. Oslo I in 1993 and Oslo II in 1995 established the Palestinian Authority and divided the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C, with varying degrees of Palestinian and Israeli control [11: The Oslo Accords 1993; 1995]. However, the agreements deliberately delayed resolving the most sensitive issues of the conflict: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security, and borders. Between 1993 and 2000, a number of interrelated factors significantly undermined the implementation of the peace process. Hamas's terrorist acts, the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, and Israeli settlement expansion fragmented the Palestinian territories and deepened public disillusionment. The economic situation in the Palestinian territories deteriorated significantly as a result of Israel's blockade policy, which led to a decline in living standards by about 30% and a sharp rise in unemployment [40: 11-12].

Both sides repeatedly missed essential deadlines set by the Oslo process, which worsened the situation. Although the five-year interim period was supposed to end with a comprehensive agreement by May 1999, the process stalled and failed to deliver meaningful results.

While formulated as a phased resolution, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process of the 1990s failed to resolve the conflict's core issues. The constant postponement of these issues and the deepening mistrust surrounding them created a build-up of tension that led to the 2000 Camp David summit as an attempt to fill these gaps. Still, it was these unresolved issues that led to the failure of the negotiations.

### **The Camp David summit of 2000: negotiation dynamics and failure**

In July 2000, U.S. President Bill Clinton facilitated two weeks of intensive negotiations at Camp David between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat. These talks, however, ended without an agreement. Despite US efforts, which included final proposals from both sides and a US plan presented later on December 19, 2000, the parties failed to reach or accept a final agreement.

The Camp David summit was convened to analyze the final status negotiations following the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles. The parties engaged in intensive negotiations that were unprecedented in their scope and

details, discussing all major aspects of the conflict, including border and security issues, the status of Jerusalem, and the issue of return for Palestinian refugees. Negotiators primarily focused on territorial and border dimensions related to a future Palestinian state. Israel proposed the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state that would include 82-88% of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, covering almost all of the territories that existed before 1967 [38: 8-9]. However, several areas near East Jerusalem, where 90% of Israeli settlements were located, would remain under Israeli control. In exchange, the Palestinians were offered land in the Negev Desert, located near Gaza.

The most contentious issue in the Israeli- Palestinian negotiations is the issue of Jerusalem which has deep spiritual and emotional significance for the three religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The negotiators suggested to divide Jerusalem into Western and Eastern parts. This arrangement included not only West Jerusalem but also the Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem that had been established since 1967, which would remain under Israeli control. U.S. mediators proposed a complex system for determining sovereignty over the Temple Mount in the Old City. The Muslim and Christian quarters of the Old City would fall under Palestinian control, the Jewish and Armenian quarters would be under Israeli sovereignty. Additionally, the possibility of establishing a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem was also considered [53: 11].

Palestinian refugees' "right of return" is another key issue in the final status process. Palestinians claim that refugees should have the right to return to the homes they lost in 1948, mentioning UN General Assembly 194 Resolution. Israel considered the return of 3 million refugees harmful, which would undermine the foundation of the Jewish state, and proposed only 10,000 people return under a family reunification program. Given almost a century of mutual violence and hatred, US negotiators focused on providing compensation and resettling the refugees.

During the negotiations, the parties discussed the issue of access to and control over water resources. The expansion of Israeli settlements had led to the fact that most of the water sources in the West Bank were under Israeli control, creating a dependence on Israel supplies for water in the Palestinian territories [29: 3]. Although the Israeli prime minister offered cooperation regarding water resources, the actual sources would remain mainly in the territories annexed by Israel. Moreover, keeping even 5% of the "strategic areas" under Israeli control would allow it to control the borders, water, airspace, and communications of a future Palestinian state, severely limiting Palestinian sovereignty and economic stability.

Ehud Barak's delegation did not present the Palestinians with any official document Tel Aviv's positions. According to Robert Malley, a member of Clinton's negotiating team, "all attempts by members of the American delegation to force the Israelis to state their positions in writing before or during the negotiations were unsuccessful. Israeli officials shared proposals only orally, fearing that written concessions could set a precedent" [33: 69-70]. On July 25, 2000, the summit concluded without a final agreement.

According to Akram Haniyeh, Yasser Arafat's immediate aide and editor-in-chief of Al Ayyam newspaper, the mandates for the peace process established by the US administration in Madrid in 1991, specifically UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and the principle of "peace on land", were undermined by the US administration at Camp David [18: 32].

The failure of Camp David summit has a number of reasons. Firstly, each side held a different attitude to the negotiations. Both parties believed that they had made significant concessions and assumed that the opposing side would need to make additional compromises to achieve peace. However, the Palestinian and Israeli delegations hesitated to take the necessary risks for a historic reconciliation. For the Israeli side, domestic politics, personal interests, and electoral calculations overshadowed the pursuit of peace agreement. From the Palestinian perspective, Israel's proposal for limited Palestinian control over certain areas of East Jerusalem was unacceptable. Palestinian officials insisted that they were willing to accept Israeli sovereignty over the Western Wall, the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, and surrounding settlements. However, they made it clear that they would agree to such concessions only if both parties officially recognized East Jerusalem as the capital of future Palestinian state.

In late September 2000, the United States made another attempt to restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations regarding a final settlement. Delegations from both sides gathered in Washington, D.C., and met separately with Dennis Ross, the U.S. coordinator for the Middle East peace process, and other State Department officials. These flexible negotiations with both sides raised hopes that a final status agreement might be reached but they also failed.

The Camp David summit highlighted the deep disagreements between Palestinians and Israelis. The lack of trust between the parties, political divisions in Israel, and the rise of radical sentiments among Palestinians contributed to a new escalation.

From a Constructivist point of view, the negotiations missed the emotional and symbolic meaning of issues like Jerusalem and refugees. For Palestinians, these

matters represent more than just political concerns, they are deeply tied to dignity, identity, and historical justice. But the negotiations have treated them as the subject of the deal. This has left many Palestinians feeling invisible, and this failure has helped pave the way for a new round of violence.

### **The Al-Aqsa Intifada: causes and consequences**

On September 28, 2000, Ariel Sharon, leading a right-wing Likud parliamentary faction delegation, ascended the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem. Sharon claimed the visit was necessary to emphasize Israel's sovereignty over the holy site, as E. Barak was ready to negotiate the city's status. [4: 25]. This visit deeply offended the religious feelings of the Palestinians. The situation in Jerusalem immediately turned into clashes. Violent clashes broke out between Palestinian demonstrators and armed Israeli police, resulting in the deaths of five Palestinians and injuries to about 300 others. [23: 24]. This event marked the most intense wave of clashes in the Palestinian territories since the start of the peace process, and the violence soon spread to Israeli territory.

The situation quickly escalated into a new general Palestinian uprising, known as the "Second Intifada" or the "Al-Aqsa Intifada."

In contrast of the first intifada, there was a large supply of artillery and ammunition among the Palestinians. These weapons entered the Palestinian territories through the three main channels: Israel officially supplied some ammunition to Yasser Arafat in the 1990s to equip the Palestinian police, smugglers regularly transported additional arms from Egypt into the Palestinian Authority through the Gaza Strip, and local groups manufactured handmade weapons and ammunition within the territories [32].

Most Palestinian and Israeli observers agree that Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount was the trigger for the Intifada, as the real reasons for the uprising were deeper. For Palestinians, the Intifada represented not just a reaction to a provocative incident, but also a clear position about the ineffectiveness of the negotiation process and the complete rejection of Israel's overall policy [25: 188-190].

Since the Oslo peace process, dissatisfaction among Palestinian society had grown, as the reality did not correspond to the expectations formed by the peace agreements. From 1993 to 2000, Palestinians expected an improvement in living conditions, especially regarding freedom of movement and socio-economic conditions, but their deterioration caused widespread dissatisfaction. These

sentiments, deepening by 2000, the failure of the Camp David summit in July, laid the foundation for growing public support for a confrontational strategy. Both sides of the conflict were preparing for violence, expecting the use of force by the other side.

Ehud Barak's policy in Israeli-Palestinian relations was contradictory. All his promises to the Palestinians were verbal and inconsistent. He often referred to the West Bank as "Judea and Samaria, part of Greater Israel [46: 179-180]. This policy made it impossible to reach any territorial solution to the Palestinian issue. In addition, the Palestinian position was also ambiguous. Yasser Arafat and his supporters repeatedly questioned the legitimacy and right of the state of Israel to exist. Although the Palestinian leadership publicly continued to speak of a two-state solution, Arafat never provided a final clarity on his vision for peaceful coexistence with Israel. Many Israelis believed that the Palestinians were deliberately using violence as a tool in the negotiation process, claiming that Arafat was rejecting on his commitments under the Declaration of Principles by attempting to revive international sympathy for the Palestinian cause through act of violence.

On October 7, 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1322, which called on the parties to cease the violence immediately, and emphasized the importance to establish a mechanism for an immediate and objective investigation into the tragic events that occurred in Jerusalem. It also called for the immediate resumption of negotiations in the Middle East peace process [50].

On October 17, representatives from Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the US, the UN, and the EU gathered in Sharm el-Sheik for the Middle East Peace Conference to discuss the tense situation in the region and find solutions based on the recent increase in violence [3: 91-92]. The conference led to the creation of a fact-finding commission, chaired by former Senator George Mitchell, tasked with investigating the causes of the violence and proposing solutions.

In the early months of the intifada, both sides suffered heavy casualties, particularly among children and young people. Violent demonstrations erupted across East Jerusalem, the Old City, the West Bank, Judea, and Samaria.

The well-known document, called the "Clinton Proposals," included several provisions regarding the establishment of Palestinian sovereignty, the status of Jerusalem's holy sites, and the return of refugees. According to this document, a future Palestinian state would include about 94-96% of East Jerusalem and the West Bank territories. The documents also suggested the return of 100,000 refugees through the family reunification program [10]. Overall, these proposals improved

upon the solutions discussed in previous negotiations, especially during the 2000 Camp David Summit, by offering a broader framework for a peaceful settlement.

On December 28, US attempts to convene a summit were canceled at the last minute when it became clear that the Israeli prime minister would not attend without Arafat's explicit approval of Clinton's proposals. Just hours after the announcement of the summit's cancellation, a series of bombings occurred in Tel Aviv and the Gaza Strip, resulting in the deaths of two Israeli soldiers and injuring fifteen others [14]. A few days later, a bombing in Netanya wounded at least forty Israeli civilians [2]. In response to that incident, Israeli security forces killed several Palestinians during the violence in the West Bank.

These events emphasized the political tensions in the region and the ongoing peace negotiation process. The failure of diplomatic efforts directly resulted in an escalation of violence, which highlighted the fundamental differences between the parties.

Concerns over further escalation in the region have intensified due to the release of Hamas and Islamic Jihad members from Palestinian prisons [20]. On October 26, 2000, Islamic Jihad carried out its first suicide bombing. In November and December, Hamas and Islamic Jihad bombings killed Israeli civilians and injured dozens more. In early 2001, Palestinian militants established the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades. Its leader, Nasser Abu Hamid, publicly declared the group as the military wing of Fatah [44: 212]. Years later, Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei confirmed that the group had operated under Fatah's auspices [15].

The Palestinian leadership perceived the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada as a lever to pressure Israel to gain an advantage in the negotiation process through security challenges. The start of the Intifada significantly impacted on the political dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, marking a phase of stagnation in the Oslo peace process.

From 21 to 27 January, 2001, the US attempted to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Taba, Egypt, with the active mediation of third parties, based on the "Clinton proposals". According to the EU envoy Miguel Moratinos, both sides approved the principle of the redistribution of their territories. However, their size and the principle of division remained a matter of discussion. Both parties approved that the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem would fall under Palestinian sovereignty, while the Jewish neighborhoods under Israeli control. However, the issue of Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem remained unresolved. The parties agreed in principle to maintain control over their holy sites in Jerusalem but did not establish clear

borders or control mechanisms. The Taba talks did not produce any conclusive results [36].

In February 2001, President George W. Bush's administration took office in the United States, and Ariel Sharon became Israel's prime minister. Sharon rejected further concessions to the Palestinians, winning strong support from right-wing religious voters and many disillusioned with the peace process. He made it clear that he would not resume negotiations based on previous agreements and emphasized that the commitments made at Taba were not binding on his administration [42].

The failed negotiation process and deepening fundamental differences between the conflicting parties significantly contributed to the intensification of armed confrontations and the activation of terrorist activities.

At first, Yasser Arafat seemed to be using the situation to put pressure on Israel, but things quickly got out of control and turned into a cycle of violence. [41: 203; 34]. The strong mistrust between both sides and the limited influence of mediators meant that attempts at dialogue didn't achieve significant results.

Since 2001, a wave of terrorist attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad has deepened the security crisis. The wave of terrorist acts spread throughout both Israel and the Palestinian territories, aimed at terrorizing Israeli society, contributing to growing public pressure and anxiety. These events forced the Israeli government to reconsider its policy on the Palestinian issue, responding to public concerns and the need to ensure security.

The leadership changes marked a turning point in the peace process, introducing a new dynamic into the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The new leaders adopted a more hardline stance, making it difficult to reach compromise. Consequently, hopes of reviving the peace process began to fade, which contributed to the escalation of the conflict.

The outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada was not a spontaneous act of violence. It resulted from years of growing frustration, broken peace talks, and worsening daily life under occupation and was sparked by a politically provocative visit to a highly sensitive religious site. The initial protests escalated into a large-scale and protracted uprising that deeply affected both Palestinian and Israeli societies. This movement exposed the deep roots of the conflict in the daily lives of people on both sides and the fragility of peace efforts. Both sides became increasingly polarized as the violence spiraled into a destructive cycle of attacks, military intervention, and political stalemate. The intifada ultimately signaled the end of the Oslo era and the negotiation process reached a deadlock.

