



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (L) shakes hands with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Tehran, Iran, on November 1, 2022.
IRNA

rorist center, complete with strategic coordination and programming. Turning to the conventional domains, it is evident that they remain of utmost importance — once again with a focus on security. Significantly elevating the quality of economic relations between Iran and Armenia is paramount. The two nations should strive to enhance the efficiency of their economic interactions, fostering an enduring era of collaboration. In essence, both states can make substantial strides toward economic integration, thereby laying a robust economic foundation that bolsters the overarching security framework.

What internal and external obstacles do you see in the development of bilateral relations? What steps are needed to eliminate them? In the realm of bilateral relations, significant obstacles stem from both internal and external sources. If we address the internal impediments, it would become apparent that further steadfast will is required within Armenia to foster multilateral ties with Iran. This determination must assume a strategic character, effectively endowing relations with Iran with a privileged status within Armenia's security strategy. Elevating this relationship to a level of strategic aspiration or significance across all dimensions is imperative. There are also certain challenges within Iran itself. Notably, one of the principal hindrances, in my view, arises from the activities of various pan-Turkic lobby groups. While these groups may not hold positions at the upper echelons of the Iranian government, they nonetheless

manage to introduce certain obstacles at intermediate and lower levels, hindering the advancement of Armenian-Iranian relations. Concerning external barriers, it is evident that nations harboring adversarial stances toward both Iran and Armenia could express substantial reservations about the deepening and heightened strategic nature of these relations. Hence, external obstacles do wield significance. However, a crucial aspect must be borne in mind: neither internal nor external impediments can preclude the elevation of Armenian-Iranian relations to the sought-after aspirational or strategic level. Such relations emanate from the vital security interests of both nations. Consequently, it is incumbent upon both sides to capitalize on all available avenues, ensuring that Armenian-Iranian relations firmly embody the aspirational or strategic nature underscored earlier.

In addition to governmental cooperation, what role should the scientific and expert communities of both sides, as well as representatives of civil society, play?

Over centuries, the Armenian and Iranian peoples have exemplified exceptional fraternal and amicable relations within our region. As I highlighted at the outset of this interview, I firmly believe that we are products of the same civilizational sphere. Armenians and Iranians, along with Armenia and Iran as states, represent two advanced and cultured societies that find themselves confronting hostile and uncivilized elements within our region, whose aim is to propagate terrorism, undermine the internal and exter-

nal security of Armenia and Iran, and ultimately erase our civilizations from the regional map. This is a complex and far-reaching agenda, which necessitates not only the active engagement of politicians but also places a significant responsibility on the intellectual class within both nations. The scientific community, in particular, possesses a pivotal role, as does the sector devoted to what is often termed "people's diplomacy".

In my view, the cornerstone of this people's diplomacy should center on the ideological framework of "one civilization, two nations," "one civilization, two states," "one civilization, two religions," and "one civilization, two languages". Within this framework, gradual deepening of relations and cooperation across scientific, academic, cultural, and broader civilizational spheres should transpire. It is within this cultural realm that a fertile ground for the advancement of political, military-political, and economic ties can be cultivated. This civilizational realm holds the potential to engender an atmosphere within both societies that yields influence over political decisions. This civilizational domain should formulate the vision that is appropriate to the concept of forming a civilizational alliance between the two states and peoples with such ancient civilizational roots. This civilizational domain is of paramount significance, and considerable effort needs to be channeled into its development. Therefore, diligent work in this direction should be actively promoted with state backing and sponsorship, amplifying the potential for even more effective cultural, civilizational, scien-



Gohar Lady's Upper Mosque A Sentiment to Armenian-Iranian Cultural Dialogue



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OPINION
EXCLUSIVE

The restoration and preservation of Gohar Lady's Upper Mosque (also known as Gohar Agha Upper Mosque) attests to Armenia's and Nagorno-Karabakh's respect for Iran's cultural and historical heritage. The mosque in question is a religious complex and "madrasa" (seminary) building adjacent to another mosque in the city of Shushi of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), which came under the control of Azerbaijan after the 44-day war in 2020.

The Upper Mosque, the main Muslim religious building in Shushi, was constructed in the 1880s under the patronage of the daughter of Ibrahim Khan of Karabakh. The roof of the Upper Mosque was renovated with state subsidies in 2009 as part of the Shushi mosques' rehabilitation program. Large-scale rehabilitation work began in 2014 with the assistance of the Initiatives for Development of Armenia (IDeA) Foundation and the Revival of Oriental Historical Heritage Foundation. Work on the study and restoration of the mosque was completed in 2019 with the participation of the Armenian National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites NGO (ICOMOS-Armenia), the Iranian architectural firm Part Saman Jahan, the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization, and Lorenzo Yurina, lecturer of Polytechnic University of Milan.

Making an opening speech at the event dedicated to the completion of the Upper Mosque's restoration, Nagorno-Karabakh's Minister of Culture, Youth Affairs, and Tourism said that the mosque will function as an Armenian-Iranian scientific cultural center and will contribute to the strengthening of Armenian-Iranian relations. As a Christian-Islamic cultural prop-

erty, Gohar Lady's Upper Mosque shows how deep Armenian-Iranian cultural ties go. The existence of the Iranian religious and cultural center in Shushi testifies to both the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's outlook toward civilizational values and the representation, preservation, and development of the cultural heritage of its neighbor state in step with its own regardless of ethnic, religious, and other differences.

In this context, Iran, too, has always demonstrated a matching civilized approach towards the Armenian cultural properties that are located on Iranian territory. Mutual respect and preservation efforts ensure that the cultural heritages of both are protected and serve as a vivid model for other countries in the region to follow.

The liberation of Shushi in 1992 was a watershed moment that paved the way for showcasing and acknowledging both Armenian and Iranian cultural properties with their unique historical, architectural, and aesthetic qualities. Furthermore, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic undertook various initiatives from 1994 to 2020 to preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritage, but the war unleashed by the Republic of Azerbaijan against the Republic of Artsakh on September 27, 2020, and Baku's post-war policies clearly targeted the historic Armenian presence in Nagorno-Karabakh and the territory's cultural properties. The deliberate destruction of Nagorno-Karabakh's cultural properties during and after the armed conflict has been qualified as a war crime in several international conventions and declarations. The most famous examples of such policies are the deliberate targeting and desecration of Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Cathedral and St. John the Baptist (or Kanach Zham) church of Shushi, and the targeting of the Upper Mosque on November 1, 2020.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the promotion of the Armenian-Iranian resource-based cooperation policy can best fulfill the strategic task of preserving, recognizing, and popularizing their civilizational and cultural heritages.



Gohar Lady's Upper Mosque in Shushi city of Nagorno-Karabakh's
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