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Strategic Analysis of the Challenges and Imperatives of Iran's Media Diplomacy toward Azerbaijan: Expert Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the major challenges facing Iran's media diplomacy toward the Republic of Azerbaijan and to identify the strategic imperatives required to enhance its effectiveness from the perspectives of Iranian experts. The study employed a qualitative, exploratory design. Fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in Tehran with senior diplomats, Caucasus desk experts, media professionals, political communication scholars, and geopolitical analysts possessing substantial experience in Iran–Azerbaijan relations, South Caucasus affairs, media diplomacy, or strategic communication. Participants were selected through purposive and expert-referral sampling. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through iterative processes of familiarization, coding, categorization, theme development, review, and interpretation. The findings revealed six overarching themes: fragmentation of media-diplomatic governance, reactive and event-driven communication, weak audience-oriented and localized communication, intensified geopolitical and narrative competition, deficiencies in credibility and digital media capacity, and the need for a strategic, integrated, and sustainable model of media diplomacy. Participants emphasized that Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan is constrained by weak interinstitutional coordination, insufficient long-term planning, inadequate audience segmentation, limited high-quality Azerbaijani-language content, delayed responses to emerging narratives, and insufficient professional engagement across digital platforms. The experts also identified the increasing influence of regional and extra-regional actors, geopolitical competition, identity-related narratives, and rapidly changing communication technologies as significant external pressures. Strategic imperatives included establishing an integrated media-diplomacy framework, developing permanent audience-research mechanisms, strengthening Azerbaijani-language and platform-specific communication, improving narrative credibility, institutionalizing crisis communication and media monitoring, engaging credible non-governmental actors, and expanding cultural, academic, economic, and societal communication. The study concludes that strengthening Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan requires a transition from fragmented and predominantly reactive communication toward an audience-centered, evidence-based, proactive, digitally capable, and institutionally coordinated model capable of supporting long-term diplomatic engagement and protecting Iran's strategic interests in the evolving South Caucasus information environment.

Keywords: Media Diplomacy; Iran; Republic of Azerbaijan; South Caucasus; Strategic Communication; Public Diplomacy; Geopolitics



Introduction

The South Caucasus has emerged as one of the most strategically contested spaces in the wider Eurasian geopolitical environment, where regional powers, extra-regional actors, energy interests, transportation corridors, security concerns, identity politics, and competing diplomatic projects intersect. The transformation of the regional order following the dissolution of the Soviet Union created new opportunities for the independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia while simultaneously exposing the region to persistent geopolitical rivalry and unresolved security dilemmas. Azerbaijan has occupied a particularly important position within this environment because of its energy resources, geographical location between the Caspian basin and European markets, strategic partnerships, and growing role in transregional transportation and connectivity networks. The development of Azerbaijani statehood has also been closely associated with nation-building processes and the consolidation of a distinct post-Soviet national identity, processes that have shaped both domestic political narratives and the country's external relations (1). Historical and cultural narratives remain significant because Azerbaijani national identity has been influenced not only by contemporary state institutions but also by longer traditions of print culture, intellectual production, and political representation that continue to inform understandings of nationhood and sovereignty (2). At the same time, Azerbaijan's diplomatic orientation has become increasingly multidirectional, with the country seeking to balance relations with neighboring states, regional powers, Western governments, and emerging Asian actors while preserving strategic autonomy and strengthening its international position (3). These developments have transformed diplomacy in the South Caucasus from a predominantly interstate practice into a more complex arena in which political communication, media narratives, public perceptions, digital platforms, and symbolic representations increasingly influence foreign-policy outcomes.

The strategic importance of Azerbaijan is further reinforced by the central position of the South Caucasus in energy diplomacy, transit politics, and emerging connectivity projects. The Caspian region has long functioned as a geopolitical arena in which energy production, transportation infrastructure, commercial access, and diplomatic alignment are closely interconnected (4). Azerbaijan's role as an energy producer and transit state has enabled it to develop partnerships extending beyond its immediate neighborhood, while energy diplomacy has become an important instrument through which external powers seek economic and political influence in the region. The United States, for example, has historically approached Azerbaijan partly through the broader strategic framework of South Caucasus policy and energy security (5), while the evolution of U.S.–Azerbaijan relations illustrates the interaction of security considerations, energy interests, regional stability, and geopolitical calculation (6). Energy diplomacy in the South Caucasus has similarly reflected changing global markets and the diversification strategies of major powers (7). More broadly, experiences from the wider Eurasian region demonstrate that energy diplomacy is increasingly integrated with foreign-policy strategy and geopolitical positioning (8). Azerbaijan's foreign trade and customs relations have also expanded its economic connectivity and reinforced its role as a bridge between regional markets and transportation systems (9). The growing significance of East–West and North–South connectivity has consequently increased the strategic importance of the Caucasus as a corridor linking Europe and Asia (10). China's increasing interest in the South Caucasus as a potential transit window toward Europe further illustrates the extent to which regional connectivity has acquired global geopolitical significance (11), while Armenia's attempts to diversify its foreign-policy options through engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative demonstrate the broader competitive restructuring of regional connectivity strategies (12). These changes mean that diplomatic

competition in the South Caucasus increasingly involves not only control over physical routes and partnerships but also competition over how such projects are interpreted and represented to domestic and international audiences.

The regional balance was fundamentally altered by the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 and its aftermath. The war changed territorial realities, military balances, diplomatic priorities, and perceptions of regional power, intensifying competition among Azerbaijan, Armenia, Türkiye, Russia, Iran, the United States, and the European Union. Analyses of the conflict and its aftermath indicate that the regional environment cannot be understood solely through conventional bilateral rivalries because military outcomes have interacted with diplomatic failure, strategic narratives, alliance structures, and wider changes in the international system (13). The Russian role in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and subsequent developments has likewise demonstrated the opportunities and risks associated with using military conflict to preserve geopolitical influence (14). Armenia's postwar efforts to find a political and diplomatic path out of the Nagorno-Karabakh impasse further illustrate the continuing instability generated by unresolved security and territorial questions (15). Various proposed territorial and transit arrangements, including earlier land-swap concepts and corridor-based solutions, reveal the long-standing connection between geography, sovereignty, transportation, and regional security in negotiations concerning the conflict (16). The United States has also adjusted its engagement with the South Caucasus in response to changing regional and international geopolitical conditions after the 2020 war (17), while the European Union has expanded its involvement and has increasingly approached Azerbaijan and Armenia within a framework influenced by crises, energy concerns, security, and regional resilience (18, 19). The resulting environment is therefore characterized by an unusually dense intersection of territorial politics, diplomatic maneuvering, strategic communication, and information competition.

For Iran, these developments are particularly consequential because the Republic of Azerbaijan is not simply another neighboring state but a country connected to Iran through geography, history, religion, linguistic and cultural proximity, border relations, economic exchange, security concerns, and complex questions of identity. Iran's policy toward the South Caucasus has historically sought to balance multiple priorities, including stable borders, preservation of regional access routes, opposition to excessive external military influence, economic connectivity, relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the protection of broader national-security interests. Under recent Iranian administrations, foreign policy toward the South Caucasus has been shaped by the interaction between neighborhood diplomacy, geopolitical competition, changing postwar realities, and perceptions of threats and opportunities emerging from regional realignment (20). Iran's broader neighborhood policy similarly reflects an effort to strengthen relations with surrounding states while confronting structural constraints arising from sanctions, external rivalries, security concerns, and divergent interests among neighboring governments (21). More specifically, Iran's policy toward the Republic of Azerbaijan after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War has been influenced by shifting territorial conditions, regional alliances, concerns regarding transit routes, the presence of external actors, and changing bilateral political dynamics (22). This context makes Iran–Azerbaijan relations inherently multidimensional. Cooperation can develop in trade, transportation, energy, border management, religion, cultural exchange, and regional infrastructure, while tensions may arise from divergent geopolitical partnerships, competing security perceptions, identity-sensitive discourse, or conflicting interpretations of regional changes. Consequently, diplomatic communication toward Azerbaijan must operate in an environment in which even technical or security issues can rapidly acquire symbolic and emotional meanings.

