

Iran backs safe return of Karabakh Armenians

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12.07.2024 Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the IRI to the RA Mehdi Sobhani made a statement on the need for the return of Karabakh Armenians to their historical homeland. *“The rights of the Armenian residents of Karabakh must be respected. This issue is like a wound, and it should be treated. If it is not treated, it is possible that it will reopen. When they talk about stable peace, this wound should also be considered... The residents of Karabakh did not leave their homes voluntarily, and I express the hope that conditions will be created so that they can return there voluntarily”.*

Ambassador Sobhani’s statement sounds similar to the words of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei after the events of the 44-day war. At that time, Rahbar expressed his opinion that the security of the Karabakh Armenians and their right to live on their native lands should be guaranteed. Also, the thoughts of Ambassador Sobhani have parallels with the statement of the interim Foreign Minister of IRI Ali Bagheri Kani, who emphasized in an interview with CNN Turk on June 9, 2024, that Iran *“will not tolerate changes in the borders and demography of the region under any circumstances”.*

However, the current statement of the Iranian ambassador is particularly remarkable and reveals several fundamentally important aspects.

Firstly, it is the first time that an Iranian representative has directly and unambiguously stated Tehran’s position on the fate of the Karabakh refugees.

Secondly, this statement was made after the election of a new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which probably indicates a tightening of Tehran’s policy towards Baku under President Pezeshkian, whose team intends to turn this issue into another instrument of pressure on I. Aliyev within the framework of Iranian–Azerbaijani relations.

Thirdly, Sobhani’s vowed position is in tune with the statements of American officials, senators and congressmen on the need to create all conditions for the return of the Karabakh Armenians to their homeland and to ensure their rights and security. Samantha Power, the head of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), was the last American official to mention it in Yerevan on 10.07.2024, i.e. two days before Mehdi Sobhani’s statement. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that the Iranian ambassador deliberately synchronized the expression of the Iranian position on this issue with the opinion of the US representative. This is of fundamental importance because for the American and Iranian sides the agenda of the return of the Karabakh Armenians to their homes are based on the main question: how and who will control and maintain security in the region? It is obvious that “Aliyev’s guarantees” cannot be considered sufficient for the repatriation process – the return of the Karabakh Armenians, as well as the normal proceeding of their lives, must take place under the protection of a military-police contingent with an international mandate of a peacekeeping mission. Tehran fears (and not without reason) that Washington is trying to play the Karabakh refugee card precisely to create a

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 16.07.2024.

basis for its military and allied forces to gain access to Iran's northern border region. Thus, the *de facto* presence of the West in the strategic region will be legitimized by the mandate of an “international peacekeeping mission”.

In view of this, it would be logical to expect that Tehran would prevent the realization of the Karabakh repatriation agenda, but Iran announces a position in line with the American one. This may be related to Iran’s no less serious fears about the possibility of populating the “Karabakh region” with settlers from the northern Syrian and northern Iranian regions, which provide the TR and the AzR with Sunni militants from radical pro-Turkish groups. Iran understands that Ankara and Baku can turn Nagorno-Karabakh into a nest of Sunni extremism that will threaten the IRI and help weaken the position of Shiism in Azerbaijan, something that Ankara consistently seeks.

On this basis, it can be assumed that Tehran intends to support the agenda of the return of Armenian refugees but will insist that the international mandate for the peacekeeping mission must be given to a contingent composed exclusively of representatives of the regional countries (IRI, Turkey and Russia). Tehran is convinced that only the participation of these states in resolving the contradictions in the South Caucasus can lead to the establishment of a just peace and order in the region.

In this regard, it is expected that Tehran will continue to support the issue of the Karabakh Armenian repatriation in unison with the West and will announce its vision within the regional peacekeeping mission when the issue of the Karabakh repatriation becomes more effective and the United States puts on the international agenda the issue of the necessity of forming a contingent to ensure the security of the Karabakh Armenians.