

# AZERBAIJANI NATIONAL IDENTITY: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

Present study investigates the historical and contemporary trends in the development of Azerbaijani national identity. The primary focus here is on the ethnic component which formed the foundation of a distinct national identity of Azerbaijanis. Both natural and situational circumstances affect the development of any ethnicity. The natural circumstances in formation of Azerbaijani ethnic identity were analyzed mainly in ancient and medieval contexts, while the situational circumstances appear in contemporary context, also defining the cause of a modern Azerbaijani statehood.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of national identity as a phenomenon of collective consciousness is crucial in understanding the development of any society. National identity is a compound term which, depending on the country, may uphold one or more distinctive factors of collective mentality, such as ethnicity, language, culture, or religion. The impact of these factors varies with geographical and historical circumstances. For example, the distinction of national identity in Pakistan is primarily religious and linguistic, while the national identity in Australia is purely geographical.

Nevertheless, on the most, if not all of Eurasian continent, the formation of modern nations and the formulation of their identities were primarily driven by ethnicity. An ethnic identity is a type of cultural collectivity that combines the genetic selection and the myths of descent emphasized by contemporary distinctions, such as language, religion, customs or institutions, with certain common attitudes, perceptions and sentiments varying with the particular situation of the subject.<sup>1</sup> This situational nature of ethnicity makes it prone to be used for rallying individual and collective interests both within the society in question and without. Hence, the ethnic identity can be an instrumental factor in cultivating social differences with the aim of attaining political influence, creating and decomposing nations, waging wars, making peace and furthering interests on a broader geopolitical scale.

The development of Azerbaijani national identity presents a particularly colorful example in this context. While not distinctly spelled out as such in the historical records prior to the end of the 19th century, and despite being occasionally disputed by coercive neighbors, an authentically Azerbaijani identity with most of its contemporary trappings was already in

forming by the 11th century. It was this distinct identity further developed over centuries and compounded by unique ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious characteristics that led to the establishment of the independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918.

Similar to the neighboring Georgia and Armenia, the evolution of ethnicity into a conscious national identity and independent statehood in Azerbaijan had both natural and situational influences. In this paper, we look at both of these influences through the review of historical development of Azerbaijani identity. On one side, there was an evolution of uniform ethnicity based purely on commonalities defined within certain geographic or historical boundaries. On the other side, there was, and still is, a situational component influenced by foreign and domestic interests and perceptions surrounding Azerbaijani identity.

In Section 2, we provide a summary on the development of ethnic identity in ancient and medieval Azerbaijan and attempt to bring clarity to its diverse yet cohesive nature. In Section 3, we focus on the formulation of contemporary identity in the early 20th century and its reshaping due to situational challenges during the same age. In the latter context, a particular attention is paid to the periods leading up to as well as after the establishment of modern Azerbaijani statehood in 1918.

## **2. AZERBAIJANI IDENTITY IN THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL TIMES**

Throughout the history, Azerbaijani people had very mixed and diverse definitions of identity. Although since at least the 11th century, Turkic-speaking inhabitants on the northern and the southern banks of river Araxes had more or less uniform ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity, it wasn't until the late 19th century when first definitions of Azerbaijani as

a distinct ethno-national factor appeared in scholarship. While this fact in no way undermines the uniqueness of Azerbaijani identity in preceding centuries nor should it question the direct applicability of it in cultural, geographic or historical aspects, it is important to review the historical development of this identity to better understand its present definition.

The historical name of Azerbaijan traces back over 2000 years, to the times of Alexander the Great. According to the most commonly accepted historical interpretation, the name originated from Atropates, the Achaemenid governor of Medes who upon Alexander's conquest of the region ruled it autonomously.<sup>2</sup> In later ages, the name of Atropatene (or Aturpatkan) evolved into Azerbaijan through Persian and Arabic linguistic influences. Apart from the ancient Medes-Atropatene which mainly spanned the territory of modern Iranian Azerbaijan, another ancient state, Caucasian Albania (also known as Arran), formed the indigenous ethno-linguistic heritage to the north, on the territory of present-day Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>3</sup> Despite the distinct Ibero-Caucasian autochtone identity of Caucasian Albanians, throughout their history, the ruling dynasties and diverse tribes of Caucasian Albania shared close cultural ties with their Georgian, Median, Parthian, Armenian, Khazar Turkic and Sassanid Persian neighbors.