### **Diplomacy during the Al-Aqsa Intifada: missed chances and strategic gaps**

On April 30, 2001, the Mitchell Commission released its report on achieving peace in the Middle East. The report emphasized that the conflicting parties must take decisive actions to end the violence and restore trust between them highlighting the need for the Palestinian Authority to take steps to prevent terrorist acts and to hold those responsible obligated for their actions. The plan proposed that Israel should refrain from excessive actions against unarmed demonstrators, as such actions often result in civilian casualties. The commission recommended halting settlement construction in Palestinian territories and highlighted the importance of resuming negotiations to foster progress and stability in the peace process [35: 2-3].

On June 13, 2001, CIA Director George Tenet introduced the "Security Implementation Work Plan" to restart the stalled peace process, with the United States taking on the role of mediator. The plan emphasized several key goals, including the implementation of security measures outlined in the earlier Mitchell Report, the resumption of direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence as the basis for a long-term resolution [47: 2].

During the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–2005), the Israeli authorities conducted a series of targeted assassinations of Palestinian armed and terrorist groups' leaders aimed at preventing terrorist acts and ensuring the safety of Israeli citizens [9]. However, the targeted assassinations did not lead to a long-term solution to the Palestinian conflict.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, profoundly reshaped the United States' policy priorities in the Middle East, placing national security and the fight against terrorism at the forefront. [8]. In this context, the US viewed Israel as a key regional ally, and efforts to combat Palestinian militant groups became integrated into the framework of its global counterterrorism strategy [24: 353-354].

On March 28, 2002, at the 14th Arab League Summit in Beirut, Saudi Arabia's Prince Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz proposed the Arab Peace Initiative amid regional tensions and the stagnation of negotiations. It called for a framework of mutual obligations, where Israel and Arab countries would take specific actions to achieve regional peace. The Initiative aimed to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the Palestinian issue, by applying principles of international law. It primarily drew on relevant United Nations resolutions, particularly Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and General Assembly Resolution 194. The Initiative also called for Israel to withdraw completely from the borders established on June 4,

1967. This withdrawal would encompass the Palestinian territories, the Golan Heights, and parts of southern Lebanon [13].

The Arab world also expected Israel to recognize the State of Palestine, comprising the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital and comprehensive resolution to the Palestinian refugee issue, rejecting any solution that involved resettling Palestinians outside their homeland, in accordance with UN General Assembly resolution 194.

The Arab League called on the Israeli government and all Israeli citizens to accept this initiative to protect the prospects for peace and stop further bloodshed, enabling Arab countries and Israel to coexist peacefully, promote good neighborly relations, and ensure security, stability, and prosperity for future generations. Instead, all Arab states must recognize the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict and commit to recognizing Israel's independence, establishing diplomatic relations, normalizing trade and providing security guarantees. This announcement coincided with a Hamas terrorist attack in Netanya that resulted in the deaths of 29 Israelis [17].

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres acknowledged the significance of the Saudi proposal in response to the Arab Peace Initiative. However, he emphasized that its implementation was impossible as long as terrorism continued in the region [37].

Despite the initiative's comprehensive and legal foundation, it remained unacceptable to Israel, mainly due to concerns over the issues of refugee return and the status of Jerusalem.

This situation underscores that even when the Arab side demonstrated a willingness to pursue mutual recognition and peace, the core problems, particularly regarding territorial and demographic matters, remained unsolvable. As a result, the Arab Peace Initiative functioned more as a symbolic diplomatic gesture than a practical roadmap toward a lasting solution.

From March 29 to May 10, 2002, Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank in response to ongoing terrorist attacks. This operation resulted in Israeli forces taking control of the West Bank, sealing off Gaza, and surrounding Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah. As a result of Operation Protective Shield, the Israeli army significantly weakened the Palestinian security forces, dismantled the security services, and destroyed most of the infrastructure [19: 236]. Israeli leadership indicated that the documents seized during the operation confirmed the ties between the Palestinian Authority leadership and terrorist groups. However, with the assistance of UN mediation, Israel lifted the blockade on 10 May.

Despite these actions, terrorism persisted in Israel and the Palestinian territories while Israeli troops continued their presence in the West Bank.

In April 2002, Israel began constructing a Separation Wall along the West Bank, citing ongoing military operations and an increase in terrorist attacks as justification to prevent attacks by terrorist groups. In July 2004, the UN International Court of Justice ordered Tel Aviv to dismantle the wall, stating that its construction violated international law and the fundamental rights of Palestinians. However, Israel refused to comply with this ruling, arguing that the wall was built for national security reasons. Furthermore, Israel constructed the wall with the explicit intention of defining future borders between itself and Palestine.

In April 2002, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, with representatives of the United States, the Russian Federation, and the European Union, formed the Middle East Quartet to resume the peace process and achieve a final and comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [49]. The Quartet's goal was to establish a multilateral framework for negotiating a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian question based on UN Security Council resolutions 242, 338, and 1397, along with the "land for peace" principle outlined in the Oslo process. It aimed to support the creation of two states, Israel and Palestine, within secure and recognized borders. The Quartet representatives urged an end to violence, a rejection of terrorism, and reforms within the Palestinian leadership, which include elections, economic development, and the establishment of transparent institutions [51: 253].

The initiative drew from a speech by US President George W. Bush on June 24, 2002, in which he outlined his vision for peace in the Middle East, proposing the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel and calling for the peaceful coexistence of the two nations. He urged an end to violence, a rejection of terrorism and called for reforms of the Palestinian leadership, including elections, economic development, and the establishment of transparent institutions [7]. President Bush stressed that the United States and the international community would support the establishment of a Palestinian state if the government implemented specific reforms and continued to fight terrorism. He also called on Israel to take steps toward peace, such as halting settlement expansion and easing restrictions on Palestinian movement, while emphasizing that the two sides must resolve core issues such as borders, Jerusalem, and refugees to achieve a permanent solution [6].

In April 2003, the Middle East Quartet introduced the "Roadmap for Peace," a well-structured plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and promote the coexistence of two states. The plan outlined three main phases designed to lead the process toward a comprehensive peace gradually [1]. The first phase called for an

immediate halt to terrorist activities by Palestinian armed groups, alongside the implementation of political and socio-economic reforms within the Palestinian Authority. Israel had to withdraw its troops from their positions by September 28, 2000, and stop the construction of new settlements to facilitate the resumption of the peace process. The second phase aimed to establish the necessary conditions for the formation of an independent Palestinian state, recognizing it with preliminary borders and some aspects of sovereignty. The Quartet members supported the drafting and adoption of a new constitution and promoted international recognition of Palestine, including its potential membership in the United Nations. The third and final phase aimed to establish a comprehensive peace agreement by directly addressing the core issues of the conflict, including the final status of Jerusalem, the fate of Palestinian refugees, the future of Israeli settlements, and the provision of security guarantees. It also aimed to promote peace negotiations between Israel and its neighboring countries, Lebanon and Syria, to ensure regional stability.

The "Roadmap for Peace" established a phased approach for resolving conflicts, including security and statehood elements. However, the execution of this plan encountered significant political and military obstacles that hindered its likelihood of success [12: 10-11].

The deep-rooted mistrust between the parties contributed to the failure of the peace roadmap, exposing stark differences in their political and military capacities and highlighting the absence of effective implementation mechanisms. Israel continued its settlement expansion and security policies, further eroding mutual trust. At the same time, internal divisions within the Palestinian leadership hindered the fulfilment of essential commitments. Furthermore, the Quartet, especially the United States, did not maintain balanced and consistent pressure on both sides, transforming the Initiative into a declaratory framework instead of a binding roadmap.

In response to the escalating violence in the region, several Palestinian and Israeli political and civil society leaders launched the Geneva Initiative in 2003. This movement aimed to move past the unsuccessful phased approaches by directly negotiating a final status agreement. The Initiative, led by former Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin and former Palestinian Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, proposed a detailed peace plan involving mutual concessions based on the Clinton parameters from 2000.

The informal Geneva Accords, presented on December 1, 2003, proposed a two-state solution that included mutual recognition between Israel and Palestine. The accords called for Israel to withdraw from most of the West Bank and Gaza, the

dismantling of settlements, and the demilitarization of a future Palestinian state. The proposed Palestinian state would encompass approximately 97% of the West Bank and Gaza, with land swaps designed to compensate for the annexation of certain settlement blocs.

The Geneva Accords envisioned Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states, assigning the Jewish quarters to Israeli sovereignty and the Arab quarters to Palestinian control. They proposed a 'safe passage' corridor under Israeli sovereignty but administered by the Palestinians to connect the West Bank and Gaza. The refugee issue would be addressed through a limited return mechanism, allowing Israel to determine the number of returnees. In effect, the Palestinians would forgo the full right of return in exchange for an almost complete Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders [5].

Although the Geneva Initiative lacked formal status, the international community welcomed it as a constructive step in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. While Clinton's parameters acknowledged that Israel accepted responsibility for the moral and material harm inflicted on Palestinians during the 1948 war, the Geneva Document omitted this issue.

The international community gave significant attention to the Geneva Accords and welcomed them as a valuable contribution to the Palestinian-Israeli peace discourse.

The agreements faced significant criticism in Israel from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and right-wing politicians and analysts [45]. They viewed the agreements as excessive concessions to the Palestinians, arguing that they legitimized violence and undermined Israeli foreign policy. Ariel Sharon maintained that any concessions involving the division of Jerusalem were unacceptable to him.

The reaction from the Palestinian side was mixed. After some initial uncertainty, the Palestinian Authority leadership, including Yasser Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas, and Ahmad Qurei, expressed conditional support for the agreement. However, there were disagreements within Fatah. Specifically, the party's parliamentary faction and central committee accused the signatories of renouncing the right of return for refugees, recognizing Israel's Zionist nature, and legitimizing resettlement in Jerusalem.

In 2004–2005, the negotiation process had effectively stalled as the Middle East Quartet limited its role to issuing appeals for peace without implementing practical measures to reduce tensions. Meanwhile, ongoing military operations in the Gaza Strip continued to deepen instability across the region.

In March and April 2004, the Israeli air force carried out targeted assassinations of two Hamas leaders, Ahmed Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantisi, which further worsened the situation. In response, in June 2004, the Israeli Prime Minister adopted a path of unilateral disengagement, primarily driven by security considerations. This plan involved the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip and the evacuation of four settlements in the West Bank [39].

This plan emerged as an alternative to the "Road Map" peace initiative, which had already reached a deadlock. Many reasons contributed to the Road Map's had collapsed. Jerusalem's status and refugee return issues were serious obstacles to implementing the Road Map. Israel firmly rejected the resettlement of Palestinian refugees within its borders and insisted on recognizing Jerusalem as its united and indivisible capital. Without addressing these core issues, the Road Map lacked viability. Sharon had already appended 14 reservations to the plan, significantly weakening its core provisions [43]. His vision of a 'future Palestinian state' remained fundamentally unacceptable to the Palestinian leadership.

In January 2005, following the death of Yasser Arafat on November 11, 2004, Mahmoud Abbas, a candidate from Fatah, won the Palestinian presidential election. As one of the architects of the Oslo Accords, the International community generally accepted him. However, his domestic support was limited. His moderate political stance was often perceived as a weakness in Palestinian politics, which undermined his authority and restricted his influence among Hamas and other factions. Hamas, questioning the legitimacy of the elections, refused to cooperate with the newly elected president, deepening Palestinian political polarization. These contradictions became a systemic crisis, hindering the centralized and effective power management.

On the eve of the planned meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh, the Israeli side took a unilateral step to build confidence by announcing the early release of 900 Palestinian prisoners [22]. However, the widespread tension in the region limited the effectiveness of this gesture.

On September 12, 2005, Israeli forces completely withdrew from the Gaza Strip, but retained control of the borders, airspace, and surrounding maritime areas creating a complete blockade of the Gaza Strip, which contributed to the growth of the popularity of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This situation ultimately led to the tragic events of the fall of 2023, the consequences of which continue to this day.

After the Intifada, several peace initiatives were launched and offered promising solutions. But in practice, they failed to bring real change. Conflict Transformation Theory explains that without addressing the root causes, such as the

occupation, everyday injustices, and deep power imbalances, these efforts were bound to fall short.

A Constructivism suggests that lasting peace isn't simply the result of political deals or technical compromises. Instead, it depends on addressing the deep-rooted beliefs, historical narratives, and identities that shape how each side sees the conflict. In the case of Israel and Palestine, international efforts have struggled because they couldn't bridge these clashing identity-based claims like the Palestinians' demand for the right of return and Israel's insistence on being recognized as a Jewish state.

### **Regional interference and the fragmentation of Palestinian politics**

The failure of the Camp David Summit and the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada require analysis beyond the Israeli-Palestinian context, as the collapse of the peace process had multiple causes, with both regional dynamics and internal Palestinian developments playing a significant role. External interventions like support for militant groups in the competitive atmosphere of neighbouring states, led to extreme internal political polarisation within Palestine. This situation created a military-political environment where achieving compromises became nearly impossible.

Iran has consistently supported Palestinian armed struggle as a key part of its foreign policy since the 1979 revolution. This stance, which is rooted in the ideological vision of Ayatollah Khomeini, has formulated the liberation of Palestine and the elimination of Israel as a religious and political imperative [27: 392]. The Islamic Republic expanded its regional influence through proxy forces and declared armed resistance as a legitimate and necessary instrument for confronting the Israeli occupation.

Iran provided significant financial and military support to the Hamas and Islamic Jihad groups, which fundamentally rejected any negotiation process with Israel. The support included arms smuggling, training of militants, and financial assistance estimated at tens of millions of dollars annually [26: 1051]. Iran's strategic interest in continuing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its support for Hamas serve several purposes. This support allowed Iran to preserve its revolutionary credibility in the Muslim world, resist the normalisation of relations between Arab states and Israel, and position armed groups along Israel's borders. The Islamic Republic's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon created a northern front that kept Israel in a state

of constant security anxiety, making territorial concessions in the West Bank politically more difficult for Israeli leaders.

