

Western Azerbaijan and the Zangezur Corridor

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*History, Economy, Law, and
Regional Power Struggle*

Edited by

Vefa Kurban

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PREFACE

The post-Cold War transformation of global balances led to profound changes in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. These changes unfolded within a complex web of historical and political processes, deeply influencing the region. The recent Karabakh Victory has been one of the most significant turning points in this geopolitical transformation. Azerbaijan's decisive triumph has reshaped the balance of power in the South Caucasus, a strategic hub in Eurasia, and paved the way for a new geopolitical order that will shape the region's future.

The 44-day Patriotic War, which took place between September 27 and November 10, 2020, resulted in Azerbaijan reclaiming its territories that had been unlawfully occupied for nearly 30 years, delivering a decisive resolution on the battlefield to a conflict that had remained unresolved through diplomacy. With the signing of the ceasefire agreement on November 10, 2020, the Second Karabakh War officially came to an end, opening a new era in Azerbaijan-Armenia relations and regional power dynamics. These developments have marked a critical turning point in the post-Cold War era, playing a key role in establishing stability in the South Caucasus, ending regional conflicts, and creating new areas for cooperation.

In this context, the new opportunities and strategic initiatives arising from Azerbaijan's restoration of its territorial integrity play a crucial role in the region's peace and economic cooperation. As the geopolitical balance in the South Caucasus becomes more stable compared to the past, the region's strategic significance continues to grow, with regional integration projects coming to the forefront. The most prominent of these projects is the Zangezur Corridor.

In light of historical facts, it is clear that Zangezur has long been a Turkish homeland. Following the Russian Empire's occupation of the Caucasus and its integration of the region into its sphere of influence, the transfer of the Zangezur area to Armenia severed Azerbaijan's land connection and erased its direct terrestrial contact with Türkiye. This situation undermined Azerbaijan's sovereignty and resulted in substantial setbacks for Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations and the geopolitical integrity of the Turkic World.

In the context of the new geopolitical conditions following the 2020 Karabakh Victory, the issue of Zangezur, which lies among Azerbaijan's

historical territories, has resurfaced and become a strategic necessity for regional cooperation. Aimed at transforming the South Caucasus into a region of cooperation, prosperity, and stability, the Zangezur Corridor is a strategic transportation project that will provide a seamless transport link between Azerbaijan's mainland and Nakhchivan.

The Zangezur project is not merely about establishing a direct transportation link between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. The Zangezur Corridor holds significant importance for regional and global stability, economic development, and integration. It will strengthen trade routes between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East while accelerating the economic and strategic unification of the Turkic World.

In this context, this book offers an in-depth analysis of the Zangezur Corridor and the realities of Western Azerbaijan, explored by experts through the lenses of history, international relations, international law, economy, and strategy. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the issue's historical background, international legal framework, economic dynamics, and strategic significance. Thus, it serves as a valuable resource for academics and readers interested in regional politics.

Prof. Dr. Vefa KURBAN
Izmir/05/02/2025

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I am especially grateful to Prof. Dr. Cavid Abdullahzade from Ankara University School of Law; Assoc. Prof. Dr. Oğuzhan Ergün, a lecturer at the National Defence University; Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hamit Özman, a faculty member at the Institute of Turkic World Studies at Ege University; attorney Burçin Oğuz; my former graduate student Nur Çümen Aşçı, currently a lecturer at Türkoğlu Vocational School of Kahramanmaraş İstiklal University; and another former graduate student of mine, Berrin Sarı, who is now taking confident steps toward an academic career. I sincerely thank each of them for their valuable contributions.

I am also deeply thankful to my beloved husband, Dr. Asif Kurban, whose unwavering support I have always felt; to His Excellency Hazar Ibrahim, Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Washington; and to the editors and proofreaders at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their essential contributions to the publication of this book.

CHAPTER I

RETURN TO SOURCE

ASSOC. PROF. DR. OĞUZHAN ERGÜN*

Keystone¹

Beginning in the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire (Devlet-i Âli) oriented itself increasingly toward the West and evolved into a Balkan state. Early in World War I, it became clear that remaining neutral would not spare the empire from suffering. At the same time, it was forced to confront the painful reality of Anatolia, which had been neglected for centuries. The stagnation and decline of the Ottoman Empire became unmistakable in the 17th century. However, despite recognizing this, the state leadership could not alter the course of events during the final phase of the gunpowder empires (See Figure 3).

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¹is the **voussoir** at the top of an arch; in vaulting, it occurs at the intersection of the ribs of a rib vault. It is important structurally since it marks the apex of the vault. Archived from Glossary of Medieval Art and Architecture: [keystone.sites.pitt.edu](https://www.keystone.sites.pitt.edu) on February 21, 2024. Accessed January 10, 2025.

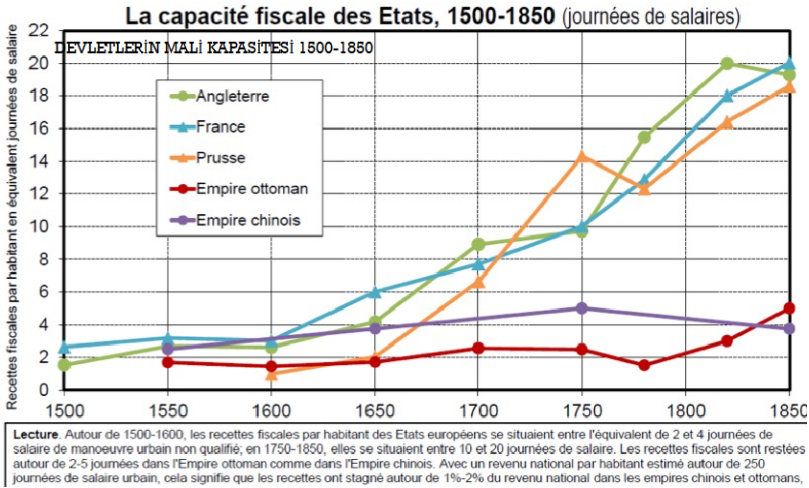


Figure 1. States' Fiscal Capacity: From 1500 to 1600, per capita tax revenues in European states were equivalent to the wages earned by an unskilled urban worker over two to four days. By 1750–1850, this figure had risen to the equivalent of ten to twenty days' wages. In contrast, as in China, tax revenues in the Ottoman Empire remained at around two to five days' worth of wages. While per capita national income is estimated to have been roughly equivalent to 250 days of urban wages, in both China and the Ottoman Empire, tax revenues remained fixed at only about 1 to 2% of national income.²

