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AZERBAIJAN - THE FOREIGN INFLUENCES

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### I.- SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT SOVIET AZERIS.

The Turk Azeri nation is today probably some 10 millions strong or more, it is almost equally divided between USSR and Iran and has several historical/cultural centers : Baku and Genje (Kirovobad) in the North, Tabriz and Ardebil in the South.

While the Southern Azerbaijan is but a province of Iran where the Azeris enjoy no special collective autonomy (the Azeri language is not recognized as an official language in Iran), the Northern Azeris are a Socialist Soviet Nation using Azeri as the official language of their Republics (with a population of more than 6 millions in 1979).

All the Azeris are Muslims, the majority belongs to the Shia branch of Islam. Probably more than 90% of Azeris in the Iranian Azerbaijan and between 70 and 75% in the Soviet Azerbaijan are Shia. The minority belongs to the Sunnism of the Hanafi mazhab. There are small groups of Ali Illahis (Ahl-i Haqq) in the area of Genje and some Baha'is in the cities. Religion is of course totally free in Iran and strongly discriminated in USSR.

The Azeris of USSR were 4.400.000 individuals in 1970 and probably around 5 millions in 1979. Almost 95% of them live in their national Republic and in other areas of Transcaucasia. They rank among the less migratory of all the Soviet Turks.

In their own Republic the Soviet Azeris represented 74% of the total population in 1970. Together with other Muslims (Daghestanis, Tatars, Kurds) they represent almost 80%. Russians and Armenians represent 10% and 9,5% of the republican population. It seems that between 1970 and 1979, the relative importance of the "Christian" (former Christian) communities in Azerbaijan had decreased. (The detailed 1979 census figures have not yet been released).

### II.- AZERI NATIONAL AWARENESS AND NATIONALISM.

Since the founding of the Safavi dynasty (of Azeri ethnic background), Shia Islam (Ithna Asharia = "The Twelvers") is the dominant branch of Islam

in both Azerbaijan. In Soviet Azerbaijan the Shia Islam is predominant in the south-western (Nakhichevan) and in the southern areas as well as in the cities. The Sunni Islam dominates in the northern part of the country near the Daghestani border. The western and central Azerbaijan are mixed. Baku has a heavy Shia majority.

The Azeris are ethnically Turks but Shia by religion. Therefore they have always been and still are influenced by and drawn toward both Turkey and Iran. To these two main poles of attraction ~~must~~ some minor poles must be added which influences cannot be ignored. These are the Daghestan, the other Turkic nations of USSR, among others the Crimean Tatars (before 1905), the Volga Tatars (between 1905 and 1928) and the Turkestanis (since W.W.II), the rest of the Muslim World and the last, but not the least, Russian and Western Europe.

In USSR, the Azeris are a Muslim minority isolated from their brethren by international frontiers or by interposed strong Christian communities. As a result, their national awareness and nationalism are conditioned more than in any other Muslim territory of USSR, not only by domestic but also by external factors.

Among the domestic factors, the most important is the presence of a large, dynamic and advanced Armenian colony in Azerbaijan. In 1970, the Armenians living in Azerbaijan were 483.520 individuals, that means a little less than 10% of the total population. But the relative importance of the Armenian community is greater than the percentage of 9,4% would indicate it. It is basically an urban community : 345.000 Armenians in 1970 (or 71% of the entire community) lived in the cities of Azerbaijan, and 207.000 of them lived in the capital Baku and their educational and professional level is certainly higher than that of the Muslim Azeris.

Before the Revolution already, the Azeris elite considered the Armenians as their most dangerous concurrents. The inter-communal rivalry was welcomed by the Russian authorities who enjoyed in this way the position of the "Enemy No. 2" and not as in other Muslim territories of the "Enemy No. 1". During the Revolution, the "anti-Armenianism" has been the basis of the Azeri nationalism and under the Soviet regime the Armenians remained the "scapegoat" supposed to

be responsible for every failure. Thus the Russians, whose presence is limited (except in Baku, where they were 350.000 in 1970) occupy but a second place in the ranks of the "most hated aliens", the first place being due to the Armenians.

