

# MERIA

## IN SEARCH OF A GLOBAL SOUL: AZERBAIJAN AND THE CHALLENGE OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

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*This article focuses on emerging Azerbaijani identity and its competing versions in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Iran, and in the diaspora. The Republic of Azerbaijan has over eight million people compared with more than 20 million Azeris in Iran. The two groups have ethnic, linguistic, and historical ties but also different experiences, giving them both a common identity contradicted by other factors.*

In her valuable book entitled *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, Brenda Shaffer astutely observes that:

Until the early 1990s, most Azerbaijanis in Iran referred to themselves as Turks. Some researchers and Azerbaijanis themselves refer to this group as the Azerbaijani Turks.... The term most commonly employed by the Azerbaijanis today, and which is considered most neutral... is "Azerbaijani."<sup>1</sup>

Since Shaffer's observation, the debate around finding a uniform ethnic/linguistic/national identity for the people of Azerbaijan<sup>2</sup> has intensified. Azerbaijanis are now using identity categories as diverse as Azeri, Azeri-Turk, Turk, Iranian-Turk, Azerbaijani-Turk, South-Azerbaijani-Turk, and North-Azerbaijani-Turk. This rich choice shows how confusing the situation has become. Consensus is nowhere in sight regarding a uniform Azeri identity. Azerbaijanis identify themselves based on their experiences within specific environments, without being able to connect these various contexts with a more comprehensive general term.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

As a geographic region, Azerbaijan extends from northwestern Iran to the Caspian Sea in the east, with Kurdistan, Armenia, and Turkey to the west, and Georgia and Russia to the north. This strategic positioning reveals Azerbaijan's geopolitical significance as a gateway to Russia and Turkey and, through them, to the West. Azerbaijan is divided into two parts: Northern Azerbaijan, which became an independent country after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, and southern Azerbaijan, which is part of Iran. The two parts have been divided since the early nineteenth century, with the Araz River as their border. In addition to the Azeri-Turks, who constitute over 80 percent of the inhabitants of Azerbaijan on both sides of the river, there are ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds, Armenians, Lezgis, Taleshis, Jews, Christians, and Baha'is living in Azerbaijan.

The language of the majority of Azerbaijanis is "Azeri" (variously known as Azeri-Turkic, Turki, and Azerbaijani), and the religion of the majority is Shi'a Islam. Of the overall Azeri population, 20 to 30 million are believed to be living in southern Azerbaijan and the rest of Iran, eight million in the Republic of Azerbaijan, close to two million in Turkey, and about two million in Russia, with the rest mainly in Georgia, Iraq, and Ukraine.

Their status in Turkey is interesting and little explored. Similar to the situation in Iran, questions around ethnic and national identity in Turkey are highly political and difficult issues. The history of the Azeri population in today's Turkey can be traced back to the earlier periods of the Safavid era in Iran (1501-1722), when their rule extended over the current Turkish regions of Kars and neighboring areas. Additionally, in the course of the Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) treaties between Iran and Russia, a significant number of Azeris migrated to Turkey and settled in its eastern regions, particularly in Erzurum and Agri. The migration of Azeris to Turkey continued during the 1920s (as a result of the overthrow of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan in the north and the suppression of the Shaykh Muhammad Khiabani Movement in the south); the late 1940s (after the suppression of Mir Ja'far Pishevari's 21 Azar Movement in southern Azerbaijan in 1946); the 1980s (as a result of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War); as well as in the 1990s, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of northern Azerbaijan. In general, the Azeri population in Turkey is considered well-integrated into Turkish society, mainly due to cultural and linguistic affinities between the Azeri and Anatolian Turks. Nevertheless, differences still remain in the areas of religion (Azeris are mainly Shi'a, whereas Anatolian Turks are mostly Sunni Muslims), dialect, and self-conception in terms of historical memory and ethnic/national consciousness.

In *The Ancient History of Iranian Turks*, Professor M.T. Zehtabi traced the origin of current Azeris to ancient Sumerian and Ilamite civilizations, dating back over 5,000 years. Through archeological and linguistic evidence, Zehtabi has shown that today's Azeris are remnants of such racial and ethnic components as the ancient Ilamites, Medes, and other agglutinative language peoples such as the Kassies, Gutties, Lullubies, and Hurraies.<sup>3</sup>

According to other sources, three different ethnic components have participated in the formation and evolution of the Azeri people:

first, the Medes, who were mainly concentrated in southern Azerbaijan; second, the Aran-Albanese, who were living in the north; and third, the Turks, who have been living in various parts of Azerbaijan from ancient times and whose number constantly increased due to the migration of Turkic tribes from central Asia, particularly after the Islamization of the region.<sup>4</sup>

Two thousand five hundred and sixty-six years ago, Azerbaijan was conquered by the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great. Two hundred and twenty-nine years later, Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and conquered Azerbaijan. Three centuries after that, it was occupied by the Roman Empire. Azerbaijan was thereafter ruled by the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire, and the Confederation of Caucasian Turks.<sup>5</sup> Within the space of 10 years, after the death of Muhammad in the year 632, around 30,000 Muslim Arabs attacked and conquered Iran, overthrowing the decaying Sassanid Empire. Azerbaijan became a part of the new Muslim empire, though resistance against the Arab invasion in northern and central Azerbaijan continued throughout the ninth century.

