



Azerbaijan's Iran Problem

By Michael Rubin

Since Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, it has been only the world's second Shi'ite-led state after Iran. Azerbaijan respects separation of mosque and state, and despite pressure from its neighbors, remains independent from political domination. Given its strategic importance, safeguarding the country's independence remains a US priority. And the threat from Iranian meddling is particularly acute. From Tehran's perspective, the combination of Azerbaijan's pre-19th-century Iranian past, modern Azerbaijan's embrace of secularism, and its relative economic success challenge Iran's legitimacy. As Iranian authorities have sought to undermine and destabilize Azerbaijan through political, clerical, charitable, and media channels, Azerbaijan's counterstrategy has been both restrained and effective.

Azerbaijan holds a unique position in the Islamic world as a majority Shi'ite state that is both run by Shi'ites and also respects the separation between mosque and state.¹ As a country that has at times been incorporated wholly into both Iran and Russia and, indeed, as the only state that borders both countries today, it also falls within both the Iranian and Russian concepts of their "near abroad," a sense that propels both Tehran and Moscow to seek influence in a manner that can undercut Azeri freedom and independence.

When Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, it became only the world's second Shi'ite-led state after the Islamic Republic of Iran. Certainly, Iraq and Bahrain were majority Shi'ite, but Sunni leaders ruled over those states, and in Bahrain they still do. Decades of Soviet rule had taken their toll on Azerbaijan. Imposed atheism had not eradicated Islam—Soviet authorities allowed some manifestations of religious practice to continue—but the Soviets had frozen religious scholarship and eroded religiosity as the older, more traditional generation died out.

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Independent Azerbaijan's reentrance into the Shi'ite world has at times been rocky. Iran's state-sanctioned, hardline clergy have persistently sought to fill the vacuum, often conflating the Iranian regime's own interpretation of Shi'ism with antagonism toward the West.² Shortly after Azerbaijan held its first postindependence parliamentary elections in 1995, the Islamic Republic's official *Iran News* chided Azerbaijan for its Western political and cultural orientation.

Key points in this *Outlook*:

- Azerbaijan straddles religious, sectarian, and geopolitical fault lines.
- Azerbaijan's pre-19th-century Iranian past, modern Azerbaijan's embrace of secularism, and the country's relative economic success as an independent country challenge Iran's legitimacy.
- Although Iranian authorities have sought to undermine and destabilize Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani government's strategy has been both restrained and effective.

“The Zionists and the pro-Zionist American lobby are active in Baku trying to safeguard their own financial interests rather than Azerbaijan's national and regional interests.” These interests, the article continued, lay with Iran,³ and *Abrar*, another hardline Iranian daily, declared the same day that a desire for “friendship and closeness with Iran [was] a sentiment that emanated from the hearts of the [Azerbaijani] people.”⁴

The pressure from Iranian politicians continues. In May 2012, the Iranian government hung the flag of Azerbaijan upside down during a visit by the Azerbaijani defense minister to Tehran, so that a green band symbolizing Islam appeared on top.⁵ On April 3, 2013, the Iranian daily *Kayhan*, whose editor—currently Hossein Shariatmadari—Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appoints and who Iran watchers both inside and outside the Islamic Republic therefore believe speaks for the Supreme Leader, published an official editorial calling for a referendum inside Azerbaijan on that country's reincorporation into Iran.⁶ Just over one year later Iranian Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani lectured Azerbaijanis that only “promotion of Imams' teachings [will] lead to your country's blossoming.”⁷

Politics of Clergy in Azerbaijan

The Soviet Union strictly regulated religion. Within the historically restive Caucasus, Soviet authorities appointed a Shi'ite theologian to lead the Muslim Spiritual Administration, under which a Sunni served as deputy. The leader provided administrative oversight to the Soviet Union's various Shi'ite communities, while his deputy oversaw the Sunni communities of the Caucasus.⁸ The collapse of the Soviet Union imbued the body with new importance as Muslim communities both grew and re-embraced their identity. For this, they relied largely on Allahshukur Pashazadeh, a native of Cil, a southern Azerbaijani village just 20 miles north of the Iranian border. Pashazadeh had long been active in Soviet-era religious bureaucracy. He had become chairman of the Caucasian Board of Muslims in 1980, and also served as the Sheikh ul-Islam of Azerbaijan. In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, he had also served as the chairman of the Muslims Advisory Council.