The second domestic factor conditioning Azeri nationalism and their national awareness is the demographic vitality of their community. The fertility rate of the Azeris is one of the highest among the Soviet Muslims: 1750 ‰ in 1970. The Azeris occupy the third rank after the Tajiks (2075‰) and the Uzbeks (1950‰). Since 1959, they are steadily pushing the non-Muslims (Russians and Armenians) out of the country and in 1970, they have, for the first time since 1917 reconquered the majority in the city of Baku. In 1970, with 51‰ of Muslims, Baku became the first capital of all Soviet Muslim republics to obtain majority. The Azeris represented 46,3‰, the remaining 4,7‰ being divided between the Daghestanis, the Tatars and the Muslim Tates. This gives the Azeri nationalism the feeling that "we" (the Muslims) are ~~stronger~~ stronger than "they" (the aliens) and that "time is working for us".

Eastern Transcaucasia has since the early Middle Ages one of the most brilliant centers of the Irano-Turkic culture. Conquered by Russia in early XIXth century, without any serious resistance, but not really colonised by the "Europeans" immigrants. It maintained its Turkic and Shia Muslim character, but also received a strong impact of the Russian literature and through it also the impact of the West European liberal (mainly French) and Ottoman culture. In the middle and in the second half of the XIXth century, Azerbaijan could boast of a remarkable group of modernist writers, such as Abbas-Kulu Bakikhanov, Fāth Ali Akhundov, Hasan beg Melikov-Zerdabi, Djalil-Mehmet Kuli Zade, Alekper Sabir etc..... The first muslim newspaper of Russia (Melikov-Zerdabi's Ekinchi) in 1875 and the first Muslim opera (Uzeir Hajibeyli's Arshin mal alan) appeared in Baku. But inspite of their old and advanced culture, because of their early conquest by the Russians and may be also, because of their dual Irano-Turkic character, responsible of the deep dichotomy in their national awareness, the Azeris have, since the late XIXth century looked at the Muslim world abroad for political ideologies; theories and programs.

Even during the dramatic years of the first Russian Revolution ( 1905-1908) which woke up Muslim Transcaucasia to the political life, Azerbaijan used to export individuals ( Mehmet Emin Rasul Zade to Tehran, members of the socialist Hümmet party to Tabriz, Ahmed Aga oglu, Ali Hüsein Zade and other radical nationalists to the Ottoman Empire), but not ideas.

Foreign influences on the Azeri national movement were and still are conditioned by various levels of Azeri national consciousness : It is therefore necessary to say some words about the complex picture presented by the national awareness of the Azeris:

- The absence of sub-national consciousness ~~Traditionally, the Azeris~~  
Contrary to what we find among other Turkic or Muslim nationalities of USSR where clanic and tribal loyalties are still strongly resented, the sub-national awareness survives in Azerbaijan only among the Iranian speaking Talyshes, not entirely assimilated by the Turkic Azeris. Among the tribal formations which were nomadic or semi-nomadic before 1917, such as the Ayrums, the Padars, the Shah-Sevens and the Karapapakhs it is rapidly disappearing.

- The national and the supra-national consciousness  
Traditionally, even before the Revolution, the Azeris had different options concerning the ways of defining themselves. These options existed already in the XIXth century and still subsist in our time. These are:

- 1) - A religious-cultural, purely Shia identity implying a solidarity with Iran and a certain distance toward the Sunnis in general (Turkey or Russian Muslims)
- 2) - A limited national, purely "Azeri" identity, implying the feeling of kinship and solidarity with the Southern Azeris,
- 3) - A Turkish, "Oghuz" ethnic identity, implying a certain distance

toward other Soviet Turks, a sense of kinship and solidarity with the Turks of Turkey and the ignorance of the religious differences between the Sunnis and the Shias.

