

**The Issue of the Azeri Minority in
Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan
and the Islamic Republic of Iran**

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ABSTRACT

The fact of Azerbaijan's separation into two parts as the result of wars between Russia and Iran in 1804-1813 and 1826-1828, still remains an important factor in the political and social life in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Now, Azeris constitute 90.6 per cent of the 9.4 million citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan. According to various sources Azeris account for one fourth to one third of 77 million Iranian citizens. After Azerbaijan re-gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and appeared on the international scene as the only independent state representing Azeris, the issue of relations with southern brethren prevailed in the political discourse of Baku officialdom.

The thesis examines Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards the Azeri minority in Iran since 1991, the dynamics of the shifts and dramatic changes in this policy and the extent to which it was influenced by the domestic public opinion and regional and international developments. To this end, the ethno-nationalistic policies conducted by President Elchibey in regard to Iranian Azeris, from 1992 to 1993, more pragmatic policies of Heydar Aliyev lasting from 1993 to 2003 and based on a kind of civic nationalism due to the ongoing state of war with Armenia and Ilham Aliyev's mostly multi-cultural policies are analysed. The qualitative research method was utilized to clarify the issue of the scope of the impact of the issue of the Azeri minority in relations between Baku and Tehran. Additionally, based on primary sources in Azeri and Persian, as well as secondary sources in English, Azeri, Turkish and Persian various methods of analysis, including comparative, conceptual and content analysis were used to have the full picture of the nature of the developments. The conclusion

made in the thesis suggests that the impact of the issue of Iranian Azeris on mutual relations has declined and that in different geo-political situations the Republic of Azerbaijan tried to utilize various political approaches to achieve its foreign policy goals regarding Iranian Azeris.

Keywords: Iranian Azeris, Azerbaijan, Iran, ethnic nationalism, minority rights.

ÖZ

1804-1813 ve 1826-1828 yılları arasında Rusya ve İran arasında çıkan savaşların sonucu olarak Azerbaycanın iki bölüme ayrılması gerçeği, halen Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin siyasi ve sosyal hayatında önemli bir faktör olmaya devam etmektedir. Azerbaycan, Çarlık ve Sovyet Rusyası'nın işgali altında olduğu son 200 yıl içinde ortak kimlik ve ruhsal bağları tutmak, akrabalık ilişkilerini sürdürmek hususunda özen göstermiştir.

Bu tez, 1991 yılında Azerbaycan'ın dünya Azerilerinin tek bağımsız devleti olarak ortaya çıkmasından sonra İran'da yaşayan Azeri azınlıkla ilgili yürütmüş olduğu dış politikaların, kamuoyu ve bölgesel uluslararası gelişmelerin nasıl bir şekilde etkilediğini ve nasıl dramatik değişikliklere yol açtığını inceler. Bu amaçla, İran Azerileri'ne yönelik, Cumhurbaşkanı Elçibey tarafından 1992-1993 tarihleri arasında yürütülen etno - milliyetçi politikalar, 1993 yılından 2003 yılına kadar süren Haydar Aliyev'in daha pragmatik ve Ermenistan'la savaşın devam etmesi nedeniyle sivil bir milliyetçilik türü haline gelen politikaları, ayrıca İlham Aliyev'in neredese multikültürel politikalar olarak algılaya bileceğimiz yöntemleri ayrı-ayrı bölümlerde analiz edildi. Bakü ve Tahran arasındaki ilişkilerin niteliği, İranda Azeri azınlığı konusunun bu ilişkileri nasıl bir şekilde etkilediği ve Azerbaycan'ın dış politikasında değişimlere yol açan gelişmeleri değerlendirmek amacıyla nitelendirici araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Ayrıca, gelişmelerin tam resmini çizebilmemiz için karşılaştırmalı kavramsal ve içerik analizi gibi çeşitli analiz yöntemlerine de başvurulmuştur. Tezde varılan sonuç; İran Azerileri konusunun iki devlet ilişkilerine etkisi azalmaktadır ve Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti'nin bu konuda dış

politika hedeflerine ulaşması için farklı jeopolitik durumlarda çeşitli siyasi yaklaşımlar uygulama çabası içerisinde olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: İran Azerileri, Azerbaycan, İran, etnik milliyetçilik, azınlık hakları .

To My Parents

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Chapter1

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union is rightly considered as one of the most important events in the twentieth century radically altering the course of developments in world politics. The impact of the break up of the USSR is not confined only to global phenomena such as the elimination of one of the world's superpowers and of the Eastern socialist block, or to the more general demise of socialist movements and rise of the capitalist camp. The reformation of the European Union on a new scale can also be traced to the collapse of the USSR which in regional terms is mostly associated with the emergence of the newly independent states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. These new changes in turn, formed new regional balances of power causing most countries in the mentioned regions to reconsider priorities in their foreign policy.

The emergence of newly independent countries such as Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkmenistan on its northern borders also impacted Iran's domestic and foreign politics. These fundamental changes were followed by modifications in Iran's behavior towards ethnic minorities such as Azeris and Turkmens residing largely in provinces bordering the two relevant newly independent states. According to various official and unofficial sources, Azeris constitute a considerable proportion of the Iranian population, estimates varying from 24 to 35 percent of the 77 million total Iranian population. Persians count for nearly half of the population. Ethnic groups

such as Gilaki and Mazandarani, Kurds, Arabs and other groups make up 8, 7, 3 and 4 per cent of the Iranian people, respectively. In some periods, in the early years of independence of Azerbaijan, the issue of ethnic policies was an important element affecting the nature of ties between Iran and Azerbaijan, as Baku's foreign policy agenda was dominated by nationalistic tenets. Inspired by the role of nationalistic movements in bringing to an end the Soviet Union, Abulfaz Elchibey, the president of the newly independent Azerbaijani Republic between June 1992 and July 1993 had intended to continue in the same vein. An ethno-nationalism aiming at the unification and solidarity of the all Turkic speaking nations across the world was the cornerstone of his domestic and foreign policies. Thus, the issue of the Azeri minority in Iran and ways to ensure their rights, including the right of self-determination, was placed as a priority on Elchibey's foreign policy agenda. However, the spread and promotion of nationalistic ideas on its northern borders not only challenged Iran's long-established ethnic policies, but also its intentions to export the Islamic Revolution to a new, mostly Shi'i-populated neighboring country.

The fall of the Elchibey government as a result of domestic complications due to failure in the war with Armenia and its replacement with one led by Heydar Aliyev, a former head of the Soviet Azerbaijan and leading member of the Soviet Politburo, changed the course of mutual ties between the two states. While leading the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan between 1991 to June 1993, which has no contiguous border with the main part of the country, Aliyev had already established good ties both with officials in Tehran and the chief executives of Iranian provinces bordering Nakhchivan. As the new leader of Azerbaijan, Aliyev gradually downgraded the role of nationalism in domestic and foreign policy and normalized

ties with Russia and Iran, while maintaining traditionally fraternal relations with Turkey. Within the framework of his so-called, “balanced foreign policy” strategy, Heydar Aliyev changed the name of the official language of Azerbaijan from Turkish into Azerbaijani, and ensured the active participation of Russia and Iran in the country’s important energy projects alongside the Western countries. Overall, the years between 1993 to 2003 which coincided with the presidency of Heydar Aliyev were characterized by the normalization of ties between Iran and Azerbaijan.

Nationalistic tenets were even less visible in the policies conducted by Ilham Aliyev, the incumbent president of Azerbaijan, who assumed office in 2003 following the death of his father. Generally, his policies in regard to Turkey and the Turkish world can be described as shifting from an emotional to a more logical and beneficial one.

The main research question will be to study how the issue of the Azeri minority of Iran has impacted relations between Azerbaijan and Iran since the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991. This main question will be further detailed through secondary questions such as “what are the reasons behind shifts and dramatic changes in this policy”, “to what extent this policy was influenced by domestic public opinion and by regional and international developments?”, and “what was the impact of the issue of Iranian Azeris on relations between Baku and Tehran?”

1.1 Methodology

The thesis is constructed on the basis of the qualitative research method encompassing a broad literature review, scholarly articles published in academic journals and interviews with political experts. A combination of various methods of

analysis, namely comparative analyses, conceptual analyses and content analysis were utilized in the research. The reason for preferring the comparative analysis method was to examine the differing aspects and views regarding nationalism and the formation of identity in the cases of Azerbaijan and Iran. As for the contextual analysis, it is based on primary sources in Azeri and Persian in a bid to examine speeches made by those such as the late leaders of Azerbaijan and Iran, Heydar Aliyev and Ayatollah Khomeini, ambassadors of both countries and other officials to make clear the role of political leaders in the decision-making processes of states regarding national issues.

Certain difficulties were faced during the study in terms of finding relevant and accurate data, such as concerned the number of Azeri's residing in Iran, for such a reliable statistic does not exist. The most important reason for this is that the Iranian state did not consider the issue of ethnicity in the censuses it took. Another problem is related to the lack of enough academic works examining the dynamics in Azerbaijan's policies regarding Iran's treatment of its Azeri minority. As Azerbaijan has regained its independence in relatively recent period most of works done in this field is about the promotion of South Azerbaijan by the Soviets. Through employing various data available in the Azerbaijani and Iranian media outlets and internet sources I tried to fill a gap between relevant literature existed in the Soviet and independent Azerbaijan. Using English, Azeri, Turkish and Persian language sources, I was thereby able to utilize a sufficient amount of material consisting of books and articles.

Importance of the study could be explained with the two factors. First, this topic has not been investigated thoroughly neither in Azerbaijan, or Iran, nor elsewhere.

Though, the issue of Iranian Azeris was a secondary subject of plenty of research with overlapping focus on the role of the Republic of Azerbaijan, there has been no detailed review of the topic from the aspect of relations between Azerbaijan and Iran.

Secondly, the study will allow us to make predictions about the future developments in Azerbaijani-Iranian relations, as well as Baku's and Tehran's approach to the issue of Iranian Azeris.

1.2 Structure

The thesis consists of five chapters. The second chapter which follows this introductory chapter examines the historical role and position of Azeris in Iran, their conceptions of national identity. The chapter elaborates on the extent to which Iran made adjustments to its ethnic and cultural policies concerning the Azeri minority following the establishment of the Azerbaijani state in its neighborhood. The similarities and differences between nationalistic policies of the current Islamic Republic that emerged following the Revolution of 1979 and the previous Pahlavi regimes is also analysed. An evaluation is made as well of the formal religio-centric paradigm of Iranian national identity and of its implementation in practice.

The third chapter elaborates on the foundations of the hard-line nationalistic tenets of the Iran policies of the National Front government established in Baku in June 1992 immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In order to provide a solid background, the prior development of nationalism, and conceptions of nation and national identity in the Republic of Azerbaijan is examined.

This will be followed by study of the eventual formation of nationalistic movements in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan and their role in the independence of

Azerbaijan. The main features of the policies conducted by the Azerbaijani government led by the 1992-1993 National Front towards the Azeri minority in Iran is also reviewed here. I will also elaborate on the history of South Azerbaijan policies in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan which dates back to the mid-1940s. The role that such policies had played in the formation of Azeri public opinion and national conscience, as well a linkage between the current and previous policies conducted in Azerbaijan will be reviewed in some detail.

The main subject of the next, fourth chapter will be the shift in Baku's political stance during Heydar Aliyev's tenure covering the years between 1993 and 2003. To this end I will start with a general review of Heydar Aliyev's "balanced foreign policy" doctrine in general and more specifically its relevance vis-à-vis Iran. It includes an analysis of the expansion of ties with the West, Turkey, Russia and Iran and the cooperation of all these actors within the framework of the exploration of Azerbaijan's energy resources in the Caspian Sea. Particular emphasis will be placed on Heydar Aliyev's policies towards Iran in respect to the Azeri minority there. Within this context, various visits made by Aliyev, speeches he delivered and other documents will be examined to this end.

A fifth chapter will focus on the most important features of the past decade of Iran-Azerbaijani relations coinciding with the presidency of Ilham Aliyev in terms of the impact of the minority issue in mutual ties. In a similar manner to the previous chapter, this one too will begin with a general review of Ilham Aliyev's related domestic and foreign policies. It will then examine Azeri-Iranian ties and the extent to which the issue of the Azeri minority played a role in the formation of Ilham Aliyev's policies towards Iran. Again, this is done based on the process tracing

methodology and contextual analyses of Aliyev's speeches, statements and other sources.

A sixth concluding chapter includes the findings about the role and place of the issue of the ethnic Azeri Iranians in political life of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in its foreign policy agenda in particular. While reviewing the previous chapters I will try to find an answer to questions such as, "to what extent the issue of the Azeri minority has hindered the development of political relations between Baku and Tehran?", "causes of the shifts in the Azerbaijani policy" and, "what measure of success has the Republic of Azerbaijan had in achieving its foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis the Azeri minority of Iran?"

1.3 Literature Review

As the thesis is connected to the nationalistic policies of Iran and Azerbaijan more specific issues such as the development of the national identity in Azerbaijan since the years of Russian rule in early 19th century were sited from a very unique book by a Polish scholar Tadeusz Swietochowski. One can say that the book titled, "Russian Azerbaijan 1905-1920: the shaping of national identity in a Muslim community" which was published by the Cambridge University Press can be considered as the most comprehensive research in this issue.

The literature review seeks to focus on materials related to policy-related issues. Objective problems being experienced while making the research mostly stemmed from the facts that the process remains ongoing and that little comprehensive study of the subject exists. In this regard, a book by Brenda Shaffer titled, "Borders and brethren: Iran and the challenge of Azerbaijani identity" can be considered one of the

exceptional seminal books in this field. The essential advantage of the book written by the Harvard researcher is the fact that she has approached the problem from a different aspect, based on the examination of the distinct identity of ethnic minorities in Iran, more effectively, while challenging long-established views. A chapter in the book elaborates on issues such as Azerbaijan's policy towards Iran's treatment of Azeri minority and its impact on domestic policies in the neighboring country. I have also cited the mainstream studies, contrary to Shaffer's perspective, namely books written by Touraj Atabaki and Richard Cottam who traditionally highlight the dominant Iranian national identity while downplaying non-Persian ethnic group identities. A further book by Atabaki titled "The state and subaltern: modernization, society and the state in Turkey and Iran," and published by Tauris Publishers in 2007 was utilized to make a comparative analyses of the implementation of integral nationalistic policies in Iran and Turkey between 1920-1930. An article entitled "Ethnic diversity and territorial integrity of Iran: domestic harmony and regional challenges," published in *Iranian Studies* in 2005 by Atabaki was used to reflect the mainstream views regarding the issue of national ethnicity in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. The mainstream school was also viewed in the thesis using books and works of Ahmadi such as that named "Unity within diversity: foundations and dynamics of national identity in Iran" published in *Critique: Critiquial Middle Eastern Studies* in 2005. A book by H. Katouzian, and H. Shahidi, named "Iran in the 21st century: politics, economics and conflict," published in London in 2008 and a book titled "Crafting a national identity amidst contentius politics in contemporary Iran" published by F. Fahri in *Iranian Studies* in 2005 are also among the reviewed traditional sources. Authors from Iranian ethnic minorities such as Azeris, Kurds were also examined to approach the research question from the symmetrically

different angles. A book by Azgharzadeh, an Iranian Azeri living abroad named “Iran and the challenge of diversity: Islamic fundamentalism, Aryanist racism, and democratic struggles” published in New York in 2007 provides a completely different explanation to the state of ethnic issues before and after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The author challenges the very paradigms concerning Persian-oriented nature of Iranian statehood and places his claims of committing ethnocide to eradicate non-Persian identities and cultures in the country. Other books titled “The Kurds in Iran: the past, present and future,” and “The political development of the Kurds in Iran” written by the ethnic Kurds written by ethnic Kurd Yildiz Taysi and Farideh Koochi-Kamali respectively were also reviewed. A book titled “Baluch nationalism: its origin and development” by Bresseg who is an ethnic Baluch was also utilized to this end.

Another book titled, “Heydar Aliyev and the East” published by senior officials from the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry includes important interviews and speeches related to Iran made by the late Azerbaijani president on various occasions between the years of 1991 to 2003. In view of the fact that the book encompasses material listing the course of events in chronological order, as well as all agreements and contracts signed between Iran and Azerbaijan during Heydar Aliyev’s tenure, the book is a useful source in the bid to conduct a comprehensive research on the subject. An article, “Azerbaijan and its foreign policy dilemma” written by Nazrin Mehdiyeva and published in Asian Affairs in 2010 mostly focuses on the contemporary features of the problems with the role of Iran’s Azeri minority and thus it is important in terms of learning the period covering the presidency of Ilham Aliyev. Several articles by an Armenia-born Azeri researcher Emil Souleimanov who is an assistant

professor at Prague's Charles University, including "The rise of nationalism among Iranian Azerbaijanis: a step towards Iran's disintegration?" and "Iran and Azerbaijan: A contested neighborhood," published in the Middle East Policy journal were also dedicated to this topic. I also reviewed articles and books by various Iranian authors related to the subject in order to explain contrary perspectives. As for the latest developments in Azeri-Iranian relations by the issue of Iranian Azeris, interviews with the former Azeri ambassadors to Tehran Nasibli and Hasanov, the former and incumbent Iranian ambassadors to Baku Suleymani and Pakayin were also quoted. Remarks by Iran's former foreign ministers Velayati and Mottaki concerning the subject of the thesis are also among utilized sources. More books and scholarly articles have been utilized to fully examine the topic from various aspects.

The main topic of the thesis is the evaluation of the impact the ethnic Azeri minority on mutual relations which makes it necessary to have a general view about the nationalism and ethnic-related issues. Nationalism has actually been occupying an important place in world politics so far. It has been a source of inspiration for various peoples in their wars for independence and liberation, acted as a basis for a plethora of ideological discourses, as well as a pretext for suppression and reactionary measures. In terms of Azerbaijan, nationalism is closely associated with independence from Tsarist and Soviet Russia, while in terms of Iran there are mixed feelings about nationalism. The following chapter will identify the features of nationalistic policies which Azeris in Iran were subjected to.

Chapter 2

IRAN'S ETHNIC POLICIES TOWARDS THE AZERI MINORITY

Numerous scholars subscribe to the idea that nationalism-related issues have been prevalent in Iran since the early years of the twentieth century. Some link the Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1905-1911) to the rise of nationalism in the country. At the highest official level, however, nationalism was for the first time systematically employed by Shah Reza Pahlavi to pursue his political agenda.

2.1 Foundations of Nationalism in Iran

In terms of history and kinds of nationalism and nationalistic policies in Iran, views of scholars vary dramatically. Cottam, for instance, believes that, “national consciousness of nationalism as a primary determinant of Iranian attitudes and political behavior,” starts from the twentieth century. He argues that nationalism became popular in Iran after a long period of mass political participation and, “at a time when nationalist values were central values for most Europeans and Americans, the concept of nationalism was an esoteric one for the vast majority of Iranians.”¹

Koohi-Kamali links the spread of nationalism in Iran to the then ever-increasing influence of the West in the region. She points that in the late-nineteenth and

¹ W. R. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*. (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1964), 5.

earlytwentieth century the expansion of Western influence coincided with the spread of new ideas, including nationalism and pan-Islamism.²

Fahri maintains that the loss of territories played a role in, “the initial impetus,” for nationalism in Iran in the 19th century. As Iran was facing new challenges to its frontiers and natural resources from Britain and Russia, nationalist ideology acted as an inspiration to defend its borders and the central government conducted policies in line with such patriotism in order to defend Iranian territory.³

Kellas believes that a kind of nationalism established in Iran at the outset of the twentieth century was also reformist nationalism. He describes the aim of policies implemented in this regard, by Reza Pahlavi, who replaced the Turkish-rooted Qajar dynasty with his own Persian Pahlavi dynasty, as the reanimation of the Iranian nation through implementing economic reforms, the elimination of dependence on foreigners and securing the national identity. He also stresses that Reza Shah’s reformist nationalist movement was strongly against the promotion of culture and language of other national groups in Iran and treated such efforts as acts sponsored by alien forces.⁴

However, Asgharzadeh holds a different view. He likens the Shah’s ethnic policies to the integral nationalist policies conducted by Hitler in Germany in the 1930s. The

² F. Koohi-Kamali, *The political development of the Kurds in Iran* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 71.

³ F. Fahri, “Crafting a national identity amidst contentius politics in contemporary Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 38 (2005): 10-11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 59-60, 70.

author points to the fact that the main postulate of the Shah's nationalistic policies was the supremacy of the, "pure Aryan race" over other racial groups in Iran. Thus, according to him, the Shah justified his policy of establishing cultural domination over and lingiocide against non-Persian people. As an example of close relations between Hitler's and the Shah's ethnic policies, Asgharzadeh mentions the publication in Iran of a Nazi-oriented and racist journal titled *Iran-e Bastan* [The Ancient Iran] in 1933, following the Nazis taking over power in Germany.⁵

The author sees fascist inspirations in the Shah's ethnic policies. To this end he quotes an article from the *Nameh-ye Bastan* journal. A passage from the mentioned article dated September 1933 and entitled, "Why We Are Superior?" stresses:

[T]he sign of Aryan triumph (swastika) is everywhere Aryan and respectable, be it on ceramics of Isfahan's Masjid-e Shah or on the column of Darvazeh Dovlat in Tehran; or be it placed on the flag of Germany or embellish the arm of "Hitler." From ancient times the Black dress has been an exclusive property of the Iranic race. If other nations have also made it their official dress or for instance the Fascists of Italy have made it their specific symbol, one must know that based on the absolute rule of history this has been an idea of the Iranians who are the father of all civilized Aryan nations."⁶

While summarizing the abovementioned facts, Asgharzadeh notes that Reza Shah's policies were aimed at promoting, "a racist and racialized view," and glorifying the Aryan race as superior to others in Iran. He believes that the theoretical/ideological bases of such policies in Iran dates back to the racist ideas and Aryanist paradigm that prevailed in parts of Europe from the eighteenth to twentieth-century. As for

⁵ A. Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the challenge of diversity: Islamic fundamentalism, Aryanist racism, and democratic struggles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 91-92.

⁶ Asgharzadeh, 93.

ways of establishing racist discourse in Iran, Asgharzadeh stresses that the Shah's regime used every means possible to encourage scholars to conduct research about the existence and exceptionalism of the Aryan race and its superiority to others in the country.⁷ However, one should note that ever-increasing German influence in Iran was among reasons leading to the Soviet and Britain invasion of Iran in 1941 and forcing the Shah to abdicate from power, in order, among other reasons, to put an end to the Nazi influence. Thus, the Nazi orientations in the ethnic policies conducted by Reza Shah can be asserted as having a temporary and short-term impact only.

Ahmadi stresses that the manifestation of a common Iranian national identity was witnessed several times during history. This common identity, according to Ahmadi, was exemplified first in the form of national resistance of Iranians to Arab dominance, and again during the occupation of Iran by the Ottomans and the Russians after the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1722. The next similar occurrence coincided with the invasion of British naval forces to the southwestern Bushehr province in 1856 to force Iran to withdraw from Herat, now in the west of Afghanistan. He also considers the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1905, the national movement led by Dr. Mosaddeq to nationalize the oil industry between the years of 1951-53 and finally, the democratic movement in Iran in the early 1990s as other examples of the manifestation of national identity among Iranians.⁸ Ahmadi argues that, "Iranian political heritage" such as the institution of the state, its political

⁷ Asgharzadeh, 93.

