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Introduction by the Special Editor

The South Caucasus has long been viewed in Western scholarship through the prism of the Romanov Empire, later the Soviet Union, and, since 1991, as an implicit or explicit Russian sphere of influence. Indeed, the region was more commonly referred to as the Transcaucasus in the past, reflecting a geographical gaze from Moscow or St. Petersburg. Alongside the discursive shift towards the more neutral term ‘South Caucasus,’ the involvement of Western actors as well as Turkey has been growing noticeably in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, whether in terms of strategic issues, the economy, culture, or other spheres.

Iran has also come to play a role in the three states of the South Caucasus over the past few decades. But there has been relatively limited scholarship on the regional policies of Tehran, its relationships with Tbilisi, Baku, and Yerevan, and the position of the Iranian government on local conflicts. This special issue of the *Caucasus Analytical Digest* seeks to fill in some of that gap.

The papers in this issue address particularly the regional dynamics following the most consequential development in recent years, namely the Second Karabakh War of 2020. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh began in the late 1980s and has continued beyond the active fighting phase in the autumn of 2020. It has drawn in a number of external actors. Iran, on the threshold of the South Caucasus, has found itself having more and more of a foot in the region as a result.

One of the most significant themes permeating all the contributions of this issue is the so-called ‘Zangezur Corridor’—a proposed land connection between Azerbaijan proper and its exclave of Nakhchivan/Nakhichevan. The prospects and modalities of such a route include economic, geopolitical, strategic, cultural, and ideological components, perceived in various ways in Baku and Yerevan, also in Tbilisi, and certainly in Tehran as well.

Besides the security outcomes and aftermaths since 2020, the contributions in this issue also take on historical developments and how they impact current bilateral ties. There is a rough arc to be drawn between the place of the South Caucasus in Iran’s past—considering the Persianate world quite broadly—and how connections were made anew following the Soviet period, during which the two spaces were for the most part closed off from one another.

Two details are worth pointing out regarding this special issue. First, the situation in the region continues to be in flux. Between writing and publication, the analyses presented here may prove already outdated. This is what makes the investigation of unstable political, economic, and social situations both compelling and risky.

Second—on a more personal note—I try as much as possible to point out my Armenian background when researching and writing about the region. Always striving to maintain integrity and high academic standards, I am sensitive to the fact that my identity may invite perceptions of bias. As the issue’s editor, I find myself in a position of particular influence in this case. I would like to emphasise that I wanted to make sure to include Azerbaijani voices when reaching out to potential contributors. It was at the suggestion of an Azerbaijani academic that Alexander Yeo was invited to write about Azerbaijan–Iran relations. He has worked with Azerbaijani scholars and has written a well-rounded contribution on the Baku–Tehran dynamic of the recent past.

As such, all of the analyses here highlight well the various factors influencing the shifts in the region over the past few years. We are also fortunate to be able to include the perspective of scholars based in Iran, invoking the gaze to the South Caucasus from the south. This is a gaze which has always been present, but—except for such outlets as the journal *Iran and the Caucasus*—it has not always been acknowledged and investigated as much as it could in English-language scholarship on the region.

About the Author

Nareg Seferian completed his doctoral studies at the School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech, in 2023. He has taught at the American University of Armenia (2013–2016) and Virginia Tech (2019–2023). His published writings are available at naregseferian.com.