THE CAUCASUS AND IRAN

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the South Caucasus republics’ relationships with contemporary Iran. It will focus on Iran’s relatively warm relations with Christian Armenia and its strained relations with fellow Shi’ite nation Azerbaijan. In order to understand this history, we must first cease to understand the three states as historically distinct geographies. Iran, Armenia, and Azerbaijan share a contiguous cultural geography that transcends contemporary national borders. Firm borders began separating them only in the past century. Before the formation of the Soviet Union cut Iran off from the southern Caucasus, there was relatively free movement in people, resources, and ideas between them. Move back in time two centuries, and there were not even the porous imperial borders of Russia, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire. The southern Caucasus existed within the Persianate sphere, and Armenians and Azeris were but two of many diverse populations sharing a common cultural idiom. The intimacy of these relationships is key to the current status of the relations amongst the three nations. In the case of Armenia and Iran, this shared heritage serves as a means of reinforcing an alliance based on economic and political interests. For Azerbaijan, the strength of this historical relationship has been a historical problem for Azeris involved in nationalist discourse and poses an existential threat to a still young nation.

The Republic of Georgia’s relationship with contemporary Iran is comparatively less complicated than those of Armenia and Azerbaijan and is less characterised by entangled identities. Without a significant diaspora in Iran and lacking shared borders, the two states do not have as extensive bilateral relations as either Armenia and Iran or Azerbaijan and Iran. While Georgian nationalism does highlight Georgia’s conquest by the Safavid Empire and the sack of Tbilisi by the army of Agha Mohammad Khan, founder of the Qajar Empire, in 1795, as notable historical tragedies, this has little bearing on contemporary Georgian-Iranian relations (see Chapter 6). Georgia will thus constitute a secondary focus in this chapter.

A point on terminology before proceeding. This chapter will engage extensively with two Azerbaijans—the Republic of Azerbaijan, formerly the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (AzSSR), and the Iranian region of Azerbaijan comprising the provinces of East Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan. The independent republic and the Iranian provinces are geographically contiguous but have been separated by a border for over a century, following
Russian conquest. This requires any contemporary scholar working on the region to perform some terminological acrobatics, made more complicated by nationalist sentiments on both sides of the border over who has the greater claim to the name. In this chapter, ‘Azeri’ will be used as an ethnic and cultural designation and ‘Azerbaijani’ as a national designation referring to the Republic of Azerbaijan. When necessary for clarification, ‘Iranian Azerbaijan’ will be used to designate the region made up of the Iranian provinces.

**Imperial legacies**

Although few citizens in the Republic of Azerbaijan speak Persian today, the legacy of Persianate culture, in terms of linguistic, literary, and cultural expression, abides in the republic. The Azeri culture of the southern Caucasus began to depart from its Persianate roots in the late nineteenth century, when the region experienced a contentious cultural renaissance characterised by the efflorescence of Azeri-language literary production, the birth of a secular theatre and opera tradition, and a vibrant native language press, all organised around ethnic Azeri voluntary associations that formed following the Russian Revolution of 1905. One result of the impulse toward culture reform was a conscious effort to de-persify on the part of many Azeri intellectual leaders. Baku’s cosmopolitanisation politicised ethnic identity at the turn of the century. Azeri reformists responded by vernacularising Azeri culture, breaking away from the larger Persianate sphere they had historically occupied. Azeris in the Caucasus increasingly no longer looked to Persian literature and culture as representative of their own identity. Furthermore, as European culture and society became the model of progress, Azeris sought to distance themselves from that which could be perceived as ‘oriental’ or ‘backwards’. Iran, the former imperial power in the region, represented stagnation while Russia, as the Caucasus’ window to the west, represented progress in the eyes of many reform-minded Azeri intellectuals. The schools and educational programmes developed by Azeri organisations focused on Azeri language literacy and fostering Azeri cultural production. When the Persianate was represented, it was typically in a negative light, as in the stock character of the corrupt *molla* that appeared in many Azeri plays.

