



Azerbaijan: An Overview

by

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Before entering a discussion of the Republic of Azerbaijan, it should be mentioned that the territory usually referred to as Azerbaijan stretches from the regions to the south of Lake Urumia in the south to the Daghistan region of the former Soviet Union to the north. It is the entire territory, which is at the present, between the Caspian Sea and Armenia and Georgia. Before the 19th century it was a part of the territory ruled by Iranian rulers. Two consecutive defeats sustained by Iran in the 19th century at the hands of Russia (see below) divested Iran of its northern territories in Azerbaijan. Thus, in modern times, this area is divided between Iranian Azerbaijan with its provincial capital at Tabriz, Iran, and the Republic of Azerbaijan with its capital at [Baku](#). The Aras river forms the borderline between the two Azerbaijanians.

A good portion of the Republic of Azerbaijan is located in the southeastern region of the Caucasus Mountains and the Talish range. And it shares a long stretch of shore with the Caspian Sea. The Aras and the Kura are Azerbaijan's principle rivers. There are also a number of lakes in the south. The combination of the many rivers that take source in the Caucasus, the lakes, and the sea provides a generally subtropical climate for the region. The rivers are also instrumental in the promotion of industry. For instance, a number of hydro-electric stations along the Kura River provides the republic with a strong power industry capable of meeting the republic's agricultural as well as industrial energy needs.

As mentioned, Azerbaijan has a subtropical climate. The Republic's annual climate averages between 58.1 F (14.5 C) and 32 F (0 C) in the lowlands. In the highlands the temperature is several degrees lesser than the lowland average. In summer the temperature averages 80.5 F (26 C) in the lowlands and about 41 F (5 C) in the highlands. In Baku, in summer the temperature averages 81 F (27.2 C) and in winter 34 F (1.1 C).

With an area of 33,436 square miles, the Republic of Azerbaijan is located to the northwest of the Caspian Sea. It is bound by the Russian Federation to the north, the Caspian Sea to the east, Iran to the south, and Armenia and Georgia to the west. The ethnic mix of Azerbaijan includes 90% Azeri, 3.2% Daghestani, 2.5% Russian, 2% Armenian, and 2.3% other. A July 2002 estimate places the population of the republic at 7,798,497. Of that 93.4% are Muslim (primarily Shi'ite), 2.5% are Russian Orthodox, 2.3% are Armenian Orthodox, and 1.8% other.

The capital city of Azerbaijan is Baku with a population of nearly 2 million. Azerbaijan's major cities include Ganja (287,000), Sumgait (235,000), and Mingechaur (100,000). The official language of Azerbaijan is Azeri (89%), a blend of Turkish (akin to the language of Turkmenistan) and Persian. There are also some speakers of Russian (3%), Armenian (2%), and other languages (6%).

During the 1930s, Azerbaijan underwent an intense process of Russification. As a result, the Latin alphabet that had replaced the Arabic alphabet in the late 1920s was changed again, this time to a modified version of the Cyrillic alphabet. Azerbaijanis considered this change, alongside other changes taking place in their homeland, an attempt by the Soviet authorities to put distance between them and their Islamic heritage, as well as between them and the scientific knowledge that they had acquired in recent past.

Like in the other republics of the former Soviet Union, the literacy rate in the republic is high (97%). Everyone over the age of 15 can read and write. Additionally, literacy is evenly divided between the male (99%) and female (96%) populations.

The territory of present-day Azerbaijan joined the Empire of the Medes in the middle of the 7th century BC. After the defeat of the Medes at the hands of Cyrus the Great (625-585 BC), the territories belonging to the Medes, including Azerbaijan, were included in the rapidly growing empire of the Achaemenians. Azerbaijan became a satrapy named Atropatena (Guarding the Fire). This name was in keeping with the faith of the population of the region, Zoroastrianism. The satrapy of Atropatena, some Azerbaijanis believe, should be regarded as the nucleus of the first Azerbaijani state.

After the defeat of Darius III at the hands of Alexander the Great (330 BC), at Gaugamela, Atropatena accepted Macedonian overlordship and, after the dissolution of Alexander's empire, it was included in Seleucus's share of the empire. Within the Seleucid dynasty Atropatena's name was changed to Albania (cf., Alvand). Note that this name is not related to present-day Albania; rather, it is an agrarian kingdom in the Kura Valley, north of the Aras River. During the rule of the Parthians, the eastern Iranian dynasty that displaced the Seleucids, Albania remained returned to the Iranian fold and held its satrapy status.