In 837, the Arabs conquered the Castle of Babak, a stronghold for a powerful resistance movement in central Azerbaijan and established their dominion all over Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup> The region was Islamized. Towards the end of the seventh century, a local dynasty known as Shirvanshahs ruled northern Azerbaijan from 668 through 1539, when they were incorporated into the Safavid Empire, once more becoming unified with the south.<sup>7</sup> Through this reunification, Azerbaijan again had economic, cultural, and linguistic autonomy as an integrated whole well into the early nineteenth century.

In the early nineteenth century, Iran (and the region of Azerbaijan in particular) was twice invaded by Russia. As a result, the vast territory of northern Azerbaijan, or what is now the independent Republic of Azerbaijan, was annexed to the Russian Empire by way of the Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) treaties. This annexation by no means crushed the aspirations of Azeris for independence and

autonomous nationhood. In the chaotic revolutionary atmosphere of 1917 that resulted in the Russian Empire's collapse, Azerbaijanis proclaimed their independence on March 28, 1918. As early as mid-1918, the Azerbaijani republic passed a law that provided for democracy through free and direct elections, proportional representation, and universal suffrage, making Azerbaijan the first country in the history of Islamic nations ever to enfranchise women. Teaching and learning the mother tongue in the school system became mandatory, and Azeri became Azerbaijan's national language. In April 1920, the Red Army occupied Azerbaijan and overthrew the democratically elected Azeri government, putting an end to this brief experience in independent nationhood.

The annexation of northern Azerbaijan by Russia notwithstanding, the southern region of Azerbaijan still continued to enjoy a relatively autonomous status, particularly in trade and commerce as well as in culture and language. However, with the coming to power in 1921 of Reza Khan and the subsequent establishment of the absolute monarchism of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, southern Azerbaijan's regional, economic, linguistic, and cultural autonomy came to an end. Through Reza Khan's harsh centralization policy, the hitherto independent region of Azerbaijan now became divided into a number of dependent "Ostans" or provinces.<sup>8</sup>

The Pahlavi dynasty ruled in Iran for well over half a century. Throughout this period, a policy of forced assimilation aimed at the creation of a homogeneous Farsi-speaking nation. As a consequence, the publication of newspapers, magazines, and books in the Azeri language was prohibited, and the people of Azerbaijan were denied the right to educate in their own language.<sup>9</sup> In 1979, the Pahlavi regime was overthrown, and subsequently the Islamic Republic was formed. The shah's sponsored Persian nationalistic ideology was briefly overshadowed by an emerging "anti-nationalist" Islamic ideology with his fall. In the revolutionary atmosphere of the time, various ethnic demands and movements began to emerge. Yet upon consolidating its power

bases, the new regime suppressed the demands of various nationalities for cultural and linguistic rights. Identifying the Persian language as "the second language of Islam," the new regime vigorously continued to enforce the ban imposed on non-Persian languages during the Pahlavi era, notwithstanding that its own constitution allowed for the teaching and learning of non-Farsi languages.

In August 1991, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the formation of an independent Azerbaijani nation-state was declared north of the Iranian borders. Realizing the importance of such an event to the southern Azeris, the Iranian regime pursued a hostile relationship with the Republic of Azerbaijan, seeking to undermine its credibility, image, and achievements at every opportunity--particularly through state-run media outlets.<sup>10</sup>

## LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND IDENTITY

In present-day Iran, in addition to the three Azeri provinces of Ardabil and Eastern and Western Azerbaijan, Azeri-Turkic is also spoken in Zanjan, Hamadan, Arak, Saveh, and northern Khorasan.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Azeri-Turkic is spoken by the Qashqayi Turks as well as by various other Turkic-speaking peoples concentrated in the province of Fars and in central Iran. In addition to the northern Republic of Azerbaijan, Azeri is also the indigenous language of Turkic peoples in Iraq and Eastern Anatolia.<sup>12</sup>

The origin of written Azeri literature can be traced back to the famous epic of *Dede Qorqud Kitabi* (*the Book of Dede Qorqud*), which originated orally in pre-Islamic Caucasia and were put into writing in the sixth or seventh century. This is how the book introduces itself and its main character:

We begin with the name of the Creator and implore his help. Years before the time of the Prophet [Muhammad], there appeared in the Bayat tribe a man by the name of Qorqud Ata. He was

the wise man of the Oghuz people. He used to prophesize and bring reports from the unknown world beyond, having been divinely inspired....<sup>13</sup>