The survival of the state and its continued existence in the future required a transformation into a new order and a new state structure. Faced with the threat of extinction, the Ottoman Empire, or the “Asian Muslim Turkish State” as Halil Pasha put it, embraced Turkist and Turanist ideas as a path to salvation, turning its attention toward the Caucasus, Iran, and Turkestan³. In their view, the solution to the existential crisis of the state lay in mobilizing the overwhelmingly Turkish and Muslim populations in these

² Thomas Piketty, *Capital et idéologie*, Annexe technique du livre, Editions du seuil - Septembre 2019, <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/ideologie>, accessed December 25, 2024.

³ Turkestan or Western Turkestan: Covering an area of 600,000 km², Western Turkestan consists of five provinces: Semirechensk (Yedisu), Syr Darya, Samarkand, Fergana, and Mavera-i Bahr-i Hazar. It borders the Caspian Sea to the west, and to the south, it is adjacent to Iran, Afghanistan, India, and China.

regions. Unlike the Ottoman experience, minorities living within the envisioned Turan state would not be able to pursue separatist agendas.⁴

The region in question, Turkestan, etymologically means “the land of the Turks.” According to Barthold, the area inhabited by Turks extends from Central Asia to the Amu Darya (Oxus) River, historically serving as the boundary between the Turks and the Sassanids. Turkestan is not only a part of Central Asia but also extends beyond it. Much of Kazakhstan, for example, lies outside the geographical boundaries of Central Asia, as does Tajikistan, yet both are considered part of Turkestan. The region is bordered by the Hindu Kush and Pamir mountain ranges in the south and the Tien Shan (Heavenly Mountains) in the east. Its northern boundaries are less clearly defined, merging gradually into the Siberian steppes and encompassing a vast area dotted with numerous lakes (see Figure 1).

Türkiye’s detachment from Turkestan and its geopolitical isolation result from deliberate historical efforts. The need for Anatolia to maintain physical connectivity with Turkestan is not a recent phenomenon. At the heart of these efforts lies the occupation of lands that Turks once inhabited and now forming present-day Armenia through the resettlement of Armenian populations encouraged during the Stalin era. This isolation has been sustained with the support of Western powers. Throughout history, Western geopolitical strategy perceived Turkish integration into the Middle East and Central Asia as a security threat, aiming to keep Türkiye isolated from active regional politics. Western reluctance toward Türkiye’s strategic initiatives in Iraq and Syria today reflects the continuation of this long-standing geopolitical stance. Armenia’s prospective integration into the European Union appears to be motivated not by economic or pragmatic factors but by a wider strategy of geopolitical encirclement.⁵ Western policymakers appear not to have drawn lessons from the case of Ukraine.

Following the expansionist activities of the Russians in Ottoman and Iranian territories, Armenians, whose numbers steadily increased with those brought from the Ottoman and Iranian regions, were settled on the lands of

⁴ Zengin, Ersoy. (2024). *The Ideal of Turan in the Memory of Ottoman Soldiers Fighting on the Caucasian Front (1914–1918)*. Atatürk University Publications, Turcology Research, 79, 70-82.

⁵ EU News, “EU and Armenia Launch Visa Liberalisation Dialogue”, September 6, 2024,

<https://tr.euronews.com/2024/09/06/ab-ile-ermenistan-arasinda-vize-serbestisigorusmeleri-resmen-basliyor>, accessed April 1, 2025; Oksijen Newspaper, “Armenia approves EU accession bill”, March 26, 2025,

<https://gazeteoksijen.com/dunya/ermenistan-ab-tasarisini-kabul-etti-238234>, accessed March 27, 2025.

the Erivan and Nakhchivan Khanates (particularly after the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828)⁶ in line with the orders of Tsar Nicholas I.

It is evident that Russia's foreign policy has been shaped in line with the goal of "expansion in all directions" since the 16th century. Between 1552 and 1917, Russia expanded at an average rate of approximately 100,000 square kilometers per year, surpassing the total land area of many European countries. From a historical perspective, Russia is a revisionist and aggressive state. "When Russia is strong, it acts with the tyrannical resolve of a superior power. In times of weakness, it goes into hibernation, concealing its fragility."⁷ When Russia's opportunities for expansion and influence in the West were limited, it shifted its focus eastward. This shift marked a period of relief for European countries. The prevailing perception was that Turkestan was naturally within the sphere of Russian dominance, making various geographical initiatives by Russia seem justified. In this way, Russia could be kept away from the West. Today, efforts to limit Russia's influence do not include its behavior in Central Asia and Turkic regions, and its strategic shift eastward and efforts for the containment of Chinese influence are even encouraged. Moreover, Russia's mission of controlling the Turkic population today has been complemented by the objective of keeping China away from Central Asian resources.