With the conquest of the region by Arabs and the spread of Islam under the Rashidun and Umayyad Caliphs in 7-8th century, identity differences between the north and the south of historical Azerbaijan started to fade away. The process was completed during the influx of Oghuz Turkic tribes and the rise of Seljuk Turkic Empire in the 11th century. Upon its subsequent disintegration a century later, the foundation was already set for the uniform ethno-linguistic identity on the territory stretching from Derbend in the north to Hamadan in the south. By the middle of the 12th century, Shamsaddin Ildeniz, a freed Qipchaq slave of Seljuk Turks, rose

from Nakhchivan to establish the kingdom of Atabegs of Azerbaijan stretching north and south from river Araxes.<sup>4</sup>

By the late 14th century, the Turcoman tribal confederation of Qara Qoyunlu rose to control the territory of historical Azerbaijan. It is important to note that Qara Qoyunlu were Shiite Muslims and their rule in Azerbaijan initiated the gradual integration of Shia religious thought into the core of Azerbaijani identity, a process further solidified during the Safavid era. The Qara Qoyunlu state of Azerbaijan reached its pinnacle during the rule of Jahan-shah. V. Minorsky cited the Timurid historian Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi's description of Jahan-shah's rule dating back to 1462 as follows:

*"Owing to the benevolent administration (husn-i inayat ve lutf-i atifat) of Mirza Jihan-shah, Azarbayjan was a highly thriving state. That well-meaning sovereign was anxious to practice justice, to secure the prosperity of the country, and to treat his subjects honorably. The capital, Tabriz, by its numerous population and the prevalence of tranquility, emulated Egypt (misr-i jami)".*<sup>5</sup>

It is also noteworthy that the rule of Qara Qoyunlu and the subsequent Aq Qoyunlu tribal confederations further strengthened the domination of Turkic component in Azerbaijani identity.

Perhaps, the most eloquent expression of Azerbaijani identity came with the rise of Shah Ismail Safavi who enthroned himself as a Shah of Azerbaijan<sup>6</sup> in 1501, later extending his ambitious Shiite empire over entire Iran. Although not distinctively spelled as Azerbaijani, Safavids were linguistically and politically Azerbaijani Turkic dynasty upon their rise to power in the beginning of 16th century. This unique identity was particularly strengthened by the fact

of overwhelmingly Turkic background of Qizilbash tribes which swept Ismail Safavi to power, and by the fact that, for the first time in history, Azerbaijani Turkic dialect was elevated to become an official language of court and military in Safavid Empire.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the assertion of Twelver Shia faith as a state religion and forceful separation from the emerging Sunni Islamic identity associated with the neighboring nemesis of Safavids, the Ottomans, strengthened the distinction of Azerbaijani Turkic identity in a historical context.

Although after Ismail, the following two centuries witnessed a general weakening of the uniquely Azerbaijani political influence within Safavid Empire, particularly so under Shah Abbas Safavi and later the Qajar Turkic dynasty of Iran, as a whole, the development of a dominant ethnic identity in Azerbaijan was not reversed. The next stage in the development came with the emergence of autonomous Azerbaijani khanates in South Caucasus upon disintegration of Safavid Empire followed by a short-lived attempt by Nadir Shah Afshar to rejoin Safavid territories. Among these semi-independent kingdoms, the Karabakh khanate founded by Panah Ali-khan Javanshir circa 1750 with a capital in present-day Shusha played a primary role in reinforcing the uniquely Azerbaijani cultural identity.<sup>8</sup> The independence of Karabakh khanate from the general Iranian domain was particularly emphasized by the 1805 Treaty of Kurekchay negotiated directly between the Khan and the Russian military commander Pavel Tsitsianov, making the Karabakh khanate a Russian protectorate.<sup>9</sup>