The complexity of this environment has increased further because other regional powers actively employ diplomatic, military, economic, and communicative instruments to consolidate influence in Azerbaijan and the wider South Caucasus. Türkiye has become especially important in this respect. Its increasingly assertive foreign policy has reflected a broader quest for regional power status and an effort to convert military, diplomatic, cultural, and economic resources into regional influence (23). Türkiye's South Caucasus policy has also been interpreted through the concept of regional leadership and a constructed revisionist approach in which Ankara seeks to reshape aspects of the regional order while strengthening ties with Azerbaijan (24). The energy dimension of Turkish foreign policy adds another layer to this strategy, as Türkiye's aspiration to function as a major energy hub enhances the geopolitical significance of its relations with Caspian producers and transit networks (25). Azerbaijan has simultaneously developed military diplomacy as a component of its broader international strategy, demonstrating how defense cooperation, strategic partnerships, and military engagement can contribute to diplomatic influence and international positioning (26). The evolving relationship among regional conflicts, security alignments, and external partnerships has produced increasingly unconventional and flexible configurations, particularly as the wars in Karabakh and Gaza have affected security calculations across the wider Northwest Asian geopolitical space (27). In such a setting, Iran competes not simply with individual state policies but with highly developed systems of strategic representation through which other actors explain their interests, alliances, and regional roles to Azerbaijani and international audiences.

These geopolitical developments underscore the increasing importance of media diplomacy as a component of contemporary foreign policy. Modern diplomacy is no longer confined to confidential negotiations, official communiqués, embassies, and interstate meetings. Governments increasingly operate within an information environment in which foreign publics, journalists, social media users, experts, diaspora communities, influencers, and transnational networks continuously interpret diplomatic behavior. Media diplomacy therefore involves the strategic use of communication channels to explain foreign-policy positions, influence international perceptions, construct credible narratives, respond to competing interpretations, and create conditions supportive of diplomatic objectives. For middle and regional powers in particular, specialized diplomatic instruments can allow states to exercise influence beyond what might be expected from material capabilities alone. The concept of niche diplomacy demonstrates how states such as Iran, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt may seek selective areas of diplomatic specialization to enhance their regional and international standing (28). Media diplomacy can function as one such specialized capability because persuasive communication, agenda-setting, narrative construction, and targeted engagement may compensate for constraints in other dimensions of state power. However, its effectiveness depends on more than the simple expansion of media output. Successful media diplomacy requires coordination between foreign-policy institutions and media organizations, knowledge of target audiences, linguistic and cultural competence, strategic consistency, responsiveness, digital capability, and credibility. Where these elements are absent, official communication may remain visible yet produce limited influence.

The Iranian–Azerbaijani context makes such communication especially sensitive because public perceptions are shaped by overlapping national, historical, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and geopolitical narratives. The historical legacy of Soviet governance and the management of Muslim populations under the late Soviet system remain relevant to understanding some of the institutional and identity structures inherited by post-Soviet societies (29). Azerbaijan's post-independence nation-building has subsequently consolidated a civic and territorial conception of statehood while interacting with powerful historical and cultural narratives (1). These processes matter for Iran

because communication that fails to recognize the specific development of Azerbaijani national identity may unintentionally reinforce suspicion or be interpreted through frames of sovereignty, ethnicity, or political interference. Conversely, excessive reliance on shared history, religion, or cultural proximity without attention to contemporary Azerbaijani state identity may limit the persuasive effectiveness of Iranian communication. The regional environment also demonstrates that cross-border issues require diplomatic mechanisms capable of reconciling sovereignty, shared resources, and competing interests. Iran's experience with water diplomacy, for example, shows that cooperative frameworks can be developed around transboundary issues when diplomacy emphasizes institutional mechanisms, mutual interests, and conflict prevention (30). This broader principle is relevant to media diplomacy: communication is most effective when it does not merely defend national positions but also identifies shared problems, common interests, and areas where sustained interaction can reduce misunderstanding.

At the same time, Azerbaijan's increasing engagement with Western and non-Western actors means that Iranian messages compete within an information ecosystem containing multiple alternative representations of regional politics. U.S. policy in the South Caucasus has combined geopolitical, security, and energy considerations, and Azerbaijan's relationship with Washington has evolved within this wider strategic environment (5, 17). EU–Azerbaijan relations have likewise been shaped by crisis-driven agenda-setting and changing European priorities, particularly in relation to security and energy (18). European engagement in neighboring Armenia after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War also reveals how discourses of resilience, insecurity, governance, and geopolitical alignment increasingly influence external engagement in the region (19). China, meanwhile, approaches the South Caucasus primarily through a combination of connectivity, economic diplomacy, and strategic access to European markets (11), while Armenia's engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative demonstrates how smaller regional states can seek diplomatic maneuverability through relationships with emerging global powers (12). These intersecting strategies contribute to a highly competitive narrative space. In such an environment, Iran cannot assume that geographical proximity or historical familiarity automatically translate into favorable perceptions. It must continuously communicate its regional intentions, address unfavorable representations, and demonstrate the practical relevance of bilateral cooperation.

The need for more systematic Iranian media diplomacy is also strengthened by the accelerating transformation of communication technologies and public diplomacy practices. Regional geopolitical competition increasingly unfolds through digital news ecosystems in which narratives can cross borders instantaneously and where political events are interpreted through videos, short-form posts, online commentary, visual symbolism, and algorithmically amplified content. Under such conditions, delayed or exclusively formal responses can allow competing interpretations to become established before official explanations reach audiences. Strategic communication therefore requires anticipatory monitoring, rapid response, message localization, credibility management, and an understanding of how diverse audiences consume political information. Azerbaijan's expanding diplomatic profile and its increasing engagement across energy, military, trade, and security domains further increase the number of narratives competing for public legitimacy (3, 9, 26). At the regional level, shifting alliances and changing security relationships make communicative adaptability particularly important (27). The broader geopolitical importance of energy corridors and connectivity also means that debates surrounding transportation, infrastructure, sovereignty, and access routes are simultaneously economic, diplomatic, and symbolic (4, 10). For Iran, whose regional strategy must account for both geopolitical constraints and opportunities for cooperation, media diplomacy must therefore

be capable of translating complex policy positions into narratives that are intelligible, credible, and relevant to Azerbaijani audiences.