In the course of the past two centuries, the book has been translated into many languages. In 1815, the German scholar H.F. Von Diez produced a German translation of the book based on a manuscript found in the Royal Library of Dresden. In 1950, another manuscript was discovered by the Italian scholar Ettore Rossi in the Vatican library. Following the German, Turkish renditions were published by Kilishli Rifat and Orhan Saik Gokyay in Istanbul in 1916 and 1938 respectively.<sup>14</sup> Professor Hamid Arasli, a well-known Azeri scholar, published the first full text of the collection in Baku in 1939, reprinted in 1962 and again in 1977. Following Arasli's version, the famous south Azerbaijani poet Bulut Qarachorlu--in collaboration with Professor Muhammad Ali Farzaneh--provided a unique rendition of the book in two volumes in the Arabic alphabet for southern Azerbaijani readers. The first volume, entitled *Sazimin Sozu (Tales of My Lute)* was clandestinely published in Iran in the 1960s. The second volume, *Dedemin Sozu (Tales of my Father)* has not yet been published, although it has been widely discussed through various sources.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from *Dede Qorqut Kitabı*, there are other common Turkic works, such as *Diwan Lughat at-Turk* written by Mahmud of Kashghar in 1072-73 and *Qutadghu Bilig* written by Yusuf Khas Hajeb in 1077, that bear witness to the early literary works in the Azerbaijani language. Around the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Azeri language and literature flourished under the rule of Shirvanshahs. Among the leading representatives of Azeri literature in this period were such prominent figures as Qetran of Tabriz, Mekhseti Khanum, Khaqani of Shirvan, and Nizami of Ganja. Nizami's well-known *Quintuple*, *Seven Beauties*, *Khosrow va Shirin*, *Iskandar-Nameh*, *Tohfatul Iraquein (Gifts from Iraq)*, and other works are among the Islamic world's classical literary heritage.

Although Nizami did not produce his work in the Azeri language, his narratives are nonetheless rooted in Azeri culture and tradition.

Thirteenth and fourteenth century Azerbaijan witnessed the birth of Hasan-Oglu's famous *Ghazals*, Qazi Darir's *Yusuf va Zuleykha*, Qazi Burhan ad-Din's *Divan*, and Imad ad-Din Nasimi's *Quatrains*. An outstanding Hurufi philosopher, mystic, and poet, Nasimi left an ineradicable mark on Azeri philosophy, literature, and culture.<sup>16</sup> His poetry's artistry, depth, and veracity have gained Nasimi a lasting place among the pioneering literary figures in the Islamic world. In effect, Nasimi's language marks the emergence of a distinct language and literature unique to Azerbaijan. In the words of M.F. Koprulu, "although Nasimi was not unfamiliar with the dialect of Anatolia, he used that of the Azeri Turkic more often."<sup>17</sup>

Koprulu's observation has been confirmed by M. Ergin, who makes similar remarks regarding the language of Qazi Burhan al-Din, a contemporary of Nasimi and another forerunner in the fourteenth century Azeri literary scene. "Qazi Burhan ad-Din's language," writes Ergin,

does differ from the Anatolian texts and bears certain of the distinguishing features of Azeri-Turkic, which gave promise of its becoming a separate language. In view of this, it is not far off the mark to consider it the product of the period when the Azeri Turkic dialect was heading straight towards separation.<sup>18</sup>

Devoting his life struggling for freedom of expression, Nasimi boldly attacked rigid regulations and religious bigotry through his poetry. For his pains, he was skinned alive at the bazaar in the town of Heleb (Aleppo).

Azeri language and literature continued to develop and evolve during the fifteenth century, when the houses of Qara Qoyunlu and Aq Qoyunlu ruled in southern Azerbaijan and Iran. To this period belong such literary figures as Jahanshah Qaraqoyunlu (Haqiqi),

Habibi, and Sheyx Qasim Enver, among many others. The sixteenth century saw the establishment of Safavid rule in Iran. The founder of this new dynasty, Shah Ismail, was a great lover of poetry and literature. Azeri was the main language in his court, followed by Farsi and Arabic. Under the pen name Khatayi, Shah Ismail produced his famous *Divani Xetayi* in Azeri-Turkic. Moreover, a unique literary style known as "Qoshma" was introduced in this period, utilized and developed by Shah Ismail and later on by his successor Shah Tahmasp.<sup>19</sup>

Paralleling Azeri written literature, various forms of folk and oral literature were also developing during this period. Included in Azeri folk literature were numerous forms of tales, proverbs, and sayings peculiar to Azerbaijan such as *Bayati*, *Sayaji*, and *Duzgi*. The sixteenth century was characterized by the rapid growth of Azerbaijan's folk literature. Such famous masterpieces as *Kor-Ogli*, *Esl-Kerem*, *Shah Ismail*, and *Ashiq Qerib* were created during this period. Indigenous Azerbaijani minstrels, bards, and *Ashiq* poetry also flourished during this time.<sup>20</sup>

Muhammad Fuzuli (1498-1556), the renowned Azeri philosopher and poet, emerged at this time. Masterfully building upon the legacy of his predecessors, Fuzuli became the unrivaled literary figure. His major works in Azeri include *The Divan of Ghazals*, *The Qasidas*, and the poem *Leyla ve Majnoon*, among others. Fuzuli's poetry manifested the spirit of a profound humanism, reflecting the discontent of both the masses and the poet himself towards totalitarianism, feudal lords, and establishment religion. From a linguistic perspective, his poetry marked a turning point in the development of the Azeri language. In her pioneering work on Azeri literature, titled *Azeri and Persian Literary Works in Twentieth Century Azerbaijan*, Professor Sakina Berengian rightly identifies Fuzuli "as both the Ferdowsi and Hafez of Azeri literature."<sup>21</sup> According to Berengian, it was in Fuzuli's hands "that the Azeri language was brought to maturity and it was in his works that Azeri classical poetry attained its ultimate refinement."<sup>22</sup>

