

---

## Interview: Dircan Shirvanian

---

# Armenia can be an important factor for peace in the Transcaucasus

*The following interview with Mr. Shirvanian appeared in a special supplement of the May 1 issue of the French bi-weekly newspaper Nouvelle Solidarité. Mr. Shirvanian is a historian and the director of the Paris-based publishing house Sevig Press.*

**EIR:** In the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the western powers have taken the side of Turkey rather than Armenia. Can you explain this?

**Shirvanian:** Of all the Muslim countries in the Middle East, Turkey occupies a most peculiar position. The Turks resolutely opted for a pro-western policy nearly 70 years ago, since Atatürk established the Turkish republic. The fact that Atatürk exchanged the Arabic alphabet for the Latin alphabet was a turning point. Since that period, Turkey has had a pro-western policy, and is a secular republic where religion and the state are, in principle, separated.

After the collapse of the Soviet empire, it is evident that the West preferred to see the secular Turkish model applied throughout the Muslim former Soviet republics, rather than the Iranian, Saudi, or Libyan models. Hence the western interest in the Turkish model for economic, social, and cultural development.

**EIR:** We are seeing the outlines of a struggle for influence being drawn between Turkey and Iran, to establish their hegemony in this region. While the spread of the Turkish practice is not a small advantage for Turkey, the Iranians have always been deeply ensconced there. Can you elaborate on this?

**Shirvanian:** While the West wants the Turkish model to win this contest, nonetheless Iran does have a role to play. Iran has been and remains a key country in the region.

Relations between Armenia and Iran are very old. Let's not forget that, even before Jesus Christ, we were neighbors. The Kingdom of Armenia was one of the kingdoms of the empire of the Shahanshah—not so very long ago—even though in practice Armenia has always maintained its independence. Thus, there are many historical ties between the Armenians and the Iranians.

Today, these ties still exist. For example, there is a very large Armenian diaspora in Iran; close to 300,000 Armenians who have been living there now for over four centuries, especially in the region of Isfahan, but also in the capital, in Teheran. They are also in Tabriz, the capital of what is called Iranian Azerbaijan. The Iranians and Armenians have known each other for more than 3,000 years.

Otherwise, the whole region of the Caucasus and especially Armenia with its present-day borders (with Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan, and also Georgia), used to be part of, until the beginning of the 19th century—not so very long ago—of the Persian Empire. The Persians withdrew when the Russians came at the beginning of the 19th century. There was the annexation of Georgia in 1801, and of Karabakh with a part of Azerbaijan in 1813. Having been dominant in the Caucasus and the region around it for centuries, Iran has left its cultural imprint on it.

To get back to Armenia! The only two open borders toward the outside are, to the north, Georgia which allows it access to the Black Sea, and to the south, Iran. To the east, Turkic Azerbaijan and, to the west, Turkey are not, since the new order, very friendly neighbors toward the Armenian people. Armenia represents a key strategic position for the Iranians, since it is through the former that they can have access to the Black Sea. For its part, Armenia finds access to the south in Iran, especially to energy wealth (oil and natural gas).

In effect, the number-one problem of the Armenian economy today is the lack of energy, especially because of the Azerbaijan blockade, which, until recent years, provided us with our oil and natural gas energy supplies.

**EIR:** Is it not precisely the need to have this opening with Iran which makes the claims formulated by certain Turkish leaders unacceptable to Armenia? After all, they hope to get direct access to Azerbaijan by going south of Armenia, which means closing the Armenian border with Iran.

**Shirvanian:** Without attributing to modern Turkey an old pan-Turkic and pan-Touranian ideology, we still have to acknowledge, in the string of peoples extending from the

Bosphorus to China, including present-day Turkey, that Azerbaijan and the Muslim former Soviet republics are mostly Turkic. The only link which separates these two great masses is tiny Armenia—the 30 kilometers of the southern width of Armenia, in effect, breaks up the homogeneity of this stretch.

Evidently, for Turkey, as well as for Azerbaijan, it is very tempting to complete the junction. It is not a question, for the Armenians, of ceding some part or other of their territory: Already Armenia's present borders represent only one-fifth of its historic territory. It is not in the interest of Armenia to cut itself off from Iran and to become surrounded only by Turks in the east, south, and west.

