

The Irano-Armenian alliance



Clément Therme

Research Assistant, Middle East/Maghreb Centre, therme@ifri.org

Clément Therme, who is studying for a doctorate at the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris, and at the Graduate Institute of International Studies (IUHEI), Geneva, was appointed as a research assistant on the Iran research programme of the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) in September 2006. He has a postgraduate diploma in international relations from IUHEI (2004) and held a scholarship at the French Institute for Research in Iran (IFRI) from April to July 2006.

Contact : therme@ifri.org

Iran has exerted an influence on Armenian territory either directly (during periods of military occupation) or indirectly (during periods of autonomy or Roman military occupation) since Antiquity. This influence has been significant in many areas, including the political, economic, cultural and religious¹. Armenia was successively the thirteenth satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire and a province of the Parthian and Sassanid Empires. However, these close ties were disrupted from the 7th century by the gradual Islamisation of Iran and then, from the 11th century, by the rise to power of the Turko-Mongolian dynasties², which pursued a highly active policy of expansion in the Caucasus and Anatolia.

Following the seizure of power in Iran by the Safavid dynasty (1501), Armenia became the battlefield in the wars between the Safavid and Ottoman armies. The devastation of the Armenian regions by the armies of Shah Abbas I was accompanied, from 1604, by a campaign of forced emigration of the Armenian people from the province of Jolfa to Iran. This affected some 200 000 to 250 000 people, most of whom were relocated to Isfahan, and to a lesser extent to the regions of Shiraz, Mazandaran and Gilan³. Subsequently, until the early 19th century, Armenia remained a bone of contention between the Russian, Iranian and Ottoman Empires. The population of Eastern Armenia came under Russian domination after the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) between the Qajar (Iran) and Tsarist Empires. However, this Russian supremacy did not prevent the continuation of cultural and commercial contacts between Iran and Armenia. Iran's Armenian minority was particularly active in Irano-Russian⁴ and Irano-European trade.

¹ The conversion to Christianity of the Armenians, in the early 4th century, did not prevent the spread of the Zoroastrian religion among the Armenian population. Elements of it have survived to the present day. On this question, see M.L. Chaumont, 'Armenia and Iran. The pre-Islamic period' in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. II, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, New York, 1987, pp. 433-438 and J.R. Russell, 'Armenia and Iran. Armenian Religion' in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), op. cit., pp. 439-444.

² The first of which was the Seljukid dynasty (1040-1194).

³ 30 000 families are said to have been moved to the Iranian regions of Mazandaran and Gilan: see 'Jolfâ bâ jolfâ neshinân' ('Jolfa and its inhabitants'), *Payman, A Cultural Quarterly Magazine*, no. 40, summer 2007 and Faramarz Talebi, 'Târikh-e armeniân-e gilân' ('History of the Armenians of Gilan'), Iran, 2007, 117p. (in Persian).

⁴ In the years following the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828), Russia was Iran's leading trading partner. See Ali Farassati, 'L'Iran et la crise du Caucase du Sud', Thèse du centre de recherche et d'analyse géopolitique, University of Paris 8, 1998, p. 99.



During the First World War, Christian militias set up by the occupying British, and largely consisting of Armenians from Iran, played a key role in the Turkish army's failure to conquer Iranian Azerbaijan⁵. After the 1917 October Revolution, official relations between Armenia and Iran were greatly reduced. During the Soviet period, no aviation routes were operated between Tehran and Yerevan, and no bridges were built across the Araks, which forms the frontier between the two countries. Moreover, there was no road network to travel to Soviet Armenia from Iranian territory. However, informal relations were maintained between the two countries via Iran's Armenian minority, which numbered 130 000 people in 1973⁶. The interruption of official cultural and economic relations was mainly due to the administrative centralism of the Soviet state, which made relations between the neighbouring Irano-Armenian and Armenian populations virtually impossible. For example, a letter sent from the region of Jolfa in Iran would take two months to reach the other side of the border, just a few kilometres away⁷. Moreover, political obstacles restricted communication between Iran's Armenian population and that of Soviet Armenia. Firstly, Reza Shah (1925-1941) feared that Armenian associates of the Iranian communist party were being used by Moscow to conduct espionage activities in Iran⁸. Secondly, although the USSR authorised holders of Iranian passports to travel to Soviet Armenia, the Pahlavi shahs, fearing communist contagion, prevented them from returning to Iran. This prohibition was finally lifted after the Islamic revolution (1979).

