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AZERBAIDZHAN

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Today the national movement in Azerbaidzhan is probably the most advanced and at the same time the most cautious among the muslim nations of the U.S.S.R. The Azeris occupy a unique position among muslims in the U.S.S.R., they alone belong to the Shia Jafarite rite ("The Twelvers"). Ethnically Turkish, they speak a language very close to the Turkish of Turkey. But in the XVth century they were separated from other Turks and since then have been tied historically to Iran. The Azeri Nation is divided almost equally between the U.S.S.R and Iran, and has two historical capitals: Baku and Tabriz. The political life of Soviet Azerbaidzhan has always been extremely sophisticated. It has influenced and in return has been influenced by several countries: Turkey, Iran, Daghestan and Russia. And the development of a national movement among the Azeri has been affected by three sets of factors: demographic, historical, and religious.

Demographic factor

Since World War II the ethnic profile of Azerbaidzhan has been steadily changing. The republic is becoming both more Turkic and more Muslim. In 1959, there were 2,497,381 Azeris in the republic; 67.5% of the total population. By 1970 their number had grown 51.4% to 3,776,778; 73.8% of the total population. This tremendous increase was due both to the very high fertility rate of the Azeri Turks and to the immigration of Azeris living in Armenia. The total Muslim

population of Azerbaidzhan including the Daghestanis, the Tatars and the Turkestanis, numbered 4,003,715 in 1970, or 80.5% of the total population of the republic. 86.2% of the total Azeri community in the U.S.S.R. lived in Azerbaidzhan in 1970. Of the 603,159 (16%) who lived outside the borders of the republic, 420,350 (or 69.7%) were in 1970 in areas of Georgia, Armenia and Daghestan bordering Azerbaidzhan, and 114,925 (or an additional 19.1%) were settled in Muslim Central Asia. Only 67,854 or less than 1.5% lived in non-Muslim territories. This situation reflects the general reluctance of Muslim Turks to migrate to territories in the Dar ul-Harb.

In contrast, the "European", non-muslim community, which consisted primarily of Russians and Armenians, is rapidly losing its position. Between 1959 and 1970 the Russians increased from 510,059 to 566,448; or only 1.7%. The average increase of the Russia Community in U.S.S.R. in the same period was 13%. This suggests that Russians are leaving Azerbaidzhan in significant numbers. The same exodus seems to be taking place among the Armenians, whose numbers increased during the same period by only 9.4% in comparison to a 27.7% average for the U.S.S.R. as a whole. In 1970, Muslims once again constituted the majority even in the city of Baku (52% against 48% for the non-Muslims). These changes give the Azeri Turks, the impression that time is on their side, and the feeling that "We" are stronger than "They".

Historical heritage

The Azeri Turks are descendants of Turkic tribes that remained outside the realm of the Ottoman Empire. Having adopted Shiism, in the XV century, they founded the Safavi Empire. Since that time, they have represented the backbone of Iranian military might. For five centuries they have fought on two fronts against the Sunni Turks, their ethnic brethren but religious enemies; against the Ottomans in the west and the Uzbeks and the Turkomans in the east. Early in the XIX century, Russia conquered Eastern Transcaucasia. Since then, the Azeri nation has been cut in two equal parts. The Northern half became part of the Russian Empire and since 1920, has constituted the Azerbaidzhan SSR. There have been only two short-lived attempts to gain independence: An Azerbaidzhan republic existed in the North from 1918-1920 before it was conquered by the Red Army. And during World War II a Popular Democratic Republic of Southern Azerbaidzhan was created with Soviet support but rapidly destroyed by the Iranian Army. Since then there has been no attempt to re-unify the two parts.

Since the Russian conquest, the two Azeri territories have followed different paths of development. Iran was ruled since the XV century by Turkic dynasties, hence, there could be no ethnic discrimination against the Turkic Azeris. In all fields including military, Court and Shia "Church", the Azeri enjoyed opportunities equal or even superior to those of the ethnic

Persians. But Persian was the only officially recognized language of Iran; there was no Turkic press and the Turkic language was not taught in schools. With the Russian Imperial conquest in Northern Azerbaidzhan, the Azeri elite was eliminated (with some minor exceptions) from positions of political responsibility. But the Azeri bourgeoisie remained wealthy and even became economically powerful after the discovery of the oilfields. Turkic languages enjoyed relative freedom. A brilliant pleiade of writers used it and in 1875 an interesting and rich Azeri press was born and flourished. The late XIX and early XX centuries were marked by an authentic renaissance of the Azeri Turkic culture. Culturally independent, economically prosperous but politically discriminated against the Azeri community developed a strong national consciousness which became manifest in the early years of the XIX century in the emergence of a powerful and sophisticated national movement.