The literati’s attempts to distance Azeri cultural production from the Persianate realm did not alter the reality of the intertwined spheres of the populations of the southern Caucasus and Iran. Indeed, despite their rather negative depictions of Iran in their work, Azeri intellectuals remained keenly invested in Iran’s destiny, and often found themselves living south of the border whenever the tsarist authorities found that their activities carried too strong a whiff of pan-Turkism or pan-Islam. The Russian-Iranian border was porous, and in the late nineteenth century thousands of Iranians crossed into the Russian Empire, both with visas and illegally, to seek work as menial labourers. Iran was experiencing rising unemployment and declining value of its currency during this period, prompting hundreds of thousands of Iranians to seek work elsewhere. The Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, India, and North Africa were the favoured destinations of Iranians seeking work abroad (Atabaki 2003: 401). For northern Iranians, especially ethnic Azeris, the southern Caucasus was a particularly attractive destination, for its proximity, high demand for labour, and co-lingual population. By the early 1900s, Baku’s petroleum industry was heavily dependent upon the influx of Iranian labour to fill low-skilled jobs, leading to a large, primarily male, population living on the margins of Baku society. This population, like the that of the city itself, mushroomed in the early twentieth century. In 1872 the population of workers in the petroleum industry was 1,800; by 1907 it had reached 30,000 (Atabaki 2003: 408). In 1900, Iranians made up about a quarter of the entire unskilled labour force, and Russian officials...
acknowledged that industry in the southern Caucasus was dependent upon Iranian labour migration to continue apace (Atabaki 2003: 417). As historian Touraj Atabaki has noted, while local Azeris referred to these Iranian transplants as *hamsharis*, ‘fellow countrymen’, the two populations remained in many ways separate, though local Azeri associations often attempted to incorporate the Iranian labourers into their programmes.

When Iran erupted into revolution in 1906, Azeris, Armenians, and Georgians in the Russian Empire took a keen interest. It had been less than a century, after all, since they themselves had been under Qajar rule. Between their shared imperial history and constant population exchanges, Caucasians felt invested in the outcome of Iran’s constitutional movement. Fresh off a revolution of their own, many radical-leaning Caucasians headed south to support the Iranian struggle. This was not a simple tale of trans-imperial camaraderie, however. As historian Moritz Deutschmann has pointed out, Armenians, Georgians, and Caucasian Azeris all tended to judge Iranians as inferior and misguided revolutionaries. Just as they sought to reform their own societies, Caucasians’ activities in Iran served as a proselytising mission of progress to their less-developed neighbours (Deutschmann 2013: 180). A number of Caucasian revolutionaries played prominent roles in Iran’s first revolution, notably the Armenian Yeprem Khan, a member of the Dashnaksutyun (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) political party who became police chief of Tehran, and the Azeri journalist, political organiser, and future president of the short-lived independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–20) Mammad Amin Rasulzade, who helped found *Iran-i No* (‘New Iran’, 1909–11), a newspaper almost entirely written by him, which became the official organ of the Social Democratic Party and had the largest circulation of any paper in Iran during its run (Abrahamian 1982: 104). Armenians and Azeris living in the Russian Empire were both able to occupy fluid identities that were trans-imperial in nature. Drawing upon shared Persianate legacies, they staked a claim in Iran’s destiny throughout the tumultuous first decades of the twentieth century.

**The Soviet era**

It was only with the violent collapse of the Russian Empire and the birth of the Soviet Union that Iran and the southern Caucasus became separated by a firm border. The Soviet era brought with it a nationalities programme that did not accommodate the fluid identities that had characterised the nineteenth century, and the residents of the newly formed AzSSR and Armenia Soviet Socialist Republic (ArmSSR) soon found themselves separated first by Reza Shah’s movement closer to Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and on the opposite side of the Cold War to their brethren in the south in the post-war era.¹