⁸ H. Ahmadi, "Unity within diversity: foundations and dynamics of national identity in Iran," *Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14 (2005): 131-132.

history, mythology and land; “the existence of a rich cultural heritage” created and conveyed mainly through Persian language and literature; and that the influence of religion were key elements that acted as, “foundations for a sense of unity and a national identity among different Iranian groups.” He concludes that the abovementioned factors, “in tandem, played a crucial role in the integration of Iranian society after the arrival of Islam.”⁹

Crane, W. Kaith and J. Martini emphasize the role of Shi’ite Islam as, an, “important glue holding together an Iranian national identity.” They argue that after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the religio-centric formulation of the Iranian national identity prevailed over the ethnocentric one and that the Islamic Republic of Iran has been using, that “the homogenizing influence of religion [was] to override ethnic and tribal loyalties.”¹⁰

As for the state of issues after the Islamic Revolution which forced Mohammad Reza Shah to flee the country in January 1979 and eliminated the monarchy in Iran, Asgharzadeh stresses that Islamic fundamentalism propagating the solidarity of the world Muslims with all ethnic, racial and sectarian background was declared as the dominant ideology in Iran. The fundamentalist ideology as a rule sets religious discourses as its priority while considering civil society and democracy-related issues such as rights of ethnic and religious minorities, their proportional representation, promotion of religious tolerance and linguistic pluralism as minor questions.

⁹ Ahmadi, 134.

¹⁰ W. Crane, J.M. Kaith, *Iran’s political, demographic, and economic vulnerabilities* (USA, Pittsburg: RAND Corporation, 2008), 41-42. Retrieved 29 October 2013, from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG693.pdf

Nevertheless, the author maintains that the Islamic Republic's establishment did not make any substantial change to the racist policies of the Shah's regime which had reflected itself largely in the language issues and that the existing Iranian nationalism was even more enriched by religion-based elements as well.¹¹

Most scholars argue that nationalism emerged in Iran at the end of the nineteenth and at the onset of the twentieth century as the by-product of the ever-increasing Western cultural and political engagement in the Middle East. However, some scholars argue that, although a Western influence of sorts is undeniable, the formation of years of Iranian nationalism dates back to the mid-nineteenth century and is mostly related to domestic developments. As far as the features of Iranian nationalism are concerned, the majority of academic circles term it as a kind of reformist and to some extent social nationalism pursuing the goal of the establishment of a powerful and modern state. Counter to this view, however, a group of scholars, who are mainly from Iranian minority populations such as the Azeris, Kurds and Baluchs, hold that the type of nationalism emerged in Iran was actually integral nationalism. According to them the true goal of the integral nationalism was establishing Persian dominance over other Iranian national groups. These scholars argue that it was necessary to eliminate non-Persian national cultures through employing the so-called nation-building process.

2.2 Ethnic Policies of Pahlavi Dynasty

The Pahlavi monarchy survived for just over half a century from 1925 to 1979. During Reza Shah's rule starting from 1925 and ending in 1941 he resorted to

¹¹ Asgharzadeh, 213-214.

repressive methods and widespread propaganda to establish a new model of a national secular state in the country. Stated differently the Shah tried through suppressive policies to create a centralized state, comprising a single dominant nation where people spoke only in Persian, while eradicating other non-Persian ethnic identities and cultures. As a part of such policies, the Shah's propaganda machine described Iranians as genuine descendants of the ancient civilization encompassing large swathes of territories from Egypt to India. The most important tools to spread such propaganda were media outlets, educational centers, and state agencies. The Shah's propaganda machine mainly focused on the glorification of Iran's pre-Islamist past, including the Zoroastrian religion. Moreover, all the problems facing the country were attributed to the Arab conquest of Iran and the domination of Arab language and traditions. Propaganda also depicted the period of Turkish rule over Iran as a historical barrier separating the nation from the glorious historical empire of the Persians.¹² The fact that Iran was a multinational and multicultural country was simply ignored by the new ideology introduced by the Shah, while declaring languages of non-Persian groups, namely Turkish and Kurdish to be, "local dialects" of Persian. Rahnama and Behdad argue, without, however, offering very convincing evidence that it would otherwise have been impossible for the Shah to assimilate non-Persians into the dominant Persian identity without committing genocide and ethnocide. Nevertheless, according to several experts, most of whom are representatives of the Iranian minorities, in order to integrate various ethnic groups Reza Shah's army forcibly moved various nomadic tribes into central regions populated mostly with Persians, brutally suppressing their resistance. Based on these

¹² S. Rahnama, S. Behdad, *Iran after the Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris and Co Ltd. Victoria House, 1996), 231.

facts, *Rahnama* and *Behdad* describe restrictions imposed on the development of culture and language of non-Persian ethnic groups as part and parcel of the Reza Shah's policies aimed at creating a new social nation in Iran.¹³

Proponents of Reza Shah mostly argue that such policies were necessary in order to create national unity and consolidate the country in the face of the increasing threat from the imperialist powers. However, most of his political behavior, including far-reaching policies such as, "an artificial imposition of the Persian consciousness," in order to stand against the threat from the imperialist powers noted by Entessar, are controversial because of the Shah's great and obvious dependence on the great powers of the day such as Germany, Britain and Russia and the role that Britain in particular had played in order to bring Reza Shah to power. In line with such policies, the Society for Public Guidance was established and charged with the spread of Persian national consciousness. The Society was involved in fostering the dissemination of the Persian ethnic identity to all non-Persian ethnic groups, and played a key role in controlling all radio broadcasts, textbooks, and media. An Iranian Academy was also established to purge Arabic and Turkish words from the Persian language though this politically-motivated cultural move was only partly implemented because of complications caused by the, "centuries-long intermingling of Persian, Arabic and Turkish cultures."¹⁴ Taking into the consideration the fact that nearly in the same period Turkey was witnessing cultural reforms in the form of the establishment of the Turkish Language Academy, activities aimed at the purification of the Turkish language from the Arabic and Persian words, as well as very close

¹³ *Rahnama*, 231.

¹⁴ N. Entessar, *Kurdish politics in the Middle East* (USA, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), 17.

similarities between other non-cultural novelties such as the introduction of new forms of dress for men and women, the banning of the religious veil for women in public places and restriction on the activities of religious figures and the introduction of a secular educational system one should note a sort of paradox in co-relations and parallels between the spread of Turkish nationalism in Turkey and Persian nationalism in Iran accompanied with ethnic particularism. Touraj Atabaki terms the abovementioned changes introduced in Turkey and Iran as a part of the process of modernization. He holds that unlike the modernization process in the northwestern Europe leading to the civil society and the dominance of individualism, the process brought about asymmetric outcomes both in terms of individual and collective rights as they were led by military men or, “men of order” in Iran and Turkey. The author believes that the both countries were suffering from constant military and political defeats during the 18th and 19th centuries and thus reforms were prescribed as a remedy to the chronic problems of their societies. Atabaki highlights that as the previous attempts of the modernization initiated by intelligentsia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were unable to protect Turkey and Iran from threats such as ethnic separatism and partial occupation, the military designers of the modernization saw the establishment of national unity and assurance of the state sovereignty as superior to other factors.¹⁵

Restrictions were also imposed on the music, dance, literature, and life style of peoples with non-Persian origins. Efforts to eliminate the usage of Azeri, Kurdish,

¹⁵ T. Atabaki, *The state and subaltern: modernization, society and the state in Turkey and Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2007), xv.

Arab, Baluch as well as other minority languages were implemented through the imposition of official and non-official prohibitions. In this way, the Pahlavi regime tried to get rid of the main distinct dimension of national identities in Iran and it was perhaps among the most important part of the nation-building policies led by Reza Shah.¹⁶ Dr. Afshar, known as a staunch supporter of the Shah's policies to Persianize various national groups in Iran, urged the prohibition of the use of Turkish in public. Going further he advocated for the transfer of the Turkish people to areas mostly populated with Persians, and to abolish the administrative boundaries and the name of the Iranian province of Azerbaijan. Afshar also prescribed similar policies for the province of Khuzestan mostly populated with Arabs and placed in the southwest of Iran, on the Iraqi border.¹⁷ As Walker Connor notes, it can be thus argued that "nation-building requires first of all the destruction of nations." He describes not, "nation-building" but, "nation-destroying" as the main goal of the new post-war, postcolonial states, comprised of a number of different nations¹⁸ Regarding Connor's assessment, in terms of Iran, one should remark that the nation-building was indeed implemented at the expense of the destruction of various ethnic groups.

As for the implementation of the Shah's nationalistic policies in Azeri populated provinces, Souleimanov terms them as being extremely assimilatory and as part of the effort to maintain national unity in a multi-national state. According to him, such policies were mainly articulated in the rejection of the ethnic and linguistic identity of the Azerbaijani Turks. He believes that such assimilatory policies aimed at the

¹⁶ Rahnama, 232.

¹⁷ Cottam, 131-132.

¹⁸ W. Bloom, *Personal identity, national identity and international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 55-58.

elimination of the Azeris' distinct ethnic identity were implemented through deprivation of the ethnic Azeris from essential ethno-linguistic rights, as well as the transformation of their identity advocated by Pahlavi ideologists. Reza Shah's policies presented Azerbaijanis as, "Turkified Aryans." It was attempted to prove that Azeris had been Iranians by origin before the arrival of the Turks into the region in the ninth century, speaking a language from the family of the Indo-European languages. The state machine tried to create a feeling of racial and cultural inferiority in the Azeri population while comparing Azeris as descendants of uncivilized Mongols and Chingiz Khan with civilized Persians possessing a 2,500 year old civilization. As a result of such chauvinistic policies, the derogatory image of the "stupid Turk" was cultivated and spread in order for it to be associated with Iranian Azeris. In particular, millions of Azeris, residing in Tehran and other large cities with a mixed ethnic population, had to deny their Azeri origin in order not to face social and psychological pressure. This in its turn further deepened their assimilation into the Persian socio-linguistic group which was dominant in Iran.¹⁹ From my own observations based on talks with Iranian Azeris visiting Baku in the first years of the independence of Azerbaijan in the early 1990s and with Iranian students, many Azeri residents of Tehran preferred to speak in Persian even to their family members. The reason was simply the fact that they were trying to strengthen the Persian-speaking capabilities of their children in order to prevent their Azeri accents from being noticeable while talking to Persians and safeguard them from associated feelings of shame. However, the signs of such an inferiority complex have apparently since decreased and now it is the norm to hear Azeris speaking to each other loudly in

¹⁹ E. Souleimanov, "The evolution of Azerbaijani identity and the prospects of secessionism in Iranian Azerbaijan," *The Quarterly Journal Summer* (2010):78.

public places in Tehran, unlike Kurds, Baluchs, Lurs and other minorities who still prefer to use Persian among themselves in public so as not to feel ashamed.

A Turkish scholar, Süer Eker who is author of numerous academic works on the topic, asserts such policies were an attempt to rewrite history. Eker, refutes such policies aimed at dismissing the Toorian roots and “proving” the Iranian roots of Azeri Turks. Referring to the fact that Turkish is the natively language of millions of Azeris, he disproves the allegations that Azeris were speaking a different language before the arrival of the Turks and that under a 500 year long dominance of Turkish tribes they rejected their own language and accepted the language of Turks. Eker points to the absence of proper political, social and cultural paradigms that might have made making possible such a large scale process of rejecting one’s own language. He stresses that the Oğuz tribes that originally invaded Iran have maintained their Oğuz identity, and Persians have maintained their Persian identity during thousands of years in the region. Eker, however, accepts shared Shi’i faith, a common historical past and Shi’i faith as factors ensuring some influence of Persian culture on Azeri Turks, and describes Persian as a language of communication between various national groups in the region for centuries.²⁰

Samii argues that Reza Shah tried to establish a nation state in Iran and his nationalistic policies conducted between 1925 and 1941 served to suppressor deprive all the non-Persian national groups of their own ethnic identity and language. He points at that as Persians constituted just half of the population in a multinational

²⁰ S. Eker, “Farsçanın kısılcında Güney Azerbaycan türkçesi (South Azerbaijanian Turkish in the pincer of Persian language),” *Türkiyat Araştırmaları (Turkish Studies)* 9 (2008): 190.

country like Iran, there was no other way for the Shah but to resort where necessary to violent repressions against non-Persian groups in order to establish a nation state dominated by Persians. Samii sees the main goal of the policies conducted by the Pahlavi state as subjecting the Iranian minority groups to “genocide”, and “ethnocide” in a bid to Persianize them.²¹ One should note that the term of genocide in this context could be considered as a kind of exaggeration due to the lack of any fact proving mass killing of Iranian Azeris by the Reza Shah administration for the reason of their ethnicity. He also draws attention to the hostile nature of Iranian nationalism as promoted by the Shah towards all the non-Persian peoples including, Azeris, Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmens and concludes that such an approach stemmed from the view that, “ethnic and cultural pluralism,” was a threat to the nation-state.²²

Similar policies, though with a lesser degree of suppression were followed in Iran by Reza Shah’s son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi between the years of 1941 to 1979. There was no fundamental change in ethnic policies of the new Shah and not only Azeris, but all ethnic minorities in Iran were subject to discrimination and deprivation in terms of the use of mother tongue and developing national culture. As during Reza Shah’s tenure, the ancient Persian emperors were glorified while downplaying the role of other rulers of Iran, most of whom were of Turkish origin, as well as that of the Arab conquest of Iran and the spread of Islam in this country. An Achaemenid emperor Cyrus was propagated as the founding father of the Iranian nation. National existence of Azerbaijanis was denied, Azerbaijan was divided to

²¹ A. W.Samii, “The nation and its minorities: Ethnicity, unity and state policy in Iran,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20 (2000): 231-232.

²² Rahnama, 129-130.

East and West Azerbaijan provinces, and Azeri ethnic identity was subjected to a policy of gradual elimination and Iranization.²³

Although the data showing the budget distribution among Iranian provinces during Reza Shah's period is not available, one can deduce the nature of the discrimination policies towards non-Persian populated provinces that was being continued, if on a lesser level, by his son Mohammad Reza in the 1970s. The *Markazi* (Central) Province, for instance, populated mostly with Persians, with slightly more than one fifth of the population, was given approximately 33 % of the development budget in the years of 1972 and 1973. On the other hand, the next year less than 5% of the budget was allocated to the East Azerbaijan Province a home to one tenth of the population. Moreover, 14.3% from the agricultural budget were allotted to the *Markazi* province, while the Baluchistan Province, traditionally one of the farming regions of the country, on the Pakistani border and home to a Baluch minority, was given just 0.7% of the available credits.²⁴ According to the data for 1976, the number of people living in urban areas in the mostly Persian populated Markazi province reached 79.7% by a 9.4 per cent increase against the year of 1966, which is 32.9% above from the country's average. This figure for urbanization at the same period reached 36.3 per cent in the East Azerbaijan province owing to a 7.3% increase, however, it was still 10.5% below the national average. Such policies brought about mass migration of ethnic minorities to the central provinces mostly populated with Persians where they were used as a cheap labor force. In terms of the literacy rate,

²³ Asgharzadeh, 106, Souleimanov 102, Nasibli 5.

²⁴ A. Aghajanian, "Ethnic inequality in Iran: an overview," *Journal of Middle East Studies* 15 (1983): 221.

before 1966 nearly half of the population, 49.6%, in the Markazi province, and a little more than one-fifth of the people, 20.5%, in the East Azerbaijan province were literate. After ten years the Markazi province had the rate of 66.1% which was 18.6% above the national average. This number reached 36.3 per cent in the East Azerbaijan province which was 11.2% less than the Iranian average. The rate of literacy constituted 17.5% and 17.8% in the Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan provinces.²⁵ One should note that in all cases related to literacy and urbanization the percentage of the East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan provinces which are home to ethnic minorities were below the national average. Aghajanian sees the roots of this inequality in the uneven modernization and political modernization introduced by the Reza Pahlavi, however Atabaki tends to focus more on the center-periphery antagonism in the then Iranian society.²⁶

2.3 Ethnic Policies of the Islamic Republic

Referring to the nature of ethnic policies after the establishment of the Islamic Republic which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979, Asgharzadeh underlines the fact that Shi'ism and Islamic fundamentalism became the dominant discourse in the country. The main postulate of the new discourse was the solidarity of all Muslims with various ethnic, racial and linguistic backgrounds, and issues such as ethnic and religious minorities, civil society and pluralism actually were regarded as non-important. Nevertheless, the author concludes that the Islamic regime also

²⁵ Aghajanian, 215-216.

²⁶ T. Atabaki, "Ethnic diversity and territorial integrity of Iran: domestic harmony and regional challenges," *Iranian Studies* 38 (2005): 24.

maintained, “the language-based racism of the Pahlavi era,” just adding a new, “Shi’i-based religious component,” to Iranian nationalism.²⁷

Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, and other high-ranking officials of the Islamic Republic strongly condemned all kinds of nationalism. Khomeini, for instance, termed ethnic policies introduced by the Shah regime, as a plot hatched by the West to create a rift between Muslims and prevent them from being united. He accepted no difference between all the world’s Muslims based on their various linguistic backgrounds. Atabaki quotes Ayatollah Khomeini as saying, “They create the issues of nationalism, of pan-Iranism, pan-Turkism, and such isms, which are contrary to Islamic doctrines. Their plan is to destroy Islam and the Islamic philosophy.”²⁸

There was no basic change in the ethnic policies of the Islamic Republic following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 and his replacement as Supreme Leader by Ayatollah Khamene’i. A statement by Khamene’i in this regard contends that, “the noble nation gives priority to unity over factors which might divide it.”²⁹ As Samii, argues, in general, the state propagates the idea of unity of the Muslims and pretends that, “all minorities see themselves as part of the Iranian nation-state first and foremost.”³⁰

²⁷ Asgharzadeh, 213-214.

²⁸ Atabaki, (2005), 38.

²⁹ Samii, 128.

³⁰ Ibid., 129.

While comparing the outcomes of the ethnic policies of the Shah regime and the Islamic establishment in Iran concerning the country's Azeri minority, it is useful to examine them in terms of three broad categories of political representation, economic welfare and cultural development. However, it is helpful first to provide some information about the number and geographical settlement of various ethnic groups in Iran in order to better understand the nature of the problem. Official information concerning the mentioned matters is not available, as the Iranian censuses conducted during Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule did not consider the issue of ethnicity. Surprisingly enough, the current Islamic establishment also considers the issue of religious affiliation of the people rather than their ethnicity. According to various sources the Persians, mostly inhabitants of the central provinces, constitute nearly 51 per cent of the Iranian population of 77 million. The second largest ethnic group are Azeris with at least 24 per cent, which are followed by the Gilakis and Mazandarani, from the Persian language family with 8 per cent for each and populated mostly in the north of Iran, on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. The percentage of the Kurdish population is given as 7, predominantly residing in the Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces. The Kurds constitute a considerable percentage in the West Azerbaijan province, as well. These provinces are bordering Turkey and Iraq, in the west of Iran.³¹ However, some sources indicate the number of the Kurds in Iran varying between 12 and 15 per cent.³² The Arabs which make up 3 per cent of the Iranian population reside mostly in the Khuzestan Province on the Iraqi border in the southwest of Iran. The Turkmens with 2 per cent of the whole

³¹ Samii, 128-129

³² K. Yildiz, T.B.Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran: the past, present and future* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 3.

Iranian population constitute a considerable portion of the residents in the northeastern provinces of Golestan and Khorasan-e Shomali bordering the Republic of Turkmenistan. Baluchs represent 2 per cent of the population and they are mostly populated in the Sistan-Baluchestan Province on the Pakistani border in the southwest of Iran.³³ As for the religious affiliations, the majority of the Persians, Azeris, Gilakis and Mazandarani are followers of the Shi'i branch of Islam while the Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens and Baluchs are Sunni Muslims. However in numerous sources, including Asgharzadeh and Yıldız the number of the Persians is shown as less than 50 per cent and the estimated number of the Azeris varies from between one third and one fourth of the total Iranian population. The vast majority of the people in East Azerbaijan, Ardabil and Zanjan provinces in northwestern Iran and bordering the republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia are Azeris. Azeris constitute the majority in the West Azerbaijan province which shares borders with Turkey and Iraq. A large number of Azeris also reside in the Qazvin and Hamadan provinces in the northwest and in a strip of the Gilan province bordering the Republic of Azerbaijan.³⁴

The following map derived from University of Texas, Perry-Castaceda Library Map Collection of 2004 better illustrates the geographic location of ethnic groups in Iran.³⁵

³³ Samii, 128-129.

³⁴ E. Souleimanov, K. Pikal, J. Kraus. "The rise of nationalism among Iranian Azerbaijanis: a step towards Iran's disintegration?" (2013). Retrieved 30 October 2013, from <http://bay.tc/xeber/221>

³⁵ Crane, Kaith, 42.



Crane and Kaith show the number of Azeris in Iran as 20 million people. They describe Azeris as “Iran’s relatively well-integrated largest ethnic group.”³⁶

The support of the Azeris was crucial in deposing the Pahlavi dynasty and replacing it with a Shi’i based religious establishment and several Azeris were among the leadership of the Islamic Revolution. However, their expectations in terms of a breakthrough in terms of ensuring the ethnic and cultural rights of Azeris have apparently not been met. Ethnicity-related unrest that engulfed almost all of the

³⁶ Crane, Kaith, 42, 38.

minority-populated provinces in Iran in the early 1980s showed that the central government continued to treat the expansion of demands for more rights for the ethnic minorities as a threat. Tehran had believed that the meeting of such demands might pave the way for demands for more rights for the ethnic groups. In the case of Kurdistan demands for more cultural/ethnic rights were coupled with those for the establishment of autonomy and the bloody unrest they lasted nearly six years. Interestingly enough, in the case of East Azerbaijan province, a movement initiated by a high-ranking Shi'i cleric, Ayatollah Seyyed Kazem Shariatmadari, put the expansion of minority rights among other demands related to the democratization of society. The movement which started on 25 February 1980 in the provincial capital of Tabriz resulted in the occupation of state agencies by the supporters of Shariatmadari and lasted two months with the eventual fall of the city to the hands of the supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini. During these two months some new newspapers were launched to boost the national identity among Azeris; all of them, except the journal "Varliq" (Existence), ceased their activity after the suppression of the movement and the arrest of Shariatmadari.³⁷

The vast majority of Azeris, are followers of the Shi'i branch of Islam, as was mentioned earlier, unlike other Iranian ethnic minorities such as Arabs, Kurds, Baluchs, and Turkmens. As a consequence, in terms of political rights in the state where Shi'i ideology is dominant they have enjoyed an advantage as far as concerns being promoted to leadership positions in the country. A large number of high-ranking Iranian officials, namely, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamene'i, the incumbent

³⁷ H. Katouzian, H. Shahidi, *Iran in the 21st century: politics, economics and conflict* (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2008), 54-55.

religious leader himself, as well as Mirhuseyn Musavi, the opposition leader are Azeris. The ideology of the new Islamic state promoting policies of Islamic brotherhood, policies put an end to the glorification of the country's pre-Islamic Persian past and to the humiliation of other Muslim nations. In accordance with such policies the Pahlavi dynasty, as well as ancient Persian emperors were declared as being anti-religious by nature. As far as changes in the sphere of economic rights, it is said that Azeris were not subject to any special discrimination and in fact they possess good positions in the lucrative markets and in the economy generally, especially in the capital city Tehran. However, the above-mentioned positive changes were not equally applied to the field of cultural rights.