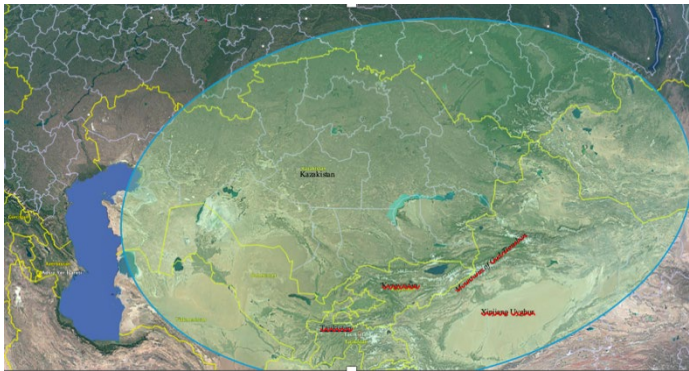


Figure 2. Turkestan, Source: Google Earth

⁶ It is a peace treaty signed between the Russian Empire and the Qajar Dynasty on February 10, 1828.

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, Trans. S. Gül. Istanbul: Boyner, (2016): 65.

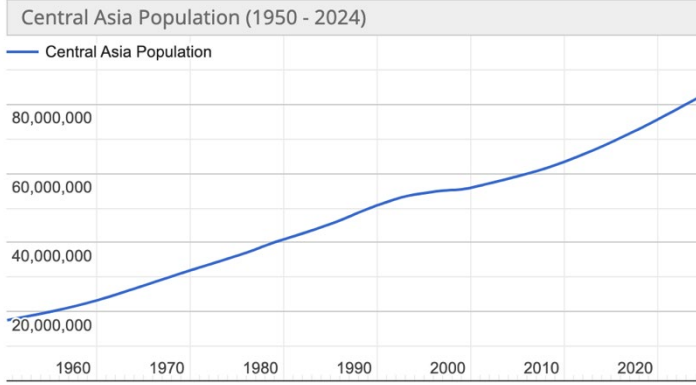


Figure 3. Increase in population,
<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/central-asia-population/>

Orta Asya'daki ülkeler

Ülke	Nüfus (2024)
<u>Özbekistan</u>	36.361.859
<u>Kazakistan</u>	20.592.571
<u>Tacikistan</u>	10.590.927
<u>Türkmenistan</u>	7.494.498
<u>Kırgızistan</u>	7.186.009

Figure 4. Current population,
<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/central-asia-population/>

Azerbaijan's Tovuz district (Figure 4) serves as a vital “lifeline” connecting Anatolia to its ancestral homeland and core resources from the west, with access to this area passing through foreign territories (Georgia). In addition to the Tovuz region, the Zangezur Corridor, which was one of the discussion topics during peace talks after the Second Karabakh War and is an ancient Azerbaijani territory, has emerged as a potential route for physical connection. Figure 5 shows details about the Zangezur.

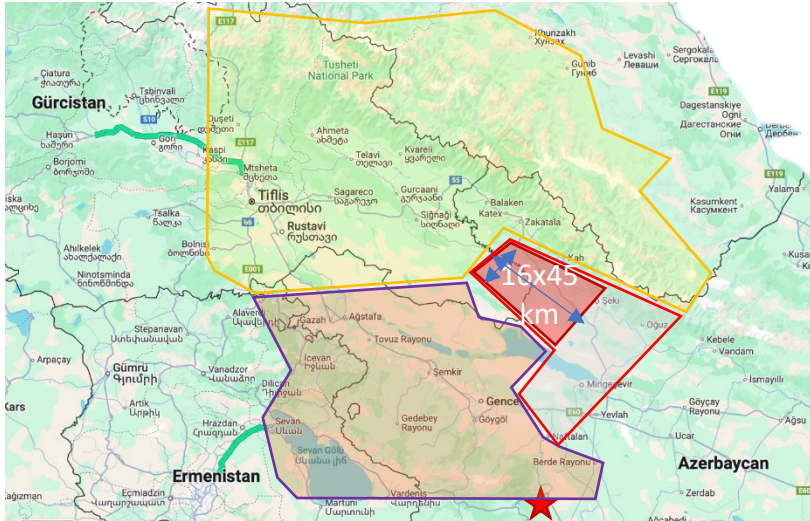


Figure 5. Exit from the Tovuz district, Source: Google Earth

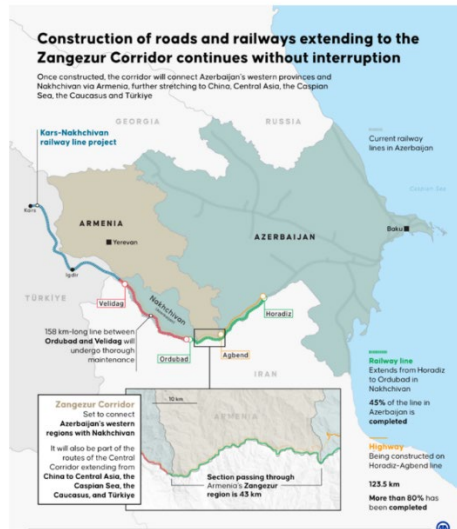


Figure 6. The Zangezur Region, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/azerbaijan-accelerates-zangezur-corridor-construction-opening-vital-transport-routes/3104421YGHY8Y598***0ÜÜĞ-O

Peter the Great's Strategic Genius and the Entrance to Zangezur

When considering the South Caucasus, including Zangezur, it serves not only as a potential link between Anatolia and Central Asia, but also as a crucial route connecting Russia and Armenia to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Throughout history, this region witnessed several wars between Russia and Iran, and today, it remains one of Russia's vital lifelines. If Russia were deprived of a physical connection to Iran and the Persian Gulf, it would be trapped as a landlocked state, pushing it further north. That is the reason why Armenians were relocated to "Northern Azerbaijan" (present-day Armenia) from Iranian and Ottoman territories after the occupation of the Erivan Khanate by Russian forces in the early 18th century, as per the will of Tsar Peter the Great.^{8,9} The settlement of the Armenian population in the lands of the Erivan and Nakhchivan Khanates by Tsar Nicholas I under the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) was part of Russia's expansion and encirclement strategy. In the long run, this also facilitated a physical connection to Iran and the Persian Gulf.

Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the ties with the Turkic world were largely severed. The occupation of lands populated by Turks through Armenian settlers during Stalin's era and the subsequent reluctance of the Republic of Türkiye to intervene are key reasons for this break.

The Corridor Project

After the liberation of Azerbaijan's occupied territories, Türkiye signaled its intent to take steps toward normalizing relations with Armenia. This significant move came after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Baku on December 10, 2020, and the signing of the Trilateral Declaration. During his visit, Erdoğan suggested the creation of a "Six-Nation Cooperation Platform" or a "Regional Cooperation Platform for Lasting Peace and Stability in the South Caucasus". He emphasized the

⁸ İrade Memmedova, "The population of the Iravan Khanate (Information provided by travelers, social, ethnic, religious composition and population size, employment fields, population policy of khans, resettlement of Armenians)", *Academic Journal of History and Idea*, Volume: IV, Number: XI, May / MMXVII, АКАК, т. II, в типографии Главного Управления наместника Кавказского, Тифлис, 1868, с. 631.

⁹ Yaqub Mahmudov, "Real tarih və "Böyük Ermenistan" uydurması", Turhan NPB, Baku (2014): 8.

potential involvement of Armenia in this process along with Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, and Georgia, presenting a crucial opportunity for the normalization of relations.¹⁰ The Cooperation Platform convened at a meeting in Moscow on December 10, 2021. As announced by Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on December 9, the decision was made for the meeting to be participated in by Deputy Foreign Ministers from Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, and Iran. However, the long-term viability of such a partnership is questionable, given the competing geopolitical interests of these nations.

The Zangezur Corridor is a strategic initiative that could end Türkiye's geopolitical isolation from Turkistan. First and foremost, this corridor is an area of historically Azerbaijani land that was separated from Azerbaijan through occupation and currently disrupts the connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. The corridor serves as a vital lifeline, linking Anatolia to Turkistan. Discussed during peace talks following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Zangezur Corridor aims to establish a direct connection between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The opening of this corridor would strengthen Türkiye's ties with Central Asia and the Turkic world. However, as the pain of war begins to fade, Armenia continues to maintain its previous stance. Indeed, Pashinyan stated that they officially presented a project called the "Crossroads of Peace" to Baku, aimed at reopening transportation links in the region, and that they have no other projects on their agenda. This statement has strained the relations between the two states.¹¹

Reflecting on the past, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 concluded with a ceasefire brokered by Russia. Article 9 of the ceasefire agreement aimed at reopening transportation links between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. The article included provisions to facilitate this connection:

¹⁰ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Azerbaycan Cumhurbaşkanı Aliyev ile ortak basın toplantısı düzenledi", Republic of Türkiye, Presidential Office, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/123142/-44-gunluksavas-sonrasinda-ortaya-cikan-netice-azerbaycan-daki-kardesleri-gibi-turkiye-deki-kardeslerini-desevindirmistir>, accessed December 10, 2025.

¹¹ BBC Türkçe; Zangezur Koridoru: Azerbaycan ile Ermenistan arasında tartışma yaratan proje hakkında neler biliniyor? <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cd0e0p2zj7do>, accessed January 9, 2025.

“All economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo in both directions.”

The agreement also included the provision, “Subject to agreement between the Parties, the construction of new transport communications to link the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic with the western regions of Azerbaijan will be ensured.” Azerbaijan argues that this clause signifies an agreement between the two states on the Zangezur Corridor. However, Armenia maintains a more obstructive stance, stating that while it supports the opening of transport routes, the term “Zangezur” is not mentioned in the clause, nor is there any reference to a corridor project in the form demanded by Baku.¹²



Figure 7. Projects

In the context of the aforementioned provision of the agreement, Armenian Foreign Minister Mirzoyan responded to a journalist’s question regarding the possible transfer of security responsibilities to private companies on the route that would connect Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through the Syunik region (Zangezur), with the following statement:¹³

¹² BBC Türkçe, Zangezur Koridoru: Azerbaycan ile Ermenistan arasında tartışma yaratan proje hakkında neler biliniyor?

<https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cd0e0p2zj7do>

¹³ Oksijen Newspaper, “Statement from Armenia on the Zangezur Corridor: Control by third powers is unlikely”, September 9, 2024,

“There is no discussion regarding the establishment of a corridor or the transfer of its control to any party. We have stated that the presence of third parties or the control by third parties is out of the question and unacceptable for Armenia. Our position on this matter has not changed.”

Through its proposed “Crossroads of Peace” initiative, Armenia suggests alternative routes that remain under its own sovereignty and control. Iran has also joined the competition over new transport corridors by proposing what it calls the Aras Corridor.¹⁴

Iran’s Geopolitical Myopia or Theopolitical Stagnation

Since its inception, the Iranian clerical regime has regarded the secular and democratic Republic of Türkiye, which is seen as a potential model for the Iranian people, as a threat. For this reason, one of Iran’s long-standing national objectives has been to maintain control over Türkiye’s connections with Central Asia and the Turkic republics. This also implies a desire to exert influence over the flow of oil and natural gas in the region.

In a statement regarding the Zangezur Corridor, the then-Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, remarked, “Some corridors forming around Iran not only threaten our national interests but also our national security. It is our duty to stand against such initiatives.” Such an uncontrolled corridor would jeopardize Iran’s physical connections with Armenia and Russia, with whom it maintains close relations.