The sealing of the once-porous border did not mean that the Soviets did not look to spread their influence south, however, and Soviet Transcaucasia served an important role in Iranian-Soviet relations. Entry into the Soviet Union supplied Azeri reformists not only with long-sought influence at home, but also with the clout they had long desired to export their brand of cultural and social reform to Iran and promote it in Central Asia. The first, and until the creation of the Uzbek SSR in 1924 only, Turkic, Muslim, Soviet Socialist Republic, the AzSSR (1920–22), and then the latter’s inclusion in the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (often referred to by its Russian acronym ZSFSR, 1922–36; the ‘z’ stands for Zavkavkazskaia, ‘Transcaucasian’) acted as the model for progress and development that the Soviet Union presented to both its internal Muslim populations and its Muslim neighbours while pursuing good relations with Iran and Turkey (Yılmaz 2015). This policy continued into the early 1930s, when Soviet relations with its two southern neighbours soured as Turkey moved closer to the West and Iran drew closer to Nazi Germany.
The Soviet model of nationalities was ill-suited to the diversity of Iran. This further distanced Soviet Armenians from Iranian Armenians, as Soviet authorities could not conceptualise Armenia as culturally connected to a predominantly Muslim state. Soviet Armenian relations with Iran were thus quite strained, with little cultural exchange occurring in the Soviet era (Hovannisian 1994). Armenians living under the rule of Reza Shah were treated with suspicion for their shared ethnicity with the ArmSSR, with the shah’s authorities often accusing them of being Soviet agents (Chaquèri 1998: 132). This suspicion was not helped when, under the recently crowned Mohammad Reza Shah, the ArmSSR embarked upon a repatriation campaign from 1946–48 that saw 20,597 Iranian-Armenians, most of whose ancestors had resided in Iran for over three centuries after being resettled there in the Safavid era, and who had never lived in the territories occupied by Soviet Armenia in the first place, ‘repatriated’ to the ArmSSR (Lehmann 2012: 184). This campaign emphasised the Soviet understanding of nations as primordial and coherent, and helped promote it abroad where diasporic communities such as the Armenians became vulnerable to ‘othering’ in countries such as Iran, which were in fact their ancestral homes despite increasingly exclusive understandings of nationality.

Many Armenians from Anatolia sought refuge in Iran during the genocide (Hovannisian 1994: 260). The ‘repatriated’ families from Iran, Syria and Lebanon (the source of the largest number of ‘repatriated’ Armenians, numbering 32,238; Lehmann 2012: 184), and other regions were thus often survivors of the Ottoman campaign to purge the Armenian population from Anatolia, yet they found that, despite Soviet discourse on the repatriation campaign as a triumph of the Armenian nation over Turkish aggression, the genocide itself was a taboo topic (Lehmann 2012: 201). Genocide recognition and remembrance, today a priority of Armenian foreign policy, was suppressed in the Soviet era, with the memory of Iranian shelter during wartime holding little sway over Iranian-Armenian relations. The Soviet era was thus a period of suspension for Iranian-Armenian relations, with historical ties effaced by two visions of nationality that did not accommodate the historic ties that would come to the fore in contemporary Iranian-Armenian relations.

The Georgia SSR, following the lead of the ArmSSR, pursued a repatriation campaign of its own in Iran. Like the Armenians, a substantial population of Georgians had been forcibly moved to Iran in the early seventeenth century by the Safavid Shah Abbas I (see Chapter 6). The Georgian population was largely resettled in Fereydan, a region of the central province of Isfahan, with about 20,000 Georgians identified as living there in the 1960s. Unlike the Armenians who were resettled in Iran, the Georgian population converted to Islam not long after arriving, though much of the population had maintained use of the Georgian language, and still identified as gurji (‘Georgian’; Kaiser 2015: 270). Using linguistic preservation as an argument for shared national identity, Soviet Georgian officials began advocating a ‘repatriation’ of the Fereydan Georgians as early as the 1920s (Kaiser 2015: 271). The cause was initially unsuccessful, and while Soviet authorities sought the repatriation of Georgian émigrés who had moved to Iran in the tsarist and early Soviet periods in the 1940s, it would not be until the 1960s that the cause of the Fereydan Georgians gained traction (Kaiser 2015: 278). Under the Pahlavi dynasty, Iranian authorities had pursued a national programme of homogenisation through persification. Non-Muslim minorities such as the Armenians proved a problem in this project, and Iranian authorities did not resist letting them go. The Muslim Fereydan Georgians, however, were but one of a multitude of ethnic minorities belonging to the Muslim majority that the state sought to assimilate (Kaiser 2015: 280). The repatriation campaign was thus more difficult. In 1970, however, Soviet Georgian authorities successfully repatriated 17 families consisting of 109
people, eventually repatriating a total of 23 families (Kaiser 2015: 286). Soviet theories around nationalities were immediately put to the test by this population that had been separated from their Georgian homeland for over three centuries. The observant Muslim families faced confusion and judgment from their new neighbours over their aversion to pork and wine, with one Fereydan migrant lamenting that it had been better to be a gurji in Iran than a Tatar in Georgia. By 1978, nine families requested to return to Iran. As of 2013, only two of the Fereydan families continue to reside in Georgia (Kaiser 2015: 288–90).