The right of teaching minority languages, including Azeri in provincial primary schools embodied in Article 15 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic could be mentioned as an example of potentially positive developments for Azeris, following the Islamic Revolution.³⁸ It has though never been implemented. Officials explain the non-implementation of Article 15, with the lack of any popular demand for establishing local schools teaching Azeri.³⁹ However, there is much evidence to the contrary. For example, Manuchehr Mottaki, a former foreign minister, and Ali Akbar Velayati, a former head of the diplomacy office and the incumbent advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, who had run as candidates in the most recent presidential race, were questioned by residents about the reasons for non-implementation of the mentioned Article during their election campaign in Tabriz. Mottaki accepted the

³⁸ Ghanun-e Asasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran). Retrieved October 29, 2013, from <http://www.parliran.ir/index.aspx?siteid=1&pageid=219>

³⁹ Interview with Iran's ambassador to Azerbaijan, Pakayin. (2013). Retrieved 25 October, 2013, from <http://aznews.az/news.php?id=22374>.

unsatisfactory level of work done in the sphere of education in minority languages, including Azeri, and vowed that more opportunities would be created in this field were he elected. However, Velayati diplomatically supported the government's ethnic policies likening the importance of Azerbaijan for Iran to the importance of the head for the body, adding that the issue of education in the mother tongue for minority groups was unlikely to change anything in the country.⁴⁰ The ever-increasing intensification of debates about schools with Azeri as the medium of instruction and partial recognition of the failure of official policies in this regard, rules out the general indifference of Azeris towards education in their mother tongue.

Unlike the era of the Shah, the speaking of Azeri in public has not been forbidden. The state TV and radio broadcast programs both in Azeri and Persian in East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardebil, and Zanjan provinces. However, the language used in these "Azeri" programs, news bulletins in particular, is full of Persian words, and is completely different from the normal Azeri language spoken by ordinary people. The language of the provincial TV channels is described as pigeon Azeri based on the literal translation of the texts of the central TV programs in Persian and thus it does not contribute to the development of the Azeri language.⁴¹ Stated differently, the language used is a mixture of Azeri and Persian languages. However, preachers use normal Azeri in their Friday prayer sermons in the Azeri-populated regions, and the same is true for the use of other minority languages by clerics in

⁴⁰ Azerbaijan Iranin bashidir (9 May 2013). Retrieved 30 October 2013, from <http://www.aznews.az/site/index.php?c=news&id=23186>,

⁴¹ My observations include the programs of the TV channels aired in the East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan provinces, as well as the radio programs of Ardabil and Tabriz. An ordinary citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan, who unlike me does not speak in Persian, just could suggest a smattering of topics aired in the Azeri news bulletins of the channels.

different provinces as well. Some experts, including Shaffer, link this important development to the difficulties that prayer imams may face in delivering their sermons in Persian. Normally it would be difficult for worshipers in rural townships to understand their speeches in Persian, as well.⁴² It might be concluded that those cultural rights that may have contributed to the strengthening of a distinctive Azeri identity were not ensured by the state, whereas cultural rights that might serve to move Azeris closer to Iranian culture were granted.

2.4 The National Identity Issue among the Azeri Minority in Iran

Despite continued pressures, scholars see a linkage between the emergence of the state of Azerbaijan in 1991 and a sharp rise in the level of activity among Iranian Azeris, in identity-related issues, in particular. Shaffer states that the establishment of the independent state of Azerbaijan following the collapse of the Soviet Union served as a, “stimulant for many Azerbaijanis in Iran to identify with the Azerbaijani ethnic group though not necessarily with the new state itself.” The author observes that the emergence of the state of Azerbaijan in the neighborhood has since the 1990’s brought about the political expression of ethnic identity issues and demands for more cultural rights for Azeris in Iran. Shaffer describes a widespread tendency among Iranian Azeris to identify themselves as “Azeris” not Turks as a sobering example of the rise of the identity issue in Iranian Azerbaijan. This shift in self-reference from Turk to Azeri had nothing to do with avoiding the derogatory references of the Persian establishment and as the author underscores was mostly a

⁴² B. Shaffer, “The formation of Azerbaijani collective identity in Iran,” *The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 28 (2000): 452.

consequence of developments related to the emergence of the state of Azerbaijan in Iran's northern neighborhood.⁴³

The rising demands for the use of the Azerbaijani language backed with political activities could also be considered as another reflection of the strengthening of Azeri identity. To this end, Shaffer quotes clear-cut demands for the development of the cultural rights included in an address of a group of Azerbaijani students to the Iranian leadership:

It is time to pay attention to such important items as the realization of a bilingual educational system based on clause fifteen of the Iranian constitution. This does not contradict our unity, because we are united by Iranian Muslim duties, but not by the Persian language. We must take into consideration that if we do not realize necessary issues in the sphere of native language, cultural and other demands, some undesirable phenomena may occur.⁴⁴

Some scholars tend to term the considerable rise in the number of publications in minority languages since the last decade of the last century as vivid evidence showing a growing national consciousness of the ethnic minorities. The publication of books in non-Persian languages was a rare cultural development prior to Rafsanjani's presidency and was confined only to the provincial sphere. According to a study covering the years of the Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Khatami presidencies (1997-2005), a total of 920,000 copies of books in Azeri with 460 titles were published in Iran in the abovementioned period which is considered as a

⁴³ Shaffer (2000), 460.

⁴⁴ Ibid.,460-461.

considerable progress. However, one should note that these figures for publications and books do not compare favorably with those in the Kurdish language where 708 titles and 1,416,000 copies, respectively were published and produced.⁴⁵

Rise of national consciousness among Azeris was also clearly visible in the immediate responses to any derogatory behavior targeting their identity in Iran. For the first time it happened in the onset of 1990s, when Azerbaijanis reacted forcefully against offensive jokes depicting them as retrograde and ignorant. In their addresses to MPs from the Azeri-inhabited provinces and public statements published in media, Azeri students demanded, in particular, “the expansion of their language and cultural rights,” and putting an end to what they termed, “cultural humiliation.”⁴⁶

In the spring of 1995, a survey conducted by Iran’s State Broadcaster (IRIB) also sparked street protests in Azeri populated provinces, as well as in the capital Tehran. The survey asked numerous questions, including whether respondents would like to have an Azeri neighbor, which were considered as derogatory and revealing, “widespread negative prejudice,” among Persians towards their Azeri compatriots. Through the staging of protest rallies and sending of letters to the Iranian leadership Azeri students and activists denounced the survey itself and urged the authorities to launch courses at Tabriz University for the study of the Azeri language. Ten days later, the state broadcaster publically denied any connection to the survey. Shaffer puts such an upsurge in nationalistic activities among Iranian Azeris down to a sort

⁴⁵ Katouzian, 59.

⁴⁶ Shaffer (2000), 462.

of, “ethnic self-confidence” that may have erupted partly as an aftermath of the emergence of the state of Azerbaijan on the country’s north-western borders.⁴⁷

The next and even more large-scale protests were held on 12 May 2006 in the mostly Azeri populated regions against the publication of a derogatory cartoon by the state-owned “Iran” newspaper. Riaux asserts these mass protests constituted the, “peak of the ethnic mobilization.” The cartoon had depicted Azeris as giant cockroaches harmful to Iranians. One should note that the author of the cartoon also humiliated Azeris by implying that cockroaches should not be fed unless they learn to speak Persian properly. Large rallies of protests were organized throughout the Azeri populated cities such as Tabriz, Urmiah, Ardebil, and Zanjan, as well as in the Iranian capital. In Tabriz, the largest Azeri populated city of Iran, protests were accompanied by violent clashes and protesters destroyed cars and state facilities.⁴⁸

Shaffer also describes the widespread viewing of the Turkish satellite TV channels since 1992, which became more easily possible following the partial lifting of the ban on the use of satellite dishes in Iran as a very crucial development leading to the awakening of the sense of collective identity among the Azerbaijanis in the country. Owing to linguistic kinship it was not difficult for Azeris to understand the Turkish films where, the “Turk” was depicted as the embodiment of a positive, civilized and

⁴⁷ Shaffer (2000), 462.

⁴⁸ G. Riaux, “The formation years of the Azerbaijani nationalism in post-revolutionary Iran,” *Central Asian Survey* 27 (2009):45.

wealthy, in a sharp contrast to domestic propaganda portraying Turks as backward servants and the uncivilized peasant.”⁴⁹

A number of scholars challenge the mainstream views of officially sanctioned Iranian studies about the absence of a distinct Azeri identity in Iran. On the contrary, they note the emergence and a considerable rise of Azeri identity in Iranian society. Shaffer, for instance, draws attention to a considerable rise in the cases of explicit expression of distinct Azerbaijani identity in the country. While acknowledging the existence of the great diversity among Iranian Azeris in terms of self-identification, she divides Azeris into three groups to better explain her views. The first group, according to Shaffer, is composed of Azeris who are a part of the ruling establishment. This group consider themselves as both followers of the religion of Islam and representatives of the Iranian nation while accepting their commitments towards the language and culture of Azerbaijan. The Azeri intelligentsia constitutes the major part of the second group who, “harbor primary collective Azerbaijani identity, but strive to maintain state identity as Iranians in a supra-ethnic Iran.” They identify themselves as both Azeri and Iranians and see no contradiction in possessing dual identity. According to Shaffer, the third group of Iranian Azeris consider themselves primarily as Azeris. Some in this group also focus on their distinct Azeri identity in political activities. She describes the ratio between the mentioned groups as changeable. However, the author stresses the impact of the establishment of the independent state of Azerbaijan on the ever-increasing expansion of a distinctive

⁴⁹ Shaffer (2000), 463.

Azeri identity in Iran.⁵⁰ On the other hand, N. Tohidi and J. Bradley also acknowledge a considerable rise in demands of Azeris for greater cultural rights. According to them, Azeris are now more insistent in having schools operating in their mother tongue, mostly inspired by the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the neighborhood in 1991.⁵¹

Due to restrictions imposed on the open expression of national identity and political and cultural demands, a sport-based reflection of nationalism, has acted as a unique opportunity for Iranian Azeris to expose their ethnic distinctness and cultural demands. Football games mostly accompanied with Tabriz's "Tractorsazi" team can be shown as a clear evidence of such expressions and the spark of a sports-related nationalism among Azeris. The most famous incident occurred with the opening of a banner declaring, "The South Azerbaijan is not Iran" in English at a stadium on February 2013 during a football game aired live on national TV. Tractorsazi gathers together tens of thousands of Azeri fans and they chant various slogans such as "Tabriz, Baku, Ankara, our path leads in a different direction from the path of the Persians", "All people have the right to study in their own language", "Down with Persian fascism", thereby putting across some of their cultural and political demands. Tractorsazi's games against teams from the Persian-populated provinces are usually more escalated with ethnic defamatory slogans chanted by the fans of both the sides.⁵²

⁵⁰ Shaffer (2000),470-471.

⁵¹ J. R. Bradley, "Iran's ethnic tinderbox," *The Washington Quarterly* 30 (2006-7): 187.

⁵² Souleimanov, Pikal, Kraus. "The rise of nationalism among Iranian Azerbaijanis: a step towards Iran's disintegration?" (2013). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://bay.tc/xeber/221>

By and large, the above-mentioned factors could be summarized as clear evidences of the rise of Azeri national consciousness in Iran. In other words, this conclusion shows the failure of the 70-year long policies of the Shah Regime and nearly 30-year long religious-based policies of the Islamic Republic in forging a new identity Persian and Iranian-oriented identity for Azeris, except some regions. The Pahlavi and Islamic regimes downplayed the distinct ethnic identity and culture of Iranian Azeris and tried to assimilate them in to a general Iranian nation which is mostly dominated by Persian ethnic identity. To achieve these goals the Pahlavi dynasty utilized ethnocentric policies based on integral nationalism an integral part of which was the destruction of the distinct national identity of minorities, including Azeris through repression. In line with such policies, the Shah's regime also rejected the Turkish roots of Azeris and promoted the view that Azeris were Aryans by origin and were Turkified as the result of the influx of the Turkish tribes into the region.

As far as the Islamic Republic has been concerned, on the other hand, even though it put an end to the ethnocentric policies of the Pahlavi dynasty, the clerical leadership refused to accept and promote multiculturalism in Iran and did not shift to espousing a civic nationalism. Azeris are now in a better situation in the Islamic establishment and after a nearly 70 year interval, have re-occupied the top political and military posts and control a considerable part of markets in the country, benefiting from the fact that the absolute majority of them were Shi'i. Nonetheless, the same did not apply to their cultural rights. Iranian Azeris are still subjected to cultural deprivation, if not to political and economical. Their cultural deprivation is mostly related to the state policies promoting religious identity as the supreme form of collective identity,

boosting identities linking ethnic minorities, including Azeris to the dominant Persian culture and restricting cultural activities and the use of the mother tongue which might strengthen a distinct identity in Azeris.

Despite such measures, the strengthening of the sense of national self-consciousness and nationalism among Azeri population is attested to by various scholars. This gradual ascent of Azeri identity could be obviously observed in mass protests of Azeris to any kind of offensive activities targeting their national feelings, and increasing demands for more cultural and linguistic rights. Unlike previous times, Azeri identity is now a matter to be taken more seriously in Iranian political and cultural life and Azeris sensitively react to any humiliation concerning national feelings. Its strengthening stems mostly from the two facts. The first factor is their dissatisfaction with the level of cultural rights ensured following the emergence of the Islamic state in Iran in 1979. The second factor is closely related to the establishment in their neighborhood of the only independent national Azeri state in the world. The Republic of Azerbaijan borders Iran's Gilan province and the predominantly Azeri provinces of Ardabil, East and West Azerbaijan. According to available data, a million Iranians visit their northern neighbor as tourists. The rise of nationalism among Iranian Azeris has been mostly articulated in the form of sport and linguistic nationalism and to a lesser degree in autonomy nationalism.

However, this considerable rise in Azeri nationalism is not enough to claim any possible transformation of the issue of cultural rights of Iranian Azeris at international level in the foreseeable future. This argumentation is based on the two

important factors stemming from the specific nature of the principle of self-determination in international law and the foreign policy priorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In terms of the self-determination of ethnic minorities, scholars identify two kinds of self-determination, such as internal and external self-determination. By internal self-determination which includes not only minority groups, but also all citizens of the country, experts mean the right of people to choose the form of social and political participation in the governance and autonomy issues inside the country.⁵³ From this aspect, one should not rule out that the further rise of the nationalistic movements among Iranian Azeris would bring about the evolution of the current demands for cultural or even geographical autonomy to the level of internal self-determination. However, the future course of events also largely depends on the ethnic policies of the Iranian government and the extent to which the cultural demands of Azeri minority would be met.

As far as external self-determination is concerned, it is based on the right of people to choose the form of their governance including the establishment of an independent state. As Malanczuk notes, the implementation of the principle of self-determination is one of the controversial and complicated principles of the international law. He argues that there is a general agreement on the implementation of this principle about the non-self-governed, trust and mandated territories and the UN does not display general willingness to support self-determination in other cases.⁵⁴ According to the author, it stems from the fact that Article 73 of the UN Charter explicitly explains

⁵³ D. Kılınç, "Self determinasyon ilkesinin azınlıklar açısından değerlendirilmesi," *Gazi Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi* 12 (2008): 955-956.

⁵⁴ P. Malanczuk, *Akehurst's modern introduction to international law* 7th edition (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 332-333.

a set of rules to deal with self-determination of non-self-governed territories, whereas Articles 1 and 55 include general and vague terms obscuring the very definition of self-determination. Moreover, there are obvious contradictions in other relevant documents as well. Paragraph two of the Resolution 1514 adopted by the UN General Assembly on 14 December 1960, for instance, acknowledges the right of self-determination for every nation, however, the sixth paragraph of the same resolution does not recognize any right of secession for them.⁵⁵ The general practice used in the international law is based on the assumption that the right of self-determination of minorities also determines the fate of other nationals. Stated differently, in a federal or unitary state the right of self-determination is acceptable when other federal units and nations do not reject this and this does not violate their territorial integrity. A sobering example of this practice is seen in the verdict of the Canadian Supreme Court declaring invalid the right of secession of Quebec due to its rejection by other federal units.⁵⁶

However, some experts describe the ability of active resistance of ethnic minorities as an effective way of forcing the central governments to accept their right for self-determination. Such a strong resistance in most cases is available only through foreign support. In the case of the Republic of Azerbaijan it can be completely ruled out that Baku would show any kind of support or transfer the issue of Iranian Azeris to international bodies in the near future. The problem is that Azerbaijan is currently facing a conflict initiated by secessionist attempts of the Armenian minority in Nagorny Karabakh Region. During the peace talks brokered by the OSCE Minsk

⁵⁵ Malanczuk, 332

⁵⁶ Kılınç, 967.

Group the Armenian side insists on the right of self-determination of people, whereas Azerbaijan stresses the principle of non-violation of the territorial integrity of states. In such a situation Baku's promotion of the right of self-determination of Iranian Azeri's could seriously undermine its position in the peace talks. Additionally, due to the nature of the current strategic relations with Iran, Baku refrains from adopting any official position on the issue of South Azerbaijan that might provoke its southern neighbor. Interestingly enough Baku sided with Tehran even in the UN voting condemning the violation of rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran in November 2006, which we will elaborate on in the coming chapters.

Chapter 3

POLITICS OF EARLY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

This chapter deals mostly with the reasons behind the rise of nationalism in Azerbaijan's foreign policy immediately after its independence and the distinctive features of the ethno-centric policies conducted towards Iran by the Elchibey-led Azeri government between July 1992 and June 1993. The roots of this nationalist impetus which reached its apogee on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union can be traced back to the earlier periods of the Soviet and even the Tsarist era. It is of help to briefly review the ethnic and identity policies which the people in the Republic of Azerbaijan were subjected to after the Russian occupation of Azerbaijan in the early 19th century following the two wars with Iran, as well as during the 70 year period of Soviet rule from 1920 to 1991.

3.1 Nation-building Attempts of Russia in Azerbaijan

Interestingly enough the degree of assimilation policies implemented in the then Russian Azerbaijan is not less than those implemented in the Iranian Azerbaijan. Having defeated Iran in war, and in accordance with the treaties of Gulustan and Turkmenchay signed in 1813 and 1828 respectively, Tsarist Russia annexed a part of Azerbaijan which now is known as the Republic of Azerbaijan and a larger part of Azerbaijan which currently is situated in the East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardebil, Zanjan, Qazvin and Hamadan provinces of Iran. As authors note, there were two kinds of approaches in the official Tsarist circles regarding the ways through

which the newly-occupied Azerbaijan should be assimilated into the Russian Empire. Baron P. V. Hahn the head of the temporary ministerial Caucasian Committee was in favor of assimilation through a, “quasi-autonomous regionalism” and advocated that no dramatic change should be introduced to the existing social structures in occupied Azerbaijan. They advised that the Transcaucasian region as a whole should be kept separate from Russia and that changes to the socio-economic structures and norms should only be introduced gradually. Another school of thought, known as “the integrationists”, argued on the contrary that rigid Russification policies should be implemented throughout these territories. To this end, they prescribed the swift abolition of the existing social and economic structures and the rapid integration of the region into the Russian Empire.⁵⁷

As the course of events proved, supporters of the second school usually held the upper hand and the Russification policies they advocated played an essential role in shaping Russian policies in the Caucasus. In line with such a strategy, borders of the former khanates were dismantled. The previously existing administrative units, khanets, were broken down and parts from various former khanets were intentionally included in the newly established civil administration in a bid to eliminate the authority and land claims of the khanates. This was also accompanied by the general dismissal of existing native officials and confiscation of some kinds of feudally controlled lands.⁵⁸ A mass immigration wave of Russians was also launched into Azerbaijan in the 1880s and almost every week new-comers were settled in the

⁵⁷ T. Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan 1905-1920: the shaping of national identity in a Muslim community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

provincial capital Baku and other districts. The new settlers were enticed by the allocation of loans and of large portions of land at the expense of further deepening the problem of land-shortages in the region. Forty-four settlements were, for example, established in a territory of just 54,000 acres in the central Mughan Steppe of Azerbaijan. Such policies, however, paved the way for increasing anti-Russian sentiment in the region.

The expansion of the oil industry further contributed to the multi-nationalization or even the internationalization of the provincial capital Baku. Whereas before the discovery of rich oil fields in the 1870s Baku had been only a town of 14,000 people it soon became the largest city in Transcaucasia and a, “multinational urban centre” with the population rocketing to 206,000 in 1903; half of the residents in the provincial capital by the early 20th century were non-Azeris.⁵⁹ While Azeris who were mostly employed in low-skill jobs, constituted only 40-50 per cent of the city’s population; the second and third largest ethnic groups were Russians and Armenians who typically occupied the most important posts and better-paid jobs.⁶⁰ Under Russian patronage, Armenians were in a better position than Azeris in their own capital.⁶¹ According to the data available for the outcome of the oil auction in the year of 1872, Azeris won only a miserable 5 per cent of oilfield leases, while the Armenians’ share was nearly ten times larger. Some 49 mostly small facilities out of

⁵⁹ Swietochowski, 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ After wars with Turkey and Iran concluded in 1828, Tsarist Russia vowed its patronage for Armenians and encouraged them to move to the newly occupied territories in the north of the River Aras. The main goal of Russia was to place Armenians on the territories bordering Turkey and Iran and use them as a buffer zone separating Azerbaijan from those countries.

167 oil firms belonged to Azeris, while Armenians owned 55 large and medium-sized companies in this sector.⁶²

Alongside with the annihilation of the existing social and economic structures, the second effective tool of Russification was the spread of Russian language in society. To this end the school system was reformed in Azerbaijan in a bid to control education and a stratum of Russian-educated native intelligentsia calling for the learning of the Russian language was promoted. The learning of Russian was mostly associated with the learning of modern skills, progress and modernization.⁶³

As for the assimilation policies of the Soviet period, their most striking features were related to identity-building particularly in the lingvo-cultural field, rather than the relatively more socio-economic assimilation of the Tsarist era. The Bolshevik forces who toppled a two-year long Azerbaijani Democratic Republic and established a Soviet state in Azerbaijan in 1920, first decided in 1924 to replace in several steps the existing Arabic script with Latin in order to, “block new generations from reading pre-Soviet publications that might perpetuate religion or, ‘bourgeois’ ideas of liberty or cultural autonomy.”⁶⁴ The alphabet in Azerbaijan was changed again in 1940 from Latin into Cyrillic script. Officially this was explained by the, “more progressive nature” of the Cyrillic and its ability to bring closer peoples of other

⁶² Swietochowski, 38-39.

⁶³ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁴ L. A. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: power and identity under Russian rule* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Hoover Institution Press 1992), 124.

Soviet republics with Russians through facilitating the, “learning of Russian.”⁶⁵ Interestingly enough, however, the Soviets failed to replace old national scripts with the Cyrillic one in several non-Muslim and non-Turkish republics, namely Armenia and Georgia in Azerbaijan’s neighborhood. Formally it was explained in this way that Armenia and Georgia had been exempted for their “older civilization”, Ukraine and the Baltic republics were saved for their more “Western outlook.” The Central Asian republics, Azerbaijan, Moldova and the ethnic groups of Siberia were subjected to script changes.⁶⁶

In terms of ethnicity building, the fact is that in the 1926 census conducted by the Soviets, people in Azerbaijan principally identified themselves with being Turk. As the Stalin government considered such an affiliation to be a potential danger, the state discouraged pan-Turkish identity in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. In 1936 the official term used to designate the people of Azerbaijan was renamed from “Azeri Turks” to “Azerbaijanis” and the term “Azeri Turkic” was replaced with “Azerbaijani”. According to certain authors, such moves eventually prompted the further spread of Russian language and literature in Azerbaijan.⁶⁷

Russification forced native Azeri officials in the next decades to struggle against the marginalization of the Azerbaijani language in official use and maintain its utilization by Azeris in their capital city. Taking the opportunity of the all-Union

⁶⁵ Altstadt, 124.