In the prevailing geopolitical context, the clerical regime has consistently demonstrated that it possesses no value system or greater purpose beyond its own survival. Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli, one of the founders of Hezbollah in Lebanon and recognized as a religious scholar, has stated that “Iran stands alongside every attack directed at the Islamic world.” Tufayli goes even further, asserting, “Today, Iran acts in unison with the occupying and colonial forces that shed blood in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Afghanistan, all for the same mission. Both historical facts and the current situation make it clear that Iran is the sword

<https://gazeteoksijen.com/dunya/ermenistandan-zengezur-koridoru-aciklamasi-ucuncu-gucler-tarafindan-kontrolun-saglanmasi-ihimal-disi-222444>, accessed February 10, 2025.

¹⁴ Kenan Aslanlı, “Zengezur Koridoru mu Aras Koridoru mu?”, Center for Iranian Studies (IRAM), July 7, 2023, <https://iramcenter.org/zengezur-koridoru-mu-aras-koridoru-mu-2395>, accessed April 20, 2025.

of the West against Islam.”¹⁵ Ultimately, the founder of the current regime, Imam Khomeini, developed much of his political and ideological outlook during his years in France.

Clearly outlining Iran’s policy toward Türkiye, Tufayli stated, “Why does Iran not wage war against the UAE, which is Israel’s second-largest ally after the United States? Yet we know that Iran has robust relations with the UAE. They are lying. Their only fear is Türkiye’s increasing influence in the region.”¹⁶

Concerning Iran’s policy toward Armenia, Sheikh Tufayli, recalling that he was in Iran during the 1990s when Armenia occupied the Nagorno-Karabakh region, stated: “At that time, the Iranian press and politicians supported Armenia’s occupation. Just yesterday, the Armenian Prime Minister said, ‘Without Iran’s support, the Armenian army would have been defeated at the beginning of the 1990s.’ In fact, Iran provided military and logistical support to Armenia for the occupation of Azerbaijani territories.”¹⁷

The most important connection for Iran is the physical link with Russia through Armenian territory. The ties with Russia and China, which form the two main pillars of the clerical regime, are of indispensable importance and priority for the regime’s survival.

China’s Impact on the Region

Despite the production of various adversities, China continues to update the projects it initiated under the slogan “London to Beijing in 48 Hours”. The **Zangezur Corridor**¹⁸ is also poised to be a part of the Middle Corridor,

¹⁵ Haksöz Haber, “Sheik Tufayli: Iran stands alongside every attack directed at the Islamic world”, March 30, 2022, <https://www.haksozhaber.net/seyh-tufeyli-iran-islam-dunyasina-yonelen-her-saldirinin-yaninda-yer-aldi-152264h.htm>, accessed February 11, 2025.

¹⁶ Haksöz Haber, “Sheik Tufayli: Iran stands alongside every attack directed at the Islamic world”, March 30, 2022, <https://www.haksozhaber.net/seyh-tufeyli-iran-islam-dunyasina-yonelen-her-saldirinin-yaninda-yer-aldi-152264h.htm>, accessed February 11, 2025.

¹⁷ Anadolu Agency, “Lebanese Shia scholar Tufayli’s claim that ‘the youngest Iranian diplomat is giving instructions to Lebanese officials’”, October 25, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/lubnanli-sii-alim-tufeyliden-iranli-en-kucuk-diplomat-lubnanli-yetkililere-talimat-veriyor-iddiasi/2402237>, accessed February 1, 2025.

¹⁸ Ruslan Rehimov, “Azerbaijan accelerates Zangezur corridor construction, opening vital transport routes”, Anadolu Agency, January 9, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/azerbaijan-accelerates-zangezur-corridor-construction-opening-vital-transport-routes/3104421>, accessed April 1, 2025.

which stretches from China to Turkestan, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and ultimately to Türkiye. Such a mobilization capacity is likely to have military implications that cannot be overlooked.

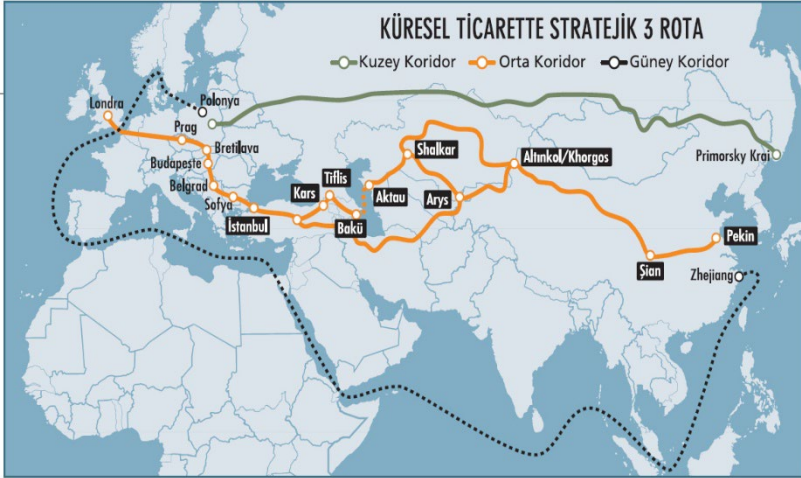


Figure 8. Middle Corridor, Source: Ekonomist, “The Middle Corridor opportunity in global trade”.

The Middle Corridor project aims to strengthen the connection between China and Europe and is estimated to have a trade volume potential of approximately \$600 billion annually. The Russia-Ukraine War and the security concerns related to the Suez Canal have made the route of the Middle Corridor more strategically attractive. With the contribution of the railway lines that became operational in 2017, the Middle Corridor has emerged as a significant trade route, supporting economic activity worth hundreds of billions of dollars annually. In this context, it is expected that the Middle Corridor will be preferred more in the near future compared to the Northern Corridor, which reaches Poland via Russia, and the Southern Ocean Route, which starts from China’s Zhejiang Port and extends to London through the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.¹⁹

When the Zangezur Corridor provides a direct land connection between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, it will positively impact economic and trade

¹⁹ Ekonomist, “Middle Corridor opportunity in global trade”, April 22, 2024, <https://www.ekonomist.com.tr/makale/kuresel-ticarete-orta-koridor-firsati-48882>, accessed May 1, 2025.

relations. The corridor, supported by energy pipelines, railway, and highway projects, has the potential to generate a significant trade volume in the region. The logistical opportunities offered by the Middle Corridor will contribute to the further increase in trade volume between Türkiye and the Central Asian Turkic Republics.