Soviet Azerbaijan presented a much more complicated neighbour for Iran. Just as Soviet Armenia viewed the Armenian diaspora as a dispersed population that should be rightly gathered to its Soviet homeland, Soviet Azerbaijanis looked directly south to an Azeri population larger than their own and saw fertile ground for influence and expansion. An increasingly stable and nationalist Iran, meanwhile, also had its eye on the AzSSR as rightfully Iranian territory (Morozova 2005: 88). This mutual scepticism of the territorial integrity of the two states reached its zenith in the midst of the five-year Soviet occupation of northern Iran during the Second World War. In November 1945 the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, an Iranian Azeri political party, declared the formation of the Azerbaijan People’s Government, an autonomous government of Iranian Azerbaijan. This autonomous government would last a little over a year, and is a defining historical moment in which the territorial fragility of Iran with regard to its Azeri region was cast in stark relief.

Before 1946, Iranian Azerbaijan had risen in separatist revolt once before, in 1920. For approximately nine months, starting early in the year and lasting through September, Sheikh Mohammad Khiyabani, the leader of the Democratic Party in Azerbaijan, founded the autonomous state of Azadistan (‘Land of Freedom’). Azadistan was a nationalist uprising, with Khiyabani identifying himself as an Iranian – rather than ethnic Azeri – patriot opposed to the central government and the persistent British interferences into the country that it facilitated. He framed the revolt as an attempt to restore the constitutional rule that had collapsed in 1912 (Kashani-Sabet 2014: 153). The movement was not devoid of pan-Turkist sentiment and Bolshevik propaganda, however, and while Azadistan collapsed violently and resulted in the execution of Khiyabani, the legacy of Azadistan shaped politics in the region in subsequent decades. Of the seven leaders of the Azerbaijan People’s Government in 1946, five had been involved with Khiyabani, with the Jangali movement (a concurrent rebellion against the central government in the province of Gilan), or with early communist political activities (Atabaki 2000: 123).

The Azerbaijan Democratic Party, led by Jafar Pishevari, splintered off from the Tudeh Party, the most prominent communist party in Iran, as Azeri party members began to prioritise local interests over class solidarity (Atabaki 2000: 102). The ideological underpinnings of the Azerbaijan People’s Government were heavily inflected by the Soviet Union, and Pishevari drew on Soviet nationality-building strategies in building his coalition. Just a few years before leading Iranian Azerbaijan into a breakaway government, Pishevari had been living in Tehran and editing a Persian-language newspaper. In his quest to rally his fellow Iranian Azeris to a political movement built around ethnic identity, he landed on the Azerbaijani language as an effective cause to unite around. This emphasis on language as a national identifier was lifted directly from the Soviet playbook and proved effective (Atabaki 2000: 105). This influence was unsurprising. Most of the leaders of the Azerbaijan People’s Government had spent significant time in Russia or other regions that would come to form the Soviet Union. Atabaki notes that ‘all seven top leaders of the ADF [Azerbaycan Demokrat Firqesi – the Azerbaijan Democratic Party] – Pishevari, Shabestari, Padegan, Javid, Keviyan, Daneshiyan and
Biriya – either studied or spent considerable lengths of time as political activists in tsarist Russia or, later, the Soviet Union’ (Atabaki 2000: 116–17).