Following a tumultuous decade after regaining independence in which independent missionaries had free reign to proselytize in often radical directions, President Heydar Aliyev also created the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations to regulate and

monitor religious activity. Islamic scholar Rafiq Aliyev was its inaugural head, but was replaced in 2006 by former presidential aide Hidayat Orucov. The committee has broad power over publication and dissemination of religious publications, and also registers places of worship.⁹ A 2009 religion law requires all mosques to join the Caucasian Board of Muslims. The board has used its power to shut down mosques that agitate against the state.¹⁰ While this is a common practice in the region and the broader Islamic world, it effectively drives radicals underground.

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Pashazadeh has used his position as Azerbaijan's top religious cleric to promote tolerance, often calling upon religious leaders to unite to fight terrorism and separatism. He walks a tightrope, however, as he also frequently meets with Iranian officials and seeks to ameliorate them, at times and at least according to Iranian sources, by embracing some Iranian positions. He has, for example, endorsed Tehran's conference on the Palestinian Intifada, an annual event in which Islamist radicals demand Israel's annihilation.¹¹

Iranian authorities are unwilling to accept mere lip service, however. While they have modulated pressure with time, the Iranian government still seeks a more radical future for Azerbaijan. In July 2005, Azerbaijani security forces raided the Juma Mosque in Baku's ancient old city to curtail the increasingly radical preaching by Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, an Iran-trained preacher.¹² More recently, Tehran's main tool for this effort has been Sheikh Taleh Bagirov, a 29-year-old cleric who from 2005 to 2010 studied in Qom, Iran's main clerical center.

Upon his return to Azerbaijan in 2011, Bagirov began preaching at the Hazrat Abulfaz Aga Mosque, often targeting the moderate positions of state religious bodies. He also began to agitate against the ban on headscarves in schools, a regulation Azerbaijan upholds to prevent coercion by religious radicals against schoolgirls, eventually receiving 18 months imprisonment.¹³ Incarceration did not moderate him. Upon his release he

used his sermons to attack the government. “No matter how many evil-doers there are in this world, how many men in black masks and guns, Allah is with us. You have stolen people’s land, you have stolen the oil, and you still sit there with no one to say anything to you,” he declared in one sermon. “Now you want to rule in the mosque too? No matter how influential an official is, he cannot rule inside the mosque.”¹⁴

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The Nardaran Flashpoint

Bagirov has his power base in Nardaran, a small town on the Abşeron peninsula just 16 miles northeast of Baku. A nondescript suburb but for Hezbollah’s flag flying from buildings and pro-Iranian graffiti on compound walls, it has for well over a decade been a flashpoint for agitation that is both pro-Iranian and against the Azerbaijani government. Its atmosphere of strict Islamic conservatism stands in sharp contrast to the rest of Azerbaijan.¹⁵ Nardaran was, in 1991, the birthplace of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), which supports closer relations between Tehran and Baku; promotes an anti-West, anti-Israel platform; and is often at the center of antigovernment agitation.

The IPA campaigned against the Azerbaijani government’s efforts to ban the rebroadcast of Iranian television inside Azerbaijan, but suffered a blow in 1995 after the Azerbaijani government passed a law banning clerics from running for political office.¹⁶ That same year Azerbaijani security arrested several party leaders on accusations of spying for Iran and seeking to overthrow the government, after which they stripped the IPA of registration. The lack of legal status, however, did not end the IPA; it has continued its activities illegally and with the support of Iran to the present day.

In 2002, protests over lack of services and employment led to an escalating series of clashes with police. A truce negotiated by Pashazadeh restored an uneasy calm in February 2003, but protests re-erupted in 2006 after locals responded violently to an article in *Sanat*, an

obscure newspaper that blamed Islam for Azerbaijan’s lack of economic development.¹⁷

The crisis was entirely manufactured by Nardaran’s radicals and their supporters in the Islamic Republic. After the article appeared, Islamists from Nardaran wrote to Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Fazel Lankarani, a strong supporter of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s philosophy and the product of a Persian mother and Azerbaijani father, explaining, “Recently one of the Azeri newspapers . . . published an article from Rafiq Taği, an apostate journalist causing fury and wrath among Muslims of the region.” They continued falsely, “The writer of the article is trying to conclude with his analysis that Europe and its religion, Christianity are superior in all aspects to the Middle East and its religion, Islam. He describes Islam as inferior to Christianity in all aspects. In a section of his article he has insulted the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and ridiculed all sanctities of Islam.” They asked, “What is the duty of Muslims with regard to this unbearable issue?” Lankarani answered, “He is considered as someone who has insulted the Prophet and in any case, given his confessions, it is necessary for every individual who has an access to him to kill him. The person in charge of the said newspaper, who published such thoughts and beliefs consciously and knowingly, should be dealt with in the same manner.”¹⁸

The Iranian government was wholly behind the crisis, which became the Azerbaijani equivalent of the 1989 Salman Rushdie crisis, when Ayatollah Khomeini called for the British Indian author to be killed for his alleged blasphemy. Just as Khomeini’s call for Rushdie’s murder rallied both Islamic and Western liberals to Rushdie’s defense, so too did the Lankarani *fatwa* rally Azeri intellectuals. Forty prominent Azeri scholars and civil society leaders published an open letter calling for Iran to cease its support for religious extremists inside Azerbaijan.¹⁹ There the similarity ends, however. For while Rushdie remains a free man and increasingly public figure, assassins ambushed Taği in a Baku parking lot on November 19, 2011; he succumbed to his stab wounds four days later.