Conclusion

The Zangezur Corridor holds significant importance in many areas, from revitalizing historical ties to strategic and economic cooperation. As a vital link for both Türkiye and Azerbaijan, this corridor will contribute to strengthening the physical and cultural bonds with the Turkic world. The opening of the Zangezur Corridor will alter the geopolitical balance in the region and enhance Türkiye's strategic position.

This scenario presents itself as a geopolitical development that certain Western powers, Iran and Russia, are unlikely to consent to. Even if Armenia's dream of becoming an EU member and having its territory under EU protection does not come to fruition, it will not alter Armenia's position as a buffer state.

Iran has clearly demonstrated that it will not consent to geopolitical changes in the region. Russia's conditional support for a transportation corridor that is perceived to favor Türkiye yet remains under its control should be assessed within the current geopolitical context. China poses significant risks as a partner for Russia. Given Russia's historical alignment with Western powers like the US and the UK in major conflicts, it seems unlikely that Russia would allow space for both China and Türkiye in the region.

Ultimately, if the foundations upon which the "Keystone" will support its connecting bridge do not lie within Turkish sovereignty, it may not lead to the expected geopolitical outcomes.

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CHAPTER II

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN WEST AZERBAIJAN IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY AND ARMENIAN ATTEMPTS TO ERASE TURKIC HERITAGE IN THE REGION

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Introduction

Located in the South Caucasus, a region that has been a battleground for great powers throughout history due to its strategic significance, Azerbaijan emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War and gained its independence.

Azerbaijan is the only South Caucasus country with a coastline on the Caspian Sea. It borders Russia (Dagestan) to the north, Georgia to the northwest, Armenia to the west, and Iran to the south, while its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic shares a land border with Türkiye. Due to this geographical position, Azerbaijan is considered a strategic crossroads in both the Caucasus and the broader Eurasian region.

Azerbaijan has emerged as a rising power in the post-independence period due to its energy resources, geopolitical position, and economic advantages; however, it has also faced challenges that threaten its territorial integrity.

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Due to its strategic position at the crossroads of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijani lands have long been the focus of attention for major powers such as the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Russia, and have become a pretext for the conflicts between Russia and Iran. During the Tsarist Russian period, due to Russia's policies to expand in all directions, the Azerbaijani lands became a point of contention between Iran and Russia, and the region's demographic balance was deliberately altered. Armenians, who pursued the ideal of a "*Greater Armenia from the Caucasus to the Black Sea*", were actively resettled in West Azerbaijan to reshape the population structure¹. The major contemporary crises in international relations surrounding this issue emerged mainly as a result of the relocation of Armenians to West Azerbaijan by Russia.

In this context, one of the problems that remains relevant in the international arena is the West Azerbaijan and Zangezur issue. As is known, although the Soviet Union ignored the ethnic tensions caused by Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia, these tensions escalated in the final years

¹The concept of West Azerbaijan: The term West Azerbaijan has gained prominence in academic and political discourse, particularly in 1988 following the forced displacement of Azerbaijanis from the present-day territory of the Republic of Armenia, which is historically and ethnically an Azerbaijani homeland. Over time, this geographical term has evolved into an alternative designation for the area where the Republic of Armenia is located. The demographic structure of this region, the historical details of which will be examined in detail throughout this study, underwent systematic alterations beginning in the early 19th century, and that process accelerated notably after the signing of the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828. As a result of this treaty, Armenians were relocated from Iranian and Ottoman territories and resettled in the region, leading to a deliberate transformation of the ethnic composition of West Azerbaijan.

A historical analysis reveals four significant periods of mass displacement of Azerbaijani Turks from this region: 1905–1906, 1918–1920, 1948–1953, and 1988–1991. During these years, the Azerbaijani population was systematically expelled from its ancestral homeland, West Azerbaijan. This demographic transformation was not limited to forced migrations of the native people of the land but was also accompanied by the destruction of Azerbaijan's historical and cultural heritage in the region. This historical fact, which is clearly indicated in Armenian and Russian historical sources, acknowledges that Azerbaijani Turks lived in these lands for centuries and are one of the region's indigenous populations. However, due to the policies of ethnic engineering, Azerbaijanis were forcibly uprooted from their native lands, and the demographic structure of West Azerbaijan was altered in a way that is difficult to reverse. This study examines the historical trajectory of West Azerbaijan, the enduring presence of Azerbaijani Turks in the region, and the forced migrations they endured within an academic framework.

of the Cold War, eventually erupting into armed clashes and setting the stage for an international crisis.

Ethnic tensions swept under the rug during the Soviet Union era resurfaced in the South Caucasus in the final years of the Soviet Union. Armenia occupied the Karabakh region, which is recognized as a part of Azerbaijan by international organizations, and 7 rayons belonging to Azerbaijan, causing serious humanitarian tragedies in the process. The occupation covered approximately 20% of Azerbaijani lands, prompting diplomatic negotiations between the parties in 1994, which resulted in a ceasefire. However, these negotiations failed to produce a lasting solution over the next 30 years.

Although the United Nations Security Council resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884 reiterated that Karabakh and other regions occupied by Armenia belong to Azerbaijan, these resolutions could not be implemented. Moreover, the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) could not develop an effective solution for the region. Azerbaijan, however, largely resolved this issue, which could not be solved through diplomacy, with the 2020 Karabakh War. Following the 44-day conflict, Azerbaijan successfully liberated its occupied territories, ending nearly 30 years of Armenian occupation.

