

# ON RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND AZERBAIJAN

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To a great extent, stability and security in the Caucasus, in the Caspian Sea zone, and in Russia's southern "soft underbelly" depend on the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.

The geostrategic importance of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the Azerbaijanian Republic (AR) cannot be overestimated.

Indeed, Iran belongs to the Caucasian, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian regions; it is situated on the Caspian shores and has access to the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. In one way or another, the state is exposed to all the most painful problems of this vast region. None of the sores—ethnic, religious, military, or economic—or any of the problems related to refugees, drug trafficking, terrorism, and separatism can be successfully resolved without Tehran's involvement. This is true even of the seemingly domestic problems plaguing individual parts of the region. It should be added that Iran has its ultimate value as a source of natural hydrocarbons and as an oil and gas transit territory. The country, with a population of 70 million, has one of the world's largest armies (about 800,000). This is a decisive factor in West Asian regional politics, irrespective of either the domestic or foreign policy situation.

In the Western Asian context, Azerbaijan is a key strategic factor because of its oil reserves and its bioresources. It is one of the region's most developed industrial countries, which successfully masters high technologies; on top of this it is an important international transportation center.

This explains why Iranian-Azerbaijani relations have always been of great importance in international relations, and why the numerous complications in these relationships call for a detailed and profound analysis. Here I shall outline the most important of them.

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Throughout many centuries Iran has maintained and continues to maintain close economic and cultural ties with the peoples of the Transcaucasus; its relations with Azerbaijan are of special nature.

Under the Gulistan Peace Treaty Russia and Persia signed in 1813, the Azeris were divided between these two states; the majority of ethnic Azeris live in Iran (there are different estimates of their numbers—from 17 to 18 million, or 20-25 percent of the total population; or from 16 to 35 million). About eight million Azeris live in Azerbaijan.

The Persians and Azeris are not merely neighbors—they share the same religion. Both nations are Shi'a Muslims and, therefore, they have similar customs and habits.

At the same time, the Azeri mentality is a combination of Shi'a Islam and Turkic ethnicity, the latter being a stumbling block in the relations between the two countries. For two centuries, some of the Azeris were subjects of the Persian Empire, while the others lived within the Russian Empire. This could not but deeply affect national awareness of the "southern" and "northern" parts of the same ethnos: they were developing within different systems of coordinates. In Iran, the Azeris were gradually assimilated, sometimes by force, with the titular nation (the Persians). After the Islamic 1979 revolution the two ethnic groups were driven together on the basis of Khomeinism, which concentrated on Islamic unity. In Russia they preserved their national autonomy and were secularized and Europeanized. This was especially obvious under Soviet power when communist ideologists and politicians were working hard to uproot "the remnants of religion" from people's minds to shape them into a "new nation."

The Soviet Union, which disappeared from political maps in the early 1990s, left a wide gap between the national awareness of the southern and the northern Azeris. Recently, Heydar Jemal who heads the Islamic Committee of Russia said that the Iranian Azeris treated the northern Azeris with a great degree of arrogance. They look at their northern neighbors from imperial positions as a psychologically and morally degraded part of the Azeri nation, which needed a jolt in order to be able to rise again. This means that the southern Azeris think of themselves as a strong, enterprising, and highly organized part of the ethnos with firm principles and ideals. By contrast they are convinced that their northern relatives were weak and have lost their drive and ability to control their lives, support themselves, and observe traditions. The southern Azeris explain the loss of part of the national northern territory by these obvious failures and faults of the northern character.

Despite this, both sides have demonstrated a desire to re-unite—an intention which naturally bothered official Tehran quite a lot. In anticipation of the mounting separatism in their multinational country, spurred on by the social and political processes in the U.S.S.R., the Iranian leaders did not rejoice at the Soviet Union's disintegration.

Independence of Azerbaijan ushered in a new era in the history of both countries: they established contacts, yet the old ethnic and religious problems remained and even worsened under the burden of newly acquired political content.