As for the Iranian mediation, it must be acknowledged that, for the moment, their efforts have resulted in a ceasefire that has held, for better or worse, for more than a month. Sure, there are skirmishes every day, but there are no longer the battles on the grand scale there were a month and a half ago. Last April 11, there were still Azeri attacks on the north of Karabakh and the massacre of about 100 Armenians in the village of Maragha.

The Iranians also have a certain amount of influence on the Azeris, in addition to the Armenians, because their mediation seems to be impartial.

This is not the case with the Turkish mediation, because Turkey considers Karabakh to be part of the Republic of Azerbaijan, with the Armenians of Karabakh being only a minority community for whom they would eventually reserve nothing more than cultural and religious autonomy. Whereas for us, this is a matter of a struggle for liberation and self-determination.

Apparently the Iranians have showed a far more neutral attitude both toward the Armenians and the Azeris, and the fact is that their efforts have had better results than Russia, the Community of Independent States, or the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

**EIR:** What is the dominant influence in the former Soviet Central Asian republics?

**Shirvanian:** Iran has stakes in the Central Asian republics; Tajikistan, for example, despite its Turkish name, speaks Farsi, and seems to be much closer to Iran than to Turkey. But the other republics are, for the most part, closer to Turkey. However, it's important not to simplify the problem and say that all these republics, because they use the Turkic language, are the day after tomorrow going to become dissolved within a Turkish empire that would extend from China to the Bosphorus. You have only to look at the Arabs' efforts. For a long time now, the Arabs have been trying—without ever succeeding—to achieve Arab unity; however, they have the same religion, the same language, and are situated in the same geographic area, without discontinuity.

Iran does seem to want to export the Islamic revolution, but I am not persuaded that this is its primary objective. Iran has been a great power for millennia, has experienced

different regimes, and we have even witnessed religion take second place when, during the Iran-Iraq War, one Muslim people—the Iranians—fought another Muslim people—the Iraqis. National sentiments, even with the mullahs, won out over religious ones.

Certainly, Iran has a role to play in the geographical area of Central Asia. The Iranian tradition is characterized throughout history by tolerance. The Iranian empire, from the beginning, was very much more tolerant toward other peoples and toward minorities. That is what created the grandeur that was Iran, and which has allowed it to play an important role in this region. The present regime could be an obstacle for the West because it is too extremist, too fundamentalist. But regimes come and go, and the fundamental interests of great countries remain. And Iran is one of them in this region.

**EIR:** What are the advantages that Armenia has?

**Shirvanian:** Unfortunately Armenia is only a small territory which is about the area of Belgium. Its geographic location is very unfavorable, surrounded by people and by neighbors who are not very well disposed toward it, which is the least one can say. But the 3.5 million inhabitants of present-day Armenia can be an important factor for peace, good-neighborliness, and regional cooperation.

The Armenians, particularly since the massacre of 1915 (but well before the massacre, there were Armenians who lived in the diaspora) have been brought into living with nearly every other people on earth. They know their neighbors: There are 300,000 Armenians in Iran; they are in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Georgia; there were also about 400,000 in Azerbaijan up to four years ago, that is, before the massacres of Sumgait, Baku, and Kirovabad. They have a faculty for adaptation and dialogue with different peoples, religions, and cultures.

Thanks to a rather high level of culture, Armenia would be able to have a fairly rapid rate of development, if it were not for the Azeri blockade, which for the last three and a half years has handicapped all development. In spite of that, Armenia, among all the former Soviet republics, is the only country to have three years of peaceful democracy. There have been regular elections, there is an elected President, an elected Parliament, there has been no civil war, democracy is alive, and its leadership makes an effort under difficult conditions to respect the rules of a state under law. This is not the case in the other neighboring republics; Azerbaijan recently saw the eviction of its elected President. The same fate was reserved for the Georgian President, who had won 90% of the votes a few months earlier.

The political maturity of the Armenians can constitute a point of stability and in this political maturity, the role of the diaspora can be important, because the contacts, exchanges, and reciprocal visits bring a new spirit which wishes to come out in this tiny country.