Today, the South Caucasus remains a key arena of competition due to its energy resources, strategic location, and security dynamics. While Russia seeks to maintain its influence in the region, other actors, including the United States, China, the European Union, Türkiye, and Iran, pursue active policies to assert their presence. In this context, Türkiye, with its historical and cultural ties to the region, has emerged as a significant actor, leveraging its geographical proximity and strategic interests to shape developments in the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, Russia continues to view the South Caucasus as part of its “*near abroad*” and a crucial tool for preserving its influence in the former Soviet sphere. The region is of vital importance to Russia in safeguarding its economic and political power.²

The South Caucasus, which is known as the “*Balkans of Eurasia*”, holds significant geopolitical and strategic importance. However, its value cannot be attributed solely to its underground wealth, natural resources, or

² Oğuzhan Ergün and Vefa Kurban, “Questions Regarding the Impact of Russian Strategic Culture On New Period Foreign Policies, Editors: Prof. Dr. Vefa Kurban, Dr. Çağdaş Duman, *Turkish-Russian Relations in the Context of Social Economic and Political Progress In The Post Cold War Era*, By Livre De Lyon (2021): 57-69.

geographical features. To fully grasp its strategic significance, it is necessary to evaluate various factors with a broader perspective.³

Geographically, since the South Caucasus is located at a critical junction along the ancient Silk Road, it has been a trade center throughout history. The region also functions as a gateway to Asia Minor and stands out as an essential crossroads in energy trade. Besides acting as a natural bridge between Europe and Asia, the region further holds geopolitical significance as a borderland connecting the Middle East and the Russian Federation.⁴

The Caucasus, which has been a migration route for various tribes throughout history, has also served as a point of intersection of cultures and civilizations. Today, the South Caucasus is strategically involved in energy projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and TANAP pipelines and international transportation projects. Additionally, ongoing regional crises remain one of the key factors that keep the South Caucasus at the center of global attention and further reinforce its geopolitical significance.

The Caspian Sea adds another layer of strategic significance to the region with its vast oil and natural gas reserves. The transportation of these energy resources to Europe via land and pipeline networks depends on transit routes passing through the South Caucasus. This fact has turned the South Caucasus into a focal point of competition and strategic rivalry, particularly for Western states with growing energy dependence.⁵

The South Caucasus is home to three states that gained independence in the 1990s: Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. Each state contributes to the region's geopolitical landscape with its unique characteristics. For instance, Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea coastline, abundant natural resources, and role as a strategic logistics hub for energy transportation are important factors for the region's dynamics. Additionally, Azerbaijan's strong ethnic and cultural ties with Türkiye enable Türkiye to engage swiftly in diplomatic and political processes in response to developments in the South Caucasus.

³ Toğrul İsmayıl and Murat Kağan Toprak, "The Difference Between Turkey and Russia; Strategic Partnership? Tactical Cooperation?", Editors: Prof. Dr. Vefa Kurban Dr. Çağdaş Duman, *Turkish-Russian Relations in the Context of Social Economic And Political Progress In The Post Cold War Era*, 2021 By Livre De Lyon, 39-57.

⁴ Okan Ancak, "Yeni Avrasyacılık Bağlamında Güney Kafkasya'da Türkiye Ve Rusya", *Journal of Ankara University School of Political Sciences*, 75(3), (2020): 1113 - 1144. Doi: 10.33630/ Ausbf.700806.

⁵ İsmayıl and Toprak, "The Difference Between Turkey and Russia; Strategic Partnership? Tactical Cooperation?", Editors: Prof. Dr. Vefa Kurban Dr. Çağdaş Duman, *Turkish-Russian Relations in the Context of Social Economic And Political Progress In The Post Cold War Era*, 2021 By Livre De Lyon, 39-57.

These factors collectively reinforce the geopolitical significance of the South Caucasus.⁶

Georgia is strategically important as the gateway of the Caucasus to the Black Sea. While it does not have as rich underground resources as Azerbaijan does, Georgia serves as a crucial transit corridor for transporting energy resources to the West, which gives Georgia the potential to exclude Russia from the regional energy dynamics. Due to its geopolitical position, Georgia is also strategically important to Russia. Moscow views Western influence as a threat to its security and regional impact, making Georgia a critical area for Russia.

Georgia's departure from Russia's sphere of influence could shift the geopolitical balance in the region, as the South Caucasus is the center of strategic competition between Russia, the West (the U.S. and the EU), and regional powers (Türkiye and Iran). A radical change in Georgia's foreign policy orientation could directly impact these dynamics.

Armenia, on the other hand, maintained close ties with Russia until the Second Karabakh War, ensuring Russia's continued influence in the region. Armenia's alliance enabled Russia to sustain its strategic presence in the South Caucasus and intervene when necessary. In this regard, Armenia served as a key ally for Russia, contributing to the regional strategic balance for Russia.⁷ However, in recent years, Armenia's foreign policy has shown a noticeable shift from its traditional alignment with Russia towards closer ties with the West. Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia's failure to meet Armenia's security expectations and the lack of support from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)⁸ led to significant disappointment within the Armenian leadership, accelerating Yerevan's efforts to strengthen relations with Western powers.⁹ Steps such as

⁶ İsmayıl and Toprak, "The Difference Between Turkey and Russia; Strategic Partnership? Tactical Cooperation?", Editors: Prof. Dr. Vefa Kurban Dr. Çağdaş Duman, *Turkish-Russian Relations in the Context of Social Economic And Political Progress In The Post Cold War Era*, 2021 By Livre De Lyon, 39-57.