Canadian intelligence reported in 1999 that Palestinian police found documents showing a \$35 million transfer from Iran's MOIS to Hamas for attacks against Israeli targets. Palestinian sources similarly estimated Iran's aid at "tens of millions of dollars." Expert testimony in the *Diana Campuzano et al. v. The Islamic Republic of Iran* case shows that 1995 totaled \$30 million and ranged from \$20 million to \$50 million annually between 1990 and 2000 [31: 172].

Syria adopted a dual approach in the region, since it took part in peace negotiations, yet at the same time extending support to Palestinian resistance groups. This strategy allowed Damascus to apply pressure on Israel and strengthen its position in the negotiations. The presence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad leadership in Damascus, as well as control of arms supply routes from Iran, allowed these groups to operate outside the control of the Palestinian Authority. Egypt and Jordan, which had peace treaties with Israel, officially supported the Oslo process and peace initiatives, while some Arab states sometimes contributed to the continuation of the resistance. Saudi Arabia officially supported peace initiatives, most notably by presenting the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002. However, Riyadh did not tolerate or sufficiently regulate the activities of financial foundations that transferred significant funds to Hamas and the Islamic Jihad organization through charitable organizations and religious institutions [30].

This financial support enabled Hamas to simultaneously build its extensive social service network and strengthen military capabilities. Hamas's strategy involved integrating military activities with large-scale social programs, which made it difficult to distinguish between humanitarian aid and funds that supported terrorism and some Arab states found it either difficult or were unwilling to make this distinction with the necessary clarity. In this context, although concerns about the connection between charitable activity and political violence were legitimate, broad attempts to dismantle Islamic social welfare institutions would not significantly reduce Hamas's military operations and would likely worsen the humanitarian situation, increasing public support for the movement [21: 1].

As a result, while Arab governments publicly supported the peace process, private financial networks operating in their territories were maintained for the main opponents of the peace process. The Arab League's diplomatic initiatives, while symbolic, often lacked the tools to compel the Palestinians to accept more realistic compromises. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative did not include provisions that would

pressure Palestinian factions to accept interim agreements or to restrain factions that continued their armed struggle.

Additionally, the support from Arab states for the Palestinian cause has often been more symbolic rather than substantive. While Arab leaders emphasized Palestinian rights in public, their diplomatic efforts to mediate between Palestinian factions or to establish favorable negotiating conditions were limited. The failure of Arab states to facilitate a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas represented a significant missed opportunity that could have complicated the peace process.

External interference and Israeli policies significantly influenced the failure of the peace process while the underestimated internal Palestinian political dynamics also undermined negotiations and prolonged the conflict. The deep divisions within Palestinian society over strategy, ideology, and ultimate goals created structural obstacles to reaching and implementing any peace agreement.

The Oslo process brought forward two distinct approaches to ending the conflict with Israel, and these differences fundamentally influenced Palestinian political life. Fatah entered the negotiations through the 1993 Declaration of Principles under Yasser Arafat's leadership. Fatah acknowledged Israel's right to exist and formally rejected terrorism as a means of pursuing political objectives [16]. This decision represented a major shift from the position set out in the PLO's founding charter and demonstrated Fatah's strategic choice to seek a settlement through international recognition and diplomacy. Hamas, in contrast, maintained an ideological commitment to the "liberation" of all of Palestine and rejected any framework that involved recognising Israel, since it regarded the territory as part of the Islamic Waqf that could not be surrendered. Created in 1987 as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas set out this position in its 1988 Charter, which demanded Israel's elimination and viewed the conflict in both national and religious terms. From this perspective, the Oslo process constituted a betrayal of Palestinian rights and Arab-Islamic principles, and Arafat's policies were portrayed as cooperation with Israel.

Hamas used violence as a strategic tool to disrupt peace negotiations, especially when they were close to making significant progress. They weakened the Israeli public's confidence in the peace process and strengthened the Israeli right-wing forces. Yasser Arafat adopted a dual, frequently contradictory approach during the Oslo years, and this ultimately weakened the peace process. In his statements to an international audience, he advocated a peaceful resolution. However, when addressing his domestic audience, he frequently used rhetoric that echoed themes of resistance and "martyrdom". Arafat's goal was probably to remain acceptable to all

camps while maintaining both diplomatic and armed struggle options. But this “dual strategy” destroyed Israeli confidence, undermined the institutional legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority, and, in the long term, became a factor of collapse. The creation of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades in 2001, which operated under the name of Fatah and carried out terrorist attacks, became the most apparent consequence of Arafat’s political ambiguity. Arafat refused to disarm the terrorist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad as required by the Oslo accords. He created a far larger Palestinian army (the so-called police force) than was permitted by the accords.

After the Nakba of 1948, liberation ideology shaped Palestinian political thought. It rested on the principles of national self-determination and armed resistance to Israeli occupation. The nationalist line of the PLO gave little space to other opinions and approaches. A lack of ideological openness created an environment in which dissent was frequently equated with betrayal. Thus, political thought failed to develop a multifaceted, structured vision and remained confined to slogans. The first intifada, which began in 1987, revitalised Palestinian politics. Social movements, civil resistance, and widespread participation provided an opportunity to enter a new phase. However, this potential did not become a basis for sustainable political reconstruction.

The Oslo negotiations from 1993 to 1995 raised great hopes for the establishment of a Palestinian state. However, the outcome was the creation of the Palestinian Authority, which became more of an administrative unit under external and Israeli control. Palestinian politics gradually lost its focus on liberation and became a governmental mechanism unable to make independent decisions. The failure of the Camp David negotiations in 2000 revealed the limited resources and the Palestinian political elite’s unwillingness to respond to the new circumstances. The Al-Aqsa Intifada emerged as a mass uprising in reaction to this disappointment. However, this movement did not lead to any ideological renewal. Instead, it repeated previous methods of struggle without introducing new ideas.

The victory of Hamas in the parliamentary elections in 2006, and then the split between Gaza and the West Bank, deepened the political crisis. As a result, it became clear that neither Fatah nor Hamas had a political program that was relevant to the situation. At the same time, regional support was declining as some Arab countries began to normalize their relations with Israel. The Palestinian Authority became a structure heavily dependent on external funding and lacking absolute sovereignty.

Elections were continually postponed, political competition was constrained, and the voices of younger generations remained largely excluded. As a

result, Palestinian political thought reached a deadlock. Political actors did not introduce new ideological ideas, pursue institutional reforms, or develop a coherent strategy for responding to changing regional conditions. The political system became increasingly conservative and reactive, rather than proactive and innovative.

### **Conclusion**

The failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit and the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada were pivotal turning points in a long-standing conflict characterized by unequal power dynamics, contested national identities, and the structural violence of occupation.

This article argues that the collapse of the negotiations and the Al-Aqsa Intifada outbreak signified the end of the Oslo era. These events marked the beginning of a painful new chapter, in which violence replaced dialogue, extremism filled the gap left by diplomacy, and the possibility of a just and lasting peace faded from the daily lives of both Palestinians and Israelis. This period set the stage for the rise of Hamas, the blockade of Gaza, and the cycle of wars that continues to this day.

The Camp David Summit failed because of differing political goals and a significant perspective divide. While Israel aimed for practical, strategic compromises, the Palestinian leadership focused on historical justice and statehood recognition, refused any agreement that stripped them of symbolic sovereignty over East Jerusalem and sidelined the refugee question.

International initiatives, despite their commitment to peace, have failed to change the situation. The Clinton parameters, the Arab Peace Initiative, and the Road Map all failed due to the same fatal flaws: the refusal to hold Israel accountable for its actions on the ground, the lack of enforcement mechanisms, and the international community's unwillingness to confront the reality of occupation and settlement expansion. The so-called peace process has become a means of reinforcing the status quo defined by control, division, and constant instability.

Constructivism reveals that inconsistencies between cognitive and narrative approaches have contributed to a legitimacy crisis, eroded trust, and raised public expectations. Conflict transformation theory helps explain why these failures did not produce sustainable resolutions and instead intensified existing dynamics, redirecting the focus from negotiated solutions to resistance-driven strategies.

This long history of diplomatic failures and resistance exploded again in 2023. Hamas's October 7 attack and Israel's military response did not happen suddenly. They were rooted in two decades of unresolved grievances, geographical

division, economic siege, and a complete collapse of the political landscape. Since the 2005 disengagement, Gaza has been isolated, transforming it into a region of despair and armed conflict. The 2023 escalation exposed the fragility of regional containment and the consequences of an unfulfilled peace process that failed to bring about real peace, instead managing the status quo.

Strategically, the 2023 war marks a turning point in the formulation of the conflict. The escalation is not seen as a diplomatic impasse, but as an open crisis of legitimacy for both the Palestinian Authority and Israel's unilateral security doctrine. It highlights the enduring centrality of Jerusalem, displacement, and sovereignty as unresolved core issues that continue to drive the conflict and impact those living under its shadow.

The cycle that began with the symbolic failure of Camp David and the physical resistance of the Second Intifada now culminates in an ontological conflict in which diplomacy is absent, and the Palestinian issue has been reduced to a minor role in the international political discourse.

The legacy of Camp David and the Al-Aqsa Intifada, particularly in light of the catastrophic events of 2023, emphasizes that achieving a lasting solution requires more than territorial concessions or security agreements. Negotiators will likely repeat past failures if they overlook structural inequalities and national identity issues, because these deeper factors lie at the core of the conflict.

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**Բանակցություններից Ինթիֆադա. Քեմփ Դեյվիդ 2000թ. գազաթնաժողովի  
ձախողման և Ալ-Աքսայի ապստամբության պատճառները**

**Հրաչուհի Թուրվանդյան**

**Հիմնաբառեր.** Իսրայել, Պաղեստին, Ալ-Աքսա Ինթիֆադա, Քեմփ Դեյվիդի գազաթնաժողով, Ճանապարհային քարտեզ, Ժնևյան նախաձեռնություն

**Ամփոփում**

2000 թվականը կարևոր շրջադարձ էր իսրայելա-պաղեստինյան հակամարտության մեջ: Հուլիսին ԱՄՆ նախագահ Բիլ Բլինթոնի նախաձեռնությամբ կայացավ Քեմփ Դեյվիդի գազաթնաժողովը, որը նպատակ ուներ լուծելու հակամարտության հիմնարար հարցերը: Գազաթնաժողովին մասնակցում էին Իսրայելի վարչապետ Էհուդ Բարաքը և Պաղեստինյան Ինքնավարության ղեկավար Յասեր Արաֆաթը: Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է վերլուծել Քեմփ Դեյվիդի 2000 թվականի գազաթնաժողովը և Ալ-Աքսայի Ինթիֆադայի բռնկումը՝ դիտարկելով դրանք իսրայելա-պաղեստինյան հակամարտության քաղաքական զարգացումների համատեքստում: Հոդվածն ուսումնասիրում է այն քաղաքական և ինստիտուցիոնալ գործոնները, որոնք խոչընդոտել են հակամարտության խաղաղ կարգավորմանը: Քեմփ Դեյվիդի գործընթացի ձախողումը հանգեցրեց Օսլոյի խաղաղ գործընթացի կասեցմանը, խորացրեց փոխադարձ անվստահությունն ու նպաստեց կողմերի քաղաքական ռադիկալացմանը՝ ի վերջո նպաստելով իրավիճակի ապակայունացմանը: Հոդվածում անդրադարձ է կատարվում այն խաղաղարար նախաձեռնություններին, որոնք ուղված էին երկու-պետություն լուծման՝ տարածքային զիջումների և անվտանգության երաշխիքների հիման վրա: Բանակցությունների ձախողումն ու կարգավորող մեխանիզմների բացակայությունը խորացրեցին կողմերի միջև անվստահությունը՝ ստեղծելով բռնության նոր ալիքի և տարածաշրջանային անկայունության բարենպաստ միջավայր:

## Αβασιλευτοι - THOSE WHO HAVE NO KING

*On the question of the ethnicity of the autonomous tribes (who are not subject to kings) living on the banks of the Araxes, who came to the aid of the Armenian king Tigran II the Great in his fight against the Romans (Plut., Luc., 26, 4)*

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DOI: 10.52837/27382702-2025.5.2-93

### Abstract

In the issue no. 1 (1992) of the journal *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii (Journal of Ancient History)* the article by R. L. Manaseryan entitled “*International Relations in the Near East in the 80s–70s BCE (Tigranes II and the Troops from the Banks of the Araxes)*” was published. In this study, the author sought to clarify the ethnic identity of the autonomous tribes from the banks of the Araxes River who arrived at the military camp of the Armenian king Tigranes II the Great on the eve of his clash with the Romans. Manaseryan acknowledged that, given the current state of the sources, the solution he proposed was inevitably hypothetical. Through a detailed interpretation of the available evidence, he ruled out the possibility that these tribes had lived on the Armenian Highlands, specifically along the course of the Araxes River flowing into the Caspian Sea. According to Manaseryan, accepting the presence of such a tribe in Greater Armenia during the reign of Tigranes the Great would require recognition of a circumstance that he regarded as fundamentally incompatible with the political realities of the period [34:152-153]. On the basis of these considerations, R. L. Manaseryan concluded that Plutarch’s account refers not to the Armenian Araxes Rivers, but rather to the Central Asian Araxes, that is, the Amu Darya. While acknowledging a certain degree of hypothetical uncertainty in his conclusions, Manaseryan nevertheless suggested that the tribes in question were most likely the Sacaraucae. This position was reiterated without modification in the second edition of his monograph (*Manaseryan Ruben. Tigran Mets. Hayastani payk’ary Hromi yev Part’evastani dem, m.t’a. 94–64 t’t’., Yerevan, 2007, 261 pp.*) [35:101-107], as well as in the

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Received March 1, 2025, revised July 27, 2025, accepted December 3, 2025.