Many of the aspects of regional relationships can be described by Hegel's dialectics: while the Persians and Azeris share identical confessions and the Azeris of both countries have common ethnic roots, the elites of both countries cannot agree on state and national priorities.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Iran, which had just emerged from an eight-year-long war with Iraq, revised the doctrines formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini, the then late leader of the Islamic revolution. Tehran did not intend to abandon the teaching—it wanted to adjust it to the changing world. The Iranian clerics preserved the idea of "export of the Islamic revolution" as the linchpin of their military-political doctrine; they merely shifted the accents from the use of force to the ideological and cultural aspects. Since Khomeinism does not distinguish between religion, ideology, and policy, Iranian propaganda abroad has been and remains religious.

The Iranians launched ideological attacks on all Muslim-populated regions of the former Soviet Union to capture the hearts and minds of their co-religionists. They aimed at raising the level of religious awareness among the "Soviet Muslims" and at creating the positive image of an Islamic republic living according to the *velaiat-e faqih* principle—religious spirituality expressed in political terms—institutionaliza-

tion of the Islamic canon represented by a generally respected and just cleric and theologian holding power and acting as the supreme instance of spiritual Shi'a authority (*Marja-e Taglid*).

The Iranian ideological machine reached many countries; there are about 70 cultural centers of the IRI functioning in Europe, Asia, and America. They were set up by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation and are actively functioning under its guidance. It is their task to coordinate Iran's propaganda efforts and adjust them to local specifics. As a rule, the state and ideological institutions of Iran use several channels: they disseminate the Koran and religious books, leaflets, and other propaganda materials abroad; build mosques and organize religious centers (madrasahs, cultural centers, libraries, etc.); support numerous Muslim communities abroad, including Shi'a communities, and rely on them in their propaganda activities. Official Iranian representatives are acting within their diplomatic status to promote the same ideas. Numerous Shi'a missionaries are trained for work abroad; pilgrimages to holy places, mainly to the Shi'a sanctuaries in Iran, are organized; there are international Islamic foundations set up in Iran; Iranian youths, including Iranian students studying abroad, are involved in this wide-scale propaganda effort. Brainwashing is applied to foreign students studying in Iran in order to turn them into vehicles of the ideas of Iranian revolution in their countries; the Iranian diaspora abroad is being used to promote the interests of Shi'a propaganda; there are efforts to plant Islamic ideas in the minds of those living in Central Asia and the Caucasus, keeping in mind the local ethnic and religious specifics and the people's willingness to embrace the ideas of the Islamic revolution.

Azerbaijan is obviously the primary and main target of these efforts.

Nina Mamedova, Russian Orientalist, is convinced that the evolution of the Islamic regime, which has become obvious over the last 25 years, suggests that the forecasts of the early 1990s about the threat of Islamic fundamentalism spreading far and wide in the region was never realized.<sup>1</sup> This is partly true: the threat of Shi'a fundamentalism is hypothetical rather than real. Tehran has not abandoned its efforts to spread its religious influence: this is amply confirmed by what the Imam Khomeini Committee is doing. For several years now it has been involved in charities in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan.

As I have pointed out above, contrary to Tehran's expectations no upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism occurred in Azerbaijan. This is explained by several factors.<sup>2</sup> First, Azerbaijan is a highly urbanized country, while its capital is a multinational city and the larger part of the country's intellectual elite is Europeanized. Second, the public (and practicing Shi'a) regarded any degree of Tehran's stronger influence on Baku as potentially threatening. This alone limits the prospects of Shi'a fundamentalism in this post-Soviet republic. We can say that the local population is virtually unprepared to embrace the ideas of an Islamic Shi'a revolution.

The Turkic-ethnic scenario unfolded in the republic alongside the Shi'a factor.

The Azerbaijanian question is causing tension between Tehran and Baku. At the very dawn of independence, then President of the AR Abulfaz Elchibey said that the Azeris should unite into a single state to create Greater Azerbaijan. The IRI government interpreted this as an attempt to split the Iranian state. Heydar Aliiev, who came after Elchibey, did a lot to ease the tension, yet the problem is still alive. The Za Ediny Azerbaijan (For United Azerbaijan) alliance set up by President Elchibey is fervently discussing all the possible alternatives of Azerbaijanian unity. This breeds anti-Iranian sentiments heated up by spy scandals. There is a secret separatist organization of Iranian Azeris called the National Liberation Movement of Southern Azerbaijan.

The situation in Iranian Azerbaijan is relatively calm: back in 1945-1946 an attempt to set up an independent state of the Iranian Azeris was cruelly suppressed by the Shah troops. Since that time Tehran has been closely following the developments in the country's ethnic fringes, of which Iranian Azerbaijan is one.

<sup>1</sup> See: N.M. Mamedova, *Ekonomicheskie sviazi Irana i stran SNG. Sbornik nauchnyh statey "Iran i SNG,"* Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS and Institute of Israel and Middle East Studies, Moscow, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See: A.V. Malashenko, *Islam i islamovedenie v SNG v 90-e gody,* Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, Moscow, 1998.

It should be added that Khomeinism as the IRI official ideology rejects the possibility of a national question in the “united Islamic community—the Ummah.” Ethnic affiliation is unimportant—the main thing is to follow the teaching of Muhammad, the Muslim laws, and the Shari‘a canons.

It is hard to say how strong the feeling of national identity is in the Azeri-populated area of Iran: many of the local people have already assimilated with the Persian milieu and no longer regard themselves as Azeris. A large number of those who are still aware of their Azeri roots have successfully integrated into Iranian society and the ruling elite. They regard themselves as Iranians in the first place. This can be said about Ayatollah Khamenei, former foreign minister Dr. Velayati, members of parliament, officials of local administrative structures, heads of large companies, businessmen, etc. There is the common opinion that at least half of the Iranian army is made up of Azeris. The larger part of the local Azeri community, however, lives in the countryside, is not interested in politics made in large cities or in problems of national self-determination.

According to the Marxian formula “life determines consciousness,” the range of opinions about the Azerbaijanian question in the IRI is very broad: some people favor complete separation of Iranian Azerbaijan from Iran in order to set up an independent state (the ideas about it are likewise varied: some believe that Iranian Azerbaijan should unite with former Soviet Azerbaijan into Greater Azerbaijan; others prefer to see two independent Azerbaijanian states); still others would like to grant basic cultural and national rights to the compact groups of Azeris. It has been noted that recently ethnic tension was relieved to an extent, though some of the highly politically committed Azeris disagree with this. Makhmudali Chekhragani, former professor of Tabriz University, an active defender of the national and cultural rights of the Iranian Azeris, and a prominent political dissident who served a term in an Iranian prison now living in the United States, recently stated that nationalist sentiments are rising among the Iranian Azeris, and if the government failed to satisfy the demands of this “movement” it would have to cope with disturbances. He forecasted changes in the next three to five years caused by unrest stirred up by numerous local Azerbaijanians.

His supporters in Turkey and Azerbaijan believe that the Iranian Azeri community should unite with Azerbaijan and never hesitate to make their views public. The community itself is not tempted—most observers agree about this lack of enthusiasm. This forced Chekhragani to publicly denounce the unification idea and insist on a more resolute protection of the national and cultural rights of the local Azeris, who should fight for a federal Iranian state organized according to the U.S. pattern in which the Azeris would acquire their own flag and a parliament.

While insisting on broader national and cultural rights, the Iranian Azeris have betrayed no separatist intentions and do not believe, contrary to what Chekhragani says, that ethnic unrest is possible. The idea of separation from Iran or unification with Azerbaijan is not popular; few people do betray their dissatisfaction with the political, social, and economic situation (shared by the majority), which takes the form of ethnic disturbances.

According to Dr. Hasan Javadi, a native of Tabriz educated in Cambridge, now professor of Persian, Azerbaijanian, and English literature at George Washington University, the Iranian Azeris have enough trouble without piling national-cultural issues on their plate. He says time and again that together with the rest of the country, Iranian Azerbaijanians are involved in the movement for reform and democracy. He is convinced that separatist organizations are not popular among the broad masses and remain at the periphery of “public conscience.” He also says that he does not believe that the problems of any individual ethnic culture are more important than the common national culture; he does not believe that the separation issue is widely discussed.

In fact, the Iranian Azeris, as well as Persians, Kurds, Baluchi, and other ethnic groups for that matter, are displeased with the Shi‘a Ayatollahs, irrespective of their ethnic origins, who have led the country into a political impasse. The Iranian Azeris are displeased with Iran’s economic weakness and the absence of political rights, and throughout the 20th century they played a key role in the political and economic movements in the country. Like Tehran, Tabriz, an Azerbaijanian city, is widely known as a bulwark of the most active and progressive student democratic movement, which continues the traditions of the Tabriz-Tehran national-democratic opposition rooted in the constitutional revolution of 1905-1911.

The relations between Azerbaijan and Iran are affected by ethnic and religious factors, yet the scope of political, economic, and military problems relegates these factors to the background. Baku and Tehran are playing their own roles in the region and are pursuing their own interests. The Caucasus is a place where the interests of many countries, primarily Russia, Turkey, and the U.S., clash.

Each of these three states shapes its policy according to numerous factors caused by the specifics of bilateral and multilateral relations within the so-called “Caucasian heptagon”: Azerbaijan-Iran-Russia-the U.S.-Turkey-Armenia-Georgia. An analysis of the relations between any two of them requires taking into account all their contacts in the region.

Two events have affected the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan the most: the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran and the independence of the Azerbaijanian Republic proclaimed in August 1991.

There are four key problems that stand aside from all other spheres of interstate relationships: the legal status of the Caspian; the transportation of energy fuels and the North-South transportation corridor; the Karabakh issue; and the role of the United States and Israel in the region.

For over ten years now, the coastal states have been grappling with the Caspian legal status issue; no consensus has been yet reached. In the past twelve months Azerbaijan, Russia, and Kazakhstan have brought their positions on the northern part of the Caspian much closer, while in the south there is no agreement among Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan. In the summer of 2001, Iran and Azerbaijan failed to agree on the status of oil fields in the open sea. As a result, Iranian warships blocked the Azerbaijanian ships prospecting for oil for BP.

Iran insists that the treaties it signed with the Soviet Union should be revised: it seeks control over 20 rather than 12 percent of the Caspian, which includes the Alov, Sharg and Araz oilfields (Azerbaijan considers them its own). In other words, Iran wants to divide the sea into five equal parts. There is some progress in this respect, too: very soon Iran and Azerbaijan will meet for consultations after which the foreign ministers of five coastal states will meet in Moscow.

They all agree that the sea should become a sea of peace and consent. When commenting on Azerbaijan President Ilkham Aliev’s words about desirable demilitarization of the Caspian, the IRI Ambassador to Baku Akhad Gazai said that Tehran wholeheartedly supported this idea, and that all coastal states should have access to the sea’s riches. Once achieved, the five-sided agreement on the Caspian will favorably affect the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.

The oil routes leading from Baku to the open sea caused tension between the two countries. Iran expected that one of the routes, the shortest, would cross its territory to reach the Gulf terminal; the route leading to Ceyhan via Turkey and Iran was expected to be the second best option. Instead, under American pressure, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan rejected both; as a result Iran was kept away not only from extracting, but also from transporting Baku oil. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline now under construction did not make Tehran happy either.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan has not yet joined another huge project—the North-South transportation corridor co-founded by Russia, Iran, and India. The prospects are extremely tempting (gradually it will attract all cargos now shipped through the Suez Canal to reach a fantastic figure of 100m tons a year). Today, the states of the Indian Ocean, the Gulf, Southeast Asia, Middle East, Northern Europe and, naturally, the Caucasus have already announced that they would like to join it. One glance at a map shows that Azerbaijan, Russia, and Iran will be the key states.

Baku and Tehran do cooperate in the transportation sphere. On 16 February, 2004, transport specialists of the two countries met in Azerbaijan to discuss the sites for two cross-border bridges over the Astara River (a railway bridge and one for cars), their designing, funding and construction. They also discussed certain aspects of another important project—an Aliat-Astara highway, in which Tehran is prepared to invest \$40m. As soon as discussions are completed they will be submitted for approval at the highest level.

The Karabakh issue is the greatest stumbling block in the Caucasus. At first Iran helped Azerbaijan in many ways: loans, arms, and ammunition; and it offered to act as an intermediary several times. Little by little political pragmatism prevailed over ideological considerations. Iran not only refused to unques-

tioningly support the co-religionists, to export the ideas of the Islamic revolution by force, and to too obviously promote Islamic fundamentalism, but also shifted its stance on the Karabakh issue.

It moved to the Armenian side: Iran opened a transit corridor (closed on the Turkish side) to help Erevan extend its foreign trade. It came to the Armenian market, invested in it, and offered loans. To a certain extent both countries equally profited from this: they could finally end their isolation. The Iranian political leaders are convinced that since Armenia officially has no troops stationed in Karabakh Tehran's support extended to this country cannot be regarded as siding with an aggressor, while their political, economic and military-technical cooperation allows Erevan to preserve its economic potential. At the same time, according to the recent statement of Iranian Ambassador to Baku Akhad Gazai, Tehran will support any decision on Karabakh that will preserve Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. He pointed out that his country favored the liberation of occupied Azerbaijanian territory and a peaceful settlement of the conflict. He went even further by saying that the settlement would promote the interests not only of Baku, but also of Tehran.

Washington is another important factor in the relations between the two countries. For nearly 25 years now, America has been considered the Great Satan in the IRI, while the United States responded by calling Iran part of the "axis of evil." Experts believe that there is the possibility of American anti-Iranian actions; it became even more real after the February elections, which brought more conservatives to the parliament.

Even if the United States has anti-Tehran designs, they are mainly concentrated on weakening the regime from the inside. There is an opinion, widely shared by the expert community, that the Azerbaijanian factor is one of the real instruments for weakening the country before force is used against it. There are signs of more active involvement by the U.S. State Department in stirring up Azerbaijanian separatism. In any case, annual human rights reports compiled by this structure concentrate on human rights violations with respect to this ethnic group. Makhmudali Chekhragani, who has American support and who is viewed in the West as an unofficial leader of the national liberation movement of the Iranian Azeris, never tires of saying that the movement is gaining momentum and that to win it must receive support from "all progressive international forces."

Azerbaijanian separatism in Iran has supplied the United States with one of the possible options of American policy around Iran. Tehran is worried; it is also concerned with the possibility of American military bases in Azerbaijan and with possible deployment of American troops there. In May 2004, the House of Representatives of the U.S. Congress allowed the military to deliver preemptive strikes on Iran. It has become known that according to the plan drawn up in 2003, America can launch missile attacks against the nuclear sites in Arak, Natanza, Isfahan, and Bushehr in Iran using the territories of Azerbaijan and certain other IRI's neighbors. Javad Ismayylly, Director of the Ediny Azerbaijan information-analytical center, does not exclude the possibility that the territory of his country could be used to deliver missile blows at Iran. "This is confirmed by the frequent visits of Washington representatives to Baku," said he.

It should be said in all justice that on 19 May, 2004, Reno Harnish, U.S. ambassador to Baku, denied all rumors about American plans to attack Iran from Azerbaijanian territory. He even added that he personally found the source of this information—it was an American newspaper.

Yet there is no smoke without fire. Javad Ismayylly insists that this threat stirred up the Iranian special services, which stepped up their activities in Azerbaijan, and means that Tehran is concerned about Washington's plans regarding Baku. He pointed out that, along with other things, the United States planned to use Azerbaijanian separatists, members of the National Revival Movement of Southern Azerbaijan, to topple the Iranian regime.

This explains why the Iranian special services are now actively involved in anti-separatist activities. According to the Associated Press agency reporting from Tehran, the Iranian security services prevented a wave of terrorist attacks. It turned out that between 20 March and 20 April, the special services arrested about 55 people on various charges, ranging from threats to national security to insults of the leading clerics. The Iranian media mentioned members of Baku-based "Azerbaijanian nationalist organizations" in this connection. Six of them, who had contacts in Baku, were accused of stirring up unrest in

the cities of Khvoy and Orumiyeh in an Iranian province in Western Azerbaijan. "They planned to organize a revolt on 24 April and were promoting ideas of separatism," says AP.

The IRI's foreign policy doctrine does not approve of, and prevents, non-regional states from increasing their influence in the Caspian and in Western Asia as whole. Meanwhile Baku is busy developing friendly relations with Washington and even with Tel Aviv, which is second on the Iranian list of foes after Washington. It is called the Smaller Satan, as well as the Zionist regime, and the regime that occupied Palestinian territories. This foreign policy orientation of Azerbaijan irritates Iran a great deal. Although negative factors are obvious in their bilateral relations, there are positive shifts as well: their mutual accusations never go beyond the limits prescribed by diplomacy.

Recently the foreign ministers of the two countries were much more active; officials on both sides of the border are making promising statements. Iranian ambassador to Azerbaijan, Akhad Gazai, announced not so long ago that his country was prepared to cooperate with Azerbaijan in the military sphere. (In fact, this is the first statement of this sort coming from Tehran's official representative.) Prominent Azerbaijanian political scientist, Zardusht Alizadeh, recently said, however, that even if this cooperation does take place it will be formal—no military alliance should be expected. He continued: first, the Azerbaijanian army is equipped with Russian weapons, while Iran relies on American armaments. At best, this hypothetical military cooperation will be limited to "exchanging patriotic experience." Zardusht Alizadeh has pointed out that his country will profit most from relations with NATO in the sphere of weapon deliveries and successful military actions. He added: "The talks between Iran and Azerbaijan regarding military cooperation are nothing more than political games. Both sides are doing their best to present their relations as broad, including their contacts in the military sphere."

He confirmed that Baku is looking toward the West and added that probable military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Iran would not cause irritation in the West—the ties between his country and the U.S. are strong. Said Zardusht Alizadeh: "Oil transportation to the West and the pro-American course of official Baku are the centerpiece of these relations. More than that: Iran is no rival to the United States in the military sphere."

This is true but...

Recently IRI and AR signed about 20 joint documents, the Treaty on the Principles of Friendly Relations and Cooperation being one of them, together with agreements in the transportation and economic spheres. The Memorandum on Mutual Understanding in Controlling Illicit Drug Trafficking, as well as on Money Laundering between the Azerbaijanian Republic, the Republic of Georgia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the U.N. Program of International Drug Control are extremely important. The two countries find contacts between their ministries of internal affairs and justice very useful. Deputy Minister of Justice of Azerbaijan Aydin Kasymov described the contacts between the judicial and law enforcement structures of both countries in very positive terms. He said that the relevant agreements, in particular on the surrender of fugitives and extradition of criminals, had created a solid basis for better and deeper cooperation between Baku and Tehran. He described cooperation on extradition as quite successful and said that the contacts in this sphere were going on uninterrupted. According to what he said, the courts of Azerbaijan officially recognized verdicts and decisions passed by Iranian courts in relation to Azerbaijanian citizens and apply them to the extradited criminals upon their arrival in Azerbaijan.

Summits are expected to strengthen bilateral relations still further. Visits by President of Azerbaijan Ilkham Aliev to Tehran and of IRI President Mohammad Khatami to Baku are being prepared: it is expected that both visits will take place in 2004. They will certainly help the two countries to take more toward each other.

President of Azerbaijan Ilkham Aliev has described closer cooperation with Iran as one of the key strategic goals of his country's foreign policy; he never tires of repeating that both countries are interested in developing cooperation in the sphere of energy, transport, culture, etc. He is convinced that projects related to the construction of high-voltage power lines, gas pipelines to bring Iranian gas to Nakhichevan, and the Astara-Baku highway are very promising. Transborder cooperation is actively developing.

By way of a summary, I would like to say that Tehran and Baku can overcome all problems and strengthen their mutual understanding. Friendly relations between them are important not only for the two nations, but also for the region as a whole and for Russia, which has good relations both with the Islamic Republic of Iran and with the Azerbaijanian Republic.