The character of this movement was influenced by a number of factors. Both the nature of Russian rule and the role of Armenians in Azerbaidzhan influenced the focus of Azeri nationalism. The Russians never tried to make Eastern Transcaucasia a colony of settlement and, even after the oil boom they remained a minority in the cities. They relied on native and Armenian lower and medium administrative cadres. Thus their presence in Azerbaidzhan was limited and not particularly oppressive. Consequently of all Soviet Turks,

the Azeris were and still are the least anti-Russian. On the other hand, development of the oil industry brought both Armenian capital and managerial skills to Baku. The Armenians rapidly became the second most powerful group in Baku after the "European"--that is, Russians and Jews. Because of their greater cohesion as a group, their greater financial power, and their higher technical skills, the Armenians became the real middlemen between Russian power and authority on the one hand and the Muslim population on the other. They were perceived by the Azeri bourgeoisie as its most dangerous rival. Consequently, Azeri nationalism took a strong anti-Armenian character.

Barred by the Russians from political power, threatened by the Armenian presence, and isolated from other Turkic territories, the Azeri national movement was compelled to look abroad for support. The attraction toward Iran was two-fold. The conservative elements "the Bazar", (middle and petty bourgeoisie) and the poor urban elements were looking toward Iran for spiritual guidance. The great religious centers of Shiism are in Iran (Qom, Mashhad) and Iraq (Najaf, Kerbala) and on the other hand some radical members of the Azeri intelligentsia were powerfully attracted by the revolutionary movement in Southern Iran: the two Tabriz revolutions (1908-1911 and the 1920); the Jengel movement in Ghilan (1916-1922) and the Khorassan revolution (1920).

The progressive liberal left wing of the Azeri intelligentsia, in contrast, believed that the ethnic brotherhood with the Ottoman Turks was more important than religious or revolutionary solidarity with Iran. Indeed, many Azeri liberal intellectuals simultaneously were active in both Azerbaidzhan (Musawat Party) and Turkey (Kemalist movement). The moderate liberal, westernized intelligentsia (wealthy bourgeoisie, and landed nobility) was little interested in religious matters and was hostile to both the conservatives and Iran. It also rejected the idea of unification with the Ottoman Empire as unrealistic. But understanding the inherent weakness of an isolated Azerbaidzhan, joined the Russian panislamic movement led by Volga Tatars. Azeri political leaders played a major role in the creation of the great panislamic movement, in the formation of the Ittifak al-Muslimin and in the Muslim Congresses of 1904, 1905 and 1917. Both the Shia Azeris and their Sunni partners accepted the idea that in order to resist Russian pressure the dogmatic contradiction between Sunnism and Shiism were to be put aside and the Jafarite rite of Shiism was to be treated as the fifth legal mazhab, on the same level as the four Sunni legal schools.

Finally, the extreme left wing of the Azeri community (mainly bourgeois intellectuals) joined the left (bolshevik) wing of the Russian Social-Democracy, but for various reasons,

they refused to join the Russian bolshevik Party. With the blessing of Lenin they created their own Muslim Socialist Party in 1904: the Hümmet. Membership in the Hümmet was restricted to Muslims (Azeri and Iranian). This party was the ancestor of the C-P's of both Azerbaidzhan and Iran. Because of its national and confessional character, the Hümmet and its successor--the Communist Party of Azerbaidzhan--acquired a strong nationalistic profile which is still very much apparent.

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The Religious Factor

The majority of Azeris belong to the Shia Jafarite rite which recognizes twelve visible Imams. In 1970, the Shiites represented a community of some 2,650,000 persons or approximately 70% of the Azeris community. Sunnis numbered about 1,200,000, or 30% of the Azeris plus all "other" Muslims (Daghestanis, Tatars, Kurds). The Shiites represent the majority in the Eastern, Western and Southern districts of the republic. The Sunnis are numerically dominant in Central and Northern Azerbaidzhan. The majority of the population in the cities, including Baku, is Shia only, Kuba, Nukha and Shemakha have Sunni majorities.