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second book of the first volume of the recent academic edition of the *History of Armenia*, 2024 [19:313-314]. However, a detailed analysis of both the primary sources and the relevant scholarly literature raises certain doubts regarding the validity of Manaseryan’s conclusions and indicates possible inconsistencies with the evidence preserved in the sources. As far as I know, following Manaseryan’s publications, the question of identifying the ethnic affiliation of the autonomous (“who are not subject to kings”) tribes from the banks of the Araxes River has not been revisited in scholarly debate. Moreover, a number of aspects—textological, etymological, historical, geographical, and political—which could have substantially affected the conclusions reached, were not sufficiently taken into account by the respected scholar. These considerations make it necessary to revisit the issue and seek further clarification.

**Keywords:** *Tigranes II the Great, Great Armenia, Rome, Parthia, Artaxiad dynasty, “who have no king”, “who are not subject to kings”, Sacaraucae, Mardians*

First, it should be noted that Plutarch’s works have been translated into almost all European languages. However, the present study is limited to the Russian and Armenian translations of Plutarch’s *Lives*, specifically the *The Life of Lucullus*. At present, there are four Russian translations of this work by S. Destunis, V. Guerrier,<sup>1</sup> V. Alekseev, and S. Averintsev, as well as two Armenian translations: one in Classical Armenian (Grabar) by Vardapet E. Tomatchean and another in Modern Armenian by Simon Grkasharyan. From a textual and interpretative perspective, these translations differ substantially from one another. In particular, the Greek term *Ἀβασιλευτοὶ* in Plutarch’s *The Life of Lucullus* is interpreted differently by the Russian and Armenian translators.

Translation by Spiridon Destunis: “At first Tigran listened with meekness, but when the Armenians and Gordians gathered to him with all their forces, when the kings of the Medians and Adiabenes joined him, when many Arabs arrived from the shores of the Babylonian Sea, and from the shores of the Caspian Sea - Albanians and Iberians neighboring them, when many of the peoples living near the Araxes, **ungoverned by the kings**, came to him, partly out of friendship, partly enticed by gifts, the royal councils were filled with great hopes, vanity and threats” [46:630].

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this translation was not available for review [47].

Translation by Vasilii Alekseev: “At first the king willingly obeyed the advice. But when all the Armenian and Gordian armies gathered to him, when the princes of Medians and Adiabeniens appeared with all their armies, when numerous crowds of Arabs from the shores of the Persian Gulf, hordes of Albanians from the shores of the Caspian Sea and the Iberians neighbouring the Albanians arrived, when hordes of **independent nomads** from the banks of the Araxes came, partly out of favour with him, partly because of gifts, at the king’s feasts and councils, began to express one after another bold hopes and threats in the spirit of barbarians” [48:589-590].

Translation by Sergey Averintsev: “At first Tigran listened calmly to such advice, but when the Armenians and Gordians gathered to him with all their forces, and the Median and Adiabeniens kings appeared with all their forces, when hordes of Arabs arrived from the Babylonian Sea, and crowds of Albanians and neighboring Iberians from the Caspian Sea, and they were joined in no small number by **free tribes** from the banks of the Araxes, attracted by the kindness and gifts of Tigran - then, both at the royal feasts and in the royal council, only presumptuous boasts and threats in the spirit of barbarians were heard” [50:568].

Translation in Old Armenian (grabar) by vardapet E. Tomatchean: “First, Tigran calmly listened to the admonition (to the warning, word of caution). Afterward, when the armies of Armenia and Corduene gathered around him, generally the kings of the Medes and Adabids also placed their army before him (under his command). Regiments of Arabs also came to him from the coast of Babylon, many also from the Caspian [region] and Georgia, which bordered Albania. And a considerable number also came from the native peoples of Yeraskh, **who do not have a king**, either in honor of (out of respect for) Tigran, or because they were motivated there by the reward (expectation of reward) of the tributes (gifts). It was then necessary to observe that, generally, the people called at the kings invitation (those at the table; literally, the kings invitation and the tablemates), the council meeting, the court, were full of hope and the audacity of arrogance, along with the threats of the barbarians wrath”<sup>2</sup> [44:567].

Translation by S. Grkasharyan: “At first, Tigran listened calmly to such advice, but when the Armenians and Gordienians gathered to him with all their forces, and when they came at the head of all their forces the Median and Adiabeniens kings, when hordes of Arabs arrived from the Babylonian Sea, and

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<sup>2</sup> I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Ani Arakelyan (Matenadaran Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan, Republic of Armenia) for her help in translating this fragment from Old Armenian (grabar) into Modern Armenian and English.

crowds of Albanians and neighboring Iberians from the Caspian Sea, and they were joined in no small number by **free tribes** from the banks of the Araxes, attracted by the courtesy and gifts of Tigran - then, both at the royal feasts and in the royal council, only presumptuous boasts and threats in the spirit of barbarians were heard” [45:64].

It should be noted that the term *αβασίλευτοι*, used by Plutarch in the original text, is rendered differently by various translators. S. Destunis, V. Alekseev, and S. Averintsev translate it respectively as “*ungoverned by kings*,” “*independent nomads*,” and “*free tribes*.” R. L. Manaseryan, for his part, interprets this term as “*those who are not subject to kings*” (неподвластные царям) [34:155].

A.D. Weismann in his *Greek-Russian Dictionary*, interprets the term *αβασίλευτος* as “ungoverned by the kings”, “independent” [63:1]. That is, in his dictionary, Weismann interprets them in the same way as S. Destunis and V. Alekseev had suggested before him.

J. Kh. Dvoretzkiy, in his *Ancient Greek–Russian Dictionary*, interprets the term *αβασίλευτος* as “*ungoverned by kings*” and “*not subject to kings*” [9:13], which generally corresponds to the interpretation proposed by S. Destunis and that adopted by R. L. Manaseryan.

In this case, it is difficult to determine which of the proposed interpretations of this term is the most applicable in the particular case, since all of the suggested options are, in principle, academically valid. However, it is noteworthy that Vardapet E. Tomatchean, in the first six-volume translation of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* from Ancient Greek into Old Armenian (grabar), rendered the term *αβασίλευτοι* as *անթագաւոր* [*ant’agawork*], which clearly means “those who have no king” [44:567].

In the new translation of Plutarch’s *Lives* (*Lucullus* XXVI, 4) from Ancient Greek into Modern Armenian, S. Grkasharyan renders the term **αβασίλευτοι** as «**azat**» (“free”) [45:64]. This interpretation clearly corresponds to the Russian translation by S. Averintsev, who likewise translates the term as “free [tribes].”

Thus, five interpretations of the term **αβασίλευτοι** exist: “ungoverned by kings,” “not subject to kings,” “who have no king,” “independent [nomads],” and “free [tribes].” In my opinion, the most accurate rendering is the one proposed by vardapet E. Tomatchyan, who translated the term as «**անթագաւոր**», that is, “those who have no king.”

From the above interpretations of the word (term) **αβασίλευτοι**, one can state with certainty that, whoever this people or tribe may have been, it was not

only subject to Tigranes II the Great but also had no kings within its own society (in its natural habitat). This, undoubtedly, should be understood as a characteristic of their socio-political (worldview) way of life. Exactly because of this interpretation, the version proposed by R. L. Manaseryan regarding the Sacaraucae or Sacavracs appears fragile, since the Sacaraucae are Scythians, and the Scythians were familiar with royal authority and had their own kings. And this is such a well-known fact that, within the framework of the present article, it does not even require references to sources or additional evidence. That is, in the case of the Sacaraucae or the Sacauracian Scythians, it is impossible to speak of them as being “not subject to kings” or “not ruled by kings” in the sense of their socio-political (ideological) organization. When considering this term, it is important to note that the Plutarch was well aware of hierarchy and understood the difference between the Armenian king Artavasdes [50:618] and the Arab chieftain Abgares [50:619]. Yet only with regard to a single tribe from the banks of the Araxes he employs the specific term ἀβασιλευτοί [50:568].

Another important consideration is the composition of the peoples and tribes allied with or vassal to Tigranes II the Great who gathered at his military camp in the Taurus Mountains. This composition should be compared with the peoples and tribes listed among his troops at the Battle of Tigranakert and the Battle of the Aratsani. According to Plutarch, the vassals and allies of Tigranes II the Great who came to his military camp included Median (both Greater Median and Atropatenian), and Adiabenean kings, as well as Arabs, Caucasian Albanians, Iberians (Iberians/Iverians), and Gordiens. In addition, a considerable number of people came from the indigenous populations of the Araxes region, tribes from the banks of the Araxes “that had no kings” (“free,” “independent,” “not subject to kings,” “ungoverned by kings”). They joined Tigranes either out of respect for him or because they were motivated by the expectation of tribute or gifts.

From the descriptions of Tigranes II the Great’s preparations for war and the deployment of forces before the Battle of Tigranakert, it is clear that not all of the tribes and peoples mentioned above took part in the battle. The Arabs who were marching to join Tigranes were defeated by a detachment sent by Lucullus under the command of Sextilius [50:568]. During the battle of Tigranakert, among the allies of Tigranes named by Plutarch were the Median and Adiabenean forces with their kings [50:570]. Thus, among the peoples mentioned as participating were the Armenians [50:571-572], the Medians and the Adiabeneans [50:570]. All three peoples were familiar with royal authority and were led into battle by their own kings. The Gordiens are likewise absent from the list, most likely because

their king, Zarbienus, had secretly entered into negotiations with Lucullus through Appius Claudius, being dissatisfied with (resenting) the rule of Tigranes II the Great. This was reported to Tigranes, who put Zarbienus and his family to death even before the Roman invasion of Armenia [50:564-565,572]. It is known that after the physical elimination of their king, the Gordiens themselves came to Tigranes' military camp with their troops. However, they did not take part in the battles. Presumably, Tigranes did not trust them because of the betrayal of their king, Zarbienus. As we see, the Atropatenians, Iberians (Iberians), Caucasian Albanians and the "free" ("independent," "not subject to kings," "ungoverned by kings") tribes from the banks of the Araxes did not participate in the Battle of Tigranakert. Consequently, the thesis expressed by R.L. Manaseryan about the participation of the Sacaraucae troops from the banks of Amu Darya in the battle at Tigranakert [34:155; 35:101-107; 19:313-314] has no direct confirmation in the sources.

In the next battle, at the Aratsani, Plutarch's account shows a completely different composition of the allied forces accompanying Tigranes the Great: Iberian spearmen and Mardian mounted archers, on whom Tigranes, as foreign contingents, placed particular hopes; a formidable and numerous Armenian cavalry; and Atropatenian infantry (which wavered even before the Romans came to close combat with them) [50:572-573]. It should be noted that if we compare the list of Tigranes' allies who came to him at his headquarters in the Taurus Mountains with those who took part in the Battle of Tigranakert and the Battle of the Aratsani, we see that, prior to the confrontation with the Romans, Tigranes divided the allied forces. Some were with him at the Battle of Tigranakert, while others fought at the Battle of the Aratsani. It should also be emphasized that neither in the Battle of Tigranakert nor in the Battle of the Aratsani are the Albanians living near the Caspian Sea or the Gordiens mentioned. Why the Albanians did not participate in the battles remains unclear. Why the Albanians did not participate in the battles remains unclear. However, they have no connection with the "free" tribes from the banks of the Araxes, since the latter are mentioned independently of the Albanians in Plutarch's list. Consequently, only the Mardians can be considered plausible candidates for the "free" tribes from the banks of the Araxes.

However, R. L. Manaseryan argues that in Tigranes' era, a people possessing at least a status independent of Tigranes himself (since they came to his headquarters in the Taurus Mountains not as his subjects, but only after receiving gifts and out of Tigranes' courtesy) could not have lived in Armenia. This conclusion, however, overlooks several factors: 1) the Mardians as a people were

already recorded on the Armenian Highlands prior to Tigranes' era [31:90]; 2) the decision to conquer a particular people living in Armenia itself or near its borders, was entirely made by the Armenian king of kings Tigranes II the Great. Such decisions were made based on expediency. And the Mardians were not easy people (tribes). They were professional warriors, murderers (killers), robbers, marauders (pillagers), so powerful, that according to Strabo, the Achaemenids themselves paid tribute to them [60:494]. It is worth noting that during the Achaemenid period, the Armenians themselves paid tribute to the Achaemenids [20:271], and the powerful Persian king of kings, to whom many nations paid tribute [20:269-275], themselves paid off the Mardians [60:494]. It is hard not to notice the consonance and similarity of some of the above-mentioned words (murderers, marauders) with the ethnonym "Mardians" and their specific way of life as recorded in the ancient sources. It seems likely that for Tigranes the Great, it was easier to coexist with them and, by offering gifts, to employ them from time to time for his purposes, rather than wasting lives on their conquest.

Plutarch asserts that three kings took part in the battle at the Aratsani River against Lucullus. He names Tigranes II the Great and Mithridates VI Eupator of Pontus explicitly, but he does not mention the third king. Hypothetically, this third king would have been either the Iberian (Iverian) king or the Atropatenian king, as both peoples had their own monarchs at the time—the Iberians under Artoces (Artacus) [4:367,378; 7:96-99; 11:53,104; 13:59; 39:181-182; 40:377] and the Atropatenians under Darius, [4:369,378] mentioned in the sources. Regarding the latter, Appian of Alexandria clearly notes that he had previously assisted Tigranes II the Great [4:369].