In January 2011, Azeri authorities arrested several dozen IPA activists after party chairmen Movsum Samadov called for the overthrow of the Azeri government. “The Azerbaijani people should rise and put an end to the despotic regime and the leader with a face of Yazid,” he declared, comparing President Ilham Aliyev to an early Islamic caliph despised by Shi’ites for killing

revered Imam Hussein bin Ali.²⁰ The following day, on January 7, an Azeri court charged Samadov with plotting to create mass unrest and perpetrate terrorism.²¹ Then, between March 2011 and March 2012, Azerbaijani authorities arrested 40 locals—most IPA activists—whom they accused of spying for Iran or planning sabotage against the Eurovision contest to which Baku played host in May 2012.²²

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reflects diplomatic difficulties.

In March 2013 protests re-erupted in Nardaran after Azeri forces rearrested Bagirov for possession of heroin, a charge that his supporters say the state based on planted evidence.²³ Protestors not only chanted, “Down with corrupt officials of Azerbaijan,” but also took up the common Iranian regime refrains, “Death to America” and “Death to Israel.”²⁴ Members of parliament accused Iran of seeking to infiltrate mosques to incite supporters against the Azerbaijani government and to promote radicalism in response.²⁵

Iranian Soft Power

Beyond sponsoring political proxies, agitators, and activist clergy, the Islamic Republic also employs charities to further its influence. Initially, the Iranian government and regime-linked charities began building mosques and sponsoring Iranian-trained mullahs. As of 2008, there were 200–250 Azerbaijani students studying in Qom’s religious seminaries.²⁶ Rather than provide scholarships directly, Iranian-sponsored mosques throughout Azerbaijan often apply religious donations to send Azerbaijani students to Iranian seminaries.²⁷

Tehran also dispatched the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), the regime’s chief external aid agency, to Azerbaijan, where it won hearts and minds by providing services to refugees displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh following the Armenian invasion and occupation of that territory.²⁸ This, of course, was ironic given that Iran largely sided with Armenia against Azerbaijan as a means to keep the Islamic Republic’s Shi’ite competition weak and in check.

With assets supplied by the Supreme Leader, the IKRC has also sponsored programs similar to those conducted by

Western nongovernmental organizations, providing, for example, assistance with housing, food aid, and vocational training, even if some of its activities took on a religious hue.²⁹ While such activities might look benign, the IKRC’s track record is more sinister. In 2010, the US Department of the Treasury designated its branch in Lebanon as a terrorist entity because of its financial and operational inks to Hezbollah.³⁰ With both the Revolutionary Guards and Relief Committee funded from the same trough, it is possible that committee offices in Azerbaijan now also provide cover for Revolutionary Guards operations. This fact certainly has not been lost on Azerbaijani authorities who have kept IKRC offices and other Iranian charities under close surveillance and have, on occasion, closed IKRC projects. However, the Iranian government maintains pressure on Baku to reopen its offices and projects when shuttered.³¹

As with Bahrain and Iraq, the Islamic Republic also makes ample use of its media to extend its influence in Azerbaijan. Iranian propaganda is often sophisticated. Rather than confront the Ilham Aliyev government head on, Iranian media often adapt the theme that Iran can best protect Azerbaijani interests. The Iranian-based Sahar television broadcasts regionally in both Azeri and Talysh, and carries not only religious programming but also music and sports. News broadcasts regularly disparage the United States and Israel and condemn the supposed moral laxness and inequity of Western society, while depicting Iran’s Shi’ite culture as liberated and free.³²

While such media may have some impact over time, the basic fact that Azerbaijan enjoys greater social freedom undercuts the effectiveness of the Iranian media campaign. Whereas in 1991 Baku paled in comparison to Tabriz, the capital of Iranian Azerbaijan and once the capital of Iran itself, in recent years Baku has surpassed Tabriz both in quality of life and affluence. This is a fact not lost to tens of thousands of Iranian tourists and vacationers who visit Baku for holidays and during Nowruz—Persian New Year—celebrations. Iranian accents are rife in Baku’s restaurants and Azerbaijan’s Caspian Sea beach resorts, as Iranian women enjoy the opportunity—literally—to let down their veil and enjoy the equality with which Azerbaijan empowers women.