The process of rapprochement between the Sunni and the Shia Islams which began seventy years ago has continued under

the Soviet regime. Both rites have been equally oppressed. Today only formal differences separate the two branches of Islam, and there is no hostility. Mosques often serve both rites and it is not unusual to see Shia and Sunnis take part in the same ceremony (this is unique in the Muslim World).

During the Soviet period, especially strong anti-religious pressure in Azerbaidzhan has resulted in a dual evolution of religious life in this republic. On the one hand there has been a general weakening of the official Islamic establishment. But on the other there has been a strengthening of the Conservative trend. As in other Muslim Territories of the U.S.S.R., Islam in Azerbaidzhan is represented by an official religious organization and a semi-underground popular religion. The Official Islam is under the control of the Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Baku, which is a mixed organization. The Chairman is the Shia Sheikh ul-Islam, who has under his jurisdiction all the Shia communities of the U.S.S.R. (Azerbaidzhan, Southern Daghestan and small colonies in the cities of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). The Vice-Chairman is the Sunni mufti whose authority is limited to the Sunni communities of Transcaucasia. Turks, Georgian Muslims (Ajars, Ingilois) and some rare Armenian Muslims (Hemshins).

Official Islam--both Sunni and Shia--presents a pitiful picture. Only 16 "working" mosques remain in Azerbaidzhan.

And there are less than one hundred "registered" clerics. There are no religious schools and no religious publications; all social activity is forbidden to Official Islam. This contrasts sharply with the situation in 1928, before the launching of the great anti-religious campaigns. There were at that time in Azerbaidzhan 900 Shia and 700 Sunni mosques and one thousand religious schools.

Shia Islam is particularly vulnerable to external pressure because it is more structured, with a strong ecclesiastical hierarchy (comparable to a "Church"). Moreover, since 1920 it has been almost completely isolated from the great spiritual and political centers in Iran and Iraq. For these reasons, the Shia establishment in Azerbaidzhan is more submissive to the Soviet regime than the Sunni leadership of Central Asia. But at the same time, Shiism is more deeply rooted in the popular consciousness and, because of its tradition of secrecy and of the purely shia custom of taqiya (the legal right to apostasy), it has survived in the form of conservative, closed, almost secret society. It is more difficult to penetrate and more resistant to external influence. But in the U.S.S.R., Shiism is very different from the dynamic Shia church of Iran.

In contrast to the weak and submissive official Islam, "Parallel" Islam appears as a powerful, dynamic and xenophobic power. It is represented by the numerous "unregistered"

self-appointed clerics--both Shia and Sunnis--who escape the controls of the Spiritual Directorate, and by the adepts of the Sufi brotherhoods (Sunni). Shirvan in Central Azerbaidzhan has been one of the traditional bastions of the Naqshbandi Order. These "Unofficial" Islamic societies run a number of clandestine religious schools, at least a thousand underground prayer houses and some 300 "holy places", which in Azerbaidzhan as in other Muslim territories of U.S.S.R. are the real centers of Islamic religious life. This well organized "Parallel" Islam is comparable in its ability to influence public opinion to the Iranian Shiism.

It is thanks to the constant missionary work and to the propaganda activity of this underground Islam that the level of religious practice in ~~Azerbaidzhan~~ Azerbaidzhan seems to be higher than in other Muslim republics, especially among the Shiites--circumcision, religious marriages and religious burials are generally observed even by Communist Party members. The great religious festivals, in particular the Shia festival of Ashura (considered as a national--not only religious tradition) attract important masses of believers and unbelievers. The Shia religious dramas (featuring the death of the Imam Husein) are staged during the month of Muharrem and attract thousands of spectators, including a high proportion of children.