Let us pay special attention to the fact that in none of the battles, while carefully listing the tribes and people allied and vassals to Tigranes II the Great, Plutarch never mentions any Sacaraucae. Moreover, it should be noted that shortly before the events described, the Scythian-Sacaraucae of Claudius Ptolemy or, as Lucian calls them, the Sacavrachian Scythians, placed their protege, Sanatruces, on the throne of Parthia [33:234-235]. This implies that he was not an independent ruler on the throne, as it might appear at first glance. He was a convenient figure for those who placed him in power—the Sacaraucae—and acted as their representative. Sources indicate that Sanatruces was hostile toward Tigranes the Great over a disputed territory between Armenia and Parthia [7:4-5], which appears in Strabo [60:500-501] refers to as the "Seventy Valleys" (εβδομήκοντα αυλώνας της Ἀρμενίας), and Memnon calls the "Great Glen" (Μεγάλους Αυλώνας) [36:289-316; 26:283-300]. It should not be assumed that Sanatruces's

hostility toward Tigranes was merely a personal whim. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine that the Sacaraucae were so delighted with Tigran's favor that, forgetting about the disputed territories, they decided to come to his aid in exchange for gifts. It should also be noted that in the short period between the Battle of Tigranakert (October 69 BCE) and the Battle of the Aratsani (autumn–early winter 68 BCE), the Armenian king Tigranes II and his father-in-law, the Pontic king Mithridates VI Eupator, were seeking ways to involve the Parthian king Sanatruces in an anti-Roman alliance [4:356-357; 7:4-5; 7:6-9; 14:117-120]. However, the Parthian king did not rush to respond. Meanwhile, envoys arrived from Lucullus with threats if he sided with the enemy and promises if he sided with the Romans. In reply, Sanatruces sent an embassy to Lucullus, offering friendship and alliance. Lucullus welcomed this and, in turn, sent ambassadors to the Parthian king [50:572; 7:6-9]. However, the envoys discovered his treason: he had secretly asked Tigranes II for Mesopotamia as payment for an alliance with him. Upon learning this, Lucullus even considered marching against the Parthians, leaving Tigranes II and Mithridates VI unmolested. But a mutiny in his own troops prevented him from carrying out this plan (Plut., *Luc.*, 30). Moreover, according to Cassius Dio, the embassy sent by Lucullus was exposed by the Parthian king for espionage, since it secretly gathered information about the Parthian country [7:6-9]. From this it must be concluded that an anti-Armenian Roman–Parthian alliance did not materialize. At the same time, Sanatruces, according to Cassius Dio, decided to maintain neutrality, believing that an equal struggle between the two sides would be most advantageous for him. Soon afterward, Sanatruces died, and the kingdom passed to his son Phraates III [7:74-77]. Meanwhile, Lucullus was replaced by Pompey. Mithridates VI Eupator, seeking to accelerate events, sent envoys to Phraates III, but Pompey preempted him. In order not to lose control of the situation, Tigranes II the Great decided to raise the stakes and add Adiabene and the Great Glen to the previously discussed Mesopotamia [36:289-316; 26:283-300]. Regardless of whom exactly Tigranes II was negotiating with—whether with Phraates III (representing the interests of the Sacaraucae) or with the Sacaraucae themselves—such an alliance could not have been anti-Parthian, as R. L. Manaseryan argues [34:156], at least because, according to Manaseryan's own hypothesis, the Sacaraucae were supposed to fight on the Armenian side against the Romans, not against the Parthians. Even if one assumes the existence of a conflict between Phraates III and the Sacaraucae, a logical question arises: what would the Parthian king lose if his enemies were to perish in a battle against the Romans? From the facts presented above, it is already clear that the Sacaraucae do not fit the role of the “free” and

“kingless” tribes that came to the aid of Tigranes II. This means that by the Araxes, Plutarch may have meant not only the Central Asian Araxes—the Amu Darya, as R. L. Manaseryan assumed, but also one of the two rivers named Araxes that originate in the Armenian Highlands [61:8-13]. A careful analysis of Plutarch’s *Lives* of Alexander the Great [49:152-153], Pompey [49:82], and Mark Antony [49:424], shows that Plutarch refers to the Amu Darya exclusively as the Oxus [49:152-153]. At first glance, this would suggest that by the river Araxes, Plutarch could only have meant one of the two Araxes of the Armenian Highlands. [61:8-13]. However, the problem is that Plutarch himself was neither a participant in the campaigns of Lucullus and Pompey, nor a participant in Mark Antony’s Parthian campaign, nor, of course, in the campaigns of Alexander the Great. When composing the biographies of Lucullus, Pompey, Mark Antony, and Alexander the Great, Plutarch relied on secondhand information. We do not know how well the source on which he based his account of Lucullus [50:568] was acquainted with geography, nor whether that source distinguished between the Armenian Araxes [49:82,424; 61:8-13] and the Central Asian Araxes (the Amu Darya) [60:485]?

The oldest written references to the Mardians date back to about the turn of the VII-VI centuries BC [20:48-49,71-72; 38:269-270]. For the first time the Mardians and their commander Xanthius are mentioned as part of the Achaemenid army in Aeschylus' tragedy ‘The Persians’ [10:45]. However, the events described in this work belong to the 5th century B.C., to the time of the unsuccessful campaign of the Persian king Xerxes against Greece. Herodotus mentions them as a Persian nomadic tribe who were persuaded by Cyrus II the Great to break away from the Medians [20:72]. According to Nicholas of Damascus, the parents of Cyrus and Cyrus himself were Mardians [38:269; 60:677]. The same Herodotus mentions a Mard named Giread, who distinguished himself at the capture of the capital of Lydia - the city of Sardis [20:48-49]. However, despite the fact that the Mardians themselves were an Iranian people, in the very Persian environment, they had a separate way of life. They are known as a powerful bandit tribe, so formidable that even the Achaemenids paid them tribute [60:494].

On the Armenian Highlands, the earliest references to the Mardians date back to 401 BCE. Xenophon of Athens, in his *Anabasis*, mentions Armenians, Mardians, and Chaldeans among the mercenary troops of the Achaemenid satraps of Armenia, Orontas and Artukh [31:90]. According to Flavius Arrian, in the Battle of Gaugamela, the army of Darius III also included Mardian archers, who were positioned in the very center near Darius, opposite Alexander the Great and the royal cavalry [5:119,121]. Curtius Rufus notes that the Persians, along with the

Mardians and Sogdians, were led by Ariobarzanes and Orontobates. Each of them commanded their own contingent, while overall command belonged to Orsin, a descendant of one of the Seven Persians who traced his lineage back to Cyrus [32:73]. After Darius' defeat, Alexander the Great passed through much of their territory and subdued them. Arrian notes the inaccessibility of their land, the poverty of its inhabitants, and their belligerence [5:132-133]. Curtius Rufus, describing Alexander's campaign against the Mardians writes: "Having then ruined the fields of Persia, the king came to the tribe of the Mardians, warlike and very different from the rest of the Persians in their way of life. They dig caves in the mountains and hide there with their wives and children, eating the meat of livestock and wild animals. And their women have not milder manners in accordance with their nature: their hair sticks out shaggy, their clothes are above their knees, and they tie their heads with slings, which are both ornaments and weapons." [32:101].

Interesting information about the relations between the Parthians and the Mardians is mentioned by Justin [66:352] and Isidore of Charax in "Parthian Stations" [21:410; 22:6-7]. All of these references concern the wars of the Parthian king Phraates I (176–165 BCE) with the Mardians. Justin [66:352], dedicating several sentences to the reign and rule of Phraates I, mentions among his deeds the subjugation of the powerful Mardian tribe. Exactly when and how the process of subjugating the Mardians took place is unknown. From the *Parthian Stations* of Isidore of Charax, we only know that the conquered Mardians were initially relocated by the first king Phraates I to the city of Charax in Media, which was situated at the base of the Caspian Mountains, beyond which lay the Caspian Gates. It is important to note that by using the term "first" in reference to this incident, Isidore emphasizes the episodic and temporary nature of this relocation — meaning that Charax was not their permanent settlement, but rather a transit point on the way to a further, unknown resettlement destination. The Russian translation by N.V. Zhuravleva is inaccurate. In the ancient Greek original, the phrase reads "the first king Phraates", whereas in the Russian translation, the words "the first king" are inexplicably omitted before the name of the king. Thus, there is no doubt that both Justin and Isidore of Charax are referring to Phraates I.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A. Balakhvantsev, in a recently defended dissertation, questions the existence of royal titles for the Parthian kings before Mithridates I the Great. [6:282-287; 27:109]. The researcher believes that Isidore of Charax's account refers not to Phraates I, but to Phraates II. [6:282-287; 27:109-111]. This opinion is based entirely on the classification of

numismatic material, (the presence of the royal title among the Parthian kings, based on information from narrative sources, A.S. Balakhvantsev considers not supported by numismatic evidence) which in turn relies on the research of David Sellwood. [59:20-32; 27:109-111]. However, there are other points of view on this matter. In their study, G. A. Koshelenko and V. A. Gaibov attributed coin types 9.1–9.4 (which Sellwood had assigned to the minting of Mithridates I [59:20-32 (type 9.1-9.4)]) to the minting of Arsaces I. [30:327-347]. As a result, this supports the presence of a royal title among the Arsacids in numismatic evidence prior to Mithridates I. I would like to add a few of my own observations: the existence of a royal title among the Arsacids, dating back to 247 BCE, undoubtedly reflects a significant event for the Parthian dynasty, marking the beginning of their kingship. If we add evidence from a range of narrative sources, it becomes clear that for twenty years the Seleucids made no attempt to punish Arsaces I and his supporters for overthrowing Seleucid rule. The first attempt, as is known, was made only by Seleucus II Callinicus in 228 BCE. Arsaces (Tiridates) retreated before him and ultimately found refuge with the Apasiaks [51:619-620; 60:485-486]. Internal unrest within the Seleucid state forced Seleucus to return to Syria, preventing him from consolidating his initial success and subjugating the Arsacids. The next attempt occurred only after 209 BCE, when Antiochus III the Great, continuing his famous Eastern campaign, began gradually to reclaim the lost Central Asian possessions. During these 38 years, the Arsacids were independent and not subordinated to the Seleucids. What, then, prevented them from adopting the royal title? According to Polybius [51a:33-34], Justin [51:353] and John of Antioch [24], it is clearly evident that “the Persian kingdom was reconquered” by Antiochus III the Great. The example of the relationship between Antiochus III and the Bactrian king Euthydemus makes it evident that Antiochus III the Great did not oppose the Bactrian ruler retaining the royal title, given he acknowledged his subordinate position to Antiochus III [51a:33-34], especially since this in no way diminished the dignity of Antiochus III the Great, and automatically reinforced his own title of “Great King”, which was recognized not only by the peoples of Asia, but also by Europe, who recognized in him a man worthy of royal power [51a:33-34]. Consequently, the conclusion of peace (signifying the elimination of contradictions) and the acceptance of Arsacids as allies by Antiochus III, gives rise to a logical question in light of A. Balakhvantsev’s theory: What was the status of Antiochus III’s Parthian ally? What title did the Arsacids allied to the Seleucids hold before Mithridates I, if not the royal one? How should this have been reflected in the numismatic material? Moreover, on a number of Arsacid coin issues predating the appearance of the title ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ (“basileus”), there is indeed either only the name “Arsac,” or, in addition to it, the titles ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΩΡ (“autokrator”) and “karan” (*kruny*). Both titles are examined in considerable detail by A. Balakhvantsev in his dissertation, where he argues that they had an exclusively military function. However, this is not entirely accurate. I. Dvoretzky, in his ‘Ancient Greek-Russian Dictionary’, gives a rather exhaustive list of the meanings of the word ‘autokrator’: independent, autonomous, possessing unlimited powers, unlimited, autocratic, autocratic, not dependent on anything external, sovereign, unlimitedly owning, having unlimited right, willful [27:109-111]. Moreover, even if these titles are considered purely from a military perspective, it should be noted that ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ (“basileus”) primarily denotes the leader of a tribe in war (as the word itself indicates: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ = German *Herzog* = Russian *voevoda*); secondly, the

In Strabo's time, the Mardians are mentioned as tribes of robbers living both in Persia and in Armenia (scattered across Zagros and Niphat Mountains). It should be emphasized that Armenian sources are familiar with Mount Npat (Nifat) and the Nifat Mountains on the Armenian Highlands. According to Strabo, the sources of the Tigris were located near Mount Niphat [60:498-499]. Tacitus, describing Corbulo's campaign from Artaxata, which had been destroyed by the Romans, to Tigranakert, notes that his route passed through the territory of the Mardians, who were accustomed to raiding. Protected by the mountains, they attacked him, but were defeated by the Iberians (Iverians) sent against them by Corbulo, and their lands were ruined [29:250-251]. Tacitus calls the territories inhabited by the Mardians the "Land of the Mardians."

Pomponius Mela mentions the Mardians (Amardians) twice in his "Chorography". "To the interior, beside Caspian Bay, are the Caspians and Amazons (at least the ones they call the Sauromatidae); alongside the Bay of Hyrcania are the Albani, the Moschi, and the Hyrcani; and on Scythian Bay are the Amardi, the Pestici, and, at this point near the strait, the Derbices. Many rivers, great and small, flow into that bay, but the famous one, the <... >, descends in a single bed from the Ceraunian Mountains and makes its outlet into the Caspian in two beds" [52:112].

"The rivers Iaxartes go from the regions of the Sogdiani, through Scythia's deserts, into Scythian Bay. The former is large at its source, but the latter becomes larger by the incursion of other rivers. The latter rushes for a considerable distance from east to west, bends for the first time beside the Dahae, and, with its course turned to the north, opens its mouth between the Amardi and the Pestici" [52:113].

Pliny the Elder (Plinius Major), in Book VI of his "Natural History", mentions Mardians three times, and in completely different places - the eastern Black Sea region, the Caspian region and Central Asia. Describing the eastern Black Sea coast, he writes: "The town of Heracleum is 100 miles from Dioscurias and 70 miles from Sebastopol. The tribes here are the Achaei, Mardi and Cercetai, and after these the Serri and Cephalotomi" [42:322-323; 43:348-349].