⁷ İsmayıl and Toprak, "The Difference Between Turkey and Russia; Strategic Partnership? Tactical Cooperation?", Editors: Prof. Dr. Vefa Kurban Dr. Çağdaş Duman, *Turkish-Russian Relations in the Context of Social Economic And Political Progress In The Post Cold War Era*, 2021 By Livre De Lyon, 39-57.

⁸ "Russia: Our Obligation to Defend Armenia Does Not Cover Nagorno-Karabakh", *Euronews*, published October 7, 2020 <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/10/07/rusya-ermenistan-savunma-yukumlugumuz-dagl-k-karabag-kapsam-yor>, accessed February 27, 2015.

⁹ "Pashinyan: Armenia Can No Longer Rely on Russia for Military and Defense Needs", *Euronews*, published February 2, 2024,

deepening economic and political cooperation with the European Union,¹⁰ increasing defense engagements with the United States, and participating in Western military exercises¹¹ indicate a significant transformation in Armenia's foreign policy orientation. Additionally, statements from the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan questioning Russia's reliability as an ally also reflect this shift in political discourse. Regarding Russia's geostrategic orientations, Caucasus geopolitics cannot be assessed independently of the Iran and Turkestan regions. Russia's economic and strategic development is closely tied to its influence over these regions. Russia's shift in power policies and its focus on Turkish territories and the Eastern front are considered to be reassuring developments for European countries.¹² However, Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally altered these dynamics. Geopolitical competition in the Caucasus has become more complex due to the Ukraine war, and Russia's influence in the region has diminished as a result of both economic sanctions and military expenditures. This shift has changed the security perception of European countries and contributed to reshaping the balance of power in the Caucasus and its surrounding areas.

On the other hand, while the United States views the South Caucasus as part of its strategy to contain Russia, Europe considers it a critical region for energy security, and China regards it as a strategic transit zone within its security framework. As a result, this region has become a focal point of competition among major powers.¹³ Russia's growing international isolation and the economic sanctions it has faced due to the war in Ukraine have weakened its influence in the South Caucasus, deepening the power

<https://tr.euronews.com/2024/02/02/pasinyan-ermenistan-askeri-ve-savunma-ihtiyaclari-icin-artik-rusyaya-guvenemez>, accessed February 27, 2025.

¹⁰ "Armenia is considering seeking EU membership, foreign minister says", *Reuters*, published March 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-is-considering-seeking-eumembership-foreign-minister-says-2024-03-09/>

¹¹ Gabriel Gavin, "Armenia's EU dream faces a big obstacle: The Russian army", *Politico*, published March 14, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/armenia-eu-dream-membership-russia-armyobstacle/>

¹² Ergün and Kurban, "Questions Regarding The Impact of Russian Strategic Culture On New Period Foreign Policies", Editors: Prof. Dr. Vefa Kurban, Dr. Çağdaş Duman, *Turkish-Russian Relations in the Context Of Social Economic And Political Progress In The Post Cold War Era*, By Livre De Lyon (2021): 57-69.

¹³ Ali Asker and Mustafa Cem Koyuncu, "Uluslararası Politik Ekonomi Ekseninde Çin'in Güney Kafkasya Bölgesine Yönelik Stratejik Hamleleri", *Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Sosyal, Ekonomik Ve Siyasal Gelişmeler Bağlamında Güney Kafkasya*, İksad Yayınevi, Editors: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vefa Kurban, Research Assistant Seçil Öraz Beşikçi, Research Assistant Recep Efe Çoban, (2021): 21-39

vacuum in the region. This has allowed the U.S. and Europe to expand their influence, while also creating an opportunity for China to accelerate its infrastructure investments in the South Caucasus as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. In fact, integration into the Belt and Road Project has become a priority in Armenia's new foreign policy, as it increasingly distances itself from Russia.¹⁴ Moreover, Russia's economic downturn has made it more difficult for Moscow to maintain its influence in the South Caucasus, providing other regional actors with greater room to maneuver. The weakening of Russia's presence in the region due to the Ukraine war has paved the way for the United States to play a more active role in the region. In this context, strategic cooperation between the U.S. and Armenia is gradually deepening. Armenia is increasingly shifting toward the West in its foreign policy, driven by the erosion of Russia's security guarantees and declining trust in CSTO. The United States is seizing this opportunity to strengthen military, political, and economic cooperation with Armenia to counterbalance Russian influence in the region. This strategic rapprochement is shifting the balance of power in the South Caucasus and enabling Armenia to integrate more closely with the West regarding energy security and economic development.

With Trump assuming office in January 2025, signs of significant shifts in the U.S. foreign policy have emerged, potentially impacting the balance of power in the South Caucasus, particularly in relations with Russia. Although the Trump administration has generally sought to avoid direct confrontation with Russia, its approach has introduced uncertainties in the U.S. strategy for the region. A shift in the U.S. policy, especially regarding the Russia-Ukraine front, could prompt Moscow to intensify its efforts to regain influence in the South Caucasus. While this process reshapes regional actors' policies, it also contributes to geopolitical uncertainty.

Amid ongoing geopolitical struggles in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan resolved the Karabakh issue, which was left unsettled through diplomacy for nearly 30 years, by resorting to military force in 2020 during the 44-day war, successfully reclaiming its occupied territories. This development significantly altered the regional balance of power, solidifying Azerbaijan's role as a key regional actor. At the same time, it accelerated Armenia's pivot toward the West, further complicating geopolitical competition. These evolving dynamics continue to shape strategic calculations among the U.S., Russia, and regional actors.

¹⁴ Chris Wright, "Making sense of Belt and Road – The Belt and Road country: Armenia", *Euromoney*, published September 26, 2017, <https://www.euromoney.com/article/b14t180fwf28pm/making-senseof-belt-and-road-the-belt-and-road-country-armenia>