⁶⁶ W. Safran, “Language, ideology and state building: a comparison of policies in France, Israel, and the Soviet Union,” *International Political Science Review* 13(1992), 402-404.

⁶⁷ A. L. Grenoble, *The Language Policy in the Soviet Union* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 124.

condemnation of Stalinist policies after his death in 1953, Imam Mustafayev who led the Azerbaijani communists between 1954 and 1959, ensured the recognition of Azerbaijani as the official language of the republic by making an amendment to the Azerbaijani Constitution. This amendment also blocked Moscow's attempts to make the learning of Azerbaijani optional in schools where Azerbaijani was not the language of instruction. As some observers note, the policies conducted by Mustafayev, including creating of job opportunities in Baku for young graduates from rural areas, aimed at changing the demographic situation in the favor of the native population by encouraging an influx of Azerbaijanis into the capital Baku. Critical changes were reflected first during the 1959 census and as Altstadt notes, "the demographic re-conquest of Baku was accomplished" by the time of 1979 census. However, though they might be considered successful from the Azeri perspective, the initiation of such policies ultimately resulted in Mustafayev's removal from the leadership in Azerbaijan in 1959 and his early retirement from political affairs at age 49.⁶⁸

3.2 History of South Azerbaijan Politics in Soviet Azerbaijan

Nationalist feelings in Azerbaijani society, including among some of its leaders, were surprisingly enough prompted by Soviet policies in regard to Iranian Azerbaijan. Following the annexation of the western parts of Ukraine and Belorussia, the Stalin government had aimed to unite the Iranian and Soviet Azerbaijanis within the framework of the Soviet Union.⁶⁹ As Lachiner and Demirtepe note, the Soviets used Azerbaijani nationalism as a tool for their foreign policy goals and to this end several

⁶⁸ Altstadt, 165-166.

⁶⁹ E. Souleimanov, O. Ditrych, "Iran and Azerbaijan: A contested neighborhood," *Middle East Policy* 14 (2007): 102-103.

institutions were established to promote Azeri national identity in Iran. Various authors stress that Soviet leaders considered millions of Azerbaijanis living in Iran as a, “potential social group in cooperation with the communist bloc and in occupying the whole of Iranian territories,” and that the propagation of the unification of South and North Azerbaijan was as a consequence a matter of vital importance for Moscow. They maintain that such a strategy subsequently resulted in the rise of a distinct national identity among Azerbaijanis in the USSR, rather than in Iran.⁷⁰ Thus, in order to challenge the Shah’s authority in Iran, the Soviets focused on the promotion of Azeri identity, the kinship between Iranian and Soviet Azerbaijan, and the protection of the rights of Azeris in Iran. This, however, led to the strengthening of nationalistic feelings in Baku as the cradle of the Azeri nationalism, as well. As the Soviets failed and removed their troops from Iran under the pressure from the Western allies, Moscow wrapped up its temporary South Azerbaijan project. In the coming decades, as you will see in the chapter, Moscow localized the issue of South Azerbaijan to the scientific circles.

In terms of the implementation of the politics of South Azerbaijan by the Soviets, a key juncture occurred when in 1941 Moscow invaded Iranian Azerbaijan under the pretext of preventing the Nazis from launching attacks against the USSR via the Iranian border. It remained in occupation until 1946. During the presence of the Soviet forces in Iran, and with the explicit support of the Soviets, the National Government of Azerbaijan was established there in December 1945. It lasted nearly a year, but survived for only a few months after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces

⁷⁰ S. Laçiner, T. Demirtepe, “Nationalism as an instrument in a socialist foreign policy: the Southern Azerbaijan problem in Soviet-Iranian relations,” *The Review of International Affairs* 3(2004): 443-444.

from Iran. The National Government overtly fought for autonomy for Azerbaijan within Iran. However, its ultimate goal was unification with Soviet Azerbaijan. During this period, the essential feature of the policies conducted by Moscow was to facilitate of the nation-building process. Both administrative and cultural means were envisaged for the implementation of the project. The administrative means were reflected in measures such as the declaration of Azerbaijani as the official language, with it ruled as mandatory that all official business be conducted in the mother tongue; a large number of schools whose language of instruction was Azerbaijani were also established, and; the number of Azerbaijani publications and grammar books increased dramatically.⁷¹

The impact of the creation and the promotion of the “Literature of Longing” (*Hasrat*) as a cultural pillar of Soviet policies proved to be longer-lasting and more effective than certain other initiatives. According to the well-established practice, the literature was used as an effective tool to promote Soviet policies and the main objective of the Literature of Longing was to, “establish a common cultural basis on which the following generations could construct a unified cultural structure.”⁷² The Literature of Longing, whose main theme was the separation of a single Azerbaijani nation by the River Aras and associated historical developments, mostly emphasized the fostering of national sentiments such as those related to the attachment to the mother tongue, love for the motherland and national heroes, while simultaneously glorifying a common national past. Cultural and academic establishments also intensified their

⁷¹ Laçiner, Demirtepe, 451.

⁷² Ibid.

activities related to the study of classical Azeri literature, national history, art and folklore.⁷³

The map below shows how the River Aras separates two Azerbaijan.⁷⁴ Thus, the word Aras which is name for many Azeri kids is associated with the separated fates of Azeri families, has been frequently used in the Literature of Longing.



⁷³ Laçiner, Demirtepe, 450-451.

⁷⁴ Khuzestan in Western Iran. Retrieved November 5, 2013, from <http://academic.evergreen.edu/g/grossmaz/KHUZESTAN.gif>

Azeris from Soviet Azerbaijan participated actively in the implementation of the national-building policies directed at Iranian Azeris. They comprised the vast majority of the Soviet troops deployed on the northern Iranian provinces bordering Soviet Azerbaijan. Authors note their contribution to the awakening of national consciousness among Iranian Azeris, as well as to the propagation of the Soviet style of life. Soviet Azeris were actively engaged in cultural activities in Iran including publishing newspapers, establishing schools and staging plays in Azeri. Azeri intellectuals and writers dispatched by Moscow to northern Iran played an important role in the establishment of the Literature of Longing there also. This was all the more feasible during the period from 1941 to 1945 when the central government was paralyzed, Shah Reza having abdicated and been sent into exile by the Alien Forces because of his support for Nazis. The most famous of these literary “missionaries” was Mirza Ibrahimov who founded a newspaper in Tabriz called, “*Vatan Yolunda*” (On the Fatherland’s Road) published in Azeri but in Arabic script so as to be able to bring together intellectuals from both the Azerbaijanians.⁷⁵ We should note that Mirza Ibrahimov was one of the famous writers of the Soviet Azerbaijan who also later served as a deputy head of the Cabinet Council (1946-1950) and a speaker of the parliament (1954-1958) in the Soviet Azerbaijan.

Ever-increasing pressure from the Western powers eventually, however, forced the Soviets to withdraw their forces from Iran in mid-1946 and to re-consider their policies towards Iranian Azerbaijan. This shift was mostly manifested in new effort to spread socialist views in Iran through covert support for the establishing of Marxist organizations, rather than overtly promoting the idea of nationhood in South

⁷⁵ Laçiner, Demirtepe,450.

Azerbaijan. However, various activists from South Azerbaijan and members of Literature of Longing movements moved to the Soviet Azerbaijan and continued their activities there. From there, they maintained a significant impact on politico-cultural life in Azerbaijan and their ideas occupied an important place on its agenda. Political activists granted asylum in Baku discussed in public meetings various issues related to the South, including the liberation of Iranian Azerbaijan and the achievements of the literature of South Azerbaijan. In line with the promotion of the South Azerbaijan agenda, two novels about the national liberation of South

Azerbaijan titled “Galajak Gun” (The Coming Day) and “Dumanli Tabriz” (Smoke-covered Tabriz), written by Mirza Ibrahimov and Mammad Said Ordubadi respectively, were translated into Russian in order to bring the issue to the attention of Soviet society. Ibrahimov’s novel, which highlighted Azerbaijani national consciousness and condemned Persian chauvinist policies against the Azerbaijani language and culture in Iran was honored with the Lenin Prize in 1951 and contributed to debates on the South Azerbaijan problem across the Soviet Union. Additionally, academic circles in Baku began to actively investigate topics concerning national liberation movements in order to find a better formula to solve the South Azerbaijan problem. From the mid-1950’s onwards Baku Radio also launched programs specially designed for the Azeri audience in the South.⁷⁶

However, in coming years the actuality of South Azerbaijan issue was subjected to a gradual decline. After Mohammad Reza Shah returned Iran following a coup d’état against Prime Minister Dr Musaddeq in August 1953 initiated by the US and UK,

⁷⁶ Laçiner, Demirtepe, 452-453.

the Soviets largely confined the scope of pro-Azerbaijani unification activities within the borders of Soviet Azerbaijan. In other words, the issue of South Azerbaijan was popular with only local academic and social circles in Baku and it did not occupy any place on the nationwide agenda and Soviet mass media outlets until the end of Shah forced to leave Iran in January 1979 prior to the Islamic Revolution. Thus, Lachiner and Demirtepe conclude that the Soviets no longer aimed to use the nationalism card to control Iran in order not to create tensions with the Shah; preferring instead the spread of Marxist ideas in Iran using intelligence assets in that country.⁷⁷

However, as Lachiner and Demirtepe note, during a limited period between 1979 and early 1985, after the collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran, but prior to the launch of Gorbachev's "Perestroika" project, the Soviets increased the number of sections at the Academy of Sciences and other circles in a bid to expand their propaganda to encourage separatist demands in Iranian Azerbaijan and provided financial aid for Azeri activists in Iran. In this respect, Lachiner and Demirtepe distinguish various interests pursued by officials in Moscow and Baku, as well as by Azeri nationalists. According to them, Moscow was trying to play a diplomatic game with the newly-established and shaky government in Tehran using the nationalist card to spread socialism in Iran. As for Azeri communists, they considered this propaganda as an attempt to unify Iranian Azerbaijan with the socialist republic. Nationalists in Baku, for their part, saw the resumption of such South Azerbaijan policies as a chance to boost Azeri national identity in the face of Russification and Persianization attempts

⁷⁷ Laçiner, Demirtepe, 453.

and further the ultimate goal of unification of both Azerbaijanians within an independent state. However, Laçiner and Demirtepe point out that in line with the “Perestroika” policies introduced by Gorbachev.⁷⁸ The reasons behind such a decision made by Moscow can be traced back to the Soviet-American rapprochement following Gorbachev’s meeting with Reagan in 1986 and the re-distribution of zones of political interests between the two states. After the initiation of the US-Soviet meetings about the joint actions to eradicate conflicts in the region, in June 1986 the Soviet and American leaders started their discussions in the Swedish capital to find a solution to the Iran-Iraq War. As the result, the former leader Gorbachev presented his suggestions in 1987 to put an end to the conflicts in the Persian Gulf.⁷⁹ In line with such general policies, the Soviet Union once again removed the “one Azerbaijan” campaign from its political agenda in order to “rehabilitate deteriorating relations” with Iran.⁸⁰

3.3 Azerbaijan-Iran Ties During Elçibey’s Presidency: 1992-1993

As mentioned earlier, the South Azerbaijan politics conducted by the Soviets aimed at winning over Iranian Azerbaijan, but served to further strengthen nationalistic feelings in Soviet Azerbaijan, among the intelligentsia and academic circles in particular. The nature of the activities of the nationalist and liberation movements in Azerbaijan on the eve of the collapse of Soviet Union demonstrated the extent to which the idea of national association with South Azerbaijan had become influential among the intellectual community.

⁷⁸ Laçiner, Demirtepe, 453.

⁷⁹ A. Tarock, “The superpowers’ involvement in the Iran-Iraq War,” (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1998),17.

⁸⁰ Laçiner, Demirtepe, 455.

We can see provisions for the support of the ideology of a united Azerbaijan in the programs of almost all political organizations entering the political scene at that time. As Elchibey said, none of the parties and organizations active in Azerbaijan was against unification with Iranian Azerbaijan.⁸¹ The largest among these political movements was the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF), whose leadership cadres consisted mostly of staff from the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences. “Restoring historic place names [in Iran] and developing economic and cultural ties with Iranian Azerbaijan” was one of the seven goals included in the program of the Popular Front adopted in the summer of 1989.⁸² The program of the Musavat Party also included concrete provisions regarding Iranian Azerbaijan as follows:

the historical division of Azerbaijan was unjust and its unity is inevitable sooner or later.

Likewise with respect to the principle of non-violation of borders by force, support for human and ethnic rights in Iran as in other countries.

Determination of the destiny of South Azerbaijan solely by the Iranian Azerbaijanis.

Ensuring of ethnic and cultural unity on the bases of expanding all possible ties between the two parts of Azerbaijan.⁸³

The Popular Front known in Azerbaijani politics as the major protagonist on the South Azerbaijan issue launched campaigns on various occasions to promote the idea of unification. The most important of them was organized at the end of 1989 and continued into early January 1990. Thousands of Soviet Azeris entered Iranian territory from the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic ignoring troops on both sides

⁸¹ A. Elçibey, “*Bütöv Azərbaycan yolunda* (On the road to the integrated Azerbaijan)” (Ankara: Ecdad Publications, 1998), 87.

⁸² Altstadt, 205.

⁸³ N. Nasibli, “Azerbaijan-Iranian relations: past and present,” *Journal of Azerbaijani Studies* 22 (1999): 12.

of the border in order, “to see relatives and to have free trade.” This action faced harsh criticism from the Rafsanjani administration in Tehran which vowed to implement assertive measures to prevent the repetition of such violations.⁸⁴ Initiated by the Popular Front, this event was marked by a public holiday following the independence of Azerbaijan, the 31st of December being declared the “Day for the Solidarity of the World Azerbaijanis”. Elchibey likened the event to the fall of the Berlin wall prior to the unification of the German nation.⁸⁵

The Popular Front expanded its political activity concerning Iranian Azerbaijan after its leader Abulfaz Elchibey was elected as the Azerbaijani president in June 1992 replacing Azerbaijan’s Soviet-era leader Ayaz Mutallibov. To better understand Elchibey’s policies on Iran requires some understanding of his ideological mindset and political thought. Jailed between 1975 and 1976 for anti-Soviet propaganda at the Baku State University where he was an instructor, experts describe Elchibey as a nationalist prescribing the Turkish model of modernization. Elchibey, who considered himself a “soldier of Ataturk”, argued that the Ottoman Empire had been powerful because it had merged Islamic and Turkish values, and thus, he advocated a model of modernization for Azerbaijan based on the co-development of the Azerbaijani national and religious values.⁸⁶ Generally speaking, Elchibey’s political stance is evaluated as being pro-Turkish, anti-Russian and anti-Iranian. Some experts argue that factors such as the belonging of Azeris to Turkish ethnic family and

⁸⁴ N. Mehdiyeva, “Azerbaijan and its foreign policy dilemma,” *Asian Affairs* 34(2010): 280.

⁸⁵ Elçibey, 78.

⁸⁶ C. Tokluoglu, “Definitions of national identity, nationalism and ethnicity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (2006): 733.

association with the Turkish identity dominated the ethnocentric foreign policy of the Popular Front.⁸⁷ The solidarity of the entire Turkish world was the cornerstone of Elchibey's political mindset. In one newspaper article, Elchibey urged Turks living in Turkey, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Central Asia to fight fiercely against Persian and Russian chauvinisms, as the two were their most evil and ruthless enemies.⁸⁸ Interestingly enough, Elchibey managed to merge successfully the two contradictory stances of being pro-Ottoman and pro-Ataturk and shape his politico-ideological stance while benefiting both of them. The fact is that the name of the Ottoman Empire is associated with the glorious past of Turks and the name of Nuru Pasha, (whose army liberated Baku in 1918 from the Armenian-Bolshevik forces) and the name of Ataturk symbolized a modern powerful Turkey. The political culture prevailing in Azerbaijani in the early years of independence did not necessitate the two values of Ottomanism and Ataturkism to exclude one another.

Even the fact that some Turkish-speaking nations such as the Gagauz in Moldova, or Chuvash in Russia were Christian and others like the Yakut in the Far East were followers of Shamanism, was not of consequence for the APF leader. As far as his anti-Russian stance was concerned, this was mostly because of the fact that Elchibey believed that Russia, as the successor to the Soviet state, was still out to colonize Azerbaijan and eliminate its national values. Elchibey's anti-Iran politics, on the other hand, stemmed from two reasons: First, he was a supporter of the idea of the unification of both the Azerbaijanis and saw the Islamic regime in Iran as oppressing the rights of Azeris living there, including the right of self-determination. Secondly,

⁸⁷ Mehdiyeva, 283.

⁸⁸ Elçibey, 34.

relative to others at least, he advocated the downplaying of the role of religion in state affairs and Iran's politics, aiming at exporting the Islamic revolution to Azerbaijan, were at odd with Elchibey's political views and a threat to his nationalistic policies. Moreover, his demands for more freedom for the Uyghur minority in China created more tension in relations with China, eventually bringing Beijing closer to Yerevan.⁸⁹

In line with such nationalistic discourse, the Azerbaijani parliament dominated by Elchibey's supporters passed a law on 22 December 1992, "defining Azeri language as Turkish." Regarding other signs of the pro-Turkish orientation of Elchibey's politics, one should note support for ideas like pan-Turanism, the solidarity of all Turks around the world through the mass media, his close ties with Alparslan Turkesh the late leader of the Turkish nationalists, as well as the establishment of units in the Azerbaijani army called "Grey Wolves" a name associated with the followers of Turkesh based on ancient Turkish myths.⁹⁰

Anti-Iranism was one of the most striking features of the policies conducted by the Elchibey administration. Some scholars argue that his foreign policy strategy and public discourse was based on the presumption that continued demands for cultural autonomy for Azeris in Iran would constitute the first step in the unification of the two Azerbaijanans.⁹¹ According to Shaffer, Elchibey evolved the promotion of rights

⁸⁹ T. Gaffarov, *Azerbaycan tarixi: 1941-2002-ci iller* (The history of Azerbaijan: between 1941 to 2002), (Baku: Elm 2008), 259, 269.

⁹⁰ S. E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan since independence* (New York: M.E.Sharpe 2011), 166.

⁹¹ Mehdiyeva, 281.

of Iranian Azeris to the level of state policy in the newly-independent Azerbaijan and most Azeri officials considered the unity with their southern brethren as a way to establish a powerful Azerbaijani state in the region.⁹² Elchibey repeatedly made statements along the following line that: “we have a historical land named as Azerbaijan. These two should be united and become a single state. There is no way, but this. This is the course of the history.”⁹³ He had believed, it is claimed that such a unification would happen within five years.⁹⁴ To this end, Elchibey went beyond even the most aggressive Soviets’ South Azerbaijan policies openly condemning Iran for the mistreatment of non-Persian minorities in its territory, focusing in particular on the deprivation of Azeris from education in their mother tongue at schools. The Azeri president openly predicted that such discrimination would eventually result in Iran’s disintegration⁹⁵ Statements of this kind were frequently followed by official complaints issued on the Iranian state radio about Azerbaijan’s, “active campaign against Iran.”⁹⁶ Yet Elchibey continued to express his hope that, “a day will come and Azerbaijan’s three-colored flag would be flapped in Tabriz.”⁹⁷

As for Iran’s stance to counter Elchibey’s politics, experts note that Tehran acted to undermine the nationalist leader’s authority both domestically and externally in order to prevent the potential threat of national unity. As Souleimanov and Ditych both

⁹² B. Shaffer, *Borders and brethren: Iran and the challenge of Azerbaijani identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 2002), 197.

⁹³ Elçibey, 79.

⁹⁴ Souleimanov, Ditych, 104.

⁹⁵ Nasibli, 15.

⁹⁶ Mehdiyeva, 280.

⁹⁷ Elçibey, 82.

argue, “Elchibey’s statements did not fuel nationalist sentiments among the Azerbaijani population of Iran” and that “it betrayed a considerable optimism in the matter of the future unification of both Azerbaijanians.”⁹⁸ According to them Iran, in tandem with Russia, “started to support Christian Armenia” in the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh, as a retaliatory measure.⁹⁹

In the domestic arena, Iran’s anti-Elchibey activities were mostly focused on the strengthening of pro-Islamic forces and opposition figures and encouraging separatism among the Persian-speaking Talysh minority of South of Azerbaijan. In terms of boosting pro-Iranian religious sentiments, the Iranian Embassy in Baku dispatched delegations of businessmen and clergy to various regions of Azerbaijan as a part of a sophisticated public relations campaign.¹⁰⁰ Iran also established direct ties with opposition leaders ignoring the central government in Baku. A sobering example of such relations can be seen in Tehran’s relations with Heydar Aliyev, the then head of the parliament of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic who replaced Elchibey as the next president of Azerbaijan. Aliyev had paid two visits to Iran to hold negotiations with Iranian officials.¹⁰¹ Aliyev soon after stated in an interview that Iranian President Hashemi-Rafsanjani had sent his own plane to Nakhchivan for him to visit Tehran.

⁹⁸ Souleimanov, Ditych, 104.

⁹⁹ Ibid.,104.

¹⁰⁰ Mehdiyeva, 281.

¹⁰¹ Nasibli, 16-17.

We agreed about aid. We constructed an electricity line and started to import electricity from Iran. The issue of fuel and foods were also resolved in the same way.¹⁰²

Some sources also point to close ties between the Iranian Embassy in Baku and Colonel Surat Huseynov who was to initiate the mutiny against Elchibey in the second-largest city of Ganja, on 4 June 1993 that eventually forced the latter to leave power. It is claimed that the then Iranian ambassador to Baku, Nahavandian, visited Ganja during the early hours of the mutiny and personally presented a copy of the Holy Koran to the top rebel commander Huseynov.¹⁰³ Some observers state that while giving his blessing to Colonel Huseynov the Iranian ambassador, also hailed him as a, “great mujahid [fighter].”¹⁰⁴

Some observers highlight Iran’s financial and ideological support for the Talysh minority, aiming to fuel secessionism tendencies in territories bordering Iran. Iran had tried to use Talysh’s grievances over the Turkification policies conducted by Elchibey, and Mehdiyeva quotes an unnamed source in the Azerbaijani Interior Ministry as saying that, “Iran ‘certainly extended the Talyshs active financial support’ and ‘intensively proselytized Islam.’” Although it occurred following Elchibey’s fall from power, the proclamation of the establishment of the Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic in several mostly Talysh-populated districts on the

¹⁰² Q. Allahverdiyev, V. Sultanzada *Heydar Aliyev va Şarq: İran* (Heydar Aliyev and the East: Iran), (Baku: Ozan Publications, 2002), 24-25.

¹⁰³ Nasibli, 17.

¹⁰⁴ O. Mammadov, *Çayxana* (Teahouse) (2006), 45, Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://www.turansam.org/elcibey3.pdf>

Iranian border in June 1993 by groups led by Alikram Humbatov can still be considered indicative of such Iranian impact on Azerbaijan.¹⁰⁵

By and large, analysts are critical of Elchibey's policies towards Iran. Souleimanov and Dytrich for instance, describe the aftermath of Elchibey's 13 month-long presidency as, "quite catastrophic" for Azerbaijan. They argue that Elchibey's policies lacked any diplomatic tact and unwisely pushed Iran to support a Christian Armenia against a Shi'i Azerbaijan. The authors stress that Elchibey's official statements not only had little impact in terms of increasing nationalistic sentiments among Iranian Azeris, but that also they ultimately served as a betrayal of the goal of the unification of the two Azerbaijan.¹⁰⁶

Mehdiyeva, on the other hand, points to shortcomings in Elchibey's strategy, especially his failure to form a national idea capable of uniting all the ethnic groups residing in Azerbaijan. According to the 1999 census, Azeris constitute 90.6 per cent of the population, and Daghestani's 2.2, Russians 1.8, Armenians 1.5 and other ethnic groups 3.9 per cent respectively. Thus, Mehdiyeva argues that this allowed Russia and Iran to abuse the concerns of non-Turkish groups worried by the promotion of the idea of supremacy of Turkish nation, and thereby contributed to the destabilization of the situation in the country.¹⁰⁷ Mehdiyeva believes that Elchibey's open anti-Russian and anti-Iranian stance had catastrophic results for Azerbaijan.