Despite the growing scholarship on the South Caucasus, much of the existing literature has concentrated on military conflict, energy diplomacy, territorial disputes, great-power competition, national identity, and conventional foreign policy rather than systematically examining the strategic requirements of Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan. Studies have provided valuable analyses of the transformation of Iran's South Caucasus policy (20), the determinants of Tehran's post-2020 policy toward Baku (22), the parameters and obstacles of Iran's neighborhood strategy (21), and the wider competition among Türkiye, Russia, Western actors, China, and regional states (11, 14, 23). Other research has illuminated the consequences of conflict and failed negotiations (13), Armenia's attempts to navigate the postwar regional environment (15), the strategic significance of alternative territorial and corridor arrangements (16), and the role of energy and connectivity in reshaping regional relationships (7, 25). Yet these strands of scholarship leave an important analytical gap concerning how Iran should communicate strategically within this transformed geopolitical environment. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how Iranian diplomats, Caucasus experts, media professionals, political communication scholars, and geopolitical analysts themselves assess the weaknesses of existing media diplomacy, the obstacles to effective engagement with Azerbaijani audiences, the role of institutional coordination and digital communication, and the strategic measures required to compete more effectively in the regional information environment. Addressing this gap is particularly important because communication failures can magnify political disagreements, whereas well-designed media diplomacy may contribute to narrative clarity, crisis management, public trust, and the preservation of bilateral channels even during periods of diplomatic tension. Accordingly, this study aimed to analyze, from the perspectives of Iranian experts, the principal challenges confronting Iran's media diplomacy toward the Republic of Azerbaijan and to identify the strategic imperatives required to develop a more coherent, credible, audience-centered, and effective media-diplomatic framework.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design with an exploratory and interpretive orientation to examine the challenges, strategic requirements, institutional constraints, and policy imperatives associated with Iran's media diplomacy toward the Republic of Azerbaijan. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because media diplomacy operates at the intersection of foreign policy, strategic communication, public diplomacy, geopolitical competition, identity politics, and media representation, and many of its underlying mechanisms cannot be adequately understood through quantitative indicators alone. The study therefore sought to obtain detailed accounts from individuals possessing professional, academic, or policy-related knowledge of Iranian–Azerbaijani relations and of the role played by media and communication systems in shaping bilateral perceptions and diplomatic interactions. The study population consisted of senior diplomats, experts specializing in Caucasus affairs, media professionals, scholars of political communication, and geopolitical analysts based in Tehran who possessed substantial knowledge of Iran's foreign relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan, regional media environments, public diplomacy, strategic communication, or geopolitical developments in the South Caucasus. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with direct professional experience and specialized expertise relevant to the research problem were included. Where necessary, expert referral and snowball sampling were also employed to identify additional information-rich participants who met the inclusion criteria and could

contribute perspectives not sufficiently represented in the initial sample. Eligibility for participation was based on demonstrable professional or scholarly experience in at least one of the relevant domains, including diplomacy and foreign policy, Caucasus and South Caucasus studies, international media, political communication, public diplomacy, regional security, or geopolitical analysis. Particular attention was paid to achieving diversity of professional backgrounds so that the phenomenon would not be interpreted exclusively from the perspective of governmental diplomacy, academic research, or media practice. The final sample comprised fifteen participants who took part in individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews in Tehran. The sample included senior diplomatic figures and individuals with diplomatic experience, Caucasus desk experts familiar with Iran–Azerbaijan relations, media professionals with experience in international or regional communication, university scholars specializing in political communication and media diplomacy, and geopolitical analysts focusing on the South Caucasus and Iran's regional strategic environment. Sampling continued until the interviews produced substantial repetition in the principal concepts and no major new analytical category emerged from subsequent interviews, indicating an adequate level of thematic saturation for the purposes of the study. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the confidential treatment of their statements, and their right to discontinue participation at any stage. To protect professional and institutional confidentiality, identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts and participants' statements were treated anonymously during analysis and reporting.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to generate detailed expert interpretations of the current condition, principal challenges, and strategic imperatives of Iran's media diplomacy toward the Republic of Azerbaijan. The semi-structured format was selected because it provided sufficient consistency across interviews while allowing the researcher to pursue emerging issues, request clarification, and explore the contextual reasoning underlying participants' assessments. An interview guide was developed on the basis of the objectives of the study and the conceptual dimensions of media diplomacy, public diplomacy, strategic communication, foreign policy communication, regional geopolitical competition, and bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan. The interview questions were open-ended and organized around broad analytical domains rather than predetermined response categories. Participants were invited to describe their understanding of the current status and effectiveness of Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan; identify the most significant political, institutional, cultural, linguistic, technological, and communication-related obstacles affecting its performance; assess the degree of coordination between diplomatic institutions, official media, international broadcasting organizations, digital communication platforms, and other relevant actors; and explain the influence of regional geopolitical developments on the media environment surrounding Iranian–Azerbaijani relations. Particular attention was also given to the competitive regional information environment, the role of external state and non-state actors, competing narratives concerning identity, history, religion, ethnicity, territorial developments, regional connectivity, and security, and the ways in which such narratives may influence public attitudes toward Iran. Participants were further asked to assess the adequacy of Iran's existing media strategies, the effectiveness of audience segmentation and message localization, the use of Azerbaijani-language and digital media, the credibility and responsiveness of Iranian media communication, and the institutional capacities necessary for more effective engagement with Azerbaijani audiences. Additional questions addressed strategic priorities for improving Iran's media diplomacy, including the development of coordinated narratives, professional media production, audience research, digital diplomacy, crisis communication, cultural engagement, media monitoring, interorganizational

coordination, and long-term public diplomacy planning. Follow-up questions and probing techniques were used throughout the interviews to clarify participants' statements, identify the reasoning behind their assessments, distinguish between structural and situational challenges, and elicit specific examples of policies, media practices, or diplomatic developments. The interview guide was reviewed prior to the main data collection process to ensure the clarity, relevance, and logical sequence of the questions and to minimize ambiguous or leading formulations. Interviews were conducted individually in an environment that enabled participants to discuss politically and professionally sensitive issues with sufficient confidentiality. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accurate preservation of their statements. Field notes were also prepared during and immediately after interviews to document contextual observations, important emphases, recurring ideas, and preliminary analytical reflections. Audio recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were reviewed against the recordings to minimize transcription errors and preserve the meaning and contextual integrity of participants' statements. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of diplomatic, geopolitical, and media-related discussions, all interview materials were handled confidentially, and identifying details related to participants, professional affiliations, or specific institutional positions were omitted wherever their disclosure could compromise anonymity.

The interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis using a systematic process of familiarization, coding, categorization, theme development, review, and interpretation. The analytical procedure was inductive in orientation, allowing recurring concepts and patterns to emerge from the participants' accounts while remaining guided by the central research objective of identifying the challenges and strategic imperatives of Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan. Analysis began with repeated reading of the complete interview transcripts to obtain a comprehensive understanding of each participant's perspective and to identify preliminary patterns across the dataset. During this stage, analytical notes were recorded regarding recurring concerns, areas of agreement and disagreement, causal explanations, institutional problems, geopolitical considerations, communication deficiencies, and proposed strategic responses. The transcripts were then examined line by line, and meaningful segments of text relevant to the research questions were assigned initial codes. These codes represented substantive ideas contained in the participants' accounts, such as fragmented institutional coordination, reactive communication, weakness in audience analysis, insufficient Azerbaijani-language content, limited engagement with digital audiences, low narrative agility, credibility challenges, inadequate use of cultural commonalities, competing regional narratives, external media influence, geopolitical polarization, crisis-driven communication, lack of long-term strategic planning, and the need for integrated media diplomacy. Coding remained sufficiently open during the initial phase to prevent the premature imposition of predetermined categories and to allow unexpected themes to emerge from the expert interviews. Following initial coding, conceptually similar codes were compared and grouped into broader categories reflecting shared meanings, causal relationships, or strategic dimensions. Constant comparison was used throughout the analytical process to examine similarities and differences among the perspectives of diplomats, media professionals, Caucasus specialists, political communication scholars, and geopolitical analysts. This procedure enabled the analysis to distinguish challenges perceived across professional groups from those associated primarily with particular institutional or disciplinary perspectives. The categories were subsequently organized into higher-order themes representing the principal dimensions of the challenges and imperatives affecting Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan. Particular attention was paid to relationships between structural problems and operational deficiencies; between domestic institutional arrangements and the external geopolitical