After the Russian conquest of South Caucasus in the first quarter of the 19th century, the expressions of Azerbaijani identity started making their way into scholarship. Linguistic and literary works of Mirza Fatali Akhundov laid an important foundation in the process, while the final explicit definition of "Azerbaijani" as an ethno-national factor emerged later in the

19th century in the works of a prominent Azerbaijani publicist Hasan Zardabi and his first Azerbaijani-language magazine *Akinchi* ("The Ploughman").<sup>10</sup> The encyclopedic dictionary of Brokgauz and Efron published in St Petersburg by 1890 already referred to the Turkic speakers inhabiting most of the "South and South-Eastern Caucasus and Russian Armenia" as *Azerbaijani Tartars*.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY

#### 3.1 Leading up to independent statehood

The start of 20th century and the growing revolutionary processes in Russian Empire brought about the notion of Azerbaijani identity in socio-political terms. Massive development of oil deposits in Absheron peninsula from 1870s quickly turned Baku into an industrial center of the Caucasus at the end of the 19th century. The economic development brought a major influx of skilled workers, traders, major industrial barons (Nobels, Rotschields, etc.) and Western-educated intellectuals from various parts of Russian Empire and Europe. By the 1913 imperial census, the number of Azerbaijanis in the city of Baku was already less than the number of other ethnic groups,<sup>12</sup> a drastic change from a Muslim rural town into an ethnically mixed cosmopolitan city.

Described at the time in a variety of ways ranging from Caucasian Muslims to Azerbaijani Tartars and Turks, Azerbaijanis at large lagged behind these developments due to general lack of opportunities for the Muslim subjects which were not treated equally with Christians by the Tsarist authorities.<sup>12</sup> After almost a century of such rule, Azerbaijanis faced the first challenge of national self-determination in 1905 when the first Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes

erupted in various parts of South-Eastern Caucasus. This new interethnic tension, fueled in part by the Tsarist favoritism of Christian Armenians over Muslim Azerbaijanis,<sup>13</sup> had purely socio-economic reasons.

The clashes of 1905 had a profound effect on the consolidation of ethnic identity with demands of equal rights and opportunities for Muslim Azerbaijanis. The growing Azerbaijani intellectual elite embraced the socialist ideals and brought about the cultural renaissance in the years preceding the World War I, increasing the role of Azerbaijanis in economic and political life of Baku and its environs. At this time, primarily Russian- and European-educated Azerbaijani intellectuals found inspiration in Turkism, treating it as an ideal for unifying the Turkic-speaking Muslim subjects of Russian Empire to demand federalization and cultural autonomy.<sup>14</sup>

With the irredentist "myths of descent" spread by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and demands for a greater social justice preached by Azerbaijani intellectuals, fueled by Russian favoritism for the former's cause, the Armenian-Muslim socio-economic tension gradually grew into a broader inter-ethnic conflict similar to the one already burning in the neighboring Ottoman Empire. The impact of this confrontation on Azerbaijanis, especially in the aftermath of 1908 Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire, was growing awareness of a long-forgotten ethnic affinity between Azerbaijani and Ottoman Turks. It is worth noting that this situational challenge to Azerbaijani identity also helped to overcome the confessional attitudes of Shiite Azerbaijanis against Sunni Ottomans that evolved over 400 years after the bitter Ottoman-Safavid confrontation. Thus, the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation supplanted by the growing socialist tendencies assisted in the evolution of a predominantly Muslim religious identity of Azerbaijanis into the Turkic nationalist identity.