¹⁰⁵ Mehdiyeva, 251.

¹⁰⁶ Souleimanov, Ditych, 104.

¹⁰⁷ The World Factbook. Retrieved 22 October 2013, from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/aj.html>,

The author notes Iran's assistance to Armenia and in particular, Russia's 1 billion dollars worth of military aid to Yerevan that eventually contributed to the latter's ability to occupy large swathes of Azerbaijani territory. Mehdiyeva argues that instead of relying on ethno-centric policies, which pitted Azerbaijan against Russia and Iran and decreased Baku's bargaining opportunities vis-à-vis Ankara, it would have been better for the Popular Front leaders to find common points with various countries in its foreign policy doctrine.¹⁰⁸

Nasib Nasibli who had served as Elchibey's ambassador to Iran from 1992 to 1993 holds an absolutely different view. He denies tension in the mutual ties due to Elchibey's nationalistic stance, arguing that contrary to widespread opinion, Baku had tried its best in order to improve ties with Tehran in the aforementioned period. As evidence he points to the fact that from 1992-1993 Iran was Azerbaijan's number one trade partner and nearly 700 cooperation agreements were signed between Baku and Tehran. Nasibli maintains that the Elchibey's administration always tried to enhance cultural and political relations with Iran. The PFA government for example, implemented the agreement on the mutual rebroadcast of all TV programs from Baku and Tehran which was ignored by officials in Tehran. Baku also invited Tehran to cooperate in the sphere of re-uniting long-divided families and relatives residing in both countries. Tehran however, responded with the adoption of a law in 1993 to impede marriages between the citizens of the two countries. Nasibli also notes that some problems in mutual ties had stemmed from Tehran's ambitions to play the role of "big brother" in the relations. The only thing that the Elchibey government had

¹⁰⁸ Mehdiyeva, 283.

tried to do was to establish relations based on the principle of parity. According to Nasibli, another problem was the fact that the Iranian government, similar to that under the Pahlavi regime, was against the promotion of Azerbaijani culture and created obstacles for the Azerbaijani Embassy staff in implementing their duties in Tehran. Although, Iran's Consulate-general had been functioning for many years in Nakhchivan, the Iranian government, under various pretexts, did not allow the Elchibey administration to open a similar office in the Azeri populated city of Tabriz, a violation of their bilateral agreements. The former ambassador also accused Tehran of not implementing other signed agreements and of launching widespread espionage activities against Azerbaijan.¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, while summarizing Elchibey's policies regarding Iranian Azerbaijan, one surely can note that this issue was one of the foreign policy priorities of the Popular Front Government. This mostly stemmed from ethnocentric policies based on the nationalistic nature of the government. In this regard, Elchibey tried to implement policies aimed at promoting the idea of South Azerbaijan and the cultural and political rights of their southern brethren within Azerbaijani society and helping to promote the idea of the eventual unification of both Azerbaijan by every possible mean. Elchibey's administration tried accomplish this mission even at the expense of creating long-term tension in relations with Iran. Due to plenty of miscalculations, including the extent of Russia's influence in the region, war with Armenia and Iran's supports for domestic Azeri opposition, the Elchibey government not only failed in its South Azerbaijan policies, but Elchibey himself fell from power on 4 June 2003 as a result of a military-led mutiny.

¹⁰⁹ Nasibli, 15-16.

Chapter 4

Heydar Aliyev's South Azerbaijan Politics:1993-2003

With analysis of materials related to policies conducted by Heydar Aliyev as president of the Republic of Azerbaijan between 1993 and 2003, one can deduce that the issue of the Iranian Azeris was subjected to gradual marginalization from Baku's foreign policy agenda. To better explain reasons leading to the downplay of the Azeri minorities' issue, it helps to first review the development of Heydar Aliyev's political program in general and then to trace its influence on the issue of the Azeri minority in Iran.

4.1 Stabilization Period in Ties: Mid-1993-Late 1994

The most important issue affecting Heydar Aliyev's political decision-making process, was the reality on the ground when Aliyev took office from his predecessor Elchibey in June 1993. The country was experiencing political-military turmoil that had emerged as a combined result of the mutiny staged by Colonel Surat Huseynov in Ganja, the occupation of the six districts around Nagorny Karabakh by Armenian military forces, the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the occupied territories into the central parts of Azerbaijan and the declaration of the Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic in the southern regions bordering Iran. During this period Aliyev's number one priority was the mitigation of the crisis engulfing the country which threatened the very existence of Azeri statehood itself.

In order to cope with these threats Aliyev believed it necessary to normalize ties with Azerbaijan's two important neighbors Russia and Iran. To this end, Aliyev officially

declared the implementation of the balanced foreign policy vis-à-vis powerful regional and global actors. The balanced foreign policy strategy could be summarized in this way that Azerbaijan would pursue good ties with the US, Russia, Turkey and Iran and would not try to enhance with one of these states at the expense of weakening ties with another one.

While asserting striking features of Aliyev's foreign policy strategies, Brenda Shaffer points out to the consideration on "more permanent material factors rather than ideological considerations" unlike his predecessor. In addition to the balanced foreign policy, she also adds to main features of Aliyev's foreign policy strategy factors such as the removal of ideological and religious factors from the process of choosing allies, conducting policies ensuring interests of the people of the Republic of Azerbaijan, not a greater Azerbaijan, upgrading issues related to the extraction and transportation of oil and gas resources to the world markets to the level of foreign policy tool and prioritization of the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.¹¹⁰

As the relations with Russia and Iran were deteriorated due to Elchibey's hard-line nationalistic policies, Aliyev through this approach signaled the two states of a shift in the state foreign policy. In particular, Aliyev aimed to decrease Russia's largely military and Iran's mostly economic support for Armenia. This period which can be identified principally as a period of normalization, lasted nearly one year. Its end marked by the start of cooperation between Azerbaijan and the USA and Western oil companies envisaged in the contract dubbed "the Contract of the Century" by the

¹¹⁰ B. Shaffer, "Foreign policy of the states of the Caucasus: evolution in the post-Soviet period," *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 26 (2010): 55.

Azeri mass-media and signed on 20 September of 1994. As mentioned, Iran had earlier aided Aliyev's both as the head of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and as the new leader of Azerbaijan replacing the hard-line nationalist Popular Front. From this perspective, Baku's attempts to attract the USA and Western companies to the country within the framework of huge oil contracts went against Tehran's expectations. Tehran considered the introduction of the USA to its borders to be an evil action.

In terms of Russia's possible discontent regarding the oil contracts, the new Azeri president prevented anti-Russian rhetoric in public discourse and to compensate made Azerbaijan a full member of the Commonwealth of Independent States, (ratifying its charter on 23 September 1993), which had been rejected by the National Front Government as a modification of the former Soviet Union. As for Iran, Aliyev also put an end to Elchibey's anti-Iran rhetoric mainly based on the violation of the cultural rights of the Azeri population of Iran. A second factor which contributed to the restoration of better ties was the history of good relations fostered between Heydar Aliyev and the Iranian leadership when he had served as the head of the Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan. Iran's intention in extending support for Aliyev, as we said earlier, was to strengthen the Popular Front's political rivals. As the leader of the Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan was surrounded by Iran and Armenia, excepting an 11km border with Turkey's Igdir province, Aliyev had wanted close ties both with Turkey and Iran in order to secure the isolated Autonomous Republic in the face of Armenian military and economic pressures. Problems had been compounded by strains in relations with the Popular Front administration in Baku, stemming from the fact that Aliyev, who enjoyed widespread personal support in his birthplace of

Nakhchivan, had ignored the subordination procedures with Baku and could become a potential threat. Baku had therefore used every possible means to paralyze the functioning of the Aliyev administration in the Autonomous Republic in order force him to quit power. However, due to the special geographical situation of the autonomous republic and war with Armenia, the Elchibey administration avoided further deepening of the conflict. One should note that some groups within the Popular Front, including the former interior minister Iskender Hamidov tried to depose Aliyev while exerting military force, but eventually failed to dispatch a unit of Grey Wolves to Nakhchivan after the direct intervention of the President Elchibey. The problem was the fact that Heydar Aliyev had rejected a person nominated by Hamidov for the ministry of interior in Nakhchivan.¹¹¹ Thus while meeting the current Iranian president Hasan Rouhani, then serving as the head of Iran's Supreme Security Council, on 16 July 2001 in Baku, Aliyev highlighted Tehran's support to a people in a dire condition in Nakhchivan despite Baku's opposition.

Our economic condition in Nakhchivan was very hard. I remember how much aids we were receiving from Iran in those days. Your government invited me to Tehran. I went. We signed several agreements between Nakhchivan and Iran. Of course, the government in Baku was against it. Their argument was that Nakhchivan is not an independent state and thus could not do this. However, we had to save people's lives...¹¹²

Iran's support for Nakhchivan during these years included various kinds of humanitarian aid, such as the provision of food supplies, electricity, gas, petroleum,

¹¹¹ Cingiz bey berk yalan danisir (Mr Chingiz lies loeysly, an interview with the former head of the Grey Wolves units), (28 February 2011). Retrieved 30 October 2013, from <http://www.xural.com/?p=1729>

¹¹² Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 137.

medicine and tents. Visits made to Nakhchivan by high-ranking officials from the Azeri-populated Iranian provinces of East and West Azerbaijan, as well as the Iranian Embassy in Baku were mostly accompanied with the inauguration of bridges, economic facilities, the signing of protocols, humanitarian aid, and the further discussion of problems facing the Azeri enclave. Iranian companies also inaugurated several production plants in various districts of Nakhchivan. Aliyev himself also paid two visits to Iran and discussed with Iranian leaders, including the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, President Rafsanjani and other high ranking officials matters of the mutual interest, mostly ways to help Nakhchivan in solving its grave economic problems.¹¹³ Later Aliyev praised his meeting with the Iranian leader in the following manner:

I should point out to the fact that the political and religious leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khamene'i met us and that we had a very comprehensive talk lasting more than one hour, is the matter of great importance for us. He is from the village of Khamene at the outskirts of Tabriz. He spoke to us in our mother tongue. We had a very interesting and comprehensive talk.¹¹⁴

The start of Aliyev's presidency in Azerbaijan coincided with further complications in the war with Armenia caused by the political instability in Baku. Aliyev's fraternal ties with Iranian officials continued in this period as well. As an illustrative example of such good relations Iran's Red Crescent Society provided aid that met the immediate needs of 100,000 Azeri refugees from Karabakh in terms of food and

¹¹³ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 120-133.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 137.

accommodation and established camp for refugees in two districts of Azerbaijan.¹¹⁵ Another Iranian state-owned organization, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee was obliged with a similar mission to provide aid for Azeri war refugees in Baku.¹¹⁶ As for displays of Baku's good intentions, Iran was permitted under Aliyev to establish a representative office of Iran's Supreme Leader under the umbrella of the Iranian Cultural Centre, despite being well aware of the fact that this risked leading to a surge in Iran's religious propaganda in the country. Tehran was also allowed to broadcast ninety-minute long special programs in Azeri from the Azerbaijani State channel. These live broadcasts included programs propagating Iran and its Islamic values.¹¹⁷ Taking into consideration the state of Azerbaijani public opinion at that time regarding Iran, and the words of a very famous and then-prominent slogan: "*Fars, rus, ermeni, bunlar Türkün düşmeni*" (Persians, Russian and Armenians, these are enemies of Turks) as a reflection of the prevailing public mood, this was a noteworthy development. It had once been even unthinkable that Tehran would one day to broadcast programs from Baku TV channels alongside Russia which has a decades-long tradition of TV airing in Azerbaijan and Turkey because of its fraternal ties with Baku and the lack of language barrier. These broadcasts were finally stopped in mid 1997 following an upsurge in tensions in mutual ties.

¹¹⁵ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 161.

¹¹⁶ Until a few years ago the Committee remained active in the Azeri capital and has left Baku just recently following insistent demands from Baku, which stated that there was no longer need for their activities in Azerbaijan due to the improvements in the welfare of the citizens concerned. Available at <http://az.apa.az/news/302380>, in Azeri, retrieved on 23 October 2013.

¹¹⁷ Nasibli, 17.

Souleimanov and Ditych both describe the nature of the Azeri-Iranian relations during the first year of Aliyev's presidency as a period of détente. The main features of Aliyev's balanced foreign policy, according to Souleimanov and Ditych were Baku's maintaining of certain distance from Ankara and Washington, while normalizing ties with Moscow and Tehran. He notes the important role of Aliyev's visits to Iran in persuading the officials in Tehran of the positive changes in Baku's political stance towards its southern neighbor. Based on the abovementioned factors we can describe the Iranian-Azerbaijani ties as exceptionally good for a period between mid-1993 and late-1994, though as the author concludes, Baku's success in having good ties with Tehran was short-lived and it did not succeed in changing Iran's fundamental politics in regard to Azerbaijan.¹¹⁸

A contextual analysis of Heydar Aliyev's speeches regarding Iran during this period shows an absence of any negative remark by him about the southern neighbor. Aliyev frequently put emphasis on the two countries common history and culture, and praised Iran's aid for Azerbaijan during its times of hardship. Certainly, Aliyev would also refer in his remarks to the issue of Azeris in Iran, calling them brothers whom even the Soviets had failed to separate from each other during their 70-year long propaganda campaign. However, the Azeri president described the role of the Iranian Azeris in mutual ties as a bridge connecting the two countries and a reason why Iran and Azerbaijan should maintain fraternal ties. He took care to avoid talk of the problems faced by the Azeris in Iran. While answering a reporter from Russia's, "*Nezavisimiaya Gazeta*" who had focused on the, "recent strong desire in Azerbaijan

¹¹⁸ Souleimanov, Ditych, 104.

to get closer with Turkey and Iran,” Aliyev stressed, “does not only the fact that tens of millions of Azeris live in Iran, make it necessary for us to be close with these big countries?”¹¹⁹ In one of his speeches Aliyev said straightforwardly that he considered Iran’s territorial integrity as tantamount to Azerbaijan’s own territorial integrity, explicitly rejecting support for any secessionist movement in Iran.¹²⁰

Additionally, Aliyev strongly criticized policies conducted by his predecessor in regard to Iran. On various occasions he noted that Elchibey’s policies were conducted, “as if Iran was our enemy and now we [have] normalized our ties”, stated Aliyev.¹²¹ In his speech at the King College of the London University, the Azeri president noted that, “due to a failure of our previous leadership, our relations with Iran had been strained until recently, but now we have no problems.”¹²²

As far as Heydar Aliyev’s own mindset about the issue of Iranian Azeris, there are two different views concerning two different periods and positions. As the head of Soviet Azerbaijan, and later as one of the leaders of the Soviet Politburo, Aliyev implemented the Soviet’s, “South Azerbaijan” policy on which we elaborated earlier. As Laçiner and Demirtepe note, while leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, Aliyev had allegedly stressed the need to, “help the Southern Azeri brethren by the reunification of Azerbaijan,” at a meeting with a group of foreign diplomats.¹²³ Shaffer also notes

¹¹⁹ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 160.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 161.

¹²¹ Ibid., 168.

¹²² Ibid., 167.

¹²³ Laçiner, Demirtepe, 454.

that in 1981 while addressing the Seventh Congress of writers in Baku Aliyev urged Azerbaijani writers to “cooperate with South Azerbaijani writers” and “propagandize their works in the republic and abroad.”¹²⁴ However, as of 1993, as the leader of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan, Aliyev accused some circles in Azerbaijan of spreading populist views about the abuse of the rights of Azeris in Iran while not speaking about the violation of the rights of more than one million Azerbaijani refugees by Armenia:

The number of Azeris in Iran is several times more than in our country and Azeris there are represented in the government and the parliament. It is their business whether their rights are violated or not and they should act in a manner they consider it as correct. We should not intervene in the affairs of other country.¹²⁵

From the contextual analysis of Aliyev’s speeches regarding the issue of the Azeri nation, we can deduce he does not reject the fact that Azeris in Iran and in Azerbaijan constitute the same nation. However, he believes that such communality does not necessarily imply the need for politically motivated activities seeking their unity within the geography of a single state; on the contrary this fact should lead to stronger ties between the two countries. Aliyev continuously highlighted the fact that Azeris are also a part of the Iranian nation and that they should resolve their problems within Iranian borders. During his speech at the Paris School of International Affairs, Aliyev described Azeris in Iran as a part of the Iranian nation, adding that thus he does not see any problem in this matter. In his interview with

¹²⁴ Shaffer (2002), 109.

¹²⁵ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 277.

French media outlets on 27 March 1997, the Azeri president said that there were 30 million Azeris in Iran and that Azeris residing in Iran and Azerbaijan were part of the same ethnicity which was separated as a result of the war between Persia and Tsarist Russia. Aliyev added that without any doubt, Azeris were Iranian citizens and Azerbaijan respected the principle of the territorial integrity of every country, including Iran.¹²⁶ In his speech delivered in Baku on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Iranian National Day on 9 February 1999, Aliyev stressed that Azerbaijan supported the territorial integrity of Iran and a better life for Azeris residing in the neighboring country. While receiving the governor-general of Iran's East Azerbaijan Province, Abdulalizadeh on 2 August 1999, Aliyev again praised Iran's aid for Nakhchivan and described East Azerbaijan Tabriz as an, "inseparable part of Iran."¹²⁷

While comparing Aliyev's stance towards Iranian Azerbaijan during the period of Soviet rule and that of independence, it is obvious that Aliyev conducted a form of pragmatic politics. As one of the Politburo leaders of a world superpower Aliyev could afford to pursue the unification of both Azerbaijani territories within the Soviet Union. However, as the head of the parliament of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic facing geographical and political isolation from Baku, as well as the leader of the Republic of Azerbaijan fighting Armenia over the Nagorny Karabakh region and facing the influx of the hundreds of thousands of refugees from the occupied territories, Heydar Aliyev preferred to avoid policies that might provoke powerful neighbors Russia and Iran to side with Armenia and exerting pressure on Baku.

¹²⁶ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 188-192.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 218-221.

4.2 Return to Elchibey's Policies: Late 1994-Mid 2002

Starting from late 1994 renewed strains in Azerbaijani-Iranian relations started to become obvious. This period which lasted until mid-2002 was one of turmoil in mutual ties. Such a sharp negative shift in mutual ties was related mostly to Azerbaijan's policies seeking to establish strategic cooperation with the US, the Western countries generally and Turkey particularly, while again relatively distancing itself from Moscow and Tehran. The signing of major oil contracts with leading Western and American companies was considered by Tehran as a means for the expansion of American and Western influence in the region. With Azerbaijan having signed a cease-fire with Armenia on 12 May 1994, eliminated the chaos in the army and settled her refugees in special camps, the opportunity to attract foreign investors to the country grew. Such developments obviously angered Moscow and Tehran. In essence the issue of the Azeri population of Iran had nothing to do with such sudden changes in bilateral relations, however as further developments proved, the two sides nevertheless changed their accent on this topic.

Dr Nasibli describes this stage in relations as a, "return to Elchibey's foreign policy." He places a special emphasis on the change of the attitude of the Iranian leaders to Heydar Aliyev and the appearance of articles in the Iranian media accusing Aliyev of, "being a servant of America and Zionism," and recalling his remarks about Iranian Azerbaijan in the mid-1980s. Iran also reacted to the expansion of the Azerbaijan-USA relationship by enhancing its cooperation with Armenia in various strategic fields. Going further, the Iranian government started the instrumental use of historical issues, with the publication of alleged requests from the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan asking Tehran to annex, "seventeen historically Iranian

cities,” the vast majority of which are in the territory of the current Azerbaijan.¹²⁸ This move could be regarded as Tehran’s counter propaganda measure against the calls for the unification of North and South Azerbaijan.

The chronological course of events shows that Baku and Tehran resorted to both practical steps and propaganda to achieve their goals. The issue of Iranian Azerbaijan and other related issues constituted a part of the propaganda campaigns of Azerbaijan, Iran and third parties. In terms of more concrete material measures increasing conflict, on 6 April 1995, Azerbaijan under pressure from the USA, which held 40 per cent of the shares in and threatened to quit an international consortium for a major project if Iran participated, Azerbaijan annulled Iran’s 25 per cent share. Although Aliyev ensured that Iran’s participation would not be completely eliminated by guaranteeing it a 10 per cent share in the exploration of another oil field where there was no US interest, Tehran responded by developing its strategic cooperation with Armenia and directly strengthening Erevan’s position in the confrontation with Baku through supplying it with strategic goods, expansion of trade and border ties and not letting the latter to be subjected to more deep crisis due to the war with Azerbaijan.¹²⁹ As we will discuss in the next sections Aliyev likened Iran’s support for Yerevan in this period to, “opening a respiratory tract to breath” for Armenia which was under Azerbaijan’s and Turkey’s economic blockade.

¹²⁸ Nasibli, 17-18.

¹²⁹ Souleimanov, Ditrych, 104-105.

Kaweh Sadegh-Zadeh, a former research fellow at the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, confirms that although Aliyev abandoned Elchibey's hard-line nationalistic stance and pursued a balanced policy towards Iran, tensions were still present in mutual ties. He too points to the exclusion of Iran from the multinational consortium to exploit Caspian oil in 1995. According to Sadegh-Zadeh, the relations encountered further problems in 2001 when Iranian warships prevented a boat belonging to British Petroleum from conducting exploration work in the disputed oil field as a part of the said oil contract.¹³⁰

In coming years Baku barred nearly all Iranian religious and charity organizations from carrying out activities in Azerbaijan. Additionally, a group of the leaders of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, known for their pro-Iranian activities were accused of spying for Iran, charged with high treason and ultimately received long prison sentences.¹³¹ The next wave of the confrontation included the activities of certain Iranian Azeri diaspora who enjoyed close ties with the Azerbaijani State Committee for Diaspora Matters.¹³² These organizations began to raise the issue of the violation of the rights of the Azeri population of Iran in every related international conference of merit.¹³³

¹³⁰ K. Sadegh-Zadeh, "Iran's strategy in South Caucasus," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 2(2008):38-39.

¹³¹ One should note that the imprisoned leaders of the Islamic Party were set free by a presidential amnesty decree several years after as a gesture of warming relations between the two countries.

¹³² An important point is that, however, that not all of the diaspora organizations of overseas Azeris accepted the leadership of the Azerbaijani State Committee and thus do not coordinate their activities with officials in Baku.

¹³³ A. Yunis, "Azerbaijan: between America and Iran," *Russia in global affairs*, 4 (2006): 115.