4) - A "Panturkic" identity based on an ethnic and political solidarity with the other Soviet Turks and a certain distance toward both Iran and Turkey.

5) - A "Panislamic" identity, ignoring the differences between the Sunnism and the Shiism and orientated toward Daghestan and the North Caucasus - the most conservative bastion of the traditional Islam in USSR.

6) - A local Caucasian identity, the mess developed, implying a certain distance from the other Muslims (both Sunni and Shia) and a rapprochement with the Christian neighbours, Armenians and Georgians. This identity ~~has not~~ is based on common economic and political interests and eventually on a common defense against the Russian "Elder Brother".

#### ~~The influence of Turkey~~

This background explains the various foreign influences on the Azeri political development.

#### The influence of Turkey

Today the prestige of Turkey among the Azeri Turks is probably the highest, as it was already before the 1917 Revolution. The almost identical languages and the ethnic kinship are the two basis of the feeling of solidarity with Turkey.

Before the Revolution, the political union with Turkey was the final goal of the modernist, liberal-progressive religiously moderate or religiously indifferent part of the Azeri intelligentsia which opposed both the Iranian and the Russian orientation; sympathised with the political program of the Young Turks and later accepted with enthusiasm the doctrine of the Kemalism. Political leaders such as Ali Husein Zade and Ahmed Aga oglu who were between 1905 and 1908 the real leaders of the Azeri political life,

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emigrated to the Ottoman Empire after 1908. Today, because of the weakening of the religious feeling among the Azeri elite, a passionate interest in Turkey remains as intense as 60 years ago. But the opposite is not true, (there is no interest among the Turkish intellectuals for their brethrens in Azerbaijan). However this interest for Turkey is mostly platonic. It is the Turkey of Kemal (of the 1930-s and not the real Turkey of today) which is the focus of Azeri interest. For the time being, neither the Turkish left (too marxist for their liking) nor the Turkish religious conservative right can exercise any real attraction on the Azeri elite. For the while, Turkey remains for the Azeris a "faraway motherland" or rather a "great sister" which may be loved but which exercises no real influence and provides no models for political action. This passive aspect may as well change if and when Turkish political life is modified either in favour of the radical left or of the equally radical right. Turkey may then become what it was already supposed to be in the eyes of the Azeri intelligentsia around 1918 : a "revolutionary" model.

#### The Iranian influence.

The influence of Iran is as significant as the influence of Turkey. Before the Revolution, the feeling of Shia solidarity represented the dominant ideology of the deeply religious rural masses and of the conservative urban elements ("the Bazar") who were expecting from Iran spiritual and political guidance which never came.

The numerous and influential liberal or radical Azeri intelligentsia who rejected the Shia Islam as the basis of their weltanschauung also refused to look at the Qajar monarchy as the source of the political inspiration. However, in 1908 the Constitutional Movement and the Tabriz Revolution presented another, "revolutionary", face of Iran/. After 1917, various radical movements (the Jengeli movement in Ghilan in 1918-1921, the 1920 revolts in Tabriz and in Khorassan) reinforced this new aspect of Iran, which became for a certain period, between 1908-1921, a source and a model of radicalism for the most advanced elements among the young Azeri intellectuals, (Mehmet Emin Rasul Zade, the future leader of the Musawat, but socialist in 1905-1908, went to Tehran in

1908 where he published the radical newspaper Iran-i Now).

Between 1924 and 1978, the Conservative Pahlavi monarchy had nothing to offer to the Soviet Azeris in terms of political ideology, and anyhow during this period no influence from abroad could reach Soviet Azerbaijan protected by a reinforced Iron Curtain.

Today the situation is rapidly and dramatically changing. In the eyes of the Soviet Azeris who since the downfall of the Pahlavi dynasty are eagerly listening to the broadcastings from Tehran and Tabriz, Iran has become once more a "revolutionary" country where "something is happening".