In the seventeenth century, Fuzuli's unique genre was taken up by such prominent poets and writers as Saeb and Qovsi of Tabriz, Shah Abbas Sani, Amani, Zafar, and many others. Thus, the development of Azeri literature and language continued well into the nineteenth century, when the Qajars ruled Iran. Nineteenth-century Azerbaijan was characterized by the separation, in 1828, of the northern segment of Azerbaijan and its annexation to the Russian Empire. According to a veteran Azeri scholar, Dr. Javad Heyat, the separation of northern Azerbaijan did not mean the severing of ties among Azeris. Far from it; this separation gave birth to a unique genre of literature and poetry "whose subject is the theme of separation between brothers."<sup>23</sup> In his famous poem, "*Hesret*" ("Longing"), Kamran Mehdi captured the feelings of Azerbaijanis regarding this forced separation: "True, the Araz divides a nation/But the earth underneath is one!"<sup>24</sup>

The early twentieth century marked the beginning of a new national and social consciousness in Azerbaijan. Influenced by various literary and sociopolitical trends in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), Azeri writers, intellectuals, and poets began to revolutionize the Azerbaijani as well as the Iranian sociocultural landscape. Fethali Akhundzadeh introduced drama into Iranian literature. Taliboff and Zeynal-Abedin of Maragheh laid the foundation of modern creative prose, social criticism, and literary realism hitherto unknown in Iran. At the same time, Jelil Memet Quluzadeh and Aliakber Saber produced their leading social and political satires, widely spread through the now internationally renowned paper, *Molla Nesred-Din*.<sup>25</sup>

Northern Azerbaijan also produced such literary giants as Samed Vurghun, Suleyman Rustem, Resul Reza, Mir Jalal Pashayev, Enver Memedxanli, and many others. In Tabriz, Mirza Hasan Rushdiyyeh laid down the foundation for modern schooling and pedagogy. He wrote and used the first modern textbooks in the history of Iran, entitled *Veten Dili (Language of Homeland)* and *Ana Dili*

(*Mother Tongue*) in Azerbaijani schools, replacing Koranic and traditional religious texts.<sup>26</sup> Simultaneously, such poets and writers as A. Qarajadaghi, M. Hidaji, M. Xelxali, and A. Nebati promoted the ideals of social justice and democracy through their works.<sup>27</sup> With the flourishing of all these literary and cultural productions, it was not surprising that Azerbaijan became the center of Iran's Constitutional Revolution.

This rich literary legacy reached its climax in contemporary times in Muhammad-Husayn Shahryar's (1905-1988) poetry, particularly in his masterpiece "*Heyderbabaya Salam*" ("Greetings to Heydar Baba").<sup>28</sup> Cherished by both the northern and southern Azerbaijanis, this work brings together various cultural and literary tendencies in a single genre, emphasizing the common origin of Azerbaijani language, literature, culture, and identity. This provided a major building block for the construction of a unified and unifying identity.

The continuous development of this literary and cultural tradition, despite interruptions, is a strong indicator of a deep-rooted awareness on the part of Azerbaijanis regarding their language, nationality, culture, history, and heritage.

## THE AZERI DIASPORA

The Azeri diaspora is a comparatively new phenomenon, rooted in a roughly three-decade long history of migration. It owes its existence to the 1978-1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran; the demise of the Soviet Union, and the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991. During and after the Islamic Revolution, waves of mass migration took place, partly because of violations of human rights in Iran, partly as a result of the eight-year war with Iraq, and partly due to the worldwide impact of globalization, along with a whole set of economic and developmental factors.<sup>29</sup> This trend still continues, albeit on a much smaller scale.<sup>30</sup>

The demise of the Soviet Union and the independence of northern Azerbaijan significantly contributed to the formation of an

Azeri diaspora. With the coming of independence, the Iron Curtain was lifted and the hitherto isolated Azerbaijani society was exposed to the outside world in an unprecedented way. As a result, many Azeris were, for the first time, accorded the opportunity to travel or migrate.

The coming of independence also coincided with the outbreak of war between Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia over the enclave of Nagorno-Qarabagh. The Azerbaijani republic was forced to cope with about 800,000 displaced persons. In effect, one out of every ten Azerbaijani citizens became a refugee. A new wave of Azeri (mass) migration took place during the first five years of independence, to be followed by future small-scale migrations.

In addition, hundreds of thousands of Azeri citizens of the former Soviet Union who lived in Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine were now "immigrants" living in someone else's country.

These issues provide a basis for multiple potential identities for a people known as Azeris (in Arabic sources); Azeri-Turks (in Turkish sources); or Turks (in Persian sources). In recent years, additional designations have emerged due to the changing geopolitical situation, adding such terms as: Iranian-Turk, Azerbaijani-Turk, North-Azerbaijani-Turk, South-Azerbaijani-Turk, and Azerbaijani.

This situation poses a major challenge to individuals of Azerbaijani heritage in articulating a common identity applicable both to the Azeri people on either side of the Araz River and to the Azeri diaspora. Which term, which label, which designation best defines such an inclusive identity? Can all of these be used as different manifestations of the same identity, or is there a need to choose a single one?