The spread of Turkism into the Ottoman Empire and the Young Turk Revolution moved the nexus of this ideology from imperial Russia to Istanbul. Subsequently, any autonomous nationalist sentiment by the Turkic-speaking subjects of Russian Empire was treated by Tsarist authorities as an Ottoman ploy. Another fundamental feature of all nationalist and secessionist movements in Russian Empire was their inherently socialist nature which was also a cause for their persecution by Tsarist authorities. Therefore, the first Azerbaijani socialist party, Hummet, followed by the first nationalist and the oldest existing political party, *Musavat* ("Equality"), established in 1911, operated mostly undercover until the fall of Tsarist establishment in 1917. Soon after the abdication of Tsar in St Petersburg, Musavat conducted its first major Congress,<sup>15</sup> emerging as the leading force to capture the historic opportunity for establishing an independent Azerbaijani homeland.

With the fall of Russian imperial authority in 1917 amidst the ongoing World War I turmoil and the revolution, the interethnic strife in the Caucasus has also intensified. Its culmination came along by the spring of 1918, in a standoff between Bolsheviks and Musavat over the control of Baku. Seeking to eliminate the strong public support for Musavat from the Azerbaijani population in the city, despite the appeals from Lenin for diplomacy, the Bolshevik Baku Soviet led by Stepan Shaumian, an ethnic Armenian, enlisted the support of Dashnak Armenian units in town. The result was a massacre of up to 12,000 Azerbaijanis<sup>14</sup> which transpired between March 30 and April 3 of 1918. In modern Azerbaijan, these tragic historical events are treated as an act of genocide against ethnic Azerbaijanis.

Despite the defeat of Musavat, the March Days of 1918 strengthened the nationalism and pro-Turkish sympathies in Azerbaijani society preparing a fertile ground for independence. On

May 28, 1918, upon disintegration of a short-lived defunct Transcaucasian Federation, the independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) was proclaimed in Tiflis with a temporary capital in Elizavetpol (Ganja). The new Azerbaijani government immediately requested military assistance from the Ottoman Young Turk government to help defeat the Baku Soviet and establish control of all of the Caucasian Azerbaijan. Driven by pan-Turanic ideals, the Ottoman triumvir Enver Pasha responded by sending an army under the command of his brother Nuri to train Azerbaijani forces and to mount an offensive against the Bolsheviks in Baku. The offensive resulted in liberation of Baku to become the capital of ADR by September 1918.

Despite enlisting the support of Ottomans, Azerbaijani elite did not endorse the idea of unification with the failing empire. Instead, ADR established a secular parliamentary democracy, first of its kind in the Muslim and Turkic-speaking worlds, and further strengthened the independent national identity within the political boundaries that it defined for Caucasian Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani tri-color adopted during ADR clearly spelled the foundations of this contemporary identity: Turkism (blue), Modernism (red), and Islam (green). It was precisely this identity, albeit under cosmetically Soviet symbols, which continued to develop during the decades of Soviet rule and the reestablishment of independent Azerbaijani state in the post-Soviet period. Indirectly, the secular nationalist model implemented by Azerbaijani elite in 1918 was inherited and successfully exercised by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk a few years later. In this context, it is not incidental that after the establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923, one of the early Azerbaijani Turkists, Ahmed Agayev (known in Turkey as Ahmet Agaoglu), became a chief ideologist of Kemalism.

### 3.2 Soviet, post-Soviet and Iranian Azerbaijan

The Bolshevik occupation of Azerbaijan in April 1920 did not alter the development of independent Azerbaijani identity but only temporarily placed it in a new context, that of Bolshevik ideology. So despite its defeat, the ADR government managed to initiate an irreversible process, that of redefining the Azerbaijani national identity in terms of statehood with political boundaries.