In addition to the Soviet influence on Iranian-Azeri political activists, Soviet Azerbaijani political agents were active in Iranian Azerbaijan throughout the Second World War, often advocating for greater Azerbaijani unity despite protests from Moscow. In 1942, Aziz Aliyev, the third secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party, was stationed in Tabriz as an army commander. He took the opportunity to promote Turkic unity and support local communist groups, despite the Soviet ambassador in Tehran’s opposition to such activities (Morozova 2005: 91). Despite suffering from a war-weakened economy, Soviet Azerbaijan provided crucial economic aid to Iranian Azerbaijan during its year of autonomy as well as supplying it with oil (Morozova 2005: 105). The tension between the priorities of the Soviet Union in Iran was caused by the Communist Party of the USSR’s preference not to become too engaged in Iran’s internal affairs while Mir Jafar Baghirov, First Secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party, maintained an active interest in political developments in Iranian Azerbaijan (Atabaki 2000: 142). Baghirov, part of Stalin’s old Caucasian Bolshevik circle, enjoyed influential status within the Soviet Union and was able to pursue a programme of direct involvement in Iranian Azerbaijan through the fall of the People’s Government.

After the dissolution of the Azerbaijan People’s Government and the Iranian military’s reassertion of control over the region at the end of 1946, the Soviet Union’s influence in Iran receded. Prominent Iranian communists such as Pishevari found themselves living in exile in the Soviet Union as Mohammad Reza Shah, who had succeeded Reza Shah in 1941, allied himself firmly with the United States, particularly after the 1953 CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)-backed coup that pushed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh out of power and returned the nation to an absolute monarchy. The Soviet Union’s waning influence in Iranian Azerbaijan was particularly clear during the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79, where, although communists played an important role in the uprising, there was little sign of the Azeri nationalism that had proved so powerful in the immediate post-war era. The religious aspects of the revolution likely contributed to this – Azeris are as included in Shi’ite identity as their Persian brethren. Scholar Svante Cornell further notes that the constitution of the Islamic Republic allowed for considerably greater linguistic and cultural freedoms than the Pahlavi dynasty had (Cornell 1998: 54). In the first decade of the Islamic Republic, therefore, Iranian Azerbaijan did not prove a problematic region, and Iran benefitted from a powerful neighbour in the form of the Soviet Union, who could ensure regional stability.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict

The dissolution of the Soviet Union foisted a host of regional geopolitical challenges upon Iran. Where once it abutted a major world power that tightly controlled its borders, it now shared substantial borders with the three newly independent and economically insolvent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. To further complicate issues, Armenia and Azerbaijan initiated their independence by promptly falling into a war over the region of Nagorny Karabakh (see Chapter 15). This as yet unresolved conflict continues to shape Iran’s relations with its two northern neighbours. Unable to truly control events to the north, Iran views the potential for renewed warfare between the two states as an active threat to its own national security and is anxious that it should not happen (Koolaee and Hafezian 2010: 392).

Karabakh is a mountainous region in the western part of the contemporary Republic of Azerbaijan that, by the early twentieth century, was home to a majority population of
Armenians and a substantial minority of Azeris. Its largest city, Shusha, saw some of the worst violence in the ‘Armeno-Tatar War’ of 1904–5 – a series of ethnic clashes between Azeris and Armenians that ignited across the southern Caucasus in the backdrop of the Russian Revolution of 1905 (see Chapter 9). Both the ArmSSR and AzSSR laid claim to the region, but it ultimately went to Azerbaijan, albeit as an autonomous region. As the Soviet Union sought to reform itself, the Armenians of Karabakh mobilised to join Armenia, and a vicious six-year conflict broke out over the region. Today the conflict is contained by a tense ceasefire, one that is regularly broken by minor skirmishes on the front. Karabakh is an unrecognised state, de jure still part of Azerbaijan but de facto functioning as a region of Armenia (see Chapter 16).