## A PAN-ETHNIC IDENTITY: "WE ALL ARE TURKS"

In its current usage, the term "Turk" defines the ethnic/linguistic/national identity of the majority of people in the Republic of

Turkey. It also defines the ethnic/cultural/linguistic identity of other groups and communities throughout Central Asia, Caucasia, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Balkans, who loosely use the term to refer to their ethnic affiliation. One of the earliest sources that makes mention of the term “Turk” is an encyclopedia entitled *Diwan-i Lughāt at-Turk*, written by Mehmud of Kashger in 1072-1073. In this book, the author traces the genealogy of the word “Turk” back to the time of Noah and claims “Turk” to be the name of one of Noah’s sons.<sup>31</sup> There are also references to “Turk” and its variations such as “tu-kiu,” “tur-kiut,” “tur-kiu,” “turku,” “turukh,” “durukh,” and “turuk” in some ancient Assyrian, Chinese, and Japanese sources.<sup>32</sup>

As far as recent written history is concerned, various sources indicate that the majority of Azerbaijan’s inhabitants and others have consistently referred to themselves as Turks. In Persian literature, the term Turk and the Turks themselves—in fact, everything Turkic—has been demonized. The Turks have been associated with savagery, barbarism, bloodshed, pillage, stupidity, and backwardness.<sup>33</sup> In the relatively relaxed atmosphere of recent years, some Azeri scholars and activists have started the process of reclaiming their Turkic identity. This also marks the beginning of the usage of “Turk” as a local identity.

#### **A LOCAL IDENTITY: “WE ARE IRANIAN TURKS”**

The designation “Iranian-Turk” exists in the context of Iran and the Persian effort to define ethnic groups as existing in that country’s context.<sup>34</sup> To the extent that the Turkic identity is demonized and dehumanized in Iran, Iranian Turks built up this identity in an attempt to counter the attacks leveled against them. While various assimilatory methods such as the denial of Turkic identity and conformity to the dominant culture were adopted by some Azeri intellectuals during the Pahlavi regime, the current movement to reclaim Turkic identity is becoming

increasingly popular in Azerbaijan and other parts of Iran.<sup>35</sup>

Use of “Turk” on an Iranian level has inevitably linked this identity to the larger ideology of Turkism rooted in an existing notion of pan-ethnic/pan-Turkist identity. This linkage is demonstrated through some Azerbaijanis acting as advocates of the former Ottoman Empire or current Turkish Republic against the demands that certain ethnic groups such as the Armenians and the Kurds have made against them. As a result, some ethnic conflicts existing in the Turkish Republic have spilled over to Azerbaijan and are automatically made out to be an Azerbaijani issue.

This understanding of pan-ethnic identity creates hostilities among ethnic groups. In an article entitled “A Word with the People of South Azerbaijan,” Alireza Nazmi-Afshar, a well-known Azerbaijani activist, warns that southern Azerbaijani independence from Iran would eventually lead to the independence of Kurds from Turkey and be disastrous for Turks all over the world:

The Azerbaijanis’ demand for independence from Iran, no matter how reasonable and rightful, will legitimize similar demands on the part of PKK Kurds in Turkey and Dashnak Armenians in Qarabagh.... Is this really what we want? By saying this perhaps I will be accused of Pan-Turkism. But if this kind of responsibility towards other Turks and their national interests... is Pan-Turkism... then I am a Pan-Turkist. I am a Pan-Turkist. I am a Pan-Turkist.<sup>36</sup>

When Nazmi-Afshar says Pan-Turkist here, it is counterpoised to a Pan-Azeri position, which would favor unification. This is an indication of the complex choices faced by the Azerbaijani people. In order to distinguish themselves from the Turks of Turkey, some Azeris have sought to refer to themselves as Azerbaijani-Turk or Iranian Turk, though

these hyphenated-combinations may themselves be confusing.

### **THE AZERI ALTERNATIVE: A TRANSCULTURAL/DIASPORIC IDENTITY**

“Azeri” is another important designation used as an identity category to represent the Azerbaijani people. This term exists in early Assyrian and Arabic sources, dating back some 3,000 years. In ancient Assyrian sources, for instance, there is mention of a city and region known as “Azari” situated in the vicinity of “the Lake of Urmu” in western Azerbaijan.<sup>37</sup> The inhabitants of this city were referred to as the “Azers/Azerler” who were members of the Turkic racial/ethnic group. The Assyrian sources document a directive issued by the Assyrian king, Sargon II, some 2,800 years ago referring to a place called Azari.<sup>38</sup>

A number of Arab travelers and historians also made frequent references to “Azerbaijan” and “al-Azeriyya.”<sup>39</sup> Yaqut al-Hamavi, the thirteenth century Arab traveler and historian, wrote in regards to the language of the inhabitants of Azerbaijan, “They have a peculiar language called al-Azerriya and no one can understand it except for themselves.”<sup>40</sup>

Azerbaijan being the name of the land, the Arabs called the vast majority of its inhabitants and their language “al-Azerriya.” This “al-Azeriyya” was transliterated/translated into Persian and Turkish sources as “Azeri,” which has been used alongside “Turk” to refer to the identity of Azerbaijan’s inhabitants. In fact, the two terms have been used interchangeably not only by Azerbaijanis themselves, but by Arabs, Persians, and Europeans as well. For instance, regarding the definition of the term, *Borhan-e Qate’*, the great Persian Encyclopedia says:

When the Oghuz came to that region [i.e., Azerbaijan], the Lord of Oghuz took a liking to one of its towns called Ujan. He asked each of his people to bring a skirt-full of earth and pour it

there. He himself brought a skirt-full and poured. All his army personnel and his people each brought a skirt-full and piled them there. Soon a gigantic mountain was formed. He named it Azerbaijan, for “Azer” in Turkic stands for height and “Baijan” means the elders and lords.<sup>41</sup>

“Azeri” and “Turk” have been used interchangeably throughout most of Azerbaijan’s modern history. At least such was the case until an Iranian intellectual named Ahmad Kasravi published an article in the 1920s to refute this idea. Of Azerbaijani origin himself, Kasravi ventured to claim that, among other things, Azerbaijan was originally populated by “Pahlavi/Farsi-speaking” Aryans who had later become Turkified due to the Seljuk and Mongol invasions of Iran in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, respectively; hence, the “invention” of an Indo-European Azari/Azeri language.

Immediately after the popularization of Kasravi’s theory, the terms “Azerbaijani” and “Azeri” became highly politicized. The dominant Persian group in Iran used the opportunity to advance its agenda of delegitimizing Iran’s “non-Indo-European” ethnic groups. Many linguists, historians, and social scientists tried to prove that the language spoken in ancient Azerbaijan was exclusively and entirely Persian.<sup>42</sup> A number of Western scholars supported these views, insisting that Farsi was “the only” language spoken in all parts of the “Iranshehr” prior to the emergence and triumph of Islam in Iran.<sup>43</sup>

It is now clear that Kasravi’s assumptions about the Azeri language lack credibility. He publicized such views because he believed they would be “good for Iran.”<sup>44</sup> It was an era when monolingualism was promoted and diversity discarded. Kasravi and his followers proceeded on the assumption that there was an Aryan/Iranian race that could be identified and maintained in its “pure” form. Language was the main indication of this race’s identity and authenticity. In the context of Iran, this language could not be any other than Farsi/Persian.<sup>45</sup>



The definition of “Azeri” currently used stands for the inhabitants of Azerbaijan and their language, which is a Turkic one. It alludes to a distinct people living in a distinct land.

### THE EMERGING AZERBAIJANI IDENTITY

In an April 26, 2006 visit to the United States, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan observed:

Azerbaijanis live in many countries. Recently we had the Second Congress of World Azerbaijanis. And according to our estimations, there are more than 50 million Azerbaijanis who live around the world, and about 30 million of them live in Iran.<sup>46</sup>

Yet the vision he presented is one based on citizenship rather than ethnicity:

Azerbaijan is a multinational country.... We have various nationalities, various religions represented, the highest degree of religious and ethnic tolerance. Azerbaijan is a secular country, and not only by its constitution, but by way of life.<sup>47</sup>

It is “Azerbaijani-ness” that binds the diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious communities together, even people who are not ethnically Azeri but who are citizens of Azerbaijan. That is why the designation “Azerbaijani” represents a democratic identity. It is not based on an ethnocentric vision of solidarity, but on citizenship, land, and territory. It is also a way of obtaining the loyalty of Azeris at home and abroad to the country.

Among Azeris abroad, the creation of this state has also led to a greater sense of Azeri-based national identity. For example, groups and individuals living in Canada issued a statement calling on all Azeris there to identify themselves on the 2006 Census Questionnaire

as “Azerbaijanis” or “Azeris” rather than Turks, Iranians, Persians, or other designations.<sup>48</sup> One statement observed:

If we answer Turk or Turkish to this question, we will be considered as nationals of the Republic of Turkey. And if we reply Persian or Farsi, we will be considered Iranian nationals. Obviously, both responses undermine our Azerbaijani identity and are, therefore, incorrect.... Let us all come together and announce once [and] for all through this census that: **We are Azerbaijanis and our mother tongue is Azerbaijani** [emphasis in original].<sup>49</sup>

The idea of an “Azerbaijani” identity in both southern and northern Azerbaijan was first developed by Muhammad Emin Resulzadeh in the early twentieth century. At the time, the Azerbaijanis, together with other Turkic-speaking peoples of the Russian Empire, were commonly identified as “*Rusiyeye Musulmanlari*” (the Muslims of Russia), “*Tatarlar*” (the Tatars), or “*Rusiyeye Turkleri*” (the Turks of Russia)--much the same way as some Azeris in the south currently refer to themselves as “the Iranian Turks” or “the Turks of Iran.” While acknowledging the existence of certain similarities among various Turkic peoples in the region, Resulzadeh maintained that “Azerbaijan” constituted a distinct society due to unique historical, cultural, and social characteristics shared by its inhabitants.<sup>50</sup> From this observation, the modern notion of an Azerbaijani identity was born.