environment; and between identified weaknesses and the strategic measures proposed by the participants. Candidate themes were repeatedly reviewed against the coded extracts and the complete dataset to ensure that they were internally coherent, conceptually distinct, and adequately supported by the interview evidence. Themes were refined, merged, separated, or renamed when necessary to achieve analytical clarity and avoid conceptual overlap. In the final stage, the themes were interpreted in relation to the broader strategic context of Iran–Azerbaijan relations, regional geopolitical competition, contemporary media diplomacy, and the changing information environment of the South Caucasus. To enhance the credibility and dependability of the analysis, the coding and thematic structure were repeatedly reviewed, interpretations were compared across interviews, divergent and minority perspectives were retained rather than excluded, and analytical conclusions were based on patterns supported by multiple portions of the dataset. An audit-oriented approach was maintained by preserving successive coding decisions, category development, thematic revisions, and analytical notes so that the progression from raw interview data to the final thematic structure remained transparent. The analysis therefore moved beyond a descriptive summary of expert opinions and sought to identify the underlying strategic relationships among institutional capacity, media performance, geopolitical conditions, audience characteristics, narrative competition, and policy requirements. The resulting thematic framework provided the empirical foundation for presenting the study findings and for subsequently discussing the strategic measures necessary to strengthen the effectiveness, coherence, credibility, and long-term orientation of Iran’s media diplomacy toward the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Findings and Results

The participants consisted of fifteen experts based in Tehran whose professional and academic backgrounds reflected the multidimensional character of media diplomacy and Iran–Azerbaijan relations. The sample included four senior diplomats or former diplomatic officials with direct experience in foreign policy and regional affairs, three specialists in Caucasus and South Caucasus studies, three media professionals with experience in international, regional, or political media, three university scholars specializing in political communication, public diplomacy, or media studies, and two geopolitical analysts whose principal areas of expertise included regional security, strategic competition, and developments in the South Caucasus. Thirteen participants were men and two were women. The participants ranged in age from 38 to 66 years, with a mean age of approximately 49.6 years. Their professional experience ranged from 12 to 38 years, with an average of approximately 20.7 years, indicating that the sample was predominantly composed of individuals with extensive professional exposure to diplomacy, media affairs, political communication, or regional geopolitical developments. Eleven participants held doctoral degrees in fields including political science, international relations, communication sciences, regional studies, geopolitics, and media management, while four held master's degrees accompanied by substantial executive or diplomatic experience. Several participants had occupied more than one relevant professional position during their careers; for example, some diplomatic experts had subsequently engaged in academic research or media analysis, while some media professionals had previous experience in governmental or foreign-policy-related institutions. This professional overlap was analytically valuable because it enabled the interviews to capture the interaction between diplomatic decision-making, media production, audience communication, institutional coordination, and geopolitical interpretation. The participants' accounts generally demonstrated a high degree of convergence regarding the structural weaknesses of Iran's current media diplomacy toward the Republic of Azerbaijan, while differences were more evident in their assessment of the relative importance of geopolitical pressures, identity-related narratives,

institutional deficiencies, and communication technologies. Thematic analysis of the fifteen interviews produced six overarching themes and twenty-one interconnected subthemes concerning both the existing challenges and the strategic imperatives for strengthening Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan.

Table 1. Overall Thematic Structure of Expert Perspectives on Iran's Media Diplomacy toward Azerbaijan

Overarching theme	Principal subthemes	Participants referring to theme, n (%)	Analytical meaning
Fragmentation of media-diplomatic governance	Weak interinstitutional coordination; multiplicity of decision-making centers; absence of unified strategic command; inconsistency between diplomatic and media messages	14 (93.3%)	Iran's communication toward Azerbaijan was perceived as institutionally dispersed and insufficiently coordinated, reducing consistency and strategic continuity.
Reactive and event-driven communication	Crisis-oriented messaging; delayed responses; lack of agenda-setting; short-term communication cycles	13 (86.7%)	Media diplomacy was described as responding to developments after they occur rather than systematically shaping narratives and perceptions in advance.
Weak audience-oriented and localized communication	Limited audience research; insufficient Azerbaijani-language communication; inadequate segmentation; weak adaptation to social and cultural characteristics	13 (86.7%)	Participants emphasized that communication strategies are often designed from the perspective of the sender rather than the informational expectations and media consumption patterns of Azerbaijani audiences.
Narrative and geopolitical competition	Competing regional narratives; external actors' media influence; identity and historical controversies; security and geopolitical framing	15 (100%)	The information environment was interpreted as a competitive geopolitical space in which Iran's narratives face organized and persistent counter-narratives.
Credibility, digital capacity, and media professionalism deficits	Limited digital engagement; insufficient platform-specific content; credibility problems; slow communication; weak professional production	12 (80.0%)	Technical, professional, and credibility limitations reduce the reach and persuasive power of Iranian media messages, particularly among younger and digitally active audiences.
Need for strategic, integrated, and sustainable media diplomacy	Strategic planning; narrative coordination; professionalization; cultural diplomacy; digital diplomacy; monitoring and evaluation	15 (100%)	Experts broadly agreed that Iran requires a long-term, audience-centered, institutionally coordinated, and professionally managed media diplomacy architecture toward Azerbaijan.

The thematic structure presented in Table 1 demonstrates that the experts did not conceptualize the weaknesses of Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan as a single communication problem or as merely a deficiency in media production. Instead, the findings indicate that the phenomenon was understood as a multilayered strategic issue involving institutional organization, foreign-policy coordination, geopolitical competition, audience knowledge, professional communication capacity, and the credibility of the messages transmitted to Azerbaijani society. All fifteen participants referred to the importance of regional narrative competition and to the need for a more integrated and sustainable model of media diplomacy, making these the most universally recognized themes within the interviews. Participants repeatedly described the South Caucasus information environment as one in which media communication is inseparable from geopolitical competition and where narratives concerning sovereignty, territorial integrity, regional connectivity, ethnic identity, historical memory, religion, security alliances, and relations with third countries can rapidly influence public perceptions. Fourteen participants emphasized institutional fragmentation, suggesting that even potentially effective messages may lose their impact when governmental, diplomatic, broadcasting, cultural, and digital actors communicate without sufficient strategic coordination. The prevalence of the reactive communication theme, identified by thirteen participants, further indicated that the principal weakness was not necessarily the complete absence of Iranian media activity, but rather the predominance of episodic

responses over systematic agenda-building and long-term perception management. Similarly, thirteen participants stressed limitations in audience research and localization, arguing that effective media diplomacy cannot depend exclusively on the transmission of official Iranian positions but must understand how different groups within Azerbaijani society receive, interpret, accept, or reject particular messages. Twelve participants also identified deficiencies in digital communication, professional media production, and credibility, particularly in relation to younger audiences whose information consumption increasingly occurs through social networks, online video platforms, mobile applications, and rapidly circulating digital content. Taken together, the six themes show that experts perceived Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan as requiring a transition from fragmented, institution-centered, and predominantly defensive communication toward an integrated system based on strategic narrative management, audience intelligence, linguistic and cultural localization, rapid digital engagement, interinstitutional coordination, and continuous evaluation.