It is of course too early yet to appreciate the possible influence of the Iranian revolution on Soviet Azerbaijan, but we may at least mention the possible directions where this influence may be felt :

- a) The "anti-imperialist" appeal of the "Khomeinism". For the Soviet Azeris, "imperialism" means Russian rule. Therefore, the fight against American or, more broadly, against the Western non-Muslim presence in Iran may be understood as an invitation to fight Russian presence in Baku. For the first time since the Revolution, some Iranian leaders (the ayatollah Shariyat Madari, for instance) had spoken of "liberating" Soviet Muslims from the Russian oppression. Such appeals cannot remain without a certain echo.
- b) The religious appeal of Conservative Islam. For the Soviet Azeris, the Iranian adventure may be also understood as the demonstration of the strength (in terms of ideology and organizational ability) of the Conservative Islam. If a bunch of religious conservatives was able to overthrow a regime backed by one of the best armies in Asia and by one of the best police in the world, then the dream of a struggle against Russian imperialism may appear as not being totally hopeless. The Iranian revolution also proved -for the Soviet Azeris- that Islam may easily become a dynamic, revolutionary force, without losing its fundamentalist character.
- c) The purely Shia appeal. In several Muslim countries (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, North Yemen), the "Khomeinism" had as an unpredicted by-product -the "reactivation" of the Shia Twelvers minorities. It is doubtful that the appeal of the Iranian revolution may have the same impact in Soviet Azerbaijan but it is too



early to make any pronouncement. But would it contribute to divide the Sunnis and Shias in Soviet Azerbaijan, the "Khomeinism" would bring a curious and unsuspected help to the Soviet policy of divide and rule.

d) The "populist" character of Khomeinism with its promise to bring to power a new category of younger political leaders of more popular origin. - This would imply in Soviet Azerbaijan a new category of non-Party leaders.

#### The influence of the Southern Azerbaijan.

This influence depends largely on the reality of a limited "Azeri" identity, implying the feeling of kinship and solidarity with the Southern Azeris. This feeling was but little developed before the Revolution. The interest stirred up in Russian Azerbaijan by the Tabriz revolutions of 1908-1911 and of 1920, was of a social rather than of a national character. No serious irredentist claims were presented between 1920 and 1970 by the Soviet Azeris on the Southern Azerbaijan.

Today also the interest of Soviet Azeris in the Southern Azeris is more rhetorical than real. From time to time, there is talk in Baku of the "oppressed brothers" in the South, but it is neither an expression of deep popular feeling nor -for the time being at least- an outline of an official strategy. Up to now, the only hints of irredentist claims originate not from the Northern but from the Southern Azeris.

As said before, the Azeri nation, some ten millions strong (the third Turkic group in the world after the Turks of Turkey and the Uzbeks) is almost equally divided between USSR and Iran. It has two historical capitals: Baku and Tabriz. In both territories the national development of the Azeris is limited. In Iran, they enjoy full equality of personal rights with the Iranians, their religion is free and they have full access to their traditional culture, but their collective rights are not recognised, Azeri Turkic language is not in use as a written literary language. In USSR, the existence of an Azeri nation is officially recognised and the Azeri Turkic language is the official literary and administrative language in the Azerbaijan SSR. But Islam is discriminated

(only 18 open mosques in 1977 for more than a four millions strong muslim population) and the change of alphabets had isolated the Azeris from their own past. Soviet Azeris can read Nezami of Genje, their greatest national poet, only in a Russian or Azeri translation in cyrillic script and not in its persian original version and finally their political development is limited by the tight control exercised by the Russians.

It is therefore too early to decide who, among the Soviet Azeris or the Iranian Azeris is exercising the strongest attraction, now that Tabriz has become once more as in 1908 and in 1920 a "revolutionnary" agitated capital.