The 1920s witnessed the consolidation of Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural identity in the Turkic context. In 1928, Soviet authorities supported the decision to change the Turkic language script in Azerbaijan from Arabic to Latin.<sup>12</sup> However, the 1936 USSR Constitution strived to disassociate Azerbaijani ethnicity from its predominantly Turkic heritage, as Stalin feared the sympathy of Azerbaijani Turks towards their ethnic kins in Kemalist Turkey. The new constitution coincided with Stalin's 1937-38 Great Purges during which over 120,000 Azerbaijani intellectuals were sent to death camps or executed,<sup>12</sup> many of them on charges of inciting pan-Turkist ideas. The official language of Azerbaijan SSR was renamed from Turkic (*Türk dili*) to Azerbaijani, the ethnicity of Turk marked in Soviet passports became Azerbaijani, and the Latin script of Azeri Turkic was replaced by Cyrillic.<sup>16</sup>

It is noteworthy that while attempting to establish a non-Turkic Azerbaijani identity, Soviet authorities did not care to include the non-Turkic minorities of Azerbaijan within this national definition, i.e. the definition of Azerbaijani applied only to the Turkic-speaking inhabitants of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, during the Stalin era, Azerbaijani historians were encouraged to link the Azerbaijani identity to the ancient Medes.<sup>17</sup> Soviet authorities sought to use the

redefined Azerbaijani identity to raise the nationalist sentiment among the Azerbaijanis in Iran. In 1940s, this policy proved successful when Moscow and Baku managed to instill a secessionist movement in Iranian Azerbaijan,<sup>18</sup> culminating in the establishment of a short-lived Azerbaijan People's Government with its capital in Tabriz in 1945-46. But the effort was halted soon after the Soviet withdrawal under the U.S. pressure aimed at strengthening Shah's centralized pro-Western regime.<sup>19</sup>

After Stalin's death and by early 1970, the Turkic role in Azerbaijani identity was rehabilitated along with millions of post-humous Soviet citizens who perished during the Great Purge. From that time till the demise of Soviet Union, official Azerbaijani historiography formulated Azerbaijani identity based on three origins: Caucasian (Albanians), Turkic (Oghuz) and Iranian (Medes-Atropatene).<sup>17</sup> Local communist leaders of Azerbaijan, including Heydar Aliyev, were given greater freedom from Moscow in reconstructing the historical Azerbaijani identity.

The restoration of Azerbaijani statehood in 1991, in presence of the renewed Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the Mountainous Karabakh, brought up new situational challenges for Azerbaijani identity weakened by decades of corrupt Soviet administration. Just as in 1918, the Turkic factor initially dominated the definition of post-Soviet Azerbaijani nationalism, especially so during the 1992-93 Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) government. Upon their rise to power in 1992, the APF authorities renamed the official language of Azerbaijan to Turkic, publicly emphasizing on the close ethnic ties with Turkey. This move, however, has exacerbated the non-Turkic indigenous minorities in Azerbaijan, leading to brief secessionist activities in the north and the south in 1993, amidst the military insurrection and the Armenian onslaught on the Karabakh front.

Taking over an almost failed state in 1993, the former Soviet Politburo member and a long-time leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, managed to quell both separatist groups by reverting APF reforms and restoring the Soviet-era definitions of Azerbaijani identity. Consequently, the official language was again renamed from Turkic to Azerbaijani in the Constitution, and any explicit advertising of the Turkic identity was restricted to common cultural expressions and statements of fraternity with the neighboring Turkey. Aliyev is, however, always remembered for his historic statement: "Turkey and Azerbaijan are the two states of one nation". Despite being made under situational circumstances, the statement defined the path for the development of Azerbaijani ethno-national identity in a visible future.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Despite its written formalization in the late 19th century, a uniform Azerbaijani national identity developed consistently over the period of at least nine preceding centuries leading up to the establishment of modern Azerbaijani statehood in 1918. Undoubtedly, the ethnicity factor formed a core distinction of this national identity. While Azerbaijani ethnogenetic heritage is clearly rooted in a diverse combination of Caucasian, Iranian and Turkic elements, it was the Turkic heritage that formed a cohesive contemporary national identity in Azerbaijan.

The modern identity in Azerbaijan developed via both natural (geographic, historical, linguistic, cultural) and situational (political, ideological, confrontational) circumstances. In natural context, the linguistic and cultural elements had the most profound impact on the distinction of identity, while in situational context, Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and the affinity of Azerbaijani and Turkish political interests played a pivotal role in formulation of national identity

and modern statehood.

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