Following Armenia's independence (1991), the warmth of the Irano-Armenian reunion was genuine, after a long period of separation since 1828. Flights between Tehran and Yerevan were introduced in 1992. Likewise, a temporary bridge (1992-1994), and then a permanent one (1995), called 'the Bridge of Friendship' by the Armenians, was built over the Araks at Meghri, enabling goods to be trucked into Armenia from Iran⁹. Genuine though the Irano-Armenian friendship was, it was still primarily determined by the two partners' national interests. The border with Iran was the only route by which Armenia could receive supplies, subject as it was to a Turko-Azeri blockade due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The other possible route, namely the Georgian border, was of limited interest, as that country was in a state of anarchy following the disintegration of the USSR. Moreover, Armeno-Georgian relations were complicated by Armenian claims to the territory of Javakhk belonging to Tbilisi. On Tehran's side, the goal was to engage in active diplomacy towards the new independent states of the post-Soviet Caucasus¹⁰. The decision to ally with Christian Armenia was therefore in line with Iran's national interests, given that, over the border, the leaders of the new Azeri state were in favour in the wake of independence of creating a Greater Azerbaijan including the Azeri provinces in the north of Iran. It therefore made sense for the authorities in Tehran to seek to preserve the integrity of Iranian territory by supporting Armenia in its war against Baku over the Nagorno-Karabakh question.

⁵ On this question, see Mohammad Gholi Majd, *Persia in World War I and Its Conquest by Great Britain*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1984, iv-316p.

⁶ According to Hubert de Mauroy, 'Chrétiens en Iran', *Proche Orient chrétien*, Jerusalem, 1978, p. 81, quoted by Dominique Carnoy, 'Les chrétientés de la République islamique', *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, no. 48, fourth quarter 1998, p. 95.

⁷ The route was as follows: Jolfa, Tehran, Moscow, Baku, Soviet Armenia. Conversation with Amir Armadian, professor at the Faculty of International Relations, Tehran, 2 February 2008.

⁸ See Charles C. Hart, 'Armenians of Persia Suspected of Bolshevik Activity (1931)' in *The Armenians of Iran. The Paradoxical Role of a Minority in a Dominant Culture: Articles and Documents*, edited by Cosroe Chaqueri, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 361-362.

⁹ See Ali Farassati, op. cit., pp. 241-243.

¹⁰ See Mohammad-Reza Djalili, *Géopolitique de l'Iran*, Editions Complexe, Brussels, 2005, pp. 119-123 and Kaweh Sadegh-Zadeh, 'Iran's Strategy in the South Caucasus', *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2(1), winter 2008, p. 2.



As can be seen, the presence in Iran of an Armenian community was not the main reason behind this diplomatic alliance. However, its existence has facilitated the development of bilateral trade and cultural contacts, and in particular academic and tourism exchanges. In 2007, there were nearly 3000 Iranian students in Yerevan. Conversely, just ten Armenian students were studying in Iran, generally for a period of no more than a year. There are normally two flights per week between Tehran and Yerevan, and four during holiday periods. Buses also operate daily between Tehran and Yerevan. Apparently, around 50 000 to 60 000 Iranians visit Armenia every year. Visits by Armenian tourists in Iran are very infrequent, however.

In 1992, Iran became Armenia's second-largest trading partner after Russia. This situation has continued, and in 2007, with annual trade worth 200 million dollars, Iran was still one of the country's leading economic partners¹¹. Moreover, many of Iran's Armenian traders, who had applied for Armenian passports in the early 1990s, were disappointed by the poor opportunities for investment in the post-Soviet Armenian economy. Trading relations did grow after the creation in 2003 of the Aras free zone located in the Iranian province of East Azerbaijan, the purpose of which was to encourage foreign investment in Iran¹², but Armenian investors were quickly disappointed by the commercial opportunities offered by this free zone. Trade is now pursued more in the context of bilateral relations. As a result, commercial activity in the border zone has been declining continuously since the mid-1990s. Trade relations are also complicated by the failure of bilateral negotiations on the liberalisation of trade. Since February 2003, Armenia has been a member of the WTO, whereas the Iranian economy remains state-controlled and managed on protectionist principles. These contradict Tehran's declared objective of increasing bilateral trade, in that the Armenian economy is more liberal than the Iranian. With the increase in American pressure for relations between the emirates banks and Iran to be broken off, significant banking relations have been formed between foreign companies establishing commercial relations with Iran and Armenia's banks. However, the absence of any Armenian bank in Tehran underlines the financial difficulties encountered by any state wishing to trade with Tehran. In any case, Armenia's desire to increase economic cooperation with Iran has not met with a negative reaction from Washington, as the American authorities are aware that the Armenians have no realistic alternative to trading with the Islamic Republic.