#### The influence of other Soviet Turks.

This influence depends on the strength of the "pan-Turkic" awareness among the Azeris. Before the Revolution, the liberal moderate intelligentsia, Mehmet Emin Rasul Zade (after 1911), some members of the Musawat Party, Mardan bey Topchivashy, were the leaders of this trend which formed the majority of the Azeri intelligentsia. They were but little interested in religious matters, hostile to Iran and opposed to the pro-Turkish orientation of the radical progressive wing. They have joined the great pan-Islamic/pan-Turkic movement led by the Volga and the Crimean Tatars and played a major part in the political life of the pre-revolutionary Muslims of Russia. They played a major role in the 1904, 1905 and 1917 Muslim Congresses of Russia. In return, the influence of Tatar jadidism was predominant between 1905 and 1917 on the cultural and educational development of Azerbaijan.

The influence of Kazan waned after 1928 during the great purges of the Sultangalievism and the general onslaught of the Soviet power against the "pan-turkic" deviation.

What is the present day situation ?

In some aspects, after W.W.II Tashkent has taken the place occupied by Kazan before 1928 : that of the capital of the Turkic Muslim World of USSR. Does it mean that the Uzbeks are already playing the same role of leaders that the Volga Tatars played before the Revolution and between 1918 and 1920 ? One

should not anticipate events, but it is certain that the general weakening of the religious feeling (and of the differentiation between Sunnis and Shias), the isolation of Soviet Azerbaijan both from Iran and from Turkey and the more frequent contacts with other Soviet Turks help to the emergence of the "pan-Turkic" identity and therefore may contribute to favour the influence of Central Asia on Azerbaijan.

#### The influence of the Northern Caucasus.

Daghestan and the Chechen territory have been since late XVIIIth century the bastions of the most conservative Islam and the models of heroic armed resistance to the Russian conquest. Under Soviet regime, the same areas remained hot beds of insecurity. Sufi brotherhoods remain popular and extremely active and their hostility to both Communism and the Russian presence takes violent forms of opposition (including terrorism). Since the return in the 1960-s of the deported Chechens and Ingushes to their homeland, North Caucasus has been undergoing a revival of the fundamentalist Islam.

What impact this revival may have on Azerbaijan ?

The non-official "Parallel Islam" in Azerbaijan is represented by the same Sufi brotherhoods -Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya- which dominate the Northern Caucasus. Both are decentralised organisations but have nevertheless the same Eastern rites, rituals and the same "ideology". It is obvious that the revival of Sufism in the North has a direct impact on the revival of the conservative Islam, both Sunni and Shia in Azerbaijan. According to recent Soviet sources (1970) the "Parallel Islam" has under its control some thousand clandestine houses of prayer and some 300 major holy places of pilgrimage in Azerbaijan.

#### The influence of Georgia and Armenia.

A rapprochement between the three Transcaucasian nations, Georgian, Armenian and Azeri was an old dream of the prerevolutionary left wing liberals and socialists both Armenians and Azeris. Theoretically, the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (the future Bolsheviks) was open to the members of all

three nationalities and an Armeno-Azeri newspaper, the Koch-Devet, was even published for a short while in Baku (in 1906). But as soon as 1905, the revolutionnary leaders were obliged to separate the Christians and the Muslim socialists and to create a purely Muslim bolshevik group, the Hümmet party, open to the native Azeris and to the Iranian immigrants. Since the Revolution, the general evolution of Azerbaijan is leading toward its isolation from its two Christian neighbors and not toward a rapprochement. Since the W.W.II, Azerbaijan has acquired a more Turkic and a more Muslim profile. Between the 1970 and the 1979 censuses, the relative importance of the Armenian community in Azerbaijan has been rapidly and dramatically shrinking, dropping from ~~the 9,4 %~~ 9,4 % of the total population of the republic (483.520 individuals in 1970) to 7,9 % in 1979 (475.000 individuals in 1979). The Armenian community has thus decreased by 8.500 individuals. It is probable that psychological pressure is the main reason of the Armenian exodus.