Iran, alongside with Russia, now raised the issue of the legal status of the delimitation of the Caspian Sea into national sectors. Namely, Iran's foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati stated that treaties regarding the exploitation of oil resources could not be considered valid until the final status of the Caspian Sea was decided.¹³⁴ In line with such policies, from June 2001 Iranian jets and warships started to frequently violate Azerbaijan's air space and maritime borders in an attempt to build-up psychological pressure and provoke Baku.¹³⁵ Yunis Arif describes this development as, "bringing the two countries to the verge of war."¹³⁶ In a demonstrative move in response to violation of its air space, Baku staged flights of Turkish warplanes over the capital city. In interviews Aliyev implicitly hinted that this was a message for Iran:

Iran believes that it was a message for Iran. However, Huseyn Kivrıkoğlu, the esteemed head of the General Staff of Turkey [Armed Forces] visited Azerbaijan two months ago. "Turkish stars" [a group of Turkish Air Forces specialized in aerobatic demonstration] was also included in the program of his visit, but it happened now. Now both in the world and there [Iran] is said that it was a message for Iran. Let us everybody to consider it in the way that it wants.¹³⁷

Aliyev never officially objected to the circumstances of Azeris in Iran, even during the deterioration of relations. Brown believes that Aliyev's continued emphasis on the "sanctity of the borders" was mostly related to the fact that Azerbaijan's own territorial integrity had been violated due to the war in Karabakh. It is certainly

¹³⁴ Souleimanov, Ditarych, 105.

¹³⁵ According to some media reports in that period, Iranian warplanes were even seen over the Salyan District in the central part of Azerbaijan.

¹³⁶ Yunis, 115.

¹³⁷ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 335.

problematic to object to the violation of territorial integrity and at the same time to promote a foreign policy targeting the territories of another country.¹³⁸ Aliyev's criticism of Iran was instead related to the three main issues of Iranian-Armenian cooperation, Iran's intervention in the domestic affairs of Baku and the activities of Iranian clerics in Azerbaijan. As relations strained, both sides reacted badly to every move concerning the issue of Iranian Azeris and the sensitivities of public opinion in both countries towards the issue grew.

In terms of the Iranian-Armenian relations, with Azerbaijan and Turkey bordering Erevan to the West and East, Armenia was largely isolated from the world. The Armenian economy which was facing deep crisis survived with assistance from Iran and Russia. As Russia had no common borders with Armenia and its aid was mostly militarily and political, the Armenia secured its own energy security thanks largely to cooperation with its southern neighbor. Among strategic importance of Iran's energy deliveries for Armenia, Racimora notes "circumvent of Turkey's and Azerbaijan's sanctions," and "reducing Armenia's reliance on Russia." Additionally, millions of dollars invested by Iran into Armenia's energy sector ensured that Yerevan "won't be hit by an energy shortage during a diplomatic crisis, hence undermining Baku and Ankara in the peace process negotiations."¹³⁹ Aliyev in his meetings with various Iranian officials repeated that Iran acted as a, "respiratory tract for Armenia to take breath," and quoted the former Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosyan as saying

¹³⁸ S. B. Cameron, "Wanting to have their cake and their neighbor's too: Azerbaijani attitudes towards Karabakh and Iranian Azerbaijan," *Middle East Journal* 58(2004): 590.

¹³⁹ W. Racimora, "The Armenia-Iranian relationship: strategic implication for security in the South Caucasus region," *European Strategic Intelligence & Security Center* (2013): 13.

that, “if Armenia’s trade with Iran is stopped for two days, we would be suffocated.”¹⁴⁰ Actually as foreign experts note, Iran had established a comprehensive economic and political cooperation with Christian Armenia against the Shi’i Azerbaijan. According to Gresh’s calculations, Armenia’s GDP had declined by 60 per cent in 1992-1993 compared with the year of 1989 and the country was suffering from high unemployment and low salaries. However, in 1996 there was a slight improvement in the economy owing to improved trade relations with Russia and Iran. Iran and Russia’s shares in Armenia’s 264 million dollars worth of revenue from exports constituted 13 and 24 per cent, respectively. In 1998 Iran ranked third among Armenia’s trade partners after Russia and Belgium. Iran’s trade with Armenia reached 120 million dollars in 2001, nearly a four-fold increase since 1996. Additionally, Iran started to finance the construction of a water power plant in the border area to supply Armenia with electricity.¹⁴¹ The fact that Iran’s cooperation with Armenia enabled the latter to survive, compared negatively with the policies of Turkey which ceased its ties with Armenia after the occupation of the Kalbajar district in Azerbaijan. Thus, Aliyev insistently raised the issue of the Iranian-Armenian cooperation on various occasions, including with the aim of countering Tehran’s pressure:

We have been saying for long years that there is a very close economic cooperation between Iran and Armenia. We say this, but, the Iranian side ignore our wishes....I have said it more times. I told to mister Rafsanjani, as well as the Supreme Leader mister Khamene’i. In the recent meeting in the sideline of the Islamic Conference Organization, I

¹⁴⁰ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 232.

¹⁴¹ G. Gresh, “Coddling the Caucasus: Iran’s strategic relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia,” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 1(2006): 8.

met Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i and said there again. I told it to mister Khatami, too. But there is no change in the situation.¹⁴²

Aliyev also openly expressed his displeasure with, “the activities of some religious figures based the interpretation of the religion in accordance with their tastes,” during his meetings with Iranian officials. The Azeri president also reminded them that he himself had invited religious figures from Iran in the past, as Azerbaijan had insufficient clerics, but now the situation had changed. He also urged them to remember the fact that Azerbaijan was a secular state.¹⁴³

The Iranian side used every single anti-Iranian action in Baku initiated by opposition forces and various state agencies as a pretext to increase its pressure on Azerbaijan. Various Iranian officials and their ambassador to Baku immediately expressed their protest and demanded from Baku to put an end to such moves. Not only official statements, but also every gathering held by opposition forces, and even TV program's about history which Tehran found insulting for herself, were used as a tool to extent a pressure to Baku in the form of an official protest. Aliyev avoided entering a polemical relationship with the Iranian side in order not to give a pretext for the further build-up of tension in ties. In the same vein, he continued to pledge brotherhood and friendship with Iran and advised Iranian leaders not to take the opposition forces seriously:

We are as brother and friend, do not intervene and will not intervene in domestic affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran. If somebody from opposition forces here writes something in a newspaper do not take it seriously. I also

¹⁴² Allahverdiyev, Ditarych, 230.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 231-232.

told the ambassador that the state policies and stance of opposition parties – as we have freedom of the expression- are different things. These things do not reflect the state policies.¹⁴⁴

On another occasion, during the inauguration of a mosque in Nakhchivan constructed by Iran, Aliyev criticized some, “people and opposition figures” for spreading rumours that there was no freedom in Iran. Aliyev said that such remarks were false and nobody in Azerbaijan had the right to intervene in Iran’s domestic affairs, while hinting that even he himself was criticized by the opposition forces in Azerbaijan and Iran.¹⁴⁵

Iran meanwhile, also objected to the broadcast of certain programs by the Azerbaijani State Television which it considered damaging to mutual relations. Here Aliyev reassured Iran of Azerbaijan’s positive intentions to expand ties, saying that despite his relevant directives, some people did not listen to him:

We had some talks in this regard before. I gave some commands unfortunately they do not obey to it. Recently I received Iran’s ambassador where he expressed some grievances in this regard. He said that recently a program including remarks damaging the Azerbaijani-Iranian relations was broadcast from the Azerbaijani TV.... I assert these moves as sabotage and I am absolutely against them. I will issue additional directives to the State Broadcast Company to put an end to such activities.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 306.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 247.

¹⁴⁶ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 177.

However similar objections from the Iranian side persisted despite the passing of years and changing of ambassadors. Iran's new ambassador, Ahad Qaza'i, expressed his objection on 22 April 2002 to the publication of a map depicting the three-colored Azeri flag over Tabriz as the logo in the newspaper of president Aliyev's ruling party. In response, Aliyev described this as a stupid action by the editorial staff of the newspaper, saying that Azerbaijan would naturally defend Iran's territorial integrity, as if the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan itself were being violated.¹⁴⁷ This logo was later, however, removed from the *Yeni Azerbaijan* [New Azerbaijan] newspaper.

Given into the consideration the fact that such disobediences had no serious consequences for none of Azeri officials, one can conclude that these "mistakes" were privately sanctioned by Aliyev and his condemnation of such activities was a tactic just to ease grievances of the Iranian side. A little research in Aliyev's political past during the Soviet era where he had risen from a KGB officer to the first vice-chairmanship of the Cabinet of Ministers suggests that he was a pragmatic politician, rather than an ideological one. Although during the Soviet period he encouraged writers to further promote the idea of the unification with the Southern brethren, apparently he found it not feasible to promote this idea in the official level in the present time where the political balances and juncture was not in Baku's favor. Needless to say, in such conditions the scale of the promotion of the idea of South Azerbaijan was decreased considerably and transferred to the non-official level in order not to provoke the Iranian side, however it was not diminished completely and

¹⁴⁷ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 345.

some bodies, mostly non-government organizations, semi-opposition parties and youth organizations were still in charge of the idea. That is why “such disobedience and mistakes” were happen repeatedly and Aliyev had to rebuke some agencies publicly only following objections from the Iranian officials. The opposition forces in Azerbaijan, apparently had also preferred the official version of Aliyev’s remarks, as well as activities of the Foreign Ministry regarding Azeris in Iran, and the nationalistic forces took this opportunity to accuse Aliyev of overlooking the interests of Azeris in Iran. However, as was mentioned earlier these policies to downgrade of South Azerbaijan issue in the foreign policy agenda had little to do with Aliyev’s nationalistic orientation and stemmed from his rational foreign policy approach. Priorities of the state foreign policy was completely designed only by Heydar Aliyev and the Foreign Ministry only played as an executive body implementing president’s guidelines and lacked any initiatives and authority in this regard. The little role of the Foreign Ministry in shaping foreign policy, partly it can be explained with, as Shaffer describes it “scratch foreign ministries” of the newly independent states of Caucasus, which lacked any institution for training of diplomats and mostly were comprised of old Soviet diplomats or former translators of Soviet academic facilities.¹⁴⁸

The fact that Aliyev refrained from public statements on the issue of Iran’s Azeris did not, however, mean that he completely removed this problem from the official political agenda. There were several important reasons for this. As Brown notes, wholly abandoning the issue of the Azeris of Iran might have created the opportunity

¹⁴⁸ Shaffer (2010), 54.

for the opposition forces to undermine Aliyev's still fragile position in the early years of his presidency by playing on the nationalistic feelings that prevailed at the time in Azerbaijani society. As elaborated earlier, Aliyev had changed the name of the official language of Azerbaijan from Turkic into Azerbaijani and a further setback in the issue of the Iranian Azeris might have discredited Aliyev as a national leader. Shaffer believes that Aliyev wanted to highlight the fact Azerbaijan does not belong only to Turkish Azeri ethnic group and it actually is homeland for all people living there, even Armenians, irrespective of their ethnic, religious and linguistic background.¹⁴⁹ However, as Brown observed, due to Aliyev's politics, the topic of Iranian Azeris was kept, as much as possible, out of public discourse. As an example, he quotes the results of a survey of Iran-related media articles in Azerbaijan, showing that only five per cent of the topics of the state media were dedicated to the issue of Azeris in Iran. However, this figure was 46 per cent for the independent and 42 per cent for the opposition media. Another indicator of the sharp decline in the official importance assigned to the issue was the fact that according to the website of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Washington for that period, none of the 13 objectives set as foreign policy priorities had anything to do with the issue of the Azeri population of Iran.¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, a decree issued by President Aliyev dated 23 May 2001 on the organization of the First Congress of the World Azerbaijanis held in Baku between 9 and 10 November of the same year can be considered to be another sobering

¹⁴⁹ Shaffer (2002), 166.

¹⁵⁰ Cameron, 590.

example of the policies which Dr Nasibli had described as a, “return to Elchibey’s policies.” Aliyev’s decree actually accomplished his predecessor’s intention of gathering the leaders of the Azerbaijani communities across the world in Baku.

Elchibey had originally issued decrees on 24 December 1992 and 30 January 1993 in regard to the organization of the congress in Baku, but had not succeeded in seeing his objective realized due to the political turmoil that ousted him from power.¹⁵¹ More than 406 representatives and 63 guests from 200 Azerbaijani communities established in 36 countries attended the congress chaired by the Azerbaijani president Aliyev.¹⁵² In his address, Aliyev urged Azerbaijanis living abroad to be good citizens of their countries and to promote Azerbaijani culture, values and interests. Importantly, the second article of the Resolution adopted at the congress reads that, “the independent Republic of Azerbaijan is a moral center of support for the all Azerbaijanis in the world regardless of where they live and acts as the representative of their moral-national interests.”¹⁵³ Although both Azerbaijani presidents wished to gather all the heads of the Azerbaijani communities in Baku, as Brown underlines, Elchibey and Aliyev had symmetrically opposite views regarding the nature of the relations between the state of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani diaspora abroad. Whereas Elchibey advocated for Iranian Azeris to struggle for their linguistic and

¹⁵¹ Elchibey's decree on the organization of the congress. Retrieved 22 October 2013, from <http://e-ganun.az/print.php?internal=view&target=1&docid=8168&doctype=0#>

¹⁵² Dünya Azərbaycanlılarının 2001-ci ilin Noyabrın 9-10 da Bakı şəhərində keçirilmiş I Qurultayının yekunlarına dair məlumat (About the first congress of the World Azerbaijanis held in Baku on 9-10 November 2001). (2001). Retrieved 30 October 2013, from <http://diaspora.gov.az/index.php?options=content&id=429>

¹⁵³ The text of the Resolution of the First Congress of the World Azerbaijanis. Retrieved 22 October 2013, from <http://files.preslib.az/site/diaspora/gl2.pdf p13>.

cultural rights as a prelude for eventual independence from Tehran, Aliyev shifted his emphasis from the Azeri population of Iran to the Azeri diaspora worldwide urging them somehow to be loyal citizens both for their home countries and Azerbaijan as the motherland in moral terms.¹⁵⁴ The critical question as to, “how they should act when the interests of their home countries and Azerbaijan contradicted one another?” was left unanswered.

4.3 Azerbaijani-Iranian Relations at Arm’s Length: Mid-2003 Onwards

The Azerbaijani-Iranian relations during the period from 2002 to 2003 which coincided with the last year of the presidency of Heydar Aliyev, could be asserted as being founded on the intention of keeping the other side at arm’s length. After several years of politico-economical confrontation the two sides apparently decided to build a relation based on the observation of mutual interests and the recognition of each other’s red lines. International and regional developments, as well as certain domestic developments contributed to the adoption of such an approach in both states. Sadegh-Zadeh describes the state of relations between the two countries as being based on the pragmatic approach.¹⁵⁵

From the Iranian perspective, Baku’s ever-increasing collaboration with the USA and Western political alliances as a shelter from Iranian and Russian pressure threatened to consolidate the international isolation of the Islamic Republic. As Azerbaijan shares a long border with Iran, speculation about the possibility of a US strike on

¹⁵⁴ Cameron, 590-591.

¹⁵⁵ Sadegh-Zadeh, 39.

Iran was most probably among the reasons leading Tehran to reconsider its relations with Baku. Interestingly enough, during the period mentioned, even the US was trying to use the issue of the Iranian Azeris against Tehran. In 2002, Dr. Mahmudali Chehregani a well-known dissident from Iranian Azerbaijan and the head of the South Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement was received by high-profile American officials. In his address to the mass-media following the meeting, Dr. Chehregani officially declared the goal of his organization to be, “the creation of a democratic secular state with a federative system in Iran, with the highest autonomy for South Azerbaijan.” According to this dissident, negotiations were underway in the US to unify all Iranian opposition forces. Dr. Yunis, an Azeri political expert, sees Chehregani’s stance as being in complete accordance with US policy towards Tehran which he claims is ultimately against the disintegration of Iran. Later, in July 2003, Chehregani said in a press-conference in Baku that, “a new life for South Azerbaijanis,” had begun and, “18 months later Iran would become a federation.”¹⁵⁶ One should note the fact that following Chehregani’s news conference in Baku and as a result of the Tehran-Baku rapprochement that followed, he was barred not only from any political activity in Azerbaijan, but also from even visiting the country, as to be discussed in the next chapter.

Another factor weakening Tehran’s leverage over Baku was related to its inability to prevent the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and its failure to put sufficient pressure on Baku on the issue of the legal status of the Caspian Sea. As

¹⁵⁶ Yunis, 116.

Souleimanov and Ditych underline Russia agreed first with Kazakhstan in 1998 and then with Azerbaijan in 2001 on the sectoral division of the sea. The Azerbaijani-Kazakhstani agreement of 2001, weakened Iran's position and excepting Turkmenistan's neutral and more defensive stance, Tehran was now actually isolated in its demand for a review of the status of the Caspian Sea.¹⁵⁷

Baku's ever-increasing cooperation with the USA and its Western allies bringing about their military and political expansion in the South Caucasus could of course challenge the national security interests of both Moscow and Tehran. During this period, Azeri experts were discussing through the media the possibility of the deployment of the Western troops in Azerbaijan to protect the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline from international terrorism and sabotage. Such development pushed Russia and Iran to sign the Caspian Declaration on 12 March 2001 to prevent, "alien states" from establishment in the Caspian Basin. Then Iranian president Hashemi-Rafsanjani even threatened Azerbaijan saying that Baku would have to pay a high price if it agreed to host NATO troops on its territory.¹⁵⁸

Among the factors that inclined Baku to normalize its ties with Tehran were the presence in Iran since 1999 of Mahir Javadov, one of the organizers of a failed military mutiny against Aliyev that occurred in March 1995; the revolt demanding better social welfare for residents in the Nardaran neighborhood located in the suburbs of the Azeri capital, known as a home to religious and pro-Iranian forces,

¹⁵⁷ Souleimanov, Ditych, 105.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 112.

and; other restrictive measures by the southern neighbor against Azerbaijani citizens in terms of visa regulations and border crossings.

Mahir Javadov, was a former prosecutor whose brother Colonel Rovshan Javadov, previously the commander of the Special Forces of the Azerbaijani Interior Ministry, was slain during the armed revolt of 1995. He appeared in Iran in 1999 and stated in interviews that he had collected around himself nearly 10,000 Azeri patriots, former fighters and sportsmen and intended to enter Azerbaijan via the Iranian borders to launch a march, “to liberate Karabakh from Armenia.” Iran refused the extradition to Azerbaijan of Javadov, relying on the fact that he held an Austrian passport as the former prosecutor had been granted political asylum there. Taking into the consideration the fact there are restrictions on freedom of speech and various political activities even for Iran’s own citizens, the mentioned freedom of action and statements made by Javadov against the integrity of a neighboring country could leads us to conclude that, while exerting psychological pressure on Baku by using Javadov as a lever, Tehran was actually after a bargaining position with Baku over other matters of interest. Evidence of such bargaining may be sought in the fact that Javadov was indeed eventually forced to leave Iran, albeit only in January 2003 following Aliyev’s visit to Tehran in May 2002 and the signing of a treaty mutually banning the launch of hostile activities against Baku and Tehran from the respective territories of these countries.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Mahir Cavadov Milli Shuradan danisdi. (2013). Retrieved 22 October 2013, from <http://etatist.com/xeber/6876-mahir-cavadov-milli-uradan-dand-msahib.html>

In terms of the events in Nardaran, it should be noted that the restive neighborhood on the outskirts of Baku is famed as being home to the vast majority of the leaders of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan and pro-Iranian forces in Azeri society. Tensions in Iran-Azerbaijani relations had been reflected as tension between the residents of the area and the Azerbaijani state agencies since December 1999. As the result of the crackdown on demonstrations held to protest the social deprivation of the neighborhood on 3 July 2003, two residents were killed, social stability was endangered and the image of the country in the domestic and international arena was damaged.¹⁶⁰ Most Azerbaijani media outlets described this unrest as a plot by the Iranian intelligence bodies to undermine political stability in Azerbaijan, even if no firm evidence were provided.

Heydar Aliyev's second official visit to Tehran played a significant role in the restoration of the mutual relations. During his visit of 10-18 May 2002, Aliyev met high-ranking Iranian officials, including the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i. The most important document signed between the two sides was the treaty on the principles of friendship and cooperation banning the use of the two countries' territories for hostile activities against one another.¹⁶¹ By the end of the procedures for the ratification of the treaty Mahir Javadov had been expelled from Iran, dissidents from Iranian Azerbaijan just "disappeared" from Baku, the public discussion of the South Azerbaijan-related topics ceased and other positive signs of the improvement of relations emerged.

¹⁶⁰ Azerbaycanda eyelet etirazlari. (12 January 2010). Retrieved 23 October 2013, from <http://www.azadliq.org/content/article/1927335.html>

¹⁶¹ Allahverdiyev, Sultanzada, 353-354,447.

While asserting the extent to which the issue of Iranian Azeris influenced Aliyev's policies on Iran, its striking feature is a dramatic decrease in the importance of the South Azerbaijan issue in the foreign policy of the state compared with which was during the years of the Popular Front rule in Azerbaijan. As mentioned earlier, Elchibey had regarded the issue of Iranian Azeris as a pivotal part of his ethnocentric policies, however, Aliyev conducted a more pragmatic politics, especially during the first year of his presidency establishing close ties with the official Tehran while removing South Azerbaijan issue from the agenda. His pragmatism in South Azerbaijan issue was based on not neglecting very important factors such as the balance of power in the region and the state of war with Armenia. Aliyev regarded Iran as a big neighbor for Azerbaijan and it was undesirable to open a new front against Tehran over the issue of Iranian Azeris, and thus this issue was considerably marginalized from the political agenda. However, in later years when Iran tried to put pressure on Azerbaijan to prevent Baku from establishing strategic partnership with the West and the USA, the issue of Azeris residing in Iran appeared again as a part of Aliyev's general policies. The policies regarding Iranian Azeris were pursued through the diaspora organizations of Azeris abroad and actually acted as a special deterrence along with other tools of leverage used in the relations with Iran. As will be analyzed in the next chapter, by and large, similar line concerning Iranian Azeris has been followed to date by Heydar Aliyev's successor and son, Ilham Aliyev, with some minor modifications made in accordance with developments in the international and regional political arena.

The sharp difference in Elchibey's and Aliyev's views regarding Iranian Azerbaijan stems from the fact that Elchibey was a staunch supporter of the pan-Turkish

nationalism advocating for the unification of the Turkish ethnic groups, regardless of their religious affiliations, in order to better pursue the interests of the Turkish world. Elchibey treated Iranian Azeris as a part of the Turkish world that should be liberated from the “cultural hegemony of the Persian establishment” in Iran. From this angle some may describe Elchibey’s nationalism as the irredentist nationalism, in virtue of the fact that Elchibey saw the creation of the Great Azerbaijan as a prelude to the Great Turkistan. However, as his ultimate goal was the unification of the whole Turkish world, not necessarily rejecting the idea of the Great Azerbaijan, as well as the fact that the size and the number of population in the Iranian Azerbaijan is greater than in the Republic of Azerbaijan it seems a little bit difficult to prescribe the irredentist nationalism for the late leader of the Popular Front.

Chapter 5

ILHAM ALIYEV AND POLITICS OF IRANIAN AZERIS: 2003 – UPTILL TODAY

In October 2003 Ilham Aliyev took over power from his father who had been suffering from age-related ill-health and died shortly after. Together with the presidency, he also inherited Heydar Aliyev's main policy course. Contextual analysis of his speeches concerning Iran prior to his presidency is not possible, as he had previously been the first vice-president of the Azerbaijani State Oil Company, rather than having played a major directly political role. During Heydar Aliyev's terms of presidency, Ilham Aliyev remained largely in his father's shadow and was not even considered by most as a possible candidate for the presidency. Officially he took office in October 2003 after being declared as the winner of the presidential race, amid allegations of wide-spread fraud by opposition forces and some international organizations. Ilham Aliyev was devoted to the main postulates of the of his father's policy, especially in the first year of his presidency and the first change he made to the Cabinet of Ministers that was bequeathed to him happened only in late 2005.