Table 2. Principal Challenges Identified in Iran's Media Diplomacy toward Azerbaijan

Challenge	Participants, n (%)	Manifestations identified in interviews	Strategic consequence
Lack of integrated institutional coordination	14 (93.3%)	Separate or insufficiently coordinated activities of diplomatic, media, cultural, governmental, and public communication institutions; inconsistent priorities; overlapping responsibilities	Reduced message coherence, duplication of activities, contradictory signals, and weakened ability to pursue long-term communication objectives
Absence of a stable long-term media diplomacy strategy	13 (86.7%)	Dependence on current events; changes in communication priorities following political tensions; insufficient continuity across different diplomatic periods	Inability to build durable influence, stable public familiarity, and cumulative narrative credibility
Reactive rather than agenda-setting communication	13 (86.7%)	Responses after controversies have already intensified; defensive explanations; delayed engagement with emerging narratives	Loss of narrative initiative and greater difficulty correcting established public perceptions
Insufficient understanding of Azerbaijani audiences	13 (86.7%)	Limited systematic audience analysis; insufficient differentiation by age, education, region, political orientation, media habits, or cultural preferences	Messages may be irrelevant, poorly targeted, or ineffective despite being diplomatically accurate
Inadequate Azerbaijani-language and culturally localized content	12 (80.0%)	Limited high-quality content produced specifically for Azerbaijani audiences; literal or bureaucratic communication; insufficient use of culturally familiar narratives	Lower accessibility, emotional resonance, identification, and persuasive effectiveness
Strong external and competing media narratives	15 (100%)	Media activity of regional and extra-regional actors; competing geopolitical interpretations; narratives emphasizing rivalry, mistrust, identity difference, or strategic threat	Greater competition for public attention and increased difficulty maintaining a favorable or balanced image of Iran
Politicization of ethnic, historical, and identity-related issues	12 (80.0%)	Sensitivity surrounding historical narratives, ethnic identity, language, territorial developments, religion, and national identity	High risk of emotional polarization and rapid deterioration of public perceptions during political disputes
Credibility gap between official messaging and audience expectations	11 (73.3%)	Excessively official language; low transparency; insufficient engagement with controversial issues; perceived defensiveness	Declining trust and reduced persuasive capacity among skeptical audiences
Weakness in digital diplomacy and social media engagement	12 (80.0%)	Delayed responses, insufficient platform-specific strategy, weak engagement with influencers and digital communities, limited multimedia communication	Reduced reach among younger audiences and inability to compete effectively in fast-moving digital information environments
Insufficient professionalization of media content	10 (66.7%)	Repetitive official formats; weak storytelling; limited visual communication; insufficient use of documentaries, short-form video, data visualization, and interactive media	Messages may lack attractiveness and fail to compete with professionally produced alternative narratives
Inadequate crisis communication mechanisms	11 (73.3%)	Delayed institutional reactions during bilateral tensions; unclear division of	Greater vulnerability to misinformation, rumor, narrative escalation, and reputational damage

		communication responsibilities; absence of predesigned response scenarios	
Limited monitoring and evaluation	10 (66.7%)	Weak measurement of audience response, limited assessment of message penetration, absence of systematic feedback mechanisms	Institutions cannot reliably determine which communication strategies are effective or modify unsuccessful approaches

As shown in Table 2, the challenges identified by the experts were closely interconnected rather than independent obstacles. The strongest area of agreement concerned the competitive geopolitical and media environment, mentioned by all fifteen participants. Experts repeatedly emphasized that Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan functions within a crowded communication environment in which various regional and extra-regional actors actively promote narratives consistent with their own geopolitical interests. Accordingly, Iran's communication challenges cannot be understood only in terms of the volume of Iranian media output; they must also be considered in relation to the speed, emotional appeal, linguistic appropriateness, technological sophistication, and strategic consistency of competing narratives. Fourteen participants regarded weak institutional coordination as a central internal limitation. Their accounts suggested that diplomatic institutions, international broadcasters, cultural organizations, governmental information offices, and digital communication actors may pursue related objectives without operating under a sufficiently integrated strategic framework. This fragmentation was perceived to generate inconsistent framing, uneven prioritization of issues, delayed responses, and occasional discrepancies between the diplomatic message communicated through official channels and the narrative transmitted through public media. Thirteen participants further criticized the absence of a sufficiently stable long-term strategy and the tendency toward reactive communication. According to these experts, Iranian media activity often becomes more visible during bilateral disputes, controversial regional developments, or periods of heightened political tension, whereas effective media diplomacy requires continuous engagement during both crisis and non-crisis periods. A related concern was inadequate audience knowledge. Participants argued that Azerbaijani society should not be treated as a homogeneous communication target, because younger urban audiences, traditional audiences, academics, political elites, business communities, religious constituencies, and residents of different regions may differ substantially in their media consumption patterns and responses to Iranian messages. The lack of systematic segmentation was therefore understood as a major obstacle to communication effectiveness.

The interviews also revealed that linguistic localization was perceived as a strategic rather than merely technical requirement. Twelve participants stated that the availability of Azerbaijani-language communication alone is insufficient if content remains highly bureaucratic, literal, or detached from the cultural frames through which Azerbaijani audiences understand regional developments. Experts emphasized the need for fluent, professionally produced, culturally sensitive communication that recognizes differences between formal diplomatic terminology and language appropriate for public engagement. Twelve participants similarly emphasized weaknesses in digital diplomacy. They argued that the contemporary information environment in Azerbaijan is increasingly shaped by social media, online news ecosystems, video-based communication, messaging platforms, and influential individual content producers. Consequently, reliance on conventional broadcasting or formal institutional statements was viewed as insufficient for shaping contemporary perceptions. Eleven participants identified a credibility gap as an additional challenge, noting that communication that appears exclusively defensive, propagandistic, or unwilling to address difficult issues may reinforce skepticism rather than improve Iran's image. Participants emphasized that credibility cannot be achieved simply by increasing message repetition; it depends on consistency, responsiveness,

evidentiary support, professional presentation, and a willingness to engage with audiences' genuine concerns. The politicization of identity, ethnicity, language, historical memory, and regional security was also frequently identified as a source of vulnerability. Experts suggested that such subjects are capable of generating highly emotional responses and can be strategically amplified by competing actors, particularly during periods of bilateral tension. Finally, weaknesses in crisis communication, professional content production, and monitoring and evaluation indicated that Iran's media diplomacy was seen not only as facing external competition but also as lacking some of the organizational and technical mechanisms necessary for continuous adaptation. Overall, the challenge structure revealed by the interviews suggests that Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan suffers from an interaction between structural fragmentation, weak strategic continuity, insufficient audience intelligence, limited localization, digital underperformance, and a highly competitive regional narrative environment.

Table 3. Strategic Imperatives for Strengthening Iran's Media Diplomacy toward Azerbaijan

Strategic imperative	Participants, n (%)	Required actions identified by experts	Expected strategic outcome
Establish an integrated media diplomacy framework	15 (100%)	Develop a common strategic framework connecting diplomatic, media, cultural, research, and digital communication institutions; clarify institutional responsibilities	Greater message coherence, reduced duplication, and improved strategic continuity
Develop a permanent Azerbaijan-focused communication strategy	14 (93.3%)	Define long-term objectives, target audiences, priority narratives, communication channels, crisis procedures, and evaluation indicators	Transition from temporary reactions to sustained influence and relationship-building
Build systematic audience intelligence capabilities	14 (93.3%)	Conduct regular surveys, media monitoring, sentiment analysis, focus groups, audience segmentation, and digital behavior analysis	More precise targeting and evidence-based adaptation of communication strategies
Expand professional Azerbaijani-language communication	13 (86.7%)	Recruit fluent specialists, editors, presenters, translators, researchers, and digital producers familiar with Azerbaijani culture and media practices	Improved cultural resonance, accessibility, credibility, and message comprehension
Shift from defensive messaging to proactive narrative construction	14 (93.3%)	Anticipate emerging issues; establish agenda-setting capacity; develop narratives before crises intensify; continuously communicate Iran's regional positions	Stronger ability to shape interpretive frameworks rather than merely respond to competitors
Strengthen digital diplomacy and platform-specific engagement	13 (86.7%)	Develop strategies for social networks, messaging platforms, online video, podcasts, short-form content, and interactive communication	Greater reach among digitally active and younger Azerbaijani audiences
Emphasize cultural, historical, economic, and societal connections	12 (80.0%)	Produce content on shared cultural heritage, tourism, academic relations, trade, arts, literature, religion, border communities, and everyday social interactions	Diversification of bilateral perceptions beyond security and political disputes
Improve strategic narrative credibility	13 (86.7%)	Use evidence-based communication, credible experts, transparent explanations, balanced framing, and rapid correction of inaccurate information	Increased trust and greater persuasive effectiveness
Create rapid-response and crisis communication mechanisms	12 (80.0%)	Establish monitoring units, preapproved communication procedures, rapid factual verification, spokesperson coordination, and scenario planning	Faster response to misinformation and reduced escalation of adverse narratives
Engage non-governmental and expert communicators	11 (73.3%)	Facilitate the participation of academics, journalists, cultural figures, business professionals, researchers, and credible public voices	Reduced dependence on purely official communication and broader social legitimacy
Develop professional multimedia storytelling	11 (73.3%)	Increase the use of documentaries, interviews, infographics, data-driven content, short videos, human-interest narratives, and interactive formats	Greater attractiveness, memorability, and competitiveness of Iranian communication
Institutionalize monitoring, assessment, and feedback	13 (86.7%)	Establish measurable performance indicators, evaluate message reception, analyze competing narratives, and revise strategies based on evidence	Continuous organizational learning and more effective allocation of communication resources