We may assume that to day, the national/religious hostility between the Azeris and the Armenians is as strong as it was 60 years ago. However, the impact of the Armenian model on the political and economic development of the Azeris cannot be underestimated. It is the exemple of the Armenian concurrent that helped the Azzri landed nobility to transform itself into an industrial bourgeoisie and it is the Armenian model of the political parties, Dashnaksütün and Hinchak that was used for the foundation of the two corresponding Azeri parties, the Mussawat and the Hümmet.

#### The influence of Russia

Among all Soviet Muslim Turkic nationalities, the Azeris are the one on whom the Russian influence is the less perceptible.

The number of Azeris living outside their republic, in purely Russian milieu is insignificant. In 1970, only 41.000 Azeris lived in the RSFSR and 11.000 in Ukraine. The Russian colony in Azerbaijan declined from 10 % in 1970 to 7,9 % in 1979. The Azeris are the less "russified" of all Muslim Turkic peoples of the Soviet Union. Between 1959 and 1970, the percentage of Azeris who claimed Azeri

Turkic as their "first mother tongue" grew up from 97.6 % to 98.2 % (98.8% among Azeris living in Azerbaijan). In 1970, only 57.313 or 1.3% of the Azeris considered Russian as their first mother tongue. The Azeri language, an old literary language since the XIVth century, is the least russified of all Turkic languages of USSR. During the last 15 years, it has been cautiously purged of many Russian words which have been replaced by Turkic, Persian and Arabic ones. The Azeris have even succeeded to introduce into their alphabet some latin letters (h,j), thus making their cyrillic alphabet in use since 1939 closer to the Turkish latin alphabet in use in Turkey. We may assume that today the Azeris are among the most "xenophobic" Turkic nationalities of the Soviet Union and that this xenophobia is equally divided between the Armenians and the Russians.

However, we must remember that Marxism-Leninism has been brought to the Azeris by the Russians in its purely Russian form and that all attempts to find an "Azeri" way to Communism (among others by Nariman Narimanov), similar to the theories of Sultan Galiev have been defeated and probably forgotten. But it is also true that, as in other Muslim (or non-Muslim) territories of the USSR Marxism has ceased long ago to be a philosophy, or an ideology. It is not even an economic doctrine, but simply a technic of power, eventually to be used against the Russians.

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As a conclusion, I would like to add that Azerbaijan, which is an old cultural Muslim center and an integral part of the Muslim World undergoes inspite of its isolation, the same evolution that the Muslim World abroad. Recently it was possible to perceive there the same process of "back to the radical fundamentalism" that we perceive in other Muslim countries, Iran, Turkey and the North Caucasus. No direct foreign influence is necessary to explain

this trend. However the Azeris have always looked abroad for models. Daghestan used to provide a model of active resistance (Holy War) which is not in the character of the Azeris. Iran might, in the future, give an example of struggle against imperialism (in this case of Russian imperialism). For the time being, no model is provided by Turkey.

Azeri nationalism, especially the problem of relationship with the Russians, bears the brand of the Shia taqiya . It is probably more advanced than in other Muslim territories of the Soviet Union, but at the same time more cautious and less obvious. There have been relatively few purges, few acute conflicts in Azerbaijan, but a steady, cautious, constant and generally successful opposition of the Azeri intellectual elite to the official policy of rapprochement between the Russians and the Muslim natives. The resistance to the linguistic and cultural assimilation has been successful and the Azeri cadres are steadily gaining the control of the Party and Soviet hierarchies and also, what may be more important, of the Academy of Science and of the University.

Azerbaijan gives the impression that it has reached a stage which Central Asian republics will attain only some years from now and may show the other Muslims of Soviet Union "how to gain a certain form of real autonomy by slow progress and small steps without open conflict with Moscow".