
Geopolitics Trump Religion In Iran-Azerbaijan Relations

By Caroline Farris

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Despite Iran's sizeable Azeri population, and their shared Shi'a faith, bilateral relations remain fraught.

Image credit:flickr/ Eliza_Tasbihi Iran's Azeri population is emerging as a critical voting bloc in Iranian elections.

Ethnic Azeris in Iran may receive less fanfare than the Iranian Kurds, yet they play an increasingly important role in Iran's political process. Not only is Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Azeri descent, but Azeris have emerged as a critical voting bloc in Iranian presidential elections. Indeed, Iran's two most recent presidents, Hassan Rouhani and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have both garnered strong support from Iran's Azeri provinces, winning East and West Azerbaijan, along with Ardabil and Zanjan.

Azeris are descendants of the Oghuz Turks who migrated to the Caucasus Mountains and northwestern Iran in the 11th century from Central Asia.

During this time, many areas of the Persian Empire experienced an influx of Turkish immigrants. Although many of Iran's inhabitants remained Persian, others adopted the Turkic language. As such, there is a good deal of cultural overlap between the Iranian Azeris and their Persian countrymen. While both are Shi'a, Azeris in Iran tend to be more secular; a trait shared with Azeris living in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Although intermarriage and a fluid border have made precise counting difficult, Azeris are believed to comprise just under a third of Iran's population.

Despite Iran's sizeable Azeri population-and indeed, in part because of it-Iran's relationship with neighboring Azerbaijan has been fraught since Azerbaijan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Shortly after the Republic of Azerbaijan was established, its first President Abulfaz Elchibey called for unifying Azerbaijani Iran with the new Republic. Iran's President at the time, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, was less than thrilled by this gesture and feared that it could sew dissent and secessionism within Iran's borders. Relations weren't helped by Elchibey's pro-Turkey bent and vehement secularism.

Thus, Tehran has struggled to woo Baku since its formation. Despite being the first country to establish full diplomatic relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan, repeated attempts to solidify working relations have been thwarted. Multiple points of contention cause Baku to balk at the kind of relationship Tehran is so keen to establish.

For instance, Baku detests Iran's treatment of its Azeri population and remains bitter over Tehran's decision to align with Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

Partly as a result, Azerbaijan has always maintained ties to Iran's regional rival Israel, and this appear to be increasing. In February of 2012, for instance, Azerbaijan signed a US\$1.6 billion defense deal with Israel, which included provisions for Baku to purchase intelligence hardware, air defense systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles from Israel. While this substantial arms purchase is not an immediate threat to Iran, it underscores just how much Azerbaijan is aligning with Israel. One of Iran's top priorities in dealing with Azerbaijan is to undercut its relationship

with Israel, especially amid reports that Azerbaijan has granted Israel access to an airfield near the Iranian border.

Another factor hindering ties between Iran and Azerbaijan is the extensive smuggling networks inside Iran. Azerbaijan has been especially sensitive to the narcotics entering its borders via Iran, although this is likely conducted by non-state actors. Moreover, as international sanctions against Tehran have tightened, the lure of untold profits has resulted in many Iranian state actors-particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-expanding their black market smuggling activities.

The Iran-Armenia and Azeri-Israeli relationships show the foundation of such political alliances to be purely pragmatic. From a strictly sectarian standpoint, Iran and Azerbaijan's shared Shi'a ties would make them close allies. Yet Iran has backed a Christian nation against Azerbaijan, while the latter has cozied up to Israel. In a neighborhood where it is impossible to keep your enemies closer than your friends, the Supreme Leader's Azeri blood may not be enough to establish a lasting detente between Iran and its looming neighbor to the north.

Caroline Farris is an editorial assistant at The Diplomat.

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