It would seem natural that the Islamic Republic of Iran would err towards supporting fellow Shi’ite nation Azerbaijan in its conflict with Christian Armenia, but a number of factors arose in the early years of Azerbaijani and Armenian independence that pushed Iran closer to Armenia and further from Azerbaijan. There was a moment in 1992 that Iran moved to mediate the conflict and strengthen its geopolitical standing in the South Caucasus, seeking to build stronger ties with both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Inviting Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossian and Acting President of Azerbaijan Yakub Mamedov to Tehran to engage in negotiations in May 1992, Iranian President Akbar Rafsanjani successfully negotiated a ceasefire, announced in a joint statement on 7 May called the Tehran Declaration. Only a day later, however, Armenian forces seized the city of Shusha in Nagorny Karabakh, breaking the ceasefire before it was implemented. Seeing the possibility of military victory, Armenians were disinclined to attempt to salvage it (Mahmudlu and Abilov 2018: 39). Iran, internationally isolated and unable to recruit Russia to support its efforts, abandoned further attempts at mediation (Mahmudlu and Abilov 2018: 45).

Subsequent domestic developments in Azerbaijan further distanced it from Iran politically. Azerbaijan disposed of its former communist leader, Ayaz Mutalibov, rather quickly after independence. After Mamedov’s interim rule, Mutalibov was replaced by the dissident intellectual Abulfaz Elchibey, an idealistic reformer and avowed pan-Turkist. In the story of Caucasian-Iranian relations, Russia is the obvious third player, but Turkey looms large in geopolitical competition in the region as well. Elchibey, who proposed changing the name of the Azeri language to Türkcə (‘Turkish’) and favoured the idea of a Greater Azerbaijan, was in many ways a nightmare leader for Iran. Elchibey’s open embrace of Turkey and disdain for Iran marked a turning point in Iranian policy toward Armenia and Azerbaijan, and from 1992 on it pursued warm relations with Armenia (Zarifian 2008: 130). Iran and Azerbaijan had the opportunity to turn the tide on their souring relations when Heydar Aliyev seized power from Elchibey in 1993. Previously the First Secretary of the AzSSR’s Communist Party under Soviet rule in 1969–82, Aliyev became Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (NAR) in 1991. He had maintained strong relations with Iran in that capacity. Indeed, Iran intervened to protect Nakhchivan from Armenian attack in 1993, sending troops into the province to ensure its safety (Cornell 1998: 61). Despite this, Aliyev was unable to maintain the strong relations as president that he had developed as NAR leader, despite Iranian public opinion calling for government support of Azerbaijan against Armenian ‘infidels’ (Cornell 1998: 55). Azerbaijan, in response to Iran’s increasingly friendly relations with Armenia, turned instead to developing stronger relations with the United States and Turkey (Koolaee and Hafezian 2010: 399). As a result, Iran was increasingly marginalised from mediation in the conflict, despite obvious interest in it for its own security. It has been excluded from the Minsk Group, which is tasked with resolving Azerbaijan and Armenia’s competing claims over Karabakh.
Geopolitical challenges

For Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, three small states surrounded by much larger regional and global powers, foreign relations is a high stakes game with existential implications. The greatest threats to their sovereignty that they perceive dictate regional alliances and result in at times counterintuitive friendships. Thus, Iran’s policy with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia is largely driven by the interests that Russia, Turkey, and Israel have in the region.