The Character of Azeri Nationalism

The profile of Azeri nationalism is characterized by both cautious resistance to Moscow and anti-Armenian aggressiveness. The Azeri relationship with Moscow bears the mark of the taqiya. There have been few open clashes, but a cautious, constant and generally successful opposition of the Muslim intelligentsia to the policy of "rapprochement" between Russians and Muslims. The Azeri, like all other Muslims in the U.S.S.R., are confident in the future. They feel that "time works for them"--the "Aliens" Russians and Armenians, are leaving the republic; Azeri cadres have attained higher positions of responsibility than members of any other Muslim nationality; their resistance to assimilation by the Russians has been particularly successful; and, the Azeri literary language is the least Russified of all the Turkic languages of the U.S.S.R. Indeed, the Azeris have even succeeded in re-introducing into their cyrillic alphabet some Latin letters (h,j), which makes it closer to the Latin alphabet in use in Turkey. Finally, the process of rediscovery and rehabilitation of the traditional literature, which had been banned under Stalin, is more advanced in Azerbaidzhan than in any other Muslim republic. But this process is conducted with an utmost caution; that is in accordance with the taqiya tradition.

When pressed by Moscow, the Azeri intelligentsia apparently has always yielded without resistance. But it

has been also the first to recover lost ground. The best example is provided by the last Stalin campaign against the national culture of Turkic people of the U.S.S.R. in the period 1950-1953. The campaign was aimed at the most sensitive part of the national patrimony, the national epics. The first blow was directed in Azerbaidzhan against the national epic song "Dede Korkut". Native intellectuals accepted it without the slightest resistance, while Central Asian Turks opposed violently Moscow's attack. Central Asian resistance was followed by a purge of the native intelligentsia. After Stalin's death, the Azeris were the first to rehabilitate their epic song; both many months in advance and more completely than their Central Asian brethren.

In Azerbaidzhan the Armenians are used by the native leaders as scapegoats, and are deemed by the public opinion responsible for all shortcomings in the republic. Central Soviet authorities while they do not encourage openly either the anti-Armenian policy of the Azeri Communist Party leadership or the xenophobia of both the intelligentsia and the masses, do let it run free. They do so because this reduces the Russians to the position of the "second most hated alien". According to Armenian samizdat, Armenians are heavily discriminated against, excluded from position of responsibility and from the universities and schools, and are being pushed by the republican authorities to leave

Azerbaidzhan. It is significant that neither economic nor administrative reasons explain the anti-Armenian xenophobia of the Azeris. It is an atavistic feeling, which may easily take on a "holy war", anti-western, and anti-Christian colour. As such, it may become dangerous for other (former) Christian communities living in Azerbaidzhan, including the Russians.

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In the past, Azerbaidzhan has exported political ideologies and religious reformism to all neighboring countries. Before World War I, Azeri democratic-liberal jadidism and in the 1920's theories of Muslim national communism elaborated by Caucasians (Nadzhmuddin Samurskiy, Nariman Narimanov...) have been used as models by Turkish, Iranian and Arab revolutionaries. Today, these same theories appear antiquated, moderate, "westernized" and reasonable, in comparison with the violent radical conservatism that blossoms in the Middle East. Thus, Soviet Azerbaidzhan has lost its leading intellectual position to the more dynamic and more radical Muslim Middle East.

The question is what ideologies, could penetrate into Azerbaidzhan and from where?

It seems that today panturkic ideologies and theories based on the principle of ethnic/linguistic solidarity with other Turks--both outside and within the U.S.S.R--have less appeal than 50 years ago. Contacts with Turkey are limited.

Politically, Turkey has but little to offer to the Azeris. Neither the Turkish reactionary right, nor the Turkish Marxist left ideologies are likely to exercise any influence on Azeri national movement. Moreover, Turkish governments have been anxious to curb precisely those panturkic theories which could have been accepted in Azerbaidzhan. Until recently Iranian influence was negligible. The Shia "Church" of Azerbaidzhan was and still is completely isolated from the religious centers of Iran. As for the ultra-leftist marxist groups in Iran, their wild programs and theories could find no echo among Azeri nationalists. But this situation may change, since Iranian revolutionary-conservatism has demonstrated that the victory over a strong westernized, secularized regime backed by the "West" (and Russia is perceived as the "West") is possible. The Iranian example may well provide encouragement.

For the time being, fundamentalist, anti-Western, anti-Russian ideas (not yet ideologies, nor programs) are penetrating into Azerbaidzhan from the nearby Daghestan--the traditional bastion of Muslim conservatism. These ideas are often transmitted by the adepts of Sufi brotherhoods (Sunnis). The steady growth of the sense of religious and political solidarity with the Muslim World (either Shia or Sunni) both Soviet or foreign, and the growing importance of Islam as the basis of Azeri nationalism are among the consequences of this influence.