Cooperation on energy between the two countries is also growing. Plans to build a refinery and a power station in Armenia to be used to supply Iran could, if they materialise, increase Armenian exports to Iran by 30 million dollars a year¹³. Conversely, cooperation on gas has experienced numerous difficulties. Firstly, over fifteen years passed between the commencement of negotiations on the plans for an Irano-Armenian gas pipeline and its inauguration, in March 2007, during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Armenia. However, the Iranian authorities do not seem to number the Armenian market among their main targets for gas exports, as is demonstrated by Tehran's agreement to reduce the diameter of the pipeline, at Russia's request¹⁴, and the delay in the supply of gas. The supply is scheduled to start in December 2008, although the pipeline has been operational since March 2007. Iran could also have developed a more ambitious long-term policy had it rejected the Russian conditions, which prevent any contemplation of Iranian gas exports to Georgia or Ukraine. This choice is due both to internal difficulties in the Iranian gas sector¹⁵ and to the Caucasian policy pursued by Tehran of deference to Russian interests.

¹¹ Although Iran is not the leading trade partner in quantitative terms, Russia and Turkmenistan being Yerevan's first and second partners respectively, it remains the case that the provision of supplies to Armenia by Iran is indispensable to the survival of the Armenian economy.

¹² See the free zone's official website, <http://www.arasfz.ir/en/AFZ.org.htm>

¹³ According to Haroutiun Khachatryan, 'Iran and Armenia tighten ties', *CACI Analyst*, 14 November 2007.

¹⁴ See Haroutiun Khachatryan, 'Economic and political implications of the rise of the Russian gas price for Armenia', *CACI Analyst*, 25 January 2006.

¹⁵ On this question see my article, 'L'Iran : exportateur de gaz ?', *Notes de l'Ijri*, forthcoming on www.ijri.org, February 2008.



The political management of Iran's Armenian minority is used by Tehran in its foreign policy. Its aim is to demonstrate the democratic, pro-human rights nature of the Islamic Republic. This showcase is very important to the Iranian government, which is often condemned by the United States and the European Union for its non-compliance with international standards on human rights. Iran's Armenian minority was down to 80 000 people by 2007¹⁶. This is because, since the start of the new century, there has been an acceleration in emigration comparable to that which occurred directly after the Islamic revolution. However, the living conditions of Armenians in the Islamic Republic¹⁷ do not appear to account for most of the departures from Iran. Rather, they are to do with the emigration campaign conducted by the Hâiâz association, which since the start of the century has offered them the opportunity to emigrate to the United States via Austria for the sum of 3 000 dollars¹⁸. Finally, the Iranian authorities often used the alliance with Christian Armenia in connection with the policy of dialogue among civilisations promoted by the 'reformist' president Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005).

On the diplomatic front, Irano-Armenian relations can only be understood by taking Turkey's role into account. Although Iran presents itself as a mediator in the rivalry between Armenia and Turkey¹⁹, it has to be said that the improvement in Irano-Turkish relations has led to a cooling-down in relations between Tehran and Yerevan. Finally, although the Islamic Republic has never officially recognised the Armenian genocide, it does so implicitly. On 24 April every year, the Armenians of Iran are authorised by the Islamic regime to commemorate the genocide of 1915. However, the scale of these commemorations varies depending on the state of Irano-Turkish relations. Moreover, part of the Armenian museum in Isfahan is devoted to the memory of the genocide.

Thus the Irano-Armenian alliance is primarily based on convergent geopolitical interests. Economic cooperation with Iran is vital to Armenia, while Tehran may, if American and international economic sanctions are stepped up in the future, use its alliance with Armenia as an economic route. Thus the isolation of these two neighbouring states, although its causes differ, could lead them in the years ahead to intensify their political and economic cooperation. On the other hand, if Armenia manages to break out of its regional isolation and Iran restores its position in the international arena to normal, the whole reason for the alliance could be called into question.

¹⁶ According to a representative of Tehran's Armenian community, the minority is divided between the cities of Tehran, 65-70 000, Isfahan, 5-6000, and Tabriz, 2-3000. Conversation, Tehran, January 2008. According to the archbishop of the Armenians of Iran, they are 200 000 in number. However, this statistic is politically motivated, as the archbishopric wishes to preserve the seats of the two members who represent the community in the *majlis*: every community is entitled to one member per 100 000 people. Finally, according to the Islamic Republic's own official figures, there are 150 000 Armenians in Iran.

¹⁷ On this question, see Dominique Carnoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-115 and Anne-Sophie Vivier-Muresan, 'Communitarian Neighborhoods and Religious Minorities in Iran : A Comparative Analysis', *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 40, no. 5, December 2007, pp. 593-603.

¹⁸ Conversation with a representative of Tehran's Armenian community, January 2008. See the association's website: www.bias-vienna.at

¹⁹ Thus, during his visit to Yerevan in October 2007, President Ahmadinejad spoke out in favour of reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey: see 'Rastegâri dar sa'ât bist-o tshahârom' ('A visit cut short by 24 hours'), *Hamsbari*, 25 October 2007 (in Persian).