5.1 Carrying on Aliyev's at "Arm's Length" Policy

As in other fields, Ilham Aliyev followed in his father's footsteps in matters related to Iran as well. The issue of Iranian Azerbaijan continued to be downplayed and, as this chapter will elaborate, even completely removed from the official political agenda in later years.

Likewise Heydar Aliyev's tenure, the Foreign Ministry has a little role in the modification of the general policies towards Iran. Although a lot of work has been done in terms of expanding foreign policy capability, since 2005 by the Ilham Aliyev administration, the Ministry still lacks any autonomous institutional power. Due to a sharp increase in oil revenues Baku has nearly tripled the number of its embassies abroad and Baku intends to increase the number of its diplomatic representatives to ninety. Additionally, on 23 May 2007 the National Security Concept of Azerbaijan was adopted in which includes a clear-cut foreign policy approach of the state. Moreover, in 2006 Baku established Diplomatic Academy to further enhance diplomatic capability of the country.¹⁶² Nonetheless, foreign policy mostly relies on president's personal diplomacy and as Shaffer quotes the foreign minister Elmar Mammadyarov as saying, "an Azerbaijani foreign minister deals a lot with transportation," hinting to ministry's more focus on projects to transport oil and gas resources to open markets.¹⁶³

The possibility of the use of the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as the Azeri minority in Iran by the US as a tool to pursue its foreign policy goals concerning Tehran was one of the most important reasons forcing the Azeri leadership to adopt a policy ensuring the downplay of the issue of the Azeri population of Iran in Baku's political-social life. The counter-measures that Iran developed to prevent Baku's contribution to the USA in its policies against Tehran were among key factors shaping this policy line. Yunis focuses on the ever-increasing US-Azeri military cooperation and its possible threats for Iran. According

¹⁶² Shaffer, (2010), 55-56.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 59.

to him, in March 2004 Azeri defense minister Safar Abiyev visited Washington at the personal invitation of his American counterpart Donald Rumsfeld during which the two sides conferred over the matters of mutual interest including reconstruction of military airports and the deployment of the US troops in the territory of Azerbaijan. In November 2004, more than 50 American troopers arrived as advisers at the Chukanli airport located in the Salyan district, 190 km north of the Iranian border. Noting the fact that seven airports were modernized and were ready for the potential conduct of strikes on Iran, Yunis links such developments to the famous remarks by the former American president George W. Bush naming Iran as one of the, “axes of evil.” Yunis also sees such developments as being behind Iran’s agreement to the opening of the Azerbaijani General-Consulate in Tabriz in November 2004 and the frequent visits made by the Iranian ministers of health, intelligence and defense, as well as the special envoy of the Iranian president for Caspian Sea issues as Tehran’s effort to resolve its bilateral problems and not to give a pretext to Baku, “for turning into a bridgehead for American intervention.”¹⁶⁴

As the concluding part of Iran’s more reverent policies towards Baku, the Azeri president Ilham Aliyev paid a visit to Tehran between 22 and 24 January 2005. During his meeting nine agreements on cooperation in various fields were signed between the two sides, including the simplification of the procedure of border crossings and agreement on the inauguration of the Baku-Tabriz air route. Iran also provided Azerbaijan with one-million dollars worth of aid in loans in order to contribute to the construction of a road connecting Baku’s suburbs to the Iranian border. Further, Iranian officials publicly condemned Armenian aggression against

¹⁶⁴ Yunis, 117-118.

Azerbaijan while voicing their support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. In return, Baku agreed not to host any hostile activities by the USA against Iran and a relevant agreement was signed during the visit. Aliyev also officially reassuringly declared that he would not permit any foreign troops to be deployed in Azerbaijani territory.¹⁶⁵ He notes that Baku had planned to formulate the deployment of the American troops under guise of, "temporarily deployed forces" in order to "protect the energy resources of the Caspian Sea."¹⁶⁶ However Baku delayed with its final decision on the deployment and Yunis indirectly links to Baku's dissatisfaction with the US plan for the Nagorny Karabakh problem and demands for more democratic elections in Azerbaijan. Washington's solution for Karabakh as a bargaining in return to Baku's alliance against Iran, was based on the principle of "the occupied territories around Karabakh in exchange for Karabakh's independence" which might seriously undermine Aliyev's position in the country.¹⁶⁷ Yunis claims that Aliyev kept his promise on not siding with the USA against Iran which actually led Washington to develop closer ties with the Azeri opposition and ultimately attempt to instigate an "orange revolution" in Azerbaijan to undermine Aliyev's position and force him to accept the American position on Tehran. The author gives the cancelation of former US defense minister Rumsfeld's visit to Baku on August 2005, a sudden visit by the Iranian defense minister Najjar's sudden trip to Baku on the eve of Aliyev's visit to Washington, Iranian President Ahmadinezhad's meeting with the

¹⁶⁵ Yunis, 118.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 123.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 120.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 121.

Azeri President immediately after his return to home from the US, and Aliyev's statement saying that, "Azerbaijan will not support a military action against Iran," as evidence of his not siding of Ilham with Washington against Tehran.¹⁶⁸ However, one can deduce that the Iranian leadership offered more suitable options to Aliyev convincing him not to put the national security of the state at stake while being involved at temporary political projects.

However, from the chain of events that followed regarding the Iranian Azeris we can deduce that the Iranian Azerbaijan-related issues were also among the subjects of bargaining between the two sides during Aliyev's visit to Tehran. There are plenty of reasons to suggest that such bargaining actually took place. Following this visit by the Azeri president, the issue of Iranian Azerbaijan not only disappeared from the government's agenda, but also dramatic and radical events occurred in this regard. Among these drastic changes we can mention the expulsion of Mahmudali Chehregani, the well-known Iranian Azeri political activist from Baku, an air of complete ignorance and the lack of any official reaction from Baku to the unrest in Iranian Azerbaijan provoked by the offensive cartoon crisis, and most strikingly Baku's vote against the UN resolution concerning the violation of the rights of ethnic minorities in Iran.

While explaining the reasons why Baku declined to help Washington topple the regime in Iran, and the removal of the issue of Iranian Azerbaijan from political discourse, experts point to the dramatic consequences for Azerbaijan of any possible war in Iran. Yunis notes that even rumors about the possibility of an American strike

¹⁶⁸ Yunis, 122-123.

against Iran resulted in a 30% increase in the price of real estate in Azerbaijan in the spring of 2006, as Iranian Azeris bought up flats in Azerbaijan as a last resort. He argues that the influx of refugees from Iran could have seriously destabilized economic life in Azerbaijan and that this is why Baku had no desire to face the unpredictable changes that would result from any military action against Iran.¹⁶⁹

Sadegh-Zadeh sees another reason for Baku's reluctance in highlighting the problems of Iranian Azeris. According to him, the Ilham Aliyev administration mostly refrained from being, "dragged into," what was known as, "the second problem," because of the first conflict with Armenia which had left 20 per cent of territories occupied and one million people displaced from their places of origin.¹⁷⁰ The Azerbaijani leadership, we can presume, did not want to become simultaneously involved in two serious conflicts on the two different fronts.

Ilham Aliyev has closely followed his father's policies concerning other issues related to Iran, including the issue of working with the Azeri diaspora abroad. As Heydar Aliyev had reformulated the issue of the Azeris living across the world from what, "the Republic of Azerbaijan can do for the Azeri compatriots," into, "what the world Azeris should do for their historical motherland" Ilham Aliyev also expanded activities of the State Committee in Matters with Azeris Living Abroad, renaming it the State Committee for Diaspora Affairs. Probably Aliyev wanted to shift activities of Azeris living abroad from focus on the solidarity of the all Azeris into their contribution to the Azerbaijani state in confronting the powerful Armenian diaspora

¹⁶⁹ Yunis, 124-125.

¹⁷⁰ Sadegh-Zadeh, 7

organizations. On various occasions, he also urged the world Azeris to contribute to the resolution of the problems of their motherland while actively integrating into the societies of countries in which they lived.¹⁷¹ In his speech during the second Congress of the World Azeris in Baku in 2006, Aliyev highlighted the fact that all the Azeris together constituted a 50-million nation.¹⁷² However, even such general statements by the Azeri president did not prevent Iran from making accusations against the organizers of the Congress. The Iranian Embassy in Baku delivered a Note of protest to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Embassy found the use of terms such as North and South Azerbaijan during the Congress as meaningless and added that the expression of some views about the territorial integrity of Iran could damage bilateral ties. The Embassy also expressed its dissatisfaction over the fact that the congress was supported by the Azeri government and over the lack of any official explanation for the anti-Iranian opinions expressed during the congress. In his interview with the BBC Azeri service, the Iranian ambassador to Baku, Suleymani, who is an ethnic Iranian Azeri from the Azeri-populated Ardebil Province, said that Iran his country wished Azeris living in Iran also to be invited to the congress. Suleymani added that he was disappointed with the invitation of the only Iranian Azeris residing in the West who are in opposition to the Islamic establishment. A spokesman for the Azeri Foreign Ministry, Tahir Tagızada advised the Iranian side not to pay too much attention to personal views expressed by non-official persons.¹⁷³ In an interview with the local media

¹⁷¹ Cameroon, 592.

¹⁷² Baki diplomati, yoxsa Tehran memuru? (Baku's ambassador or Iranian officer?). (December 2008). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from http://azr.baybak.com/il_2008_say_3842.azr

¹⁷³ Iran Azerbaycandan inciyib (Iran feels injured by Azerbaijan). (18 March 2013). Retrieved 29 October, 2013, from http://www.bbc.co.uk/azeri/news/story/2006/03/060318_iran_baku.shtml

Suleymani made an emotional statement accompanied by gestures in the form of body language that was clearly interpretable as: “you can only dream about the unification of Azerbaijan.” The insulting tone of his statement created a wave of anger in Azerbaijani society and his remarks were discussed in parliament as well, where some of the MPs, urged the government to declare him as ‘persona non grata’ and expel the Iranian ambassador from the country.¹⁷⁴

5.2 Rapprochement between Baku and Tehran

Normalization of ties with Iran had not meant that Heydar Aliyev’s government would constantly and completely neglect facts related to the rights of Azeris living in Iran. As had been the case during the time of Elchibey’s Popular Front government, officials in Baku under Heydar Aliyev’s had also reacted to the issues related to Iranian Azerbaijan. Vilayat Guliyev, the former foreign minister of Heydar Aliyev, who now leads Azeri Embassy to Budapest, openly condemned the violation of the rights of the Azeri minority in Iran during his address in New York and at a news conference on 3 May 2000. His words were described by the Iranian official newspapers “Iran” and “Keyhan” as an attempt to satisfy the USA. Although, Ilham Aliyev has on the whole maintained his father’s policy in regard with Iran, in November 2006 he took what might be considered an exceptional step in a new direction when Baku refrained from voting alongside 70 other states in favor of a UN resolution calling for putting an end to the persecution of ethnic minorities, including Azeris, and ending of ethnic discrimination within Iran. Instead Azerbaijan chose to be among the 48 states, including Iran, which voted against the resolution, while 55

¹⁷⁴ Millet vekilləri İran səfirinin Azərbaycandan qovulmasını tələb edirlər (MPs demand Iranian envoy to be expelled from Azerbaijan). (2006). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://demreforms.org/az/?p=2888>

states abstained. One should note the point that if Azerbaijan had simply intended to avoid tension in ties with Iran, it could have just abstain from voting.¹⁷⁵ Azerbaijan's vote against the UN draft resolution condemning the violation of minority rights in Iran was, therefore, perhaps the clearest demonstration of the shift in Baku's policies towards Iran. The main goal of the Azeri officials may be the fact that there was a widespread speculation about the US-Azerbaijani cooperation against Iran, even some argued that President Aliyev privately expressed his consent over the unofficial use of the Azerbaijani territory by the US to strike Iran. As was mentioned earlier sudden visits by the Iranian defense minister Najjar and President Ahmadinezhad to Azerbaijan during nearly a ten-day period was closely related to the allegedly Azeri-US cooperation. Probably, through siding with Iran in the UN voting Baku tried to completely assure Tehran that it would not engaged in any action against Iran.

On some occasions Azeri officials went further and sided with Iran in the condemnation of the late Azeri president Elchibey's nationalistic policies while publicly declaring that the matter of South Azerbaijan was irrelevant to the foreign policy of their country. In an interview with the Iranian Mehr News Agency former Azerbaijani ambassador to Tehran, Abbasali Hasanov, lashed out at the Elchibey government's policies towards Iran. He actually accused Elchibey of having destroyed ties with Iran, Russia and China.

Very strong slogans were chanting against Iran and I think it was due to the provocations of the outsiders. These kinds of slogans, including a slogan on the unification of the North and South Azerbaijan, initiated by then Azerbaijani president Elchibey, had ruined ties with Iran, China

¹⁷⁵ Azerbaijan is against UN draft minorities in Iran, (23 November 2006). Retrieved 23 October 2013, from <http://www.today.az/news/politics/32975.html>

the Europe and Russia. His slogans were too provocative and blatant that even he was saying that the Azerbaijani banner should be staged in China.¹⁷⁶

While defending his remarks, in his interview with the Baku based “Bizim Yol” (Our path) newspaper Hasanov reiterated that there was no room for the South Azerbaijan issue in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy; that Azeris residing in Iran were not citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and; that the Azeri government actually considered ethnic brethren living in various other countries as a means to establish good relations between Azerbaijan and the countries in which they lived.¹⁷⁷

The Azeri ambassador later went even further and used offensive terms about former Azeri officials in an interview with a foreign news agency too as a gesture to Iran where he served as the Azeri ambassador from 1998 to 2009. Speaking about the anarchy in the early years of Elchibey’s presidency, Hasanov said that at, “that time inexperienced people came to power. A watermelon seller became a Prime Minister and a construction worker headed the General Staff of the Armed Forces.”¹⁷⁸ This interview sparked sharp criticism not only from the Azeri opposition, but also from members of the Iranian Azeri diaspora. Some of them underlined the contradictions

¹⁷⁶ Safir-e Azarbaycan: Hozur-e nezamiyan-e biganeh khelaf-e qanun-e asasi-ye Comhuri-ye Azerbaycan ast (Azerbaijani ambassador: Presence of foreign forces is against Azerbaijani Constitution. (16 Azer 1387, 6 December 2008). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://old.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=794674>,

¹⁷⁷ Safir Abbasali Hasanov tutdugunu buraxmir (Ambassador Abbasali Hasanov insists in his view). Retrieved 29 October 2013 from http://www.d-a-k.org/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=565&pop=1&page=0&Itemid=1

¹⁷⁸ Safir-e Azarbaycan: Hozur-e nezamiyan-e biganeh khelaf-e qanun-e asasi-ye Comhuri-ye Azerbaycan ast (Azerbaijani ambassador: Presence of foreign forces is against Azerbaijani Constitution. (16 Azer 1387, 6 December 2008). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://old.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=794674>,

with Ilham Aliyev's earlier remark of, "we are a nation of 50-millions," which he had stated while addressing the Second Congress of the World Azerbaijanis.¹⁷⁹

While assessing Ilham Aliyev's policies in regard to Iranian Azerbaijan, Cameroon notes that Ilham Aliyev never made reference to the Southern Azerbaijan issue, and nearly never mentioned the Azeris living in Iran independently, preferring a very general term such as, "compatriots who live indifferent countries of the world." Cameroon also found it amazing that there was nothing on the official website of the Azeri president from speeches where reference was made to Azeris in Iran, although plenty of material could be found from statements referring to Azeris residing in the Ukraine, Georgia, Russia, Turkey and other countries.¹⁸⁰

The social unrest which erupted in Iranian Azerbaijan in the summer of 2006 due to an offensive cartoon crisis that infuriated Iranian Azeris can be taken as a good example illustrating the distinctive features of Ilham Aliyev's political stance. During the protests of Iranian Azeris against the depiction of Azeri minority as cockroaches in the official newspaper "Iran" which turned to wide-scale unrest, no official media or official figure made any statement concerning the events initiated by the Azeri population of Iran. Only some opposition media, notably including the *Azadliq* newspaper, (the media extension of the Popular Front), elaborated on the issue and voiced concern about the brutal crackdown of the Iranian military units dispatched to the region against the Azeri protesters and called for support for, "the Azeri uprising in Iran." Tohidi states that the government led by Ilham Aliyev actually prosecuted

¹⁷⁹ Baki diplomati, yoxsa Tehran memuru? (Baku's diplomat or Iranian officer?). (December 2008). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from http://azr.baybak.com/il_2008_say_3842.azr

¹⁸⁰ Cameroon, 592.

two newspapers in Azerbaijan for the publication of retaliatory materials which Baku found as offensive against the Supreme Leader and the president of Iran. Additionally, Baku deported the Iranian Azeri dissident Mahmudali Chehregani just a few days after the unrest started in northwestern Iran. Tohidi asserts that such measures indicate Tehran's influence on Baku officials, as compared to Baku's influence in shaping identity policies in Iran.¹⁸¹ As for the official stance, Baku officially considered these events to be the domestic affair of Iran. During fierce confrontation between the Iranian law-enforcement forces and Azeri activists, Ilham Aliyev indirectly showed his support for Iran amid speculations on possible air-strikes from the USA, saying that his country did not support any military action against its southern neighbor.¹⁸²

The deportation of Chehregani could also be regarded as a significant indicator of Baku's reaction to events in Iranian Azerbaijan. The Azeri dissident left the USA for Turkey in order to be close to the Iranian border. However, on 9 June 2006 he was deported from Turkey to Azerbaijan. Ankara explained that it had acted in this manner in order to protect Chehregani from possible threats from Iran. The Iranian Azeri dissident was then deported from Baku to Dubai without any explanation.¹⁸³ In his interviews Chehregani, strongly criticized Baku's attitude towards Azeris residing in Iran and called for a change in the strategy followed by the officials of the Republic of Azerbaijan towards the Azeri population of Iran.

¹⁸¹ N. Tohidi, "Iran: regionalism, ethnicity and democracy," (2006). Retrieved 22 October 2013, from http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/regionalism_3695.jsp

¹⁸² Yunis, 123.

¹⁸³ Yunis, 124.

Such policies are unacceptable. Such an attitude towards compatriots who share the same religion, language, flesh and blood is not acceptable. It is a historical decision [coming to the Republic of Azerbaijan] and I will do it. Let it to be clear that who is who and how they act. Remarks such as ‘Iran issues Nota to us, Iran puts pressure on us, we can’t show support for the movement in South Azerbaijan’ are pretexts.¹⁸⁴

He also criticized officials in Baku for doing nothing in terms of ensuring the cultural rights of their brethren in Iran. Chehregani expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that the Republic of Azerbaijan had not sent even a single Note of protest to the UN in condemnation of the violation of the basic rights of Azeris in Iran. He also made a comparison between the Azeri officials and Masud Barzani, the head of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in northern Iraq, in terms of the contributions made and support displayed for compatriots in Iran.

The world is witnessing the work that have been done for the Kurds by Masud Barzani who established an autonomous region in the north of Iraq. What have you done for the South Azerbaijan? What have you done for your brothers? Nothing has been done. The current policies, strategy and approach should be changed.¹⁸⁵

5.3 Deepening Mutual Distrust

Despite the Azeri vote against the UN Iranian minority resolution we can not deduce that Azerbaijan completely avoided all policies provoking Iran. Interestingly enough only explicit mention of the issue of the Iranian Azeri was abandoned by Baku in

¹⁸⁴ Azərbaycanın indiki siyaseti deyismelidir (Azerbaijan’s current policies should be changed). (16 April 2013). Retrieved 28 October 2013, from <http://www.azadliq.info/component/content/article/370-tbriz/29503-cohraqanli.html>

¹⁸⁵ Azərbaycanın indiki siyaseti deyismelidir (Azerbaijan’s current policies should be changed). (16 April 2013). Retrieved 28 October 2013, from <http://www.azadliq.info/component/content/article/370-tbriz/29503-cohraqanli.html>

order not to provoke Iran. Other “provocative” issues, including ties with Israel, continued in the same vein and were even considerably strengthened by the new Azeri leadership. Regarding Israel, Souleimanov notes that, “despite official slogans of friendship and brotherhood between two nations,” Azerbaijan regarded threats coming from Iran in terms of the use force and the enhancement of intelligence activities in Azerbaijan very seriously and thus deepened its cooperation in relevant spheres with Iran’s archenemy Israel even further. Since 2000 Azerbaijan and Israel have entered a new stage of qualitatively different mutually beneficial cooperation. Israel now buys nearly one-sixth of all Azeri crude oil. On February 2012 Baku signed a 1.6 billion dollar worth agreement with Tel-Aviv on the import of Israeli weapons, including antimissile and anti-aircraft systems.¹⁸⁶ Another reason for the expansion of Baku-Tel Aviv ties might be the fact that the Azeri officials were seeking the support from the Jewish lobby to remedy their ties with Washington spoiled because of the issue of the democratic elections in Azerbaijan.

Together with the potential for assistance in coping with these threats from Iran, Khalifa-Zadeh believes that Azerbaijan also sees cooperation with Israel as a matter of vital importance for certain strategic reasons not directly related to Tehran. Among these reasons, Khalifa-Zadeh sees Baku’s attempts to neutralize the Armenian diaspora through the cooperation with the world Jewish community, and also improving Baku-Washington relations using the ties of the Jewish community in the USA.¹⁸⁷ He argues that Iranian policies towards Azerbaijan follow several goals,

¹⁸⁶ Souleimanov, Pikal, Kraus, (2013).

¹⁸⁷ M. Khalifa-Zadeh, “Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance and Iran.” (2013). Retrieved October 25, 2013, from <http://rslissak.com/content/israeli-azerbaijani-alliance-and-iran-mahir-khalifa-zadeh>,

including the spread of the Islamic Revolution and religious Shi'i ideology, expansion of Iranian intelligence activities, impeding Azerbaijan's rise to the status of a regional power, minimizing cooperation between Baku and the Western powers, and the extension of support for separatist movements in Azerbaijan.¹⁸⁸

In early 2012 Baku arrested a group of people accused of plotting a terrorist attack against the Israeli ambassador to Baku, and other Israeli social figures, including a teacher of the Israeli school in the Azeri capital. In this regard the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security charged 22 people, most of whom were from the restive Nardaran neighborhood, with high treason and espionage for Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Police launched a raid on the neighborhood to arrest them, and Azeri authorities blamed Iranian intelligence bodies for masterminding these actions using pro-Iranian forces in Azerbaijan. An information issued by the Ministry of National Security reads that two officers of Iran's Revolutionary Guard named Pakraveshteh and Vahidi had recruited the mentioned group for espionage against Azerbaijan while their visit to Iran in 1999.¹⁸⁹ According to some speculation, Israel's MOSSAD had foiled the plan and this indirectly showed Azeri-Israeli security cooperation in the region against Iran.¹⁹⁰

On 23 February, the Iranian Embassy in Baku, in a statement described the abovementioned news as a, "scenario to conceal the fact of the murdering of Iran's

¹⁸⁸ Khalifa-Zadeh (2013).