Pliny the Elder's next mention of the Mardians is in his description of the coast of the Caspian Sea: "For the sea actually forces a passage from the Scythian Ocean to the back of Asia, where the inhabitants call it by a variety of names, but it is best known by two of them, as the Caspian Sea and the Hyrcanian. Clitarchus is

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judge of the tribe; and finally, the representative of the tribe before the gods, the high priest [41:6].

of opinion that the Caspian is as large as a Black Sea; Eratosthenes also gives its dimension on the south-east side along the coast of Cadusia and Albania as 725 miles, from there through the territories of the Atiaci, Amardi and Hyrcani to the mouth of the river Zonus 600 miles, and from there to the mouth of the Syr Daria 300 miles, making a total of 1575 miles. Artemidorus subtract 25 miles from this total” [42:352-355; 43:362-365].

And finally, another mention of the Mardians is given by Pliny the Elder in his description of the Margiane country: “Next comes the Margiane country, famous for its sunny climate – it is the only district in that region where the wine is grown; it is shut in all round by a beautiful ring of mountains, 187 miles in circuit, and is difficult of access account of sandy deserts stretching for a distance of 120 miles; and it is itself situated opposite to the region of Parthia” [42:366-367; 43:372-373].

“In Margiane Alexander had founded a city bearing his name, which was destroyed by the barbarians, but Antiochus son of Seleucus re-established a Syrian city on the same site, intersected by the river Murgab, which is canalized into Lake Zotha, he had preferred that the city should be named after himself. Its circuit measures 8, 3/4 miles. This is the place to which the Roman prisoners taken in the disaster of Crassus were brought by Orodes. From the height of Merv across the ridges of the Bactrians extend the fierce tribe of the Mardi, an independent state” [42:367-369; 43:372-373].

Pliny’s testimony regarding the Mardians deserves special attention for two reasons: 1) the tribe that Pliny the Elder describes as *sui iuris*, that is, “independent,” clearly corresponds to one of the meanings of the term *αβασίλευτοι* (“independent”), judging by V. A. Alekseev’s proposed translation of the corresponding term of Plutarch and by the definition given by A. D. Weismann in his *Greek–Russian Dictionary* [42:367; 48:589; 63:1]; 2) because of the mentioned boundaries of this tribe’s habitation between the river Marg and the area inhabited by the Bactrians, along the ridges of the Caucasus.

The river Marg mentioned in the sources is undoubtedly the Murghab River, and Antiochia Margiana is Old Merv (the archaeological sites of Erk-kala and Gyaur-kala). Today, as in earlier times, the Murghab does not flow into any body of water but disappears into the sands of the Karakum Desert, south of the cities of Mary and Bayram-Ali, in the form of dried-up channels, apparently the remnants of former canals. In antiquity, however, a large river, the Kelif Uzboy, flowed north of its lower reaches. This river can be identified with Pliny’s Zotal with good reason, since it should be emphasized, apart from the Kelif Uzboy there

is no other river (except for the Tejen) or any other body of water (let alone a sea) north of Old Merv into which the river Marg (the Murghab) could have flowed. Actually, V. A. Obruchev had already noted that the Murghab flowed into the Kelif Uzboy [54:26].

Zotal—the Kelif Uzboy—was in antiquity one of the main branches of the Amu Darya, flowing parallel to it at a short distance as far as the eastern edge of the Merv oasis, near the modern railway stations of Uch-Adzhi and Repetek, and then toward Unguz and onward to the Caspian Sea via the Uzboy [54:26-27].

The area of Bactrian habitation is Bactria.

Bactria (Bactriana in Ancient Greek; Bahlika in Old Indic; Bactrish in Old Persian; Bakhlo / Balkh—possibly of Tocharian origin; Bahdi in Avestan) was a historical and cultural region extending along both banks of the Amu Darya (the Oxus), from the Hindu Kush (in present-day Afghanistan) in the south to the Hisar Range in the north, and from the Amu Darya in the west to the Pamirs in the east. Its capital was the city of Bactra (medieval Balkh), located in northern Afghanistan. According to Pliny the Elder [42:364-367, 368-371; 43:370-373, 372-375] and Strabo [60:486, 488], the city was also known as Zariaspa, a name meaning “golden-horse” [54:7-8]. Zariaspa in Bactria is also mentioned by Polybius [51:620-621; 28:12-13].

With regard to the western border of Bactria, which ran along the Amu Darya [54:8], it is necessary to clarify why E.V. Rtveladze at the same time defines Bactria as a historical and cultural region extending along both banks of the Amu Darya [54:7], implying the present-day Amu Darya flowing into the Aral Sea. The point is that, in the understanding of ancient geographers, the western border of Bactria was identified with one of the tributaries of the Amu Darya (the Oxus), specifically the one that flowed into the Caspian Sea [51:619-620; 60:79, 480, 482-483, 485-486, 488-489]. At the same time, Strabo also defines this same river as the boundary between Bactria and Sogdiana [60:79, 485-486, 488]. Given that Sogdiana lay east of the Amu Darya and, accordingly, east of Bactria, the Bactrian–Sogdian boundary must be understood as another branch of the Amu Darya (the Oxus), namely the one that flowed into the Aral Sea. It therefore seems logical to assume that in antiquity part of Bactria also extended between the now-desiccated channel of the Amu Darya that flowed into the Caspian Sea and the present course of the Amu Darya that flows into the Aral Sea.

Analyses of ancient sources show that the tradition of naming the Amu Darya ambiguously, i.e. both Araxes and Ox lived at least for a millennium. [53:96-103; 3:36-51]. For example, Herodotus [20:110-117], author of the 5th

century BC and Paul Orosius, who lived in the IV-V centuries AD [39:49; 40:152], describing the campaign of the Persian king Cyrus against the Massageteans, call the Amu Darya Araxes. While Marcus Junianus Justin [66:20], an author (II-III centuries AD), who abridged the work of Pompey Trogus, who wrote in the I century AD, calls this river Oax (Oxus), when describing the same campaign.

It should be noted that the damaged word [?]-r-a-x-[?]-a (DB V, 74 (20, 27)) reconstructed by Harmatta [17] as [a]-r-a-x-[s]-a “Arakhsha river” in column V of the Behistun inscription of Darius I (DB, V, 74 (20, 27)) is disputed and not accepted by modern authors. They propose a different reconstruction [d]-r-a-x-[t]-a? [55:76; 23:397,399; 56:89-90; 57:90,171]. However, judging by the question mark at the end of the proposed term, the authors themselves are not confident in the correctness of this variant, which to some extent does not rule out the reconstruction proposed by Harmatta.

As for the “ridges of the Caucasus” mentioned by Pliny the Elder as being inhabited by the Mardians, these should be understood as the slopes of the Hindu Kush, since in this sector of the interfluvium of the Murghab and the Oxus (Amu Darya), flowing into the Caspian Sea, there are no other mountain ranges that could correspond to the name “Caucasus.” According to the evidence of ancient sources, the term “Caucasus” was also used to denote the Indian mountains.

The cause for this was the information provided by Strabo, who says the following about the Caucasus: “The stories that have been spread far and wide with a view to glorifying Alexander are not accepted by all; and their fabricators were men who cared for flattery rather than truth. For instance, they transferred the Caucasus into the region of the eastern sea which lies near those mountains from the Euxine; for these are the mountains which the Greeks named Caucasus, which is more than thirty thousand stadias distant from India; and here it was that they laid the scene of the story of Prometheus and of his being put in bonds; for these were the farthest mountains towards the east that were known to writers of that time” [60:479; 51:619-620; 51a:33-34; 66:353; 25:24-26].

Claudius Ptolemy, when mentioning the Mardians (Μάρδοι) in his work, notes that the territory they inhabited was located adjacent to the region of Gordyene (Γορδύηνη; Gordiena, Arm. Korduk) and south of the region of Kotaya (Κώταια) [16:317-318, 369]. The *Armenian Geography of the Seventh Century* (attributed to Movses Khorenatsi, Anania Shirakatsi, or an anonymous author of the 610s) mentions, along the route of Corbulo’s march, the gavars (regions) of Mardastan [64:137] and Bun-Mardastan (variant: Bun Marastan) in the province of Vaspurakan [7:103], as well as the gavar of Mardakhi (Mardali) in the province of

Turuberan of Greater Armenia [7:99-100; 64:130-131], These are presented as settled areas whose names are associated with the ethnonym of the Mardians. It is especially noteworthy that within the territory of this gavar lies Mount Byurakn, from the northwestern slope of whose Sermants peak originates the Yegr River (modern Yegri-chay), which gives rise to the Araxes River [65:65,98,107,116].

At the same time, ancient Armenian sources (Agathangelos, Faustos Buzand [12], Movses Khorenatsi, Ghazar Parpetsi, Yeghishe, Sebeos [58], Ghevond, ‘Ashkharatsuits’, Tovma Artsruni [62], Grigor Magistros and others), do not mention the Mardians as a people or a separate tribe on the territory of the Armenian Highlands (15:129-157). But, the same sources universally mention such terms as ‘Mardpet’, the principality of Mardpet or the Mardpet’s principality [2:233], which Gregory Magistros also calls Mardpetakan [16:65], the department “Mardpetutyun”, as well as a special regiment - ‘Mardpetakan gund’ at the disposal of Mardpet. According to Movses Khorenatsi, this department was first organised during the reign of a representative of the younger line of Parthian Arsacids - King Vagharshak I (129-108 BC) [25:27-30; 27:125; 28:10,11,14]. There, the Mardpets are mentioned as rulers of lands from Atropatene to Chuash and Nakhchavan [37:63]. In the hierarchy of state administration, they were eunuchs of the royal court, and since they were in charge of the royal harem, concubines and royal chambers, they were especially close dignitaries of the king of Great Armenia evolved into the institution of the *mardpetut’iwn*., and its head was called ‘mardpet’, as well as “*hAyr*”, i.e. ‘father of the king’.

In the historiography devoted to the Mardpets, there exists a theory proposing their identification as noble representatives of the Mardian tribe (Μάρδοι), who allegedly found their place within the hierarchical institutions of ancient Armenia [1:417]. Over more than a century, this viewpoint has found both its supporters [15:146 (footnote 89)] and opponents [15:146 (footnote 89)], yet it has remained insufficiently clarified, contested, and in many respects contradictory [15:129–157]. In particular, scholars note that the names of administrative and military offices in the Armenian language containing the component *-pet* (such as *aspet*, *sparapet*, *hazarapet*, *mogpet*, and others) are not derived from tribal names. While Armenian contains numerous toponyms, personal names, surnames, and even designations of everyday objects whose meanings are narrowed or specified through reference to tribal names, no such derivations are attested for administrative titles [15:147]. At the same time, it should be noted that among the offices listed by these authors—specifically *mogpet* (also rendered as *magpet*)—an apparent exception may be observed. The *Mogs* (*Mags*), identified in ancient

sources as one of the Median (Iranian) tribes, are well documented in the classical tradition [20:59, 62–63, 69–70, 73, 75–76, 79–80, 254–257, 261–264, 553, 588]. It is well known that representatives of this tribe later formed the priestly caste of the Persians, whose head bore the title Mogbed or Magpet.

At the same time, extensive data on the Mardians, together with information from ancient sources about their habitats near the Araxes River, which may be understood either as the Araxes flowing from Mount Byurakn (Bingöl Dağ) in the Armenian Highland or as the Amu Darya (given that the Mardians are also attested in that region) does not, within the scope of this article, allow for a definitive conclusion as to which riverbank they came from to assist Tigranes II the Great. Nevertheless, it appears more likely that these allies were the Mardians rather than the Sacaraucae.

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## Acknowledgments

With respect and gratitude, I dedicate this article to my friend and teacher – Vigen A. Tsatryan (Chief Specislist, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, Republic of Armenia. 7/24, David-Bek, Kapan, Syunik region, Armenia).

Familiarity with the recent academic edition of *History of Armenia* was made possible thanks to the generosity of R.L. Manaseryan (Doctor of Historical Sciences, Institute of History, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia), who kindly provided me with a copy of this book. I take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation, respect and gratitude to my friend for such a valuable gift and his warm wishes that support and inspire me.

Familiarity with *Yakobean A., Ashkharhatsuyts E' dari Ananowni. Gita-qnnakan bnagir, Hande's Amso'reay (Handes Amsorya), Vienna – Yerevan, 2013, 35-194 (in Armenian) [Hakobyan A. Ashkharhatsuyts of the 7th-Century Anonymous Author]* was made possible thanks to the generosity of Alexan A. Hakobyan (Doctor of Historical Science, Institute of Oriental Studies, National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (NAS RA), who kindly provided me with a copy of this book. I take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation, respect and gratitude to my friend for such a valuable gift and his warm wishes that support and inspire me.

Familiarity with *Ashkharatsuyts (Armyanskaya geografiya V–VII vv.) Movsesa Khorenatsi i Ananiya Shirakatsi. Predislovie, perevod i komentarii A. Zh. Arutyunyana, Belgorod: Zebra Publishing House, 2023 (in Russian) [Ashkharatsuyts (Armenian Geography of the 5th–7th Centuries) by Movses Khorenatsi and Anania Shirakatsi. Preface, translation, and commentary by A. Zh. Arutyunyan]* was made possible thanks to the generosity of Hakob Zh. Harutyunyan (Professor, Doctor of Historical Science, Institute of History, Yerevan State University of the Republic of Armenia), who kindly provided me with a copy of this book. I take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation, respect and gratitude to my friend for such a valuable gift and his warm wishes that support and inspire me.

