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# Priority In Armenian Foreign Policy : The US Or Iran?

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Due to the irredentist policy it has maintained since independence, Armenia has had serious disagreements and problems with all its neighbors except Iran; these problems are for the most part still prevalent.

Armenia is currently unable to use the northern border for transportation because it invaded part of Azerbaijan, and unable to use the western border because it still insists upon refusing to recognize Turkey's territorial integrity, relying on the so-called Armenian genocide discourse. Even though it seeks to resolve the problem in relation to the northern border via transportation through Georgia, at this point it is still unable to use the route effectively because of current problems in the region. In this regard, its relations with Iran become very important. Even if Armenia's geopolitical weakness determines the relations between the parties, there are also important political factors at play. Iran has remained ignorant vis-a-vis Armenia's invasion of Azeri territories, despite the latter's predominantly Shiite population; it also extended support to Armenia in relation to the southern Azerbaijan question. In the event of an Azeri victory in this war, 30 million Azeri Turks in the region would have been eager to become independent or seek integration with northern Azerbaijan. Moreover, Iran has also sought to circumvent Turkey's influence in the region and undermine bilateral relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan by maintaining good relations with Armenia. The same goal was shared by Armenia in its policy vis-a-vis Turkey.

Rapprochement between Iran and Armenian has also been criticized by the US because of its escalating tensions with Iran. Actually, the US has never been so clear and determined in its opposition to the good relations between Armenia and Iran. Even though the US currently asks Turkey to limit its relations with Iran, its silence in response to rapprochement between Iran and Armenia should be noted. Is it because of the impact of lobbying activities by the Armenian diaspora in the US? If so, this means that US national interests are subject to the initiative of the Armenian lobbies -- which is irreconcilable with state dignity and seriousness. Is it possible to speak of Christian/American solidarity in favor of Armenia, which seeks to expand its territories in predominantly Muslim regions?

Even though Armenia has declared a strategic alliance with Russia, the amount of aid granted it by the US is far greater than the aid forwarded by Russia. Armenia receives the most American financial aid after Israel; the US still grants large amounts of aid to this country. In addition, the US views Nagorno-Karabakh as a separate unit; based on this decision, the American administration transmitted financial aid for the Karabakh Armenians to Nagorno-Karabakh directly instead of the Azeri administration.

The US does not act based on ethical considerations when it requests permission to set up military bases in Azerbaijan, while it remains silent vis-a-vis the improving bilateral relations between Armenia and Iran. The US is not uneasy with the cooperation between Christian Armenia and Muslim/Shiite Iran, while it is disgruntled by attempts to maintain relations between Muslim countries, including Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey. It goes even further, requesting to set up bases in Azerbaijan and relying on its military units stationed in Turkey in its operations against Iran.

The US has intensified its pressure on Azerbaijan to secure approval for a military base while it never considers making a similar request of Armenia, which receives large sums of financial aids from the American institutions every year and maintains good relations with Russia and Iran. Armenia sometimes returns American requests despite the large amount of financial aid. During the discussions as to whether it was possible to station NATO troops in Armenia when a crisis had erupted between the US and Iran in relation to the uranium enrichment, Armenian Defense Minister Serj Sarkisyan underlined such a possibility was out of question even in theoretical basis.

#### A new visa control procedure

Beginning Dec. 16, 2002, the US decided to apply the visa regime envisaged for the citizens of states supporting and sponsoring international terrorism to Armenian citizens as well. Armenia became the 21st state (and the first Christian state) subjected to this regime. The visa controls under this regime were made in relation to all Armenian citizens over age 16 that live in or will later arrive in the US. This decision, made after Sept. 11, has in general included Muslim countries, including Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Pakistan. During the discussions over the introduction of this regime and inclusion of Armenian citizens in its scope, David Shahnazaryan, who served as the Armenian intelligence chief in the administration of the first head of state, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, made a sensational statement wherein he noted that Afghan terrorists entered the US holding Armenian passports. Undoubtedly, this was the major reason for the US to include Armenian citizens in the visa regime.

According to new reports by Armenian news agency Panarmenian and others, the US administration lifted this tough visa regime for Armenian citizens following pressure from the Armenian government and the Armenian diaspora effective, effective Dec. 18, 2002. The US administration ceasing to apply this visa regime vis-a-vis Armenian citizens only two days after its introduction reveals how important and influential the Armenian diaspora is.

Parallel to these developments, the US has never pressured Armenia, despite some Armenian corporations selling nuclear technology to Iran. In response to improvements in bilateral economic relations, Iran seeks to construct an oil refinery plant in Armenia. The US, which expressed its displeasure and uneasiness with a natural gas agreement between Iran and Turkey, has made no statement in relation this project, which will obviously make Iran very influential in the region.

Finally, the US noticed Armenia's true face. The US State Department expressed its concerns over the frequent official visits held between Armenia and Iran. Furthermore, the US described Armenia as a terrorism-sponsoring state, adding that the country had a corrupt banking system that contributed to money-laundering activities to finance terrorist acts. Following this statement, Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisyan unexpectedly pledged to improve relations with Iran, further noting that the national security council secretary would hold official visits to Iran to meet with the Iranian president and other official figures. It is likely the US will not remain silent this time as well vis-a-vis this development, and act reasonably to pick its supporters and enemies. The US may at least suspend financial aid for Armenia and extend the aid to Nagorno-Karabakh through Azerbaijan. It may even consider repealing section 907 supplemental to the Bill on Supporting Independence, which prohibits financial aid to Azerbaijan.

The actions of the Armenian administration should demonstrate that the country's foreign policy priorities don't rely on the US, which supplies it with financial aid; its priorities instead include Russia, which has almost colonized this country, and Iran, which uses Armenia against Azerbaijan, instead of the US. The US should consider this Armenian stance in its relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey and consider also the strategic alliance between Russia and Armenia when devising a policy vis-a-vis this country. At the very least, it should base its policy vis-a-vis Turkey and Armenia on a more ethical ground.

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