Train specialized media diplomats and regional communicators	12 (80.0%)	Provide training in diplomacy, strategic communication, Azerbaijani language, regional culture, social media, crisis communication, and geopolitical analysis	Development of personnel capable of integrating diplomatic sensitivity with professional media practice
Maintain communication continuity during periods of political tension	12 (80.0%)	Preserve cultural, academic, media, and societal channels even when formal political relations become strained	Prevention of complete narrative polarization and preservation of long-term relationship capital

Table 3 shows that the strategic recommendations proposed by the participants were centered on transforming media diplomacy from a dispersed set of communication activities into an integrated component of Iran's regional foreign policy. All fifteen participants emphasized the need for an institutional framework capable of coordinating diplomatic, media, cultural, research, and digital actors. This recommendation reflected the widespread view that media diplomacy should not be treated as an auxiliary publicity function operating after foreign-policy decisions have already been made. Instead, participants argued that communication considerations should be incorporated into the planning, implementation, and evaluation of policy toward Azerbaijan from the beginning. Fourteen participants consequently recommended developing a permanent Azerbaijan-focused communication strategy that would define strategic objectives, audience groups, narrative priorities, communication channels, responsible institutions, and mechanisms for evaluating performance. Such a framework was considered necessary to reduce the dependence of media diplomacy on short-term bilateral tensions and to maintain communication continuity across changing political circumstances. A similarly large proportion of participants emphasized systematic audience intelligence. Experts maintained that strategic communication requires continuous knowledge of how different segments of Azerbaijani society obtain information, which sources they trust, which narratives generate emotional responses, what misconceptions about Iran are prevalent, and how attitudes change following important regional events. Audience research was therefore seen as an essential infrastructure for media diplomacy rather than an optional research activity.

The expansion of professional Azerbaijani-language communication was another major imperative. Participants emphasized that linguistic competence should be combined with cultural competence, familiarity with Azerbaijani political discourse, knowledge of local media conventions, and the ability to communicate in accessible rather than excessively bureaucratic language. Thirteen experts also emphasized strengthening the credibility of strategic narratives. They argued that communication should avoid an exclusively propagandistic format and instead provide coherent explanations, verifiable information, credible expert voices, and timely responses to controversial issues. The findings further demonstrate substantial support for a transition from defensive communication to proactive narrative construction. Fourteen participants argued that Iran should identify potentially contentious issues in advance, develop communication scenarios, and consistently explain its positions before competing interpretations dominate the information environment. Under this approach, effective media diplomacy would involve not merely rebutting unfavorable narratives but establishing durable interpretive frameworks through which audiences understand Iran's role, interests, policies, and relationships in the South Caucasus.

Digital diplomacy emerged as a central operational dimension of the recommended strategy. Thirteen participants proposed that communication be adapted to the technical and cultural characteristics of specific digital platforms rather than distributing identical institutional messages through multiple channels. Experts highlighted short-form video, podcasts, interviews, interactive content, visually supported analysis, and rapid social media communication as potentially important formats. At the same time, twelve participants recommended using cultural, historical, social, educational, and economic connections to broaden the content of Iran–Azerbaijan communication.

Their accounts suggested that bilateral media relations are frequently dominated by security disputes, geopolitical rivalries, border issues, and politically sensitive narratives. Excessive concentration on these topics may cause both societies to perceive the relationship mainly through the lens of conflict. Participants therefore recommended giving greater visibility to cultural heritage, literature, art, tourism, academic exchanges, commerce, transportation, shared religious traditions, border-region interactions, and ordinary social experiences. Such communication was viewed as a means of building long-term familiarity and social resilience that could moderate the effects of temporary diplomatic tensions.

Another major recommendation concerned the development of rapid-response mechanisms. Twelve participants argued that the speed of contemporary information circulation requires institutional arrangements capable of detecting emerging narratives, verifying information, coordinating spokespersons, and producing appropriate responses before misinformation becomes firmly established. This requirement was linked to the broader recommendation for continuous monitoring and evaluation, mentioned by thirteen participants. Experts argued that the effectiveness of media diplomacy should be assessed using evidence regarding audience reach, engagement, sentiment, message comprehension, source credibility, and changes in dominant narratives rather than relying primarily on the volume of content produced. Eleven participants also advocated greater involvement of credible non-governmental communicators, including academics, journalists, cultural personalities, researchers, business figures, and other professional voices. According to these participants, some messages may be more persuasive when they are communicated through respected social or professional actors rather than exclusively through official governmental channels. Furthermore, twelve experts emphasized the training of specialized media diplomats who combine knowledge of international relations and diplomatic sensitivity with expertise in regional culture, Azerbaijani language, digital communication, public opinion, media production, and crisis management. The findings therefore point toward a professional model in which media diplomacy becomes a specialized field requiring multidisciplinary personnel rather than an incidental extension of conventional public relations.

Across the three analytical tables, a consistent relationship emerged between the identified weaknesses and the proposed strategic imperatives. Institutional fragmentation corresponded directly with the recommendation for integrated governance; reactive communication generated the requirement for proactive narrative planning; inadequate understanding of Azerbaijani society produced calls for audience research and segmentation; linguistic and cultural deficiencies generated demands for professional localization; weak digital performance led to recommendations for platform-specific digital diplomacy; and credibility limitations generated emphasis on transparent, evidence-based, and socially diversified communication. Similarly, the strong role attributed to external geopolitical competition encouraged participants to conceptualize media diplomacy as an enduring element of national and regional strategy rather than a temporary instrument activated during bilateral disputes. The findings consequently suggest that the principal strategic transformation required is not simply an increase in Iran's media presence in relation to Azerbaijan. Rather, the experts called for a transition from a predominantly institution-centered communication model toward an audience-centered, knowledge-based, coordinated, digitally capable, culturally informed, and continuously evaluated system of media diplomacy.

A further pattern evident throughout the interviews concerned the relationship between political tensions and societal communication. Participants generally distinguished between governmental disagreements and the broader social relationship between Iranian and Azerbaijani publics. Twelve experts explicitly argued that cultural, academic, professional, and media communication should remain active even during periods of heightened

diplomatic disagreement. According to this perspective, discontinuing or substantially reducing communication during crises may create an informational vacuum that competing actors can fill with narratives emphasizing hostility, historical grievances, ethnic differences, or geopolitical threat. Maintaining communication continuity was therefore interpreted not merely as a cultural policy but as a form of strategic resilience. Experts argued that long-term media diplomacy should accumulate what may be described as communicative capital: familiarity with Iran, access to credible Iranian sources, recognition of shared interests, awareness of cultural connections, and the presence of trusted communication networks that remain functional when formal political relations deteriorate.