**αβασιλευτοι**

**«Թագավորների իշխանություն չճանաչող» եւ «թագավորների կողմից չղեկավարվող»**

Հռոմեացիների դեմ պայքարում Հայոց արքա Տիգրան Բ Մեծին օգնության եկած՝ Արաքսի ափին բնակվող «անթագավորք» ցեղերի էթնիկական պատկանելության հարցի շուրջ (Plut., Luc., 26, 4)

Ռուսլան Կոբզար

**Հիմնաբառեր.** Տիգրան Բ Մեծ, Մեծ Հայք, Հռոմեական Հանրապետություն, Պարթևաստան, Արտաշիայաններ, «անթագավորք» («թագավոր չունեցող»), սակարաուկներ (սագարաուկներ), մարդեր

**Ամփոփում**

1992 թ. Ռ. Լ. Մանասերյանի կողմից փորձ էր արվել՝ պարզելու «Արաքսի ափին բնակվող ազատ ցեղերի» էթնիկական պատկանելությունը, որոնք ներկայացել էին Տիգրանի ռազմական հռոմեացիների հետ նրա բախման նախօրեին: Հեղինակը, նշելով իր եզրահանգման որոշ չափով վարկածային լինելը, կարծում է, որ նրանք, ամենայն հավանականությամբ, սագարաուկներն էին: Ռ.Լ. Մանասերյանի հետազայում հրատարակված (2007, 2024) աշխատություններից հստակ երևում է, որ հեղինակը չի փոխել այդ հարցի վերաբերյալ իր կարծիքը: Սակայն, աղբյուրների և հետազոտությունների մանրամասն վերլուծությունը թույլ է տվել վիճարկել հեղինակի եզրահանգումներն ու կրկին անդրադառնալով քննարկվող խնդրին, եզրակացնել, որ «Արաքսի ափին բնակվող անթագավորք (αβασιλευτοι) ցեղերը» (Plut., Luc., 26, 4), իրենց էթնիկական պատկանելությամբ, ամենայն հավանականությամբ, մարդեր էին:

# FROM CONCEPTION TO STALEMATE: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (IMEC)

Qin Liang\* 

DOI: 10.52837/27382702-2025.5.2-118

## Abstract

The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is a cross-regional connectivity initiative proposed in 2023 by the United States in cooperation with India, the European Union, and several Middle Eastern partners. It has been framed as an alternative infrastructure network intended to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative, facilitate geopolitical realignment in the Middle East, and reinforce U.S. leadership under conditions of intensifying great-power competition. Shortly after its announcement, however, the initiative entered a state of de facto stagnation, exposing a significant gap between strategic ambition and practical implementation. This article argues that IMEC’s difficulties stem from a set of structural constraints. The escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict undermined the political premise of Saudi-Israeli normalization on which the project implicitly relied, while fluctuations in the U.S. domestic political cycle weakened sustained strategic commitment and resource allocation. At the same time, participating actors diverge in their positions toward China and in their underlying interest structures, and the project faces unresolved challenges related to economic feasibility, financing mechanisms, and implementation capacity. Taken together, these factors suggest that IMEC is more likely to remain dormant or undergo limited functional adjustment rather than achieve a comprehensive revival, highlighting the vulnerability of highly politicized transnational infrastructure initiatives in an era of strategic competition.

**Keywords:** *India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC); Geoeconomics; Strategic Competition; Transnational Infrastructure; Structural Constraints*

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Received December 18, 2025, accepted December 28, 2025.

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## **Introduction**

In September 2023, on the sidelines of the G20 Summit, the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, the European Union, along with several other partners, signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The initiative was designed to construct a composite infrastructure network linking South Asia, the Gulf region, and Europe. Far exceeding the scope of a conventional infrastructure project, IMEC has been widely interpreted as a strategic instrument through which the United States seeks to consolidate its alliance system and reshape the Eurasian geoeconomic landscape in response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative [15]. However, less than two years after its announcement, this much-vaunted “transformative” project entered a state of de facto stagnation and was even characterized in public discourse as a “PowerPoint initiative” [10]. This rapid retreat from political prominence exposes the profound vulnerability confronting highly politicized transnational initiatives amid intensifying great-power geoeconomic competition.

The stagnation of IMEC is rooted in deep-seated tensions between its strategic vision and complex political realities. Although the initiative initially aimed to promote regional integration in the Middle East and facilitate normalization between Arab states and Israel through economic connectivity, the escalation of the Israel–Palestine conflict in October 2023 fundamentally undermined the political premise of Saudi–Israeli rapprochement on which IMEC implicitly relied. Heightened regional polarization has rendered multilateral cooperation involving Israel politically unviable in the short term. Meanwhile, fluctuations in the U.S. domestic political cycle constitute another critical constraint. Changes in administration tend to reorder foreign policy priorities, and as a signature initiative associated with a previous government, IMEC has faced growing uncertainty regarding the continuity of strategic attention and resource commitment. Together, external geopolitical shocks and inward-looking domestic political dynamics have exerted a form of “dual pressure,” accelerating IMEC’s slide from strategic conception to effective suspension.

The core objective of this research is to examine IMEC as a concrete case in order to systematically analyze the key factors and their interactive mechanisms that drove its rapid transition from a high-profile launch to de facto suspension. On this basis, the article further assesses whether IMEC possesses the conditions for a potential revival and explores the possible pathways through which such a restart might occur.

This inquiry carries clear practical significance. A careful examination of the causes behind IMEC's suspension contributes to a more objective assessment of the limits and risks inherent in contemporary geoeconomic competition among major powers, particularly in the domain of large-scale infrastructure initiatives. From China's perspective, the IMEC case highlights several practical constraints confronting competing connectivity projects, including the disruptive impact of regional security crises, divergences of interests and priorities within alliance frameworks, and the limited sustainability of domestic political support in the leading state. As such, it offers concrete lessons and insights drawn from a competing initiative for advancing the Belt and Road Initiative while strengthening risk prevention and resilience under complex external conditions. By empirically reconstructing the process through which IMEC moved toward suspension, this study seeks to provide policymakers and researchers with evidence-based analytical reference points.

### **The Strategic Intent of IMEC**

The IMEC involves a broad range of participants, each driven by distinct strategic considerations. Against the backdrop of intensifying Sino-U.S. strategic competition, the United States has promoted IMEC primarily as a means to coordinate allies and partners in order to counter the expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative and to constrain China's growing influence in the Middle East, thereby reinforcing its own geopolitical advantage. India and the European Union likewise view IMEC as part of their efforts to diversify connectivity frameworks and compete with the Belt and Road Initiative, while also embedding the project within India's "Looking West" policy and the broader Indo-Pacific strategic agenda. For Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern participants, IMEC is approached through a strategy of great-power balancing, with the aim of leveraging the corridor to occupy pivotal geopolitical positions. Beyond these geopolitical considerations, the European Union, India, and Middle Eastern states also attach significant economic expectations to IMEC, particularly the prospect of advancing India–Europe economic integration and generating additional trade and investment benefits.

First, IMEC can be understood as an alternative mechanism proposed by the United States, in coordination with its Western allies, to counter the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Competition among major powers has increasingly taken on a geo-economic character. Through the BRI, China has continued to expand its economic and political influence across developing countries, thereby generating strategic anxiety among the United States and its allies. Within U.S. policy circles, there is a

growing belief that military instruments alone are insufficient to balance China [3]; instead, the United States must also advance attractive frameworks for economic cooperation. Against this backdrop, Washington has criticized and questioned the BRI by invoking allegations such as “debt traps” and a lack of transparency, while simultaneously coordinating with its allies to launch a series of infrastructure initiatives, including the Build Back Better World (B3W), the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), and the Blue Dot Network. In parallel, the European Union has introduced the Global Gateway strategy, which aims to offer developing countries what it describes as “high-standard” and “sustainable” infrastructure alternatives [11; 9].

Second, IMEC functions as a key geostrategic instrument through which the United States seeks to reassert its influence in the Middle East and advance the normalization of Arab–Israeli relations. As China has markedly expanded its regional influence in recent years—through diplomatic initiatives such as facilitating Saudi–Iranian reconciliation and supporting Syria’s return to the Arab League—the United States has increasingly been perceived by regional allies as “unreliable” amid strategic retrenchment, resulting in a relative erosion of its influence. Against this backdrop, Washington aims to demonstrate through connectivity projects such as IMEC that it will not “leave a vacuum,” restore allies’ confidence, and consolidate its regional leadership [14]. The United States seeks to politicize and securitize infrastructure development, using IMEC to rally allies and constrain China’s growing influence. Promoting Arab–Israeli normalization—particularly between Saudi Arabia and Israel—thus lies at the core of U.S. Middle East strategy, as integrating the interests of the Gulf states and Israel is viewed in Washington as essential to regional stability aligned with U.S. strategic interests. Building on earlier efforts such as the Abraham Accords and the establishment of the I2U2 grouping [16; 1], Saudi Arabia’s inclusion in IMEC is widely regarded as an economic incentive and cooperative framework designed to accelerate Saudi–Israeli normalization, a move that has elicited positive responses from key regional actors, including strong public endorsements from Israeli and Saudi leaders [2]. Third, IMEC operates as a strategic conduit through which participating states advance their respective geostrategic objectives via overseas infrastructure, with the broader aim of reshaping regional power configurations. By deepening economic interdependence, the corridor is expected to generate spillover effects in security cooperation, counterterrorism, and regional stability, thereby providing a platform for diplomatic alignment and geopolitical recalibration [10]. For India, IMEC represents a major extension of its “Look West” strategy, enabling New Delhi to position itself as a

connectivity hub linking Europe and Southeast Asia by bypassing less efficient trade routes; initiatives such as acquiring a stake in Israel's Port of Haifa and pursuing partnerships with Greece reflect this ambition, and analysts suggest that the project could recalibrate India's role within the Eurasian economic order.<sup>1</sup>

From a U.S. perspective, IMEC forms part of a broader effort to anchor India more firmly within Western-led supply chains, reduce dependence on China, and, amid strategic retrenchment, sustain American influence across the Middle East and along the corridor. For the Gulf states and Israel, the project directly serves core national strategies: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates view IMEC as a means to consolidate their status as global logistics and trade hubs while advancing economic diversification, while Israel has explicitly positioned itself as the corridor's "central hub" and "key node," framing IMEC as a historic opportunity to reshape both national and regional landscapes. For the European Union and member states such as Italy, IMEC is likewise an instrument for strengthening ties with the Indo-Pacific and operationalizing Europe's Indo-Pacific strategy, with Rome in particular viewing the corridor as a strategic opportunity to connect the Mediterranean with the Indo-Pacific via the Middle East and to enhance its maritime influence [6].

Fourth, IMEC seeks to foster a tightly integrated economic bloc across India, the Middle East, and Europe by promoting supply-chain integration and economic interdependence in response to growing global fragmentation and supply-chain insecurity. The project envisages the construction of a cross-border railway network, complemented by power transmission lines, digital cables, and clean hydrogen pipelines, with the aim of creating a reliable and efficient connectivity corridor that could outperform existing maritime routes [15]. By substantially reducing trade costs and transit times, IMEC is expected to unlock significant economic potential, deepen regional connectivity, and ultimately underpin a more secure and resilient supply-chain alliance [8].

Participating actors are driven by distinct yet converging economic and security priorities: for Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, IMEC serves as a central vehicle for economic diversification and their ambition to evolve into global logistics hubs, while also facilitating expanded energy exports to Europe and the development of integrated value chains encompassing food, hydrocarbons, and green energy; for the European Union, the corridor aligns with its

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<sup>1</sup> Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Greece on the eve of the G20 Summit. After this trip, India was invited to establish partnerships with Greece, Cyprus and Israel, aiming to build closer energy ties.

dual objectives of “de-risking” energy supplies—particularly by reducing dependence on Russia—and diversifying supply chains under a “China + 1” strategy, with the aim of cultivating India and the Middle East as reliable markets and partners [7] for India, IMEC directly supports core goals of export expansion and job creation, with estimates suggesting that the corridor could reduce freight times to Europe by around 40 percent, thereby enhancing the global competitiveness of Indian goods and reinforcing India’s role as an economic bridge between West Asia and Europe. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasized, IMEC is envisioned as a “beacon of cooperation, innovation, and shared progress,” reflecting participating states’ commitment to stimulating growth and safeguarding industrial security through deeper economic integration.

### **The Realist Dilemma of IMEC**

Since its inception, IMEC has generated considerable anticipation. The initial commitment to “formulate an action plan within 60 days,” as stipulated in the memorandum of understanding, underscored the participants’ eagerness to demonstrate tangible political achievements. Yet, the initiative’s progress quickly encountered multiple structural constraints, resulting in its transition from a “landmark commitment” to a state of “de facto suspension” in less than a year. These constraints are neither isolated nor independent; rather, they are interrelated and layered, collectively constituting a formidable barrier that impedes the translation of strategic conception into practical implementation.

The progress of IMEC is fundamentally constrained by the complex and dynamically evolving geopolitical environment of the Middle East. Cross-border infrastructure initiatives in this region have historically faced persistent challenges arising from limited political trust and elevated security risks. IMEC, spanning a broader geographic area, further contends with entrenched historical grievances, ethno-religious conflicts, and territorial disputes, which collectively constitute fundamental obstacles to its implementation.

A primary challenge lies in the political tensions among key participants and the fragility of normalization processes. The continuity of Arab–Israeli reconciliation, particularly the historic rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, constitutes a core political prerequisite for IMEC’s success. Yet this foundation remains extremely fragile. Negotiations over Saudi–Israeli normalization, regarded as the project’s geopolitical “trophy,” have progressed slowly, with Saudi Arabia conditioning its engagement on a just settlement of the Palestinian issue. The outbreak of large-scale conflict between Palestine and Israel in October 2023

effectively disrupted this delicate process. The conflict not only halted the normalization talks but also triggered widespread public opposition and intensified political pressures across the Arab world, rendering open multilateral economic cooperation with Israel politically unfeasible in the near term. Consequently, the corridor's underlying logic of "promoting peace through economic integration" has been severely undermined, and its narrative as a "corridor of peace and prosperity" has effectively collapsed.