Similarly, it was during the Democratic Government (1945-1946) of Mir Jafar Pishevari that a sophisticated Azerbaijani identity was developed in southern Azerbaijan. In this period, notions such as Azerbaijani language, Azerbaijani nation, and Azerbaijani national homeland became prevalent. This changing and shifting nature of identity formations among the Azeris confirms the postmodern and postcolonial definition of identity in the sense that identities are not

necessarily fixed and unchanging phenomena.<sup>51</sup>

As the Republic of Azerbaijan becomes more integrated into the world community, the prospect of accepting the Azerbaijani/Azeri designation becomes more practical in both southern and northern Azerbaijan. For all intents and purposes, the international community has already accepted “Azeri” and/or “Azerbaijani” as the legitimate ethnic/linguistic/cultural/national identity of the Azerbaijani people. Compared to their rival terms such as Turk, Azerbaijani-Turk, and Iranian-Turk, the “Azeri” and “Azerbaijani” designations are more inclusive, more familiar, and much more transparent. This makes them suitable identity categories for the twenty-first century.

## CONCLUSION

In the modern world, identities are articulated within a variety of shifting social, political, economic, cultural, and discursive contexts. Such understandings can and often do have exclusionary consequences, particularly in pluralistic environments.

For this case, there are multiple identities of Azerbaijan which continue to oscillate, conditioned by the experiences of individuals, groups, and communities. Such identity categories as “Turk,” “Iranian-Turk,” “Azeri,” and “Azerbaijani” are based on different social, cultural, political, and economic conditions in Iran, in the Republic of Azerbaijan, and in the Azeri diaspora. A local version of a “Turkic” identity has been forming in Iran since the 1978-1979 revolution, in reaction to non-Iranian identities of Turk and Azerbaijani, on the one hand, and to exclusionary definitions of Persian primacy on the other. Simultaneously, a more flexible, inclusive “Azerbaijani” identity has been evolving in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

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*Diversity: Aryanist Racism, Islamic Fundamentalism, and Democratic Struggles (Palgrave Macmillan, July 2007).*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, as in contemporary scholarly literature, the terms “Azeri” and “Azerbaijani” are used interchangeably to represent the majority Turkic-speaking population living in the northern Republic of Azerbaijan and in southern Azerbaijan--the northwestern section of Iran--as well as in the diaspora. The term Azerbaijani also indicates non-Turkic citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan as well as the non-Turkic residents of southern Azerbaijan who may choose to identify as Azerbaijanis.

<sup>3</sup> M.T. Zehtabi, *Iran Turklerinin Eski Tarixi* (Tebriz: Artun, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Rahim Rayees-Nia, *Azerbaijan dar Seir-e Tarikh-e Iran*, 2 volumes (Tabriz: Nima Publishers, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1992); R.G. Suny (ed.), *Transcaucasia: Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Keith Hitichins, "The Caucasian Albanians and the Arab Caliphate in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries," in R. Savory (ed.), *Iran under the Safavids*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Minorsky, *A History of Sharwan and Darband in the 10th-11th Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Javad Heyat, “Regression of Azeri Language and Literature under the Oppressive Period of Pahlavi,” paper prepared in advance for participants of The First International

Conference on Turkic Studies, (Indiana University: May 19-22, 1983); Javad Heyat, "Azerbaycanin Adi ve Serhedleri," *Varliq*, Vol. 15, No. 90 (1993), pp. 3-13; Alireza Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity: Islamic Fundamentalism, Aryanist Racism, and Democratic Struggles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, July 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren*; Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity*.

<sup>11</sup> This section on Azeri literature is a revised version of part of the author's article entitled, "The Rise and Fall of South Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1945-46): A Look at Hegemony, Racism, and Center-Periphery Relations in Contemporary Iran" (2000), published online at the Virtual Azerbaijan website:

<http://72.14.203.104/search?q=cache:0LbLq479fEJ:www.zerbaijan.com/azeri/AlirezaAsgharzadeh.htm+alireza+asgharzadeh%2Bthe+rise+and+fall&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1>.

Some parts of this section have also been used by Wikipedia, under the heading "Azerbaijani Literature:"

[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Azerbaijani\\_literature&diff=52451658&oldid=52451375](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Azerbaijani_literature&diff=52451658&oldid=52451375).

<sup>12</sup> Zehtabi, *Iran Turklerinin Eski Tarixi*; Heyat, "Regression of Azeri Language."

<sup>13</sup> E.M. Demircizade, *Kitab-i Dede Korkut Dastanlarinin Dili* (Baku: 1959); Geoffrey Lewis (ed.), *The Book of Dede Korkut* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> Demircizade, *Kitab-i Dede Korkut*; Lewis, *The Book of Dede Korkut*.

<sup>15</sup> Mohammedali Farzaneh, *Dede Qorqud* (Tehran: Entsharat-e Farzaneh, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> R.F.K. Burrill, *The Quatrains of Nesimi: Fourteenth-Century Turkic Hurufi* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> M.F. Koprulu, *Azeri Edebiyati* (Istanbul, 1958), p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> Muharrem Ergin, *Turk Dili ve Edebiyati Dergisi* (November 1950), p. 287.

<sup>19</sup> Javad Heyat, *Azerbaycan Edebiyyat Tarixine bir Baxish* (Tehran: Sazman-e Chap-e Khajeh, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Asgharzadeh, "The Rise and Fall of South Azerbaijan Democratic Republic."