¹⁸⁹ MTN İranin daha bir casus sebekesini ifşa etdi (Minsitry of National Security reveals Iran's one more espionage net). Retrieved 25 October 2013, from http://musavat.com/news/gündəm/MTN-İRANIN-DAHA-BİR-CASUS-ŞƏBƏKƏSİNİ-İFŞA-ETDİ_119812.html

¹⁹⁰ Khalifa-Zadeh, (2013).

nuclear scholars.” Some sources saw linkage between the arrests in Baku and the assassination of Ahmadi-Rovshan an official of the nuclear facility in Iran’s Natanz. Iran’s intelligence minister Moslehi on 16 January 2002 accused the USA, UK and Israel for being behind of the assassination. On 19 January, Azeri National Security Ministry in a statement said it had arrested a group planning to kill “a foreign public figure operating in Azerbaijan.” On 12 February, the ambassador to Tehran Akhundov was submitted to Iran’s Foreign Ministry where he was submitted a Nota accusing Baku of sheltering the killers of the Iranian nuclear scholar. On 28 February he was once again summoned to the Foreign Ministry and was asked an explanation for Baku’s 1.6bn worth arm deal with Israel.¹⁹¹

Another illustrative development showing the limits of Iran’s pressure on Azerbaijan was the visit to Baku of Israeli President Shimon Peres’s in June 2009. Despite strong protests from Iran Baku did not cancel Peres’s visit, a fact which was highly appreciated by Israeli officials.¹⁹²

Although Azerbaijan has not established an Embassy in Israel in order not to provoke Iran’s anger, some experts note that their relations have turned into a full-fledged strategic cooperation deepening in fields directly challenging Iran’s national security. In this regard, Khalifa-Zadeh regards the Israeli-Azeri relationship as an iceberg and quotes Ilham Aliyev as saying that, “nine-tenths of it is below the surface.” In terms

¹⁹¹ Dindarlarin habsi: Kim kimin oduna yanib? (The arrest of religious people: who for whom were sacrificed),(23.04.2012). Retrieved 30 October 2013, from <http://www.mediaforum.az/az/print/2012/04/23/D%C4%B0NDARLARIN-H%C6%8FBS%C4%B0-K%C4%B0M-K%C4%B0M%C4%B0N-ODUNA-YANIB-031052148c05.html>

¹⁹² Khalifa-Zadeh (2013).

of the issues threatening Iran's security, the author points to the former Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman's visit to Baku on April 2012 a month after an American Foreign Policy magazine revealed Azeri-Israeli agreement on the use of Azeri air space by Israel, which could be considered as a prelude to the Israeli launch of an airstrike on Iran. Although this report was denied both by the Azeri officials and Lieberman, this did not prevent Iran from threatening Baku about the consequences of such agreement.¹⁹³

Despite the threats from Tehran, Baku continued to deepen its strategic ties with Israel still further. The first trip to Tel Aviv by the Azeri Foreign Minister, Elmar Mammadyarov, which began on 21 April 2013 was described as a "historical visit" by Israeli media outlets. During the three day visit, Mammadyarov met high-ranking Israeli officials, including President Shimon Peres, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and others and conferred over issues related to Iran. According to media reports, the Israeli President praised Azerbaijan highly for what he termed as, "playing a key role in countering Iran's influence in the Middle East."¹⁹⁴

Needless to say, such anti-Iranian remarks obviously provoked Iran. An official statement issued by the Iranian Foreign Ministry stated that it would not attempt to ensure support from, "undesirable forces" prior to elections and that Tehran, "would establish ties only with the government elected by the Azerbaijani people."¹⁹⁵ In

¹⁹³ Khalifa-Zadeh (2013).

¹⁹⁴ Deitch, J. (22 April 2013). Israel praises Azerbaijan's stand in Iran crisis. Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://news.yahoo.com/israel-praises-azerbaijans-stand-iran-crisis-104002142.html>

¹⁹⁵ Ramiz Mehdiyev in Iran sefereinin perdearxasi (Hidden nuances of Ramiz Mehdiyev's Iran visit). (30 April 2013). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://bizimyolinfo.com/?sehife=1&xeber=10252>

return, Baku, within its traditional “balanced foreign policy” approach, tried to compensate Mammadyarov’s visit to Israel. To this end, Ramiz Mehdiyev, who has been serving as the head of the Presidential Administration since 1993, and is regarded as the fourth most powerful person in the country after President Aliyev, Prime Minister Rasizada, Parliament Speaker Asadov, and who leaves the country only on very rare occasions, headed a delegation to Tehran just a few days after Mammadyarov returned Baku. In his meetings with the Iranian President, the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, the Head of the National Security Council and other officials, Mehdiyev reassured the Iranian side of Baku’s continued desire to maintain close ties with its southern neighbor with which it shares such cultural and religious commonalities; stating also that, “deep historical ties connects Iran and Azerbaijan and the history of Azerbaijan constitutes an important part of the Iranian history.” According to the Iranian media, Mehdiyev went even further blaming the Western powers for attempting to create rifts between the Muslim countries, including between Iran and Azerbaijan, though this was eventually denied by the Azeri side.¹⁹⁶ Taking into consideration these factors, as well as the fact that Baku has so far not opened an embassy in Tel-Aviv, one can deduce that while expanding its cooperation with Israel, Baku at the same time tries not to further provoke Iran.

The only recent case allegedly relating to the use of the issue of Iranian Azeris as a mean to reflect Baku’s grievances to Tehran, emerged during a short period of high tension in mutual relations. A group of scholars, political experts and representatives

¹⁹⁶ Mehdiyevin Iran seferiskandalla bitdi (Mehdiyev’s Iran visit ended with scandal). (3 May 2013). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://www.azadliq.info/siyast/30205-mehdiyevin-iran-seferi.html>

of the Azeri diaspora gathered at a luxurious hotel in Baku on 30 March 2013 to discuss the problems facing the Azeri population of Iran. The event initiated by the South Azerbaijan National Freedom Front was immediately condemned by the Iranian Foreign Ministry and during a weekly briefing, a spokesman for the Ministry, Abbas Araqchi urged Baku, “to meet its commitments before Tehran in regard with fighting nationalistic movements.”

What we have been hearing from the Azeri officials about the nationalistic movements in Azerbaijan was that they reject such activities. The officials say that they do not accept such moves. Such activities undermine the relations between the two friendly, brother countries. The Islamic Republic of Iran wants to believe their words. If it is true, the Azerbaijani officials should do their utmost to prevent such activities impeding the relations between the two countries. We are also always ready to fight against all the nationalistic movements regardless of their country of origin.¹⁹⁷

Steps taken by Baku, such as once again not allowing Chehregani to enter the country when he attempted to do so for the second time in August 2013, suggest that Azerbaijan is serious about the implementation of the security agreement with Iran. This case also showed that despite the abovementioned temporal and spatial use of the issue of Iranian Azeris, Baku is not going to spoil relations with its southern neighbor over Chehregani’s visit. In terms of the technical aspects of prevention of Chehregani’s visit, first in response to the Azeri dissident’s application, the Azeri Embassy in Washington DC advised him to apply for his visa on arrival at Baku airport. At least according to the official version, however, having landed at Baku,

¹⁹⁷ Iran resmisi Bakini diplomatik dille hedeledi: Ohdeliye emel edin (Iranian official threatened Azerbaijan in a diplomatic way: meet your commitments). (June 2013). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://www.aznews.az/site/index.php?c=news&id=27063>

Chehregani was denied a visa because of problems with certain documents.¹⁹⁸ In a later interview, however, the Iranian Azeri dissident quoted an unnamed officer at Baku airport as having said, “he is not allowed to enter the country because of a security agreement signed with Iran.” According to media reports, Iran’s Fars News Agency hailed Baku’s action in preventing Chehregani from entering the country.¹⁹⁹ By and large, unwillingness of Baku to push with South Azerbaijan issue should not misled us to conclude that Baku necessarily is against the promotion of this issue. From the point of the potential benefits and losses, it seems that Baku find it not suitable to make focus currently on the issue of Iranian Azeris due to the course of events and balance of power in the region. Currently as we could see this issue re-emerges in Baku’s political agenda as a factor of deterrence through unofficial bodies such as non-governmental organizations and controlled opposition parties, immediately after Baku observes the balance in the mutual ties is changed by Tehran’s initiative.

From the analysis of materials related to Ilham Aliyev’s stance on Iran-related issues we can conclude that his policies as the head of the Azerbaijani state, aimed at striking a balance between very close and conciliatory relations that might encourage Iran to expand its influence and spread its ideology in Azerbaijan, and very poor relations that might force Iran to contemplate more hostile measures against its northern neighbor. Within this context the issue of the Iranian Azeris falls in a

¹⁹⁸ Mahmudali Cehregani deportasiya edilir (Mahmudali Chehregani is being deported). (16 August 2013). Retrieved 28 October 2013, from <http://www.contact.az/docs/2013/Politics/081500046062az.htm>

¹⁹⁹ Mahmudali Cehregani: “Azerbaycan evladi olmagima gore gurur duyuram” (Mahmudali Chehregani: “I am proud of being a son of Azerbaijani”) (20 August 2013). Retrieved 29 October 2013, from <http://blogs.voanews.com/azerbaijani/audience-comments/2013/08/20/mahmud%C9%99li-cohr%C9%99qanli-suallara-cavab-verir/>

category of potential danger for mutual ties. Although during Heydar Aliyev's presidency a gradual marginalization of the issue of the Iranian Azerbaijan from Baku's foreign policy agenda was witnessed, under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev one might declare that the matter has been completely removed from political discourse.

As a conclusion, developments such as the initial continued marginalization and then the occasional re-emergence of the issue of Iranian Azerbaijan on the political agenda during Ilham Aliyev's presidency gives us reason to suggest the instrumental use of the issue to signal Iran about certain political issues when it is considered possible and perhaps not too risky. The former ambassador Abbasali Hasanov, as we mentioned earlier, notes that his country regards Azeris living abroad, including in Iran, as a window of opportunity through which to establish closer ties with those countries and Mahmudali Chehregani, a leading political activist from Iranian Azerbaijan, points to the fact that the Azerbaijani leadership neither have the will nor the power to establish a national Azeri state encompassing Iranian Azerbaijan.²⁰⁰ However, some experts, including Souleimanov, suggest that the extent to which the Azerbaijani government is ready to support the nationalistic movements of their compatriots in northwestern Iran depends on the extent to which the support of the great powers can be guaranteed.²⁰¹ The next and concluding part of the thesis will elaborate on the abovementioned questions while summarizing arguments presented in previous chapters.

²⁰⁰ Azərbaycanın indiki siyasəti dəyişməlidir (Azerbaijan's current policies should be changed). (16 April 2013). Retrieved 28 October 2013, from <http://www.azadliq.info/component/content/article/370-tbriz/29503-cohraqanli.html>

²⁰¹ Souleimanov, Pikal, Kraus, (2013).

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

Findings in this thesis in regard with the place and importance of the issue of Iranian Azeris for relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran can be summarized in line with two main kinds of theoretical premise. One of them is closely related with the liberal worldview of International Relations, one of the three main postulates of nationalism discourses. This first theoretical approach suggests that following an upsurge that may even last for several decades, ethnic nationalism, “will soon be normalized with no lasting consequences,” and we can deduce from this that nation states will ultimately replace their hard line nationalistic policies with more pragmatic approaches based on mutual cooperation and win-win formula.²⁰² The theory implies that, following a short-term wave of nationalistic feelings prevail in decision-making, the issue of pursuing the cultural and political rights of Iranian Azeris would gradually be removed from Azerbaijan’s political agenda. Stated differently, Baku would prefer to maintain mutually beneficial relations with Tehran rather than strain ties over the issue of Iranian Azeris. The second theory which reflects the realist view of International Relations articulates that as every state follows its own national interests, this kind of matter could be used by the Azerbaijani state if it meets interests of the state, otherwise, it simply would be rejected. This means that the Republic of Azerbaijan can actively promote the

²⁰² A.D.Smith, *Nations and nationalism in a global era*. (UK, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 3.

issue of Iranian Azerbaijan, if Baku is strong enough to pursue such a matter without damaging its national security, or Tehran is weak enough to be subjected to such policies due to domestic and international complications. Even if not particularly powerful in and of itself, Baku could be a part of a regional and international project concerning Iran and through contributing to the collective international action it might achieve its preferred objectives in this area.

Findings in the previous chapters suggest that both theoretical approaches have some validity. The first liberalist worldview predicting no lasting consequence and normalization following an upsurge in ethno-nationalistic policies can be traced in Azerbaijan's foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and during Elchibey's presidency between June 1992 to July 1993, in particular. It is not mistaken to describe the issue of Iranian Azerbaijan as the number one priority of Elchibey's foreign policy alongside the liberation of Karabakh. This was mostly related to the fact that the political situation that prevailed in the Soviet Union in the second half of 1980s and prior to its collapse in 1991 was conducive to the rise of national liberation movements in the former soviet republics. Heavily influenced by the euphoria from the role of nationalism in the collapse of the USSR, the Popular Front government tried to solve every problem facing Azerbaijan through nationalistic consolidation. In the wave of ethno-nationalistic feelings, the Elchibey government prescribed the same method, to struggle for more cultural and political rights for Azeris in Iran, and his government did not hesitate in overtly and covertly supporting this agenda. In the apogee of ethno-nationalistic policies, the Azerbaijani president officially condemned Iran for suppressing the rights of its Azeri citizens and predicted a nearly collapse for the government in Tehran. Being a Pan-Turkist

nationalist, Elchibey's political struggle was not confined even only to Iran: he also was thinking of politically uniting all the Turkish speaking nations within a great Turkish World. Reliance solely on certain emotional affiliations, and the absence of a rational approach to policy making, as well as several serious mistakes, including the simultaneous confrontation with Russia and Iran while being in the state of war with Armenia, made the failure of ethno-nationalist policies in Azerbaijan inevitable. Such grave miscalculations led to domestic complications for the Popular Front government eventually deposing Elchibey from power. As was predicted by our first hypothesis, nearly a decade-long upsurge of nationalistic movement ended with Elchibey's fall and with no particular political consequences vis-à-vis the position of the Azeris of Iran excepting a brief period of heightened tensions in the two states' mutual ties. One should note such politically unskillful behavior was not peculiar only Elchibey, but almost all national movements in the former Soviet Union experienced such misfortune. Ex communist leaders turned to power in nearly all of the former Soviet republics, or more strengthened their position after a break political trouble caused by the nationalist movements, except in the Baltic republics which now are part of the European Union.

The issue of Iranian Azeris lost its pivotal position in Azerbaijan's foreign policy during Heydar Aliyev's presidency lasting from 1993 to 2003. As a reflection of a realistic tendency and precious cost and benefit calculations in foreign policy decision making, Aliyev paid a particular attention to the balance of power in the region and to remedying problems caused by the ongoing war with Armenia, including the occupation of the nearly 20 per cent of the territories of Azerbaijan and resettlement of one million refugees from the war-hit regions. Aliyev introduced a

new pragmatic foreign policy line dubbed as, “the balanced foreign policy strategy.” By and large, this strategy advocated striking a balance in relations with all the important global and regional powers and adopting a symmetrically equal distance from them in order not to destroy balance. Such policies resulted in decreasing the level of ties with Turkey, the maintenance of good ties with the US, improvements of relations with Russia and Iran. Aliyev tried to establish mutually beneficial relations with all the mentioned countries while avoiding taking sides in the conflicts existing between them. The implementation of the multinational oil projects can be shown as an illustrative example of the balance foreign policy. When the American side categorically opposed Iranian involvement in the oil exploration project, Baku did not resist, however in order not to spoil ties with Tehran, it placed the Iranian oil company in another gas project where there was no American involvement. In the same vein, Baku refrained from actions which might provoke these countries, including the promotion of the issue of Iranian Azeris. However, the marginalization of this topic did not mean its complete removal from the political agenda. Aliyev appears to have tried to maintain a position on the Iranian Azerbaijan issue through the non-official level, manipulating non-governmental organizations and semi-opposition parties, probably with the aim of remaining in the safe side, and sheltering himself from official reactions without losing the Iranian Azerbaijan issue as leverage and bargaining tool in negotiations with Iran. Yet, when interests dictated that he go even further in distancing himself, he was not averse to using his power to fully rein in even the non-official level. As our analyses have shown, the complete removal of the issue of Iranian Azerbaijan from the political agenda, the withdrawal of the Iranian Azeri activists from Baku, and virtually complete cessation of propaganda relating to South Azerbaijan which became obvious following Aliyev’s

second visit to Tehran in May 2002, were probably among the factors contributing to the withdrawal of Mahir Javadov, Aliyev's political rival from Iran and the solution of long-term problems between the two countries. Not only did non-governmental organizations and semi-opposition parties cease their propagation for rights of Iran's Azeris, but also prominent Iranian Azeri dissidents, including Mahmudali Chehregani were denied even entrance to Azerbaijani territory. The first part of our second theory, regarding rejection of the active promotion of the rights of Iranian Azeris therefore was exemplified in Heydar Aliyev's policies regarding Iranian Azerbaijan between 1993 and 2003.

Despite the fact that the issue of Iranian Azeris was partly removed from the official political agenda, apparently the Azeri leadership still cherished the idea of strengthening common national identity with Iran-originated Azeris. An example of this notion could be identified in the fact that Heydar Aliyev established a ministry to unite various Azeri diaspora organizations across the world, including Iranian Azeris most of whom were critical of the regime in Iran. Aliyev frequently met representatives of the diaspora organizations, including Iranian Azeris, during his visits to various countries abroad. Aliyev also organized and delivered a speech at the first congress of the World Azerbaijanis in Baku in order to further enhance the mobilization of the Azeri diaspora abroad.

As for the place of the Iranian Azerbaijan issue on Baku's foreign policy agenda following the coming to power in 2003 of Heydar Aliyev's son and successor, Ilham Aliyev, it has not experienced any substantial change. Ilham Aliyev has been following in his father's footsteps and both sides have avoided involvement in activities that might be considered directly threatening to each other's national

security. Aliyev's strategy regarding Iran is not unique and it is a part of the balanced foreign policy implemented in relations with other regional and global powers such as the US, Russia and Turkey. However, Baku enjoys the largest economy among the Caucasian countries due to the implementation of oil projects with international consortiums and is one of the main suppliers of gas to Europe, and this gives Baku opportunities for leverage. These opportunities are especially obvious in the coordination of relations with Azeri diaspora organizations abroad, an important part of which are comprised of Iranian Azeris. Like his father, Ilham, has also been maintaining close ties with the Azeri diaspora, indeed developing them even further.

There were some signs appearing to support Baku's alleged participation in an international campaign led by the US against Iran, which was another element of our theory. The matter is that, in early 2008 due to domestic complications in Iran compounded by America's ever-increasing threats of striking against Tehran, there was much speculation reflected even in Azeri mass-media outlets, regarding Baku's contribution to a military operation against Iran. According to the main scenario, as was mentioned in the thesis, it had been planned to deploy US forces in Azerbaijan under the guise of the protection of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline from terrorist attacks. Moreover, the American side announced through the media the initiation of large-scale military cooperation in strategic fields with Azerbaijan. However, due to domestic developments in the USA closely related to the election of Obama as the president, and consequent changes in Washington's policies towards Tehran and Baku, the American military option was not taken any further.

However, one should note the fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has played a little role in the formation of policy initiatives regarding the Azeri minority of Iran.

As was mentioned earlier, nearly all the elements of foreign policy were closely related to personal diplomacy of the head of the state. From this perspective, during Elchibey's presidency its highly ideological political line was heavily influenced by the nationalistic mindset and the Foreign Ministry was not able to manage outcomes of his hard-line politics. Partly it was related to the weak material and professional resources of the ministry in the early years of the independence. The ministry had no role in sharp changes occurred in Azerbaijan's foreign policy during Heydar Aliyev's tenure as the then Azeri president completely relied on his long-term political and governance experience he had gained as a Soviet official. However, improvements in the professional and technical capabilities of the Foreign Ministry was project little in the foreign policy strategy chosen by the incumbent Azeri president Ilham Aliyev which actually is following in his father's footsteps. This partly could be explained with the lack of proper institutionalization and autonomous institutional power of the ministry which was peculiar not only to Azerbaijan, but also to the all newly-independent states of the Caucasus in post-Soviet era.

From the perspective of the discourse of nationalism, there is a considerable decline in nationalistic tendencies in Azerbaijani foreign policy. Elchibey's ethno-nationalistic policies, for instance, conducted in regard to Iranian Azeris, from 1992 to 1993, could be described as a projection of the irredentist nationalism. However, main features of Heydar Aliyev's pragmatic policies from 1993 to 2003 were associated with a kind of civic nationalism, as it was aimed at ensuring the interests of its own nation living in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Ilham Aliyev's policies accompanied with more distancing from giving priority to common Turkish identity, could be asserted as being mostly multi-cultural approach.

In sum, the future perspective of the issue of Iranian Azeris in Baku's foreign policy depends on the state of mutual ties and possible developments in the international arena. It means that the Azerbaijani state will expand its relations Iranian Azeris living abroad through the State Committee for Diaspora Matters in order to circumvent Tehran's direct reaction. This cooperation will provide Baku with an opportunity to play a role in Azeri's political activities in Iran. The possible activation of the issue of the South Azerbaijan in Baku's domestic discourses depends on Iran's political stance towards Azerbaijan. Any large-scale anti-Azerbaijani move by Iran, directly threatening Baku's national interests, may be responded with the promotion of the idea of struggle for more rights for their brethren in Iran by non-government organizations, semi-opposition parties and youth organizations in Azerbaijan and Azeri diaspora communities abroad. This issue may also be circulated with more scale and speed in domestic public opinion if the officials in Baku decide to be a part of international or regional move regarding Iran, after calculating its cost and benefits for Azerbaijan. It is difficult to rule out the upgrade of the issue of Iranian Azeris to the level of official polemics in order to be part of the Iran-related political projects initiated likely, by the USA, Russia or some regional powers. Otherwise, the current state of affairs, which actually means the removal of the issue of Iranian Azeris from domestic public discourses, will continue unless any change happens to the mutual ties and international arena.

The aforementioned findings of thesis can be concluded in this way that first, main factors shaping Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards Iran, except Elchibey's period of presidency, were geo-strategic factors. The ideological factors, including the issue of Iranian Azeris was pivotal to Elchibey's ethno-centric policies during 1991-1992.

Sharp changes in Baku's policies regard to Tehran were mostly related the converged interests of the global and regional powers in the Caucasus region, Baku's attempts to strike a balance between them, as well as the situation around the Azerbaijani-Armenian war over Nagorny Karabakh.

The issue of Iranian Azeris, due to its long history in Baku's political life, was among important ideological factors influencing the domestic agenda and relations with Iran. Although this issue was one of Elchibey's foreign policy priorities, it was subjected to gradual removal from official foreign policy agenda by Heydar and Ilham Aliyevs. However, issues related to Iranian Azeris have never been removed completely from Baku's long-term foreign policy agenda. Stated differently, Baku has been utilizing various political approaches in different times to achieve its foreign policy goals vis-à-vis Iranian Azeris. The mentioned approaches were adopted cope with the different configuration of the balance of power in the regional and international arena in different periods of time. Secondly, Azerbaijan's foreign policy to some extent was successful in achieving goals concerning Iranian Azeris aimed at turning them into active players of Iran's domestic politics. As was mentioned earlier, a sobering example of this claim can be traced in the fact that considerable rise of Azeri nationalism and national self-consciousness among Iranian Azeris are closely related to the establishment of the only independent state of the world Azeri's on the northern borders of Iran. This led, to the high political activity among Iranian Azeris, especially in the national identity issues, accompanied with collective demands in the form of strikes, staging protest meetings and other forms of political engagement. Thirdly, the mentioned developments, in their turn, made it possible for Baku to benefit from Iranian Azeris as a leverage to confront Iran's

policies with the aim of expanding its sphere of influence in Azerbaijan. And finally, due to policies promoting unity of Azeris living across the world, Baku succeeded in attracting the support of the communities of Iranian Azeris operating abroad. Their support was important for confronting Armenian lobby organizations in the issue of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.

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