Secondly, IMEC faces significant resistance from key regional actors. Iran perceives the corridor as a U.S.-driven geopolitical instrument and potentially threatens its strategic position by leveraging control over the Strait of Hormuz. Egypt, meanwhile, adopts a cautious or even oppositional stance, concerned that the project could divert Suez Canal revenues, thereby undermining its national finances and regional influence [13]. Turkey's response is particularly complex. President Erdoğan has publicly opposed a trade corridor that bypasses Turkish territory while simultaneously promoting alternative initiatives. In practice, Turkey's underlying objective is to gain inclusion in IMEC to secure benefits and avoid strategic marginalization. This "opposition to gain inclusion" approach has compounded the complexity and cost of project coordination [12]. Collectively, Iran's confrontation, Egypt's conflicting interests, and Turkey's competitive maneuvering constitute an external pressure network that poses substantial challenges to the corridor's implementation.

The sustainability of IMEC, as a cross-border infrastructure initiative heavily reliant on the strategic will of the leading state, fundamentally depends on the continuous and stable political commitment of the United States. However, cyclical shifts in U.S. domestic politics, most notably the ascent of the "Trump 2.0 Administration" after 2025, have precipitated a significant reorientation of U.S. foreign policy, undermining the political foundation on which IMEC rests and resulting in a prolonged operational standstill. This case underscores that, within geoeconomic competition, the volatility of domestic politics in the dominant state constitutes a core risk for transnational strategic initiatives.

The Trump administration's adherence to the "America First" doctrine was reflected in a diplomatic approach characterized by transactionalism and bilateralism, which runs counter to the multilateralism, long-term investment, and strategic patience required for the successful implementation of IMEC. Research indicates that the administration's diplomatic priorities shifted from constructing a long-term strategic framework aimed at counterbalancing China to pursuing immediate economic gains through bilateral arrangements. Despite early verbal endorsements,

the U.S. government did not allocate substantial diplomatic or financial resources to advance IMEC, and its commitment was effectively withdrawn. This erosion of the leading state's political will directly contributed to IMEC's rapid decline from a highly anticipated "flagship project" to a largely symbolic "paper initiative."

IMEC exhibits profound inherent divisions in its geostrategic objectives. Divergent policy orientations and participation motives among key actors regarding China have hindered the formation of a unified strategic consensus, thereby impeding coordinated action. The United States and India explicitly view IMEC as a strategic instrument to constrain China's influence and advance geopolitical competition, aiming to establish an exclusive economic and security alliance. By contrast, although the European Union regards China as a "systemic rival," it simultaneously emphasizes China's role as a partner, openly rejecting outright decoupling or confrontation and advocating a nuanced approach that balances competition with cooperation [5]. This position constrains the EU from fully endorsing a purely confrontational framework. Meanwhile, core Middle Eastern participants, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, pursue highly pragmatic objectives focused primarily on economic diversification and the development of regional hub infrastructure. These states have explicitly resisted framing IMEC as a "substitute" for China's Belt and Road Initiative, instead emphasizing complementarity and cautioning that a confrontational posture could undermine the corridor's potential [4]. This "three-tiered differentiation" of strategic intentions, which encompasses containment, competitive coexistence, and complementarity, complicates coordination on project priorities, resource allocation, and public narratives, thereby undermining the foundation of IMEC as a cohesive strategic initiative and constituting an intrinsic constraint on its advancement.

The vision of IMEC faces not only external geopolitical challenges but also fundamental limitations in its economic logic, financing mechanisms, and implementation capacity. First, the project exhibits inherent economic feasibility constraints. Its complex multimodal transport model, combining maritime and overland routes, is capital-intensive, while the volume of India–Europe trade on which the corridor relies remains limited, undermining the underlying business case. Project financing is also heavily dependent on unstable private capital and politically contingent public funds from the United States, rendering it difficult to secure under conditions of heightened geopolitical risk.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the deliberate exclusion of

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<sup>2</sup> The US, as the main source of funds, is particularly crucial. It once proposed that this project was part of the US \$600 billion "Global Infrastructure and Investment Partnership" initiative (PGII), but the specific implementation of the funds still faces numerous difficulties.

China, which possesses extensive infrastructure experience and technological capabilities in the relevant regions that could have facilitated implementation, further increases construction costs and operational challenges, thereby reducing the corridor's overall competitiveness. As a result, IMEC lacks a robust foundation in both economic returns and feasible implementation pathways and cannot be sustained through tenuous political commitment alone.

### **Assessing the Prospects of IMEC**

From a broader global economic perspective, the large-scale cross-regional infrastructure cooperation envisaged by IMEC is not inherently devoid of practical rationale. Against the backdrop of the waning momentum of globalization and sluggish global economic growth, India, Middle Eastern states, and European countries are promoting the development of railways, ports, and shipping channels. Objectively, these initiatives help to address long-standing gaps in infrastructure investment and generate positive spillover effects at both regional and global levels. Existing research indicates that improvements in infrastructure can substantially reduce the costs of cross-regional movement of goods and personnel, enhance supply-chain efficiency, and thereby produce broad economic benefits. At this level, the connectivity blueprint outlined by IMEC aligns with the universal imperatives of sustainable global economic development and, to some extent, responds to the practical priorities of Middle Eastern countries seeking economic diversification and European states aiming to secure resilient and reliable transport and supply channels. However, the evaluation of IMEC's prospects should not be limited to its potential economic benefits. Unlike many development-oriented infrastructure initiatives, IMEC is deeply embedded in the structures of contemporary geoeconomic competition among major powers, and its strategic character outweighs its purely developmental function. The project exhibits pronounced exclusivity in its design concept, participant selection, and narrative construction. A central objective is to establish a competitive alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative by creating a "non-China-led" cross-regional connectivity network, thereby partially constraining China's influence in Asia-Eurasia interconnection patterns. This strategic, offset-oriented design inevitably places IMEC beyond the scope of conventional infrastructure cooperation, amplifying the political and security risks associated with its implementation.

For this reason, the short-term suspension of IMEC does not imply that the initiative itself has lost strategic significance; rather, it reflects the inherent tension between its highly politicized character and the complex geopolitical environment. In assessing its medium- and long-term trajectory, it is important to distinguish

between the “symbolic” and “functional” dimensions of the project. On one hand, given persistent political uncertainties within the United States and the unlikelihood of rapid stabilization in the Middle East, a comprehensive plan promoted under the IMEC banner, carrying strong strategic symbolism, remains difficult to advance. On the other hand, certain functional objectives—such as enhancing port connectivity and fostering cooperation in energy and digital infrastructure—may still be pursued or reconfigured within a more understated, decentralized framework. Such an approach of “de-identification” and “modularization” may better align with the practical logic of cross-regional cooperation projects under the prevailing international conditions.

Based on the strategic preferences of the United States and its Allies, even if IMEC were to be revived in some form in the future, it is likely to represent an adaptation of the original plan rather than a straightforward reinstatement. Compared with highly centralized initiatives with strong political symbolism, a project-based, issue-specific, and phased approach not only mitigates political risks but also facilitates the formation of a minimal consensus among multiple stakeholders. This shift does not signal a weakening of geoeconomic competition; rather, it reflects a transformation in its manifestation: competition is no longer expressed through grand, centralized narratives, but is dispersed and embedded within specific channels, regulatory frameworks, and technical standards.

For China, the potential revival of IMEC and its developmental trajectory warrant close attention. On one hand, the initiative objectively advances infrastructure development and regional connectivity, generating economic spillovers that are not entirely negative, from which China could indirectly benefit through improvements in global infrastructure. On the other hand, IMEC’s explicitly competitive orientation and exclusive design mean that, once implemented in a relatively complete form, it could adversely affect the external environment of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and potentially diminish China’s institutional and structural influence in certain regions. Accordingly, in assessing IMEC’s prospects, China must avoid reducing the initiative to a short-term setback and neglecting its long-term implications; rather, it should consider the project’s significance for the evolution of Eurasian connectivity within a broader international context.

Overall, the future of IMEC should not be framed simply in terms of “success” or “failure”; rather, it is likely to evolve as a dynamic process oscillating between dormancy, transformation, and partial revival. Its trajectory depends not only on shifts in the international political and regional security environment but also on the enduring logic of geoeconomic competition among major powers. In this

regard, continuous observation of IMEC provides valuable insights not only into the initiative's own developmental path but also into the structural constraints that contemporary cross-regional infrastructure cooperation encounters within the broader context of strategic competition.

### **Conclusion**

The rapid suspension of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) initiative underscores the structural challenges faced by cross-regional infrastructure projects in highly politicized contexts. This case illustrates that when an economic cooperation plan is overly enmeshed in narratives of geostrategic confrontation, its underlying economic rationale and feasibility can be easily subordinated to fragile political premises, rendering the initiative extremely sensitive to shifts in domestic political cycles and regional security conditions.

The deeper paradox of the IMEC concept lies in the fact that, faced with substantial global infrastructure demand, some U.S.-led countries have opted for a strategy of “competitive substitution” rather than “cooperative complementarity,” prioritizing geopolitical and normative considerations over economic efficiency. This approach not only fails to address practical development challenges but also heightens the risk of global economic fragmentation. The setbacks experienced by IMEC further underscore the fundamental limitations of a “small courtyard, high wall” strategy that seeks primarily to contain rivals, revealing its inadequacy in resolving broader development needs.

Looking ahead, global demand for connectivity and supply chain resilience remains robust, yet the experience of IMEC offers a critical lesson for all participants: sustainable cooperation must be grounded in pragmatic economic logic and built on open, inclusive partnerships. For China, this dynamic underscores that competition in the infrastructure domain has extended to the realms of rules and narratives. China's strategic response lies in steadfastly deepening its own economic development and high-level engagement with the global economy, while simultaneously showcasing the inclusiveness and vitality of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative through more effective, practice-oriented cooperation in addressing shared challenges.

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**Մտահոգումից փակուղի. Հնդկաստան–Միջին Արևելք–Եվրոպա  
տնտեսական միջանցքի գնահատում**

Չին Լիանգ

**Հիմնաբառեր** . Հնդկաստան - Միջին Արևելք - Եվրոպա տնտեսական միջանցք (IMEC), աշխարհատնտեսություն, ռազմավարական մրցակցություն, միջազգային ենթակառուցվածք, կառուցվածքային սահմանափակումներ

**Ամփոփում**

Հնդկաստան–Միջին Արևելք–Եվրոպա տնտեսական միջանցքը (IMEC) միջտարածաշրջանային կապակցվածության նախաձեռնություն է, որը ներկայացվել է 2023 թվականին Միացյալ Նահանգների կողմից՝ Հնդկաստանի, Եվրոպական միության և Մերձավոր Արևելքի մի շարք գործընկերների հետ համագործակցությամբ: Այն ձևակերպվել է որպես այլընտրանքային ենթակառուցվածքային ցանց՝ նախատեսված Չինաստանի «Գոտի և ճանապարհ» նախաձեռնությանը հակադրելու, Մերձավոր Արևելքում աշխարհաքաղաքական վերադասավորումը խթանելու և մեծ տերությունների մրցակցության սաստկացման պայմաններում ԱՄՆ-ի առաջնորդությունը ամրապնդելու համար: Սակայն նախաձեռնության ազդարարումից կարճ ժամանակ անց այն լճացման գնաց՝ բացահայտելով ռազմավարական հավակնությունների և գործնական իրագործման միջև էական խզումը: Այս հողվածի փաստարկն այն է, որ IMEC-ի դժվարությունները բխում են մի շարք կառուցվածքային սահմանափակումներից: Իսրայելա-պաղեստինյան հակամարտության սրացումը խաթարեց Սաուդյան Արաբիա-Իսրայել հարաբերությունների կարգավորման քաղաքական նախադրյալը, որի վրա նախաձեռնությունը անուղղակիորեն հիմնված էր, մինչդեռ ԱՄՆ-ի ներքաղաքական շրջափուլերի տատանումները խաթարեցին ռազմավարական հանձնառության ու ռեսուրսների հատկացման շարունակականությունը: Միևնույն ժամանակ, նախաձեռնության մասնակիցները տարբեր դիրքորոշումներ և տարբեր շահեր ունեն Չինաստանի հետ հարաբերություններում, իսկ նախագիծը բախվում է նաև տնտեսական

կենսունակության, ֆինանսավորման մեխանիզմների և իրագործման կարողությունների հետ կապված չլուծված խնդիրների: Ընդհանուր առմամբ, այս գործոնները վկայում են, որ IMEC-ը, ամենայն հավանականությամբ, կմնա պասիվ կամ սահմանափակ գործառնական փոփոխությունների կենթարկվի, այլ ոչ թե կապրի համապարփակ վերածնունդ՝ ընդգծելով խիստ քաղաքականացված միջազգային ենթակառուցվածքային նախաձեռնությունների խոցելիությունը ռազմավարական մրցակցության ժամանակաշրջանում:

**ԲԱՆԲԵՐ ԱՐԵՎԵԼԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԻՆՍՏԻՏՈՒՏԻ**  
**(պարբերականը մինչև 2021թ. կոչվում էր «ՄԵՐՉԱՎՈՐ ԵՎ ՄԻՋԻՆ**  
**ԱՐԵՎԵԼՔԻ ԵՐԿՐՆԵՐ ԵՎ ԺՈՂՈՎՈՒՐԴՆԵՐ») ՄԱՏԵՆԱՇԱՐ**  
**BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES (Until 2021 the**  
**periodical was named “The Countries and Peoples of the Near and Middle**  
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