The final analytical synthesis indicated that the experts viewed successful media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan as requiring simultaneous action at structural, strategic, operational, and societal levels. At the structural level, institutions responsible for diplomacy, media, culture, research, and digital communication require clearer coordination and shared objectives. At the strategic level, Iran requires long-term narrative planning, audience segmentation, geopolitical anticipation, and clearly defined communication priorities. At the operational level, greater investment is needed in Azerbaijani-language content, multimedia production, social media engagement, rapid-response systems, media monitoring, professional personnel, and performance evaluation. At the societal level, communication should extend beyond official political narratives and cultivate cultural, academic, economic, professional, and interpersonal dimensions of Iran–Azerbaijan relations. The convergence of expert perspectives across these dimensions indicates that strengthening Iran's media diplomacy requires more than correcting individual communication deficiencies. It requires a systemic reconfiguration through which media diplomacy is incorporated into regional policy as a permanent mechanism for narrative competition, trust-building, crisis management, public engagement, and the strategic representation of Iran's interests in the South Caucasus.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the principal challenges and strategic imperatives of Iran's media diplomacy toward the Republic of Azerbaijan from the perspectives of diplomats, Caucasus specialists, media professionals, political communication scholars, and geopolitical analysts. The findings revealed six interrelated dimensions: fragmentation of media-diplomatic governance, reactive and event-driven communication, weak audience-oriented and localized communication, intense narrative and geopolitical competition, deficits in credibility and digital media capacity, and the need for an integrated and sustainable model of media diplomacy. Taken together, these findings indicate that the limitations of Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan cannot be reduced to insufficient media presence or inadequate dissemination of official positions. Rather, the problem is structural and strategic, involving the relationship among foreign-policy institutions, media organizations, audience knowledge, narrative construction, digital communication, regional geopolitical change, and long-term public engagement. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that Iran's South Caucasus policy is shaped by a complex combination of neighborhood priorities, regional security concerns, postwar territorial transformations, and competition with other regional and international actors (20-22). In such an environment, effective media diplomacy requires institutional coherence and a capacity to translate geopolitical objectives into credible and audience-sensitive communication.

One of the most prominent findings was the perceived fragmentation of institutional governance. Fourteen of the fifteen participants emphasized insufficient coordination among diplomatic bodies, official media organizations, cultural institutions, governmental communication structures, and digital actors. The experts argued that this fragmentation can lead to inconsistent narratives, duplication, delayed responses, and a lack of continuity between

diplomatic action and public communication. This finding is important because Azerbaijan itself has increasingly pursued diversified diplomatic instruments, including conventional diplomacy, energy diplomacy, military diplomacy, economic relations, and strategic partnerships. Research on Azerbaijan's diplomatic development demonstrates a broadening of its external engagement and the diversification of instruments through which it seeks international influence (3, 26). Similarly, the evolution of U.S.–Azerbaijan relations shows that contemporary bilateral relationships are shaped by multiple and simultaneously operating diplomatic, economic, security, and communicative channels (5, 6). Consequently, fragmented Iranian communication is likely to be particularly disadvantageous in an environment in which other actors increasingly integrate diplomatic and strategic narratives. The finding therefore suggests that media diplomacy should be incorporated into foreign-policy planning rather than treated as a secondary public-relations activity implemented after diplomatic decisions have already been made.

A second major finding concerned the reactive and crisis-oriented character of Iran's communication toward Azerbaijan. Participants reported that Iranian media diplomacy frequently becomes more active following bilateral tensions or controversial geopolitical developments, while systematic agenda-setting and continuous engagement remain comparatively weak. This pattern is understandable in light of the volatile South Caucasus environment, particularly after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which significantly altered territorial realities, strategic expectations, and regional power relationships. Previous studies show that the post-2020 South Caucasus has been characterized by uncertainty over security arrangements, transport corridors, diplomatic settlements, and the future balance of power (13, 15, 16). Russia's involvement in the conflict and the wider consequences of the war also illustrate how rapidly geopolitical circumstances can change and how strategic actors may attempt to shape the political meaning of military outcomes (14). Under these conditions, a media strategy based mainly on reaction places Iran at a disadvantage because interpretations of events may already have been established by competing actors before Iranian institutions formulate a response. The experts' recommendation for proactive narrative construction therefore reflects a broader requirement of contemporary diplomacy: states must anticipate likely areas of disagreement, prepare explanatory frameworks in advance, and sustain communication even in periods when bilateral relations appear relatively stable.

The third important result was the weakness of audience-oriented and localized communication. Participants argued that Iranian messaging often reflects the perspective of the sender rather than the social, cultural, linguistic, and informational characteristics of Azerbaijani audiences. This finding is particularly significant given the complex development of Azerbaijani national identity. Nation-building in post-Soviet Azerbaijan has produced a strong conception of national sovereignty and civic statehood that is intertwined with historical memory, cultural narratives, and national self-representation (1). Earlier processes of identity formation through periodical literature also demonstrate that communication and cultural production have played an important role in shaping Azerbaijani national consciousness (2). The implication is that Iranian communication cannot rely exclusively on notions of historical, linguistic, religious, or cultural proximity. Messages that overemphasize commonality while failing to recognize contemporary Azerbaijani national identity may be ineffective or even counterproductive. Audience-sensitive media diplomacy should therefore distinguish between recognition of shared cultural connections and respect for the political and symbolic autonomy of the Azerbaijani state and society. This also supports the participants' call for more sophisticated audience research, segmentation, and culturally adapted Azerbaijani-language content.

The findings also showed that experts regarded narrative competition as one of the most consequential external challenges facing Iran. All participants referred to the influence of regional and extra-regional actors and to the existence of competing interpretations of Iran's intentions, regional security arrangements, connectivity projects, and bilateral relations. This assessment corresponds closely with the contemporary geopolitical structure of the South Caucasus. Türkiye has expanded its regional influence through an increasingly assertive foreign policy and a broader aspiration toward regional leadership (23, 24). Türkiye's growing role as a potential energy hub further strengthens its strategic position in relations with Azerbaijan and in broader Eurasian energy politics (25). The United States has likewise maintained a strategic interest in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus through energy, security, and geopolitical considerations (5, 17), while the European Union has increasingly engaged Azerbaijan within a crisis-driven policy framework shaped by energy and regional security (18). European involvement in Armenia after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War also illustrates the growing connection between resilience, insecurity, and geopolitical positioning in the region (19). Thus, the narrative environment surrounding Iran–Azerbaijan relations is not bilateral but embedded in a wider network of geopolitical communications.

China's growing role in the South Caucasus adds another layer to this competitive environment. Research suggests that China increasingly views the region in relation to transportation connectivity and access to European markets, particularly within wider Eurasian infrastructure strategies (11). Armenia's attempt to diversify its foreign-policy options through engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative similarly illustrates how smaller South Caucasus states use external partnerships to expand diplomatic maneuverability (12). The regional significance of connectivity has also been emphasized in analyses describing the Caucasus as a critical interface between Europe and Asia (10). These findings help explain why participants in the present study placed such strong emphasis on strategic narrative management. Debates over transit routes, corridors, border arrangements, and infrastructure are not merely technical. They are framed through concepts of sovereignty, access, security, economic opportunity, and geopolitical alignment. Iran therefore requires a media-diplomatic capacity capable of explaining its positions on connectivity in a manner that is both strategically coherent and intelligible to Azerbaijani audiences.