The spectre of pan-Turkism has haunted Russia since the imperial era and continues to shape Russian–Turkish relations today. This has been beneficial to Armenia, who views Turkey as its greatest existential threat. Both Russia and Iran are interested in limiting Turkish access to Central Asia, which Turkey, especially under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, views as naturally falling within a Turkish sphere of influence (see Chapter 21). Russia continues to view Central Asia in imperialist terms, as a zone reserved for its economic and political influence. Iran, meanwhile, has waged a largely failing battle for the souls of the Muslims of the former Soviet Union with Turkey and the Gulf states since their independence. This has created a triangle of alliance between Armenia, Iran, and Russia that Azerbaijan, at war with Armenia and suspicious of Iran, is excluded from (Cornell 1998: 63). Armenia, devoid of natural resources and with a shrinking population, is dependent on the support of its large, powerful neighbours to survive. Georgia, meanwhile, has suffered from Russian aggression and violation of its sovereignty since independence. Its regional policies are largely built around staving off Russian encroachment. Maintaining productive relations with other regional powers, notably Turkey, has thus long been its policy. With Iran, it walks a fine balance in its relations between being not too friendly as to alienate the United States, but friendly enough to keep the door open for trade and investment opportunities (Koolaee and Hafezian 2010: 406).

Azerbaijan, in contrast, is perhaps Turkey’s greatest foreign relations success story. Even after the ardent Turkist Elchibey was forced from office, the Azerbaijani government viewed Turkey as its first and greatest ally. The term ‘bir millet, iki dövlet’—‘One nation, two states’—is often used in Azerbaijan to characterise their relationship with Turkey, and Turkish flags in Baku are flown with nearly as much enthusiasm as Azerbaijani flags. For Azerbaijan, it is Iran’s expansionist eye that is the cause of greatest consternation. To many Iranians, the Republic of Azerbaijan has no business existing as an independent state, having been illegally seized by the Russians in the nineteenth century. This attitude has characterised Iranian nationalism for the last century, with the Iranian delegation of the Paris Peace Conference advocating for a reversal of the Treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchai (1828), the treaties that ceded the southern Caucasus to Russia (Cornell 1998: 56). As recently as 2013, Iranian lawmakers called for a renegotiation of the Treaty of Turkmenchai (Turkmanchay), with state media suggesting that such a renegotiation would lead to an annexation of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Synovitz 2013). It should be noted that Iranian scepticism of the Republic of Azerbaijan’s right to sovereignty remains confined to the realm of rhetoric; Iran has never moved to violate it, and does not seem inclined to, instead focusing on soft power influence that will be discussed in the next section. Some Azerbaijani politicians have embraced the same rhetorical tactics as their Iranian counterparts, arguing that a renegotiation of the treaty should, rather, lead to the consolidation of Iranian Azerbaijan under the Republic of Azerbaijan’s rule (Synovitz 2013). This nineteenth-century treaty continues to be a tool that both Iranian and Azerbaijani lawmakers employ to antagonise each other. The legacy of porous borders and shared culture allows both states to envision spheres of influence that extend into each other’s territory without always respecting each
other’s sovereignty. Armenia does not contend with such blurred boundaries; the Armenian population is quite small and, as a Christian community, is excluded from the Islamic Republic’s vision of itself as shepherd of global Shi’ism.

Iran has little to fear existentially from its small neighbours, but its contentious relations with Western powers shape its relationship with Azerbaijan in significant ways. Perhaps Iran’s greatest frustration with Azerbaijan is the latter’s persistently friendly ties to Israel. Israel maintains an embassy in Baku and by some estimates Azerbaijan provides 40 per cent of Israel’s oil (Altstadt 2017: 188). In return, Azerbaijan regularly makes multi-million-dollar purchases of advanced weaponry from Israel. Iran often accuses Azerbaijan of allowing Mossad, Israel’s intelligence agency, to use its border as an access point into its territory and has arrested Azerbaijani nationals for spying on behalf of Israel (Altstadt 2017: 188). Baku has rejected such charges, but the quid-pro-quo nature of its relationship with Israel is undeniable (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2012). The suspicions of espionage and their connections to Israel, meanwhile, are mutual. Since the mid-2000s, Azerbaijan’s national security forces have arrested dozens of citizens for operating as spies for Iran, primarily accusing them of monitoring Western and Israeli activities in the nation or plotting attacks on Israeli diplomats.

In opposition to Azerbaijan’s friendly relationship with Israel and readiness to cooperate with NATO, Armenia has