<sup>21</sup> Sakina Berengian, *Azeri and Persian Literary Works in Twentieth Century Azerbaijan* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Heyat, "Regression of Azeri Language," p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Kamran Mehdi, *Edebiyyat ve Incesenet* (Baku: ChicheklerYayini, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> Asgharzadeh, "The Rise and Fall of South Azerbaijan Democratic Republic."

<sup>26</sup> Berengian, *Azeri and Persian Literary Works*.

<sup>27</sup> Heyat, "Regression of Azeri Language."

<sup>28</sup> Mohammed Hossein Shahryar, *Heydarbabaya Salam* (Tabriz, 1957).

<sup>29</sup> Alireza Asgharzadeh, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Globalization, and Migration: New Challenges for Canada," in Rose Folson (ed.), *Calculated Kindness: Global Restructuring, Immigration and Settlement in Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2004), pp. 130-50.

<sup>30</sup> Asghar Fathi (ed.), *Iranian Refugees and Exiles Since Khomeini* (California: Mazda Publishers, 1991); Asgharzadeh, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Globalization, and Migration."

<sup>31</sup> Mahmood Kashgari, *Divan Lugat et-Turk*, translation by M. Siyaqi, (Tehran: Pajuheshgah-e Olum-e Ensani ve Motaleat-e Farhangi, 1073/1996).

<sup>32</sup> A.N. Kononov, *Opit analiza termina "Turk,"* (SE, No 1, 1947); Zehtabi, *Iran Turklerinin Eski Tarixi*.

<sup>33</sup> Chafi Javadi, *Tabriz ve Piramun* (Tehran: Nahsr-e Diba, 1971); Enayetullah Reza, *Iran va Turkan dar Ruzgar-e Sasanian* (Tehran: Sherket-e Entsharat-e Elmi va Farhangi, 1986).

<sup>34</sup> Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity*.

<sup>35</sup> Alireza Asgharzadeh, "The Anatomy of Iranian Racism: Reflections on the Root Causes of South Azerbaijan's Resistance Movement," *Baku Today*, May 28, 2006, <http://www.bakutoday.net/view.php?d=21507>.

<sup>36</sup> Alireza Nazmi-Afshar, "Sokhani ba mardom-e Azerbaijan Janubi," *Shams Tabriz*, May 13, 2006, <http://www.shamstabriz.com/nazmi-name.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> G.B. Lanfranchi and S. Parpola (eds.), *State Archives of Assyria*, Vol. V, *The Correspondence of Sargon II: Letters from the Northern and Northeastern Provinces* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> Lanfranchi and Parpola, *State Archives of Assyria*; Firidun Agasioglu, *Azer Xalqi* (Baki:Chashioglu Neshriyyati, 2000), pp. 16-17.

<sup>39</sup> See for example Ibn Howqal, *Surat al-Arz [Face of the Earth]*, J. Shoar (ed.) (Tehran: Bonyad-e Farhang-e Iran, 1966); A.A. al-Mas'udi, *Kitab al-Tanbih wal-Ishraf*, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, VIII, M.J. de Goeje (ed.) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1894); S. al-Muqaddasi, *Ahsan ut-Taqasim fi Ma'rifat ul-Aqalim*, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, M.J. de Goeje (ed.), (M.J. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1906); Yaqut Hamavi, *Kitab Mo'jam al-Buldan*, Vol. 1, F. Wustenfeld (ed.) (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1866).

<sup>40</sup> Hamavi, *Kitab Mo'jam*, p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> M. Khalaf-Tabrizi, *Borhan-e Qate'*, M. Moin (ed.) (Tehran: Ibn-e Sina, 1983), p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> Mahmood Afshar, "Aghaznameh" *Ayendeh*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1925), pp. 5-6.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Marquart, *Eransahr nach der Geographie des Ps. Moses Xorenac'i* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1901); Gordon V. Childe, *The Aryans: A Study of Indo-European Origins* (London: Kegan Paul, 1926).

<sup>44</sup> Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity*.

<sup>45</sup> Ahmad Kasravi, *Tarikh-e Hejdah Saleh-ye Azerbaijan* (Tehran: Taban, 1941); Ahmad Kasravi, *Azeri ya Zaban-e Bastan-e Azerbaijan*, (Tehran: Taban, 1938); Ahmad Kasravi, *Shahryaran-e Gomnam*, (Tehran, 1929); Yahya Zaka, *Maqalat-e Kasravi*, (Tehran: Nahsr-e Danesh, 1955).

<sup>46</sup> Ilham Aliiev, "A Conversation with Ilham Aliyev," *Federal News Service*, April 26, 2006,

[http://www.cfr.org/publication/10547/conversation\\_with\\_ilham\\_aliyev\\_rush\\_transcript\\_federal\\_news\\_service\\_inc.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/10547/conversation_with_ilham_aliyev_rush_transcript_federal_news_service_inc.html).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "Hamvatanan-e Aziz-e Azerbaijani," *Shams Tabriz News*, May 9, 2006, p.1, <http://www.shamstabriz.com/kanadasarsomary.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> "Hamvatanan-e Eziz."

<sup>50</sup> Mahammed Amin Resulzade, *Azerbaijan Problemi* (Ankara: Azerbaycan Kultur DernekiYayinlari, 1920/1996).

<sup>51</sup> See for example, Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta/Penguin, 1991); Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, (London: Routledge, 1990); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).