The Politics of Trade

In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon—states in which Tehran seeks diplomatic dominance—Iranian

companies often flood the markets with cheap foodstuffs and manufactured goods. This is deliberate, as Khatam al-Anbia, the economic wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, dominates Iranian manufacturing and trade.³³ If trade is a metric of influence, then declining trade between Iran and Azerbaijan reflects diplomatic difficulties. While the Islamic Republic was a leading trading partner for Azerbaijan in the 1990s, over the past decade the Iranian share of the Azerbaijani market has declined. Bilateral trade in 2007 was \$540 million, but by 2011 it was only \$305 million, representing a mere 0.8 percent of Azerbaijan's total trade.³⁴ While the figures cited—without sourcing—by some Iranian officials are slightly higher, they still represent only a minuscule portion of Azerbaijan's total trade.³⁵

Wedged between two domineering powers and with Armenian forces occupying seven districts beyond Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan straddles religious, sectarian, and geopolitical fault lines.

The Iranian government will be unlikely to significantly bolster its trade with Azerbaijan until Iran tempers its often aggressive behavior in the Caspian Sea. The core of the Iran-Azerbaijan maritime dispute is whether the Caspian Sea is a sea or lake: if a sea, then international precedents determine the extent of territorial waters; if a lake, then the Caspian might be divided like a pie.³⁶ The littoral states have negotiated a complex series of interweaving bilateral and multilateral treaties that differentiate between the waters of the Caspian and the oil-rich seabed. Of the five littoral states, all but Turkmenistan have agreed to demarcate the waters as if the Caspian were a lake, albeit one with a shared center. With just 13 percent of the Caspian coastline, Iran also refuses to accept the decision of the other littoral states that the seabed should be treated as if the Caspian were a sea, for that would limit Iranian drilling offshore in what would then become Azerbaijan's territorial waters. That Azerbaijan's Abşeron juts 37 miles into the Caspian only extends Azerbaijan's territorial waters under such a division.

Rather than resolve the dispute, however, Iran has resorted to military force to encroach on what otherwise would be Azerbaijani territorial waters. In 2001, an Iranian naval vessel confronted an Azeri vessel doing research for British Petroleum inside Azeri waters.³⁷ In

2009, Iranian vessels towed a drilling rig into waters claimed by Azerbaijan and proceeded to drill for oil.³⁸

In May 2012, Iran announced that it had discovered a 10 billion-barrel oil deposit, the first new Caspian field in more than a century.³⁹ Iranian oil minister Rostam Qasemi claimed sole ownership: "Sardar Jangal . . . is within Iran's territory. It belongs to our country."⁴⁰ The problem was that the oil field was in waters Azerbaijan claims. Tehran has been willing to use its military to enforce its claims. While Azerbaijan has sought to purchase US-made patrol boats to help defend its territorial water, American Armenian activists have sidelined any US military assistance to Baku, even that which could not be used against Armenian forces occupying Nagorno-Karabakh. Rather than fold to such Iranian pressure, the Azerbaijani government has responded by redoubling efforts to establish cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.⁴¹

Conclusion

Wedged between two domineering powers and with Armenian forces occupying seven districts beyond Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan straddles religious, sectarian, and geopolitical fault lines. That Azerbaijan remains independent from the political domination of its neighbors continues to be an immutable US interest. While Russia might believe it should have preponderant influence in Azerbaijan because of its Soviet heritage, the Iranian challenge is in many ways more serious. Simply put, the combination of Azerbaijan's pre-19th-century Iranian past, modern Azerbaijan's embrace of secularism, and independent Azerbaijan's relative economic success challenge the very legitimacy of Iran's Islamic Republic. After all, if Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution brought divinely inspired rule to Iran, then Iran's ruling clerics must explain why Azerbaijanis increasingly have a higher quality of life and are on a trajectory to surpass Iran's per capita income.

In response to the challenge, Iranian authorities have sought to undermine and destabilize Azerbaijan by seeking to co-opt the religious sphere. Azerbaijan's state oversight of religious institutions has contained the challenge. While dissident clerics might appeal to human rights activists and embassies with regard to the alleged discrimination they face at state hands, the rhetoric of these clerics delivered to their own constituents belies any notion that they subscribe to liberal or democratic values. Simply put, given the persistent

pressure and security challenge Baku faces from Tehran, the Azerbaijani government's strategy has been both restrained and effective.

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