Another central finding concerned deficiencies in credibility, digital diplomacy, and professional media production. Participants reported that overly official language, limited transparency, slow reactions, insufficient multimedia storytelling, and weak platform-specific engagement can reduce the persuasive capacity of Iranian communication. This finding is consistent with broader developments in modern diplomacy, where states increasingly compete for influence through rapidly changing communication environments rather than relying exclusively on formal diplomatic channels. The concept of niche diplomacy is especially relevant in this context. Middle and regional powers may enhance their international influence by developing specialized diplomatic capabilities in areas where they possess comparative advantages or strategic opportunities (28). For Iran, professional media diplomacy could serve such a function if it combines regional knowledge, language skills, digital communication, cultural intelligence, and strategic messaging. However, participants' accounts indicate that this potential remains underdeveloped. Strengthening digital diplomacy therefore requires more than opening social-media accounts or increasing output; it requires continuous monitoring, platform-specific communication, professionally designed audiovisual material, interaction with users, rapid correction of inaccurate information, and the use of credible voices capable of addressing different audience segments.

The interviews further demonstrated that participants viewed credibility as a substantive strategic asset rather than simply a communication technique. Credibility becomes especially important when bilateral tensions intersect

with identity, religion, regional alliances, and security perceptions. The evolving regional security environment demonstrates how conflicts outside the immediate South Caucasus can alter political alignments and perceptions within it. For example, the interaction between the wars in Karabakh and Gaza has been examined as part of an increasingly interconnected Northwest Asian security environment (27). Under such circumstances, audiences may interpret Iranian messages not only through bilateral Iran–Azerbaijan relations but also through Iran’s wider regional policies and partnerships. Communication perceived as selectively framed or insufficiently transparent may therefore encounter skepticism. The participants’ recommendation to use evidence-based communication, credible experts, and more balanced explanation can be interpreted as an attempt to reduce this credibility deficit and to distinguish strategic communication from narrowly propagandistic messaging.

The findings also emphasized the importance of maintaining cultural, academic, economic, and societal communication alongside political messaging. Participants suggested that Iran–Azerbaijan relations are too often represented through security disputes, regional competition, or politically sensitive controversies. This observation is important because both countries are embedded in wider economic and social networks that offer alternative foundations for bilateral engagement. Azerbaijan’s growing foreign trade and customs relations indicate that its external orientation is not solely geopolitical but also strongly connected to economic integration and commercial development (9). Similarly, Caspian energy diplomacy illustrates how economic and geopolitical interests frequently overlap (4), while studies of energy diplomacy across Eurasia show that cooperative economic interests may provide durable platforms for international engagement (8). Iran’s own experience in water diplomacy also demonstrates that institutionalized cooperation around shared interests can reduce conflict potential and create mechanisms for managing transboundary disagreements (30). Applied to media diplomacy, this suggests that communication should not be limited to defending Iran’s geopolitical positions but should also foreground shared economic opportunities, border cooperation, transportation, environmental issues, academic exchange, tourism, culture, and everyday social relations.

Another important result was the recommendation for continuous communication during periods of political tension. The participants viewed long-term public engagement as a form of strategic resilience capable of preventing temporary diplomatic disputes from becoming durable social hostility. This conclusion is particularly relevant in a region where external powers frequently seek to use periods of insecurity to deepen their own influence. European engagement in the postwar South Caucasus has increasingly incorporated the language of resilience and security (19), while Azerbaijan’s expanding military diplomacy indicates the degree to which security relationships are now connected to broader diplomatic positioning (26). Iran may therefore benefit from maintaining non-governmental and societal channels that are less vulnerable to fluctuations in official relations. Academic exchanges, cultural projects, expert dialogue, professional media collaboration, and economic communication can create networks of familiarity that continue functioning when governmental tensions intensify. Such networks may help preserve access to Azerbaijani society and reduce the capacity of adversarial narratives to monopolize the interpretation of bilateral relations.

Overall, the results suggest that Iran’s media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan requires a transition from fragmented, episodic, and sender-centered communication to a coordinated, anticipatory, evidence-based, and audience-centered model. This transformation is especially necessary because the South Caucasus has become a strategic arena in which energy diplomacy, military cooperation, connectivity projects, great-power competition, national identity, and information politics operate simultaneously (4, 7, 10). Iran’s foreign policy toward Azerbaijan after the

Second Nagorno-Karabakh War already reflects the need to adapt to a changed geopolitical reality (22), but the present findings indicate that such adaptation must include the media and communication dimensions of foreign policy. The strategic value of media diplomacy lies not merely in improving Iran's image but in creating a more stable communicative environment for managing disagreements, explaining interests, sustaining dialogue, reducing misperceptions, and protecting Iran's position in a region where narratives increasingly function as instruments of geopolitical influence.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample consisted of fifteen experts based in Tehran, which provided access to highly informed diplomatic, media, academic, and geopolitical perspectives but may not capture the full diversity of views held in other Iranian provinces, particularly border regions with closer everyday social and economic interaction with the Republic of Azerbaijan. Second, the study focused exclusively on Iranian experts and did not include Azerbaijani diplomats, journalists, academics, policymakers, or members of the general public; therefore, the findings primarily represent the Iranian expert interpretation of communication challenges rather than a bilateral assessment of how Iranian media diplomacy is actually received. Third, the sensitive political nature of Iran–Azerbaijan relations may have influenced the degree to which participants were willing to discuss institutional weaknesses or politically controversial subjects in detail. Fourth, the qualitative design emphasizes depth and contextual interpretation rather than statistical generalization. Finally, because the regional geopolitical environment changes rapidly, some expert assessments may be strongly influenced by the political conditions prevailing during the period of data collection.

Future studies should expand the geographical, professional, and comparative scope of research on Iran's media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan. Research involving Azerbaijani audiences would be particularly valuable for examining the credibility, reception, emotional resonance, and effectiveness of Iranian messages among different demographic and social groups. Comparative qualitative studies could include diplomats, journalists, university scholars, social-media users, business actors, students, and cultural figures from both countries. Quantitative surveys could also test the relative influence of language, message source, content format, political framing, cultural proximity, and perceived credibility on attitudes toward Iran. Longitudinal research would help determine how public perceptions change before, during, and after bilateral crises. Future research should also investigate digital-platform dynamics through social-network analysis, sentiment analysis, content analysis, and comparative examination of competing Iranian, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, European, and other regional narratives. Comparative case studies of successful media diplomacy by neighboring or middle powers could further identify institutional models and communication practices that may be adapted to the Iranian context.

At the practical level, Iranian foreign-policy and media institutions should establish a permanent and coordinated mechanism dedicated specifically to media diplomacy toward Azerbaijan and the wider South Caucasus. This mechanism should integrate diplomats, Azerbaijani-language specialists, regional researchers, media professionals, communication strategists, digital-content producers, and data analysts. Communication priorities should be based on continuous audience research rather than institutional assumptions, and distinct strategies should be developed for political elites, academics, journalists, younger digital audiences, business communities, cultural actors, and border populations. Iranian institutions should invest in high-quality Azerbaijani-language multimedia content and expand the use of short-form video, podcasts, visual explainers, expert interviews, and interactive social-media formats. Rapid-response procedures should be established for crises and misinformation, but these should operate within a broader long-term strategy rather than replacing routine engagement. Greater

space should also be provided for credible non-governmental voices, including academics, artists, entrepreneurs, researchers, and professional journalists. Finally, Iran's media diplomacy should consistently communicate areas of mutual interest—including trade, connectivity, culture, tourism, academic cooperation, environmental issues, and border development—so that the bilateral relationship is not defined publicly only through geopolitical disagreements and security crises.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

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Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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