Around AD 300, the Albanians professed Christianity. Their break with the religion of their ancestors, Zoroastrianism, gradually moved them away from Sassanian overlordship to Byzantine rule. As the battleground of the Sassanians and the Romans, Azerbaijan carried the brunt of almost all attacks and counterattacks mounted by the belligerents. In

the process, the kingdom became weak and vulnerable to the assaults of its Turkish neighbor to the north, including the Huns and the Khazars.

The Sassanian Empire was overthrown by the Arab armies in the seventh century. The territory of Azerbaijan, however, due to the nature of its terrain, did not fall to the conquering Muslim armies, in a substantial way, until the beginning of the 8th century. After two and a half centuries of Arab rule, the Caliphate in Baghdad began to lose its hold on the kingdoms on the periphery of the once mighty empire. Gradually autonomous kingdoms appeared on both sides of the Caspian, the Samanids of Bukhara to the east and the kingdom of Sherwanshah, as well as other smaller principalities, in ancient Atropatena, to the west of the Caspian.

Turkish relations with Westasia date to the time of the late Sassanian rulers, especially Qubod (AD 488 and 499). The advent of the Oghuz Turks as conquerors in the Muslim lands to the east of Baghdad, however, is much later, in the eleventh century when the Ghaznavids defeated the Samanids of Bukhara and established Turkish rule in Central Asia as far as the city of Ghazna in present-day Afghanistan. The Seljuqs, from the Oghuz tribe, defeated the Ghaznavids and mobilized their armies in the direction of the Iranian heartland, as well as the Caliphate in Baghdad, and the territories of the Byzantines in Anatolia (the present-day Republic of Turkey). Waves of invasions brought Turks from what is present-day Turkmenistan to Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Azerbaijan, too, submitted to Turkish overlordship.

Within a short time of the arrival of the Turks in the region, the original languages and cultures of the peoples of these territories underwent drastic change. Some were displaced by varieties of Turkish, while some others, like Greek, were totally displaced. Azeri, for instance, is a blend of Persian and Turkish with a heavy admixture of Arabic. Only Persian, one of the original languages of the region, continued its dominance over the arts, sciences, and education.

The twelfth century can be recognized as the era of literary development of the Azerbaijanis. As we shall further below, great poets like Nizami of Ganja and great architects like Ajami Nakhjavani, as well as other prominent figures in the arts and sciences have left a lasting legacy for the present-day Azerbaijanis to feel proud about.

The thirteenth century saw the devastation of Central Asia, the Qipchak Plain, Iran, and Iraq at the hands of the Mongols. Azerbaijan was no exception, especially that some of its territory became a bone of contention between the rulers of the Golden Horde in the north and the Persian Empire of Chingiz Khan's grandson, Hulagu Khan, centered on Tabriz, to the south. While the struggle for dominance continued, in the fourteenth century, yet another Central Asian leader, Timur (Tamerlane) entered the picture and made great advances in the west. The destiny of the Timurids, however, was rulership of the east. During the fifteenth century, the Sherwanshahs took over once again.

Between 1388 and 1503, two Turkmen tribes, the Qaraqyunlu (black sheep) and the Aqyunlu (white sheep) vied for dominance in the region. The Shi'ite Qaraqyunlu were

centered in Azerbaijan while the Aqqyunlu were in what are today northwestern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. The main power in Azerbaijan proper, as mentioned, was in the hands of the Sherwanshah centered in Ardabil and Baku.

During the fifteenth century, one of the regions that was of great importance to the Russians after their recent victory over the Mongols, was the Caucasus region. This territory was the gateway to Iran and India, two regions in the world of the time that were increasingly attractive to the Europeans, especially the British, the Dutch, and the French. The Russians, therefore, made every effort to attract the Azerbaijanis away from Iran by offering them lucrative trade possibilities, as well as diplomatic assistance.

The Safavids, an Azerbaijani Shi'ite order centered in Ardabil, expanded their power and took over not only the territories of the Sherwanshah in northern Azerbaijan but those of the Aqqyunlu, in Anatolia, as well. While Safavid Empire was expanding, a policy of de-emphasizing Azerbaijan, which favored Russia, went into effect. As a result, the empire's capital was moved from Ardabil to Isfahan. The strategy, however, did Safavid Iran more harm than good. Lack of attention not only isolated Azerbaijan but made it attractive to Russia which, in the long run, formally moved in and took it over. Although politically under Russian rule, ideologically the Azerbaijanis remained faithful to Islam, especially Shi'ite Islam, and continued the tradition, especially after 1505, when Shi'ism became the official religion of both Iran and Azerbaijan.

In addition to Russia, Ottoman Turkey was interested in annexing Azerbaijan. During a time when the Safavids were weak, Turkey put up a major struggle for capturing Azerbaijan, but it only succeeded in the slaughter of a large number of the innocent people of the region, as well as of weakening Iran's influence and ability to safeguard the territory against possible Russian invasions. Nevertheless, when the Russian invasion materialized, many from the population of Azerbaijan chose to move to Turkey rather than remain in Azerbaijan and be ruled by infidel Russians.

The first serious Russian attempt at capturing Azerbaijan takes place between 1722 and 1724 when Peter the Great occupies Derbend, Baku, and the area to the mouth of the Kura River in the south. Only under extreme pressure from Nadir Shah of Iran do the Russians agree to sign the Treaty of Ganja and pull out of the region.

After the death of Nadir Shah (1747), Azerbaijan becomes divided into a number of small principalities. These include the state of Sheka and Sherwan ruled by Haji Chelebi, the Khanate of Karabakh ruled by Panah Ali Khan, and the Kuba principality ruled by Husain Ali Shah. For a while these small states survive by playing the major powers of the time, Russia, Ottoman Turkey, and Iran, against each other. At the end, however, due to internal factionalism, they become too small to be of any consequence.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, Russia and Persia go to war over Azerbaijan, a major strategic point, and Russia's gateway to Iran and India. Iran is defeated and accepts the Treaty of Gulistan (October 13, 1813) as a result of which Iran cedes all its holdings to the north of the Aras River to Russia. Northern Azerbaijan is thus

annexed to the Russian Empire. In 1828, Iran's attempt to recapture its lost territories results in a second defeat. According to the Treaty of Turkmenchay (February 10, 1828), Iran's Nakhjivan territory, too, passes into Russian hands permanently.

In the 1870s, Russia's interest in Azerbaijan became permanent. Oil, discovered in abundance in Azerbaijan, opened a commercial vista for Russia, a vista that the Russians had not even dreamed of. Northern Azerbaijan thus became incorporated into the Russian Empire. After 1872, Russians and Armenians in large numbers migrated to Baku, the center of the new oil industry, to work in the oil fields. Oil was shipped via the Caspian Sea and the Volga River north to the farthest reaches of the Russian heartland. Additionally, new railroads connected Baku to the ports on the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The Russian language, European technology, and modern thought also found their way to Azerbaijan and Iran. And Baku, in addition to being the center of trade in oil, becomes the center of Azerbaijani politics as well. As early as 1904, Social democrats, including the Bolsheviks led by Joseph Stalin, organize a general strike among the oil workers. The meetings of these organizations, after the 1905 Russo-Japanese war, result in ethnic strife in Azerbaijan, especially among the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians.

At the end of the nineteenth century two major forces appeared in Ottoman Turkey. These were "Pan-Islamism," i.e., the coming together of all Muslims in support of the cause of Islam, and "Pan-Turkism," or the coming together of all Turks to create a united Turkish front against the enemies of the Turks. The Ottoman sultans, drawing on their claim to the caliphate and their Turkish ethnicity, found themselves in a unique position to wield the power generated by these forces.

Following the Ottoman pattern, of Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism, in 1911, Muslim Azeris established the Islamic Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, also known as Musavat (equality), in Baku. The party, which endeavored to unite the Muslims, i.e., Arabs, Persians, and the Turks, was founded by Rasalzadeh, Sharifzadeh, Kazemzadeh, and a number of others. The aim of this group, however, was larger than either Azerbaijani independence or Turkish reforms. The group hoped to create a Pan-Islamic, Pan-Turkic Caliphate that would encompass the entire Muslim nation to be guided by Turkey.

In 1918, when Turkish and British troops moved into Baku, the Musavat Party declared the independence of Azerbaijan; soon after the Party formed a coalition Party with the Turkish Federalist Party. The new party called the Turkish Federalist Musavat Party presented its first Congress. Rasalzadeh, Gujinskii, Usubegov, Akayev, and others were among the delegates. The party also published "Istiqlal" (independence) as its official organ.

The coalition did not last long. Another coalition was formed between Russia and Musavat. But, in the end, Musavat came to the conclusion that it had to stand on its own feet. Thus, on May 7, 1918, it announced the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In June of the same year, the Republic's capital was moved to Ganja. When, in September, Nuri Pasha entered Baku, the Musavat government, too, returned to Baku. Subsequent

takeover of Baku by the British troops that forced the Ottomans out of the city did not change the status of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

On April 20, 1920, the Red Army moved into Baku and brought the rule of the Musavat Party to an end. In 1922 Azerbaijan became part of the Transcaucasian Federated Socialist Republic. Other members were Armenia and Georgia.

On July 7, 1923, Bolshevik leaders (read, Stalin) made the area of Nagorno-Karabakh, that had been in dispute between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis for quite sometime, an autonomous district within Azerbaijan. This, and other measures, opened the way for the introduction of collectivization into Azerbaijan and to the subsequent formation of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses*, an action which itself became the cause of further friction among the population. Following the Soviet practices elsewhere, all independent religious organizations in Azerbaijan--mosques, madrasahs--were permanently closed and the mullahs were defrocked or eliminated.

In December 1936, the Transcaucasian Federated Socialist Republic was dissolved and Azerbaijan gained the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic. It also gained the territory of Nakhjavan, a territory which is separated from the Azerbaijani "mainland" by a strip of Armenian land. The following year the ranks of Azerbaijani communists were purged, so that Russification and Sovietization in the Union can proceed without having to be encumbered by old nationalists and enemies of the people.

Between 1943 and 1946, British and Russian troops occupied Iran. At the end of the war, in 1946, the Soviets intending to annex the rest of Azerbaijan to Soviet Azerbaijan, decided not to pull their troops out of northern Iran. Instead, they formed the new "Autonomous Government of Azerbaijan" for consolidating their position. In the long run, however, they were forced to evacuate Iran according to the original plan that had allowed them entrance.

In 1959, in yet another purge of Azerbaijani Communists, Nikita Khrushchev placed his own cadres in key positions in Azerbaijan and purged the communists whom he suspected of disloyalty and opposition to his plans. In 1969, Haidar Aliev became the Head of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan.

Between 1988, when the Nagorno-Karabakh assembly voted to secede from Azerbaijan, and 1994, Armenia and Azerbaijan fought over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Recall that during the 1920s, the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is primarily populated by Armenians, was placed under the tutelage of Azerbaijan by Stalin. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Armenia claimed that since the population of the enclave is Armenian, Nagorno-Karabakh should be annexed to Armenia. Nagorno-Karabakh, thus, created a major problem for Gorbachov, a crisis that he could not solve to the satisfaction of either side of the conflict or of the Soviet people.

In 1989, the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan declare the sovereignty of Azerbaijan.

Then the pattern in Central Asia's road to independence was repeated in Azerbaijan as well. In January 1990, Soviet forces occupied Baku and replaced Vesirov with Mutalibov. In May 1990, with the blessing of the Azerbaijan legislature, Mutalibov became the president of Azerbaijan. On August 30, 1991, Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union. In September 1991, Mutalibov was elected president.

Mutalibov's failure in preventing a bloodbath in Nagorno-Karabakh that resulted in the massacre of Azerbaijan civilians, resulted in his being ousted first as president and later as a legislator. The nationalist leader, Abulfazl Elchibey, became president in June 1992. He moved on a number of fronts to realize the goal of Azerbaijan's true independence. He demanded that Russia pull its forces out of the Republic, rejected Azerbaijan's inclusion in the CIS, moved Azeri affairs closer to Turkey, and welcomed the development of its oil resources by Western companies.

On November 26, 1991, the autonomy of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, almost all of whom are Armenians, was abolished by the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan. At the same time, Haidar Aliev, a pre-Gorbachev Communist leader (1971-1985), made a bid to regain power. Elchibey, unable to withstand the pressure from both sides, on June 15, 1993, handed the rulership of Azerbaijan to Aliev and fled. On October 3, 1993, Aliev was elected president.

In spite of an attempted coup against him, Aliev participated in elections again (October 11, 1988) and won the presidency for a second five-year term with 76% of the vote. His main task consisted of finding a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.

Azerbaijan, which was admitted to the United Nations on March 2, 1992, along with Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the Central Asian republics, is also a member of the Economic Cooperation Organization (Eurasian Development Bank), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Organization of the Islamic States (OIS). Azerbaijan's full political international cooperation hinges on resolving its Nagorno-Karabakh situation. As we have seen, Armenia claims Nagorno-Karabakh as part of its territory while some factions in Nagorno-Karabakh seek independence from Azerbaijan.

The flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan consists of three equal horizontal bands of blue (top), red, and green with a crescent and an eight-pointed star in white in the center of the red band.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, until the 1970s and 1980s when the focus shifted to the Urals, the Baku and Sumgait oil fields were central to the economy of the region as well as to the economy of the former Soviet Union as a whole. And, as unfortunately has been the case in Central Asia, especially the Aral Lake region, not every precaution was taken to assure the preservation of the integrity of water and soil resources of the Caspian shoreline while exploiting the land for oil. For that reason, today, local scientists consider the Abseron Yasaqligi (Apsheron Peninsula) (including Baku and Sumgait), the shoreline of the Caspian Sea, and many rivers in the region to be

among the world's most ecologically devastated areas. The air, water, and soil are polluted, the latter as a result of the use and abuse of the pesticide DDT. To this are added the toxic residuals of defoliants used in the production of cotton, on the one hand, and the negative impact of defoliants and DDT on birds, fish, mammals, reptiles, and insects, on the other hand.

The Azerbaijani currency is called manat or Azerbaijani Manat (AZM). The exchange rates per US dollar have varied : 5,000 (19 November, 2002), 4,656.58 (2001), 4,474.15 (2000), 4,120.17 (1999), 3,869 (1998), 3,985.38 (1997).

In 1997, Azerbaijan had a labor force of 2.9 million. Of this 32% were engaged in agriculture and forestry and 15% in industry, and 53% in services. Azerbaijan's industry is centered on petroleum (3.6 to 12.5 billion barrels) and natural gas (11 trillion cu ft.), as well as petroleum products, oilfield equipment, steel, iron ore, cement, chemicals and petrochemicals and textiles. In addition, it has a diverse base of metal and minerals such as iron, aluminum, lead, zinc, arsenic, copper, molybdenum, as well as marble and fire clay.

In addition to oil economy, Azerbaijan has a healthy agricultural base. Among Azerbaijan's agricultural products mention can be made of cotton, tobacco, grapes, and tea. Azerbaijan's raw cotton, a leading agricultural product, rivaled the cotton production of other major cotton producing republics like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Tobacco formed the second most important crop in the republic. Grapes of many varieties are mostly used in wine making. In fact, Azerbaijan's wine production, expanded in recent years, has received a number of international awards. Finally, although introduced into the republic fairly recently, tea production promises a similar trend as wine, both with regard to production and marketing. In the former Soviet Union, Azerbaijan came second in tea production, Georgia being the first. Rice, fruits and vegetables are also produced in abundance, adding variety to Azerbaijan's economy.

It should be added that since independence, Azerbaijani farms have become more productive for fruit and vegetable production, while wheat and cotton are still produced on state farms and suffer from a lack of production credit and input. There is also a robust herding tradition formed around the raising of cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats and of breeding silk worm. And there are two more unique products with high exporting values that must be mentioned: caviar from the Caspian Sea and Karabakh riding horses.

Azerbaijan's industrial economic base is the production of oilfield equipment, which is the major source of equipment for the other former Soviet republics. It has the second largest number of this industry, but its potential in this area for export to the world is hampered by equipment obsolescence.

Since most of Azerbaijan's trade was with the former Soviet republics, the potential for its economy has been hampered by the war with Armenia, as well as due to the Russian conflict with Chechnya. This is not to mention the shared difficulties that all former Soviet republics suffer from, i.e., obsolescence of equipment. In the case of Azerbaijan,

an oil producing state, this can be devastating. However, recently, Azerbaijan has begun to implement strategies which will expand trade by shifting its trade to Iran and Turkey and away from Russia, as well as developing plans for modernization. The Nagorno-Karabakh dispute with Armenia remains at the heart of Azerbaijan's ability to become an international trading partner with either its neighbors or with others.

Finally, a few words about the intellectual life of Azerbaijan. During Soviet rule, each republic in the Union had its own prominent figures who were often paired with prominent Russian figures. In Tajikistan, for instance, Sadriddin Aini and Maxim Gorkii were always depicted together; even though, in reality, they had met only once, very briefly, in the course of a conference. Abai Kunanbayev, Toghtugul Satilganov, Alisher Navoi, and Makhdumquli represent the zenith of the culture of their people among the Soviets, especially the European Soviets.

In this context, Azerbaijan is well endowed with prominent figures of its own. The most famous among them is Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1204), the author of the *Khamisa* (Quintet), which includes "*Layli and Majnun*," "*Khusrau and Shirin*," and several other stories in verse. Next to him would be Abul Hasan Shirvani (11th and 12th century), the author of *Astronomy*. Next is Ajami Nakhjivani (b. 1120), known to some as the father of Azerbaijani architecture, Muhammad Fizuli (b. 1438-1556), a major contributor to Azerbaijani folklore. In more recent times, Uzeyir Hajibeyov (b. 1885-1948) wrote the first Azerbaijani opera as well as composed Azerbaijan's national anthem. The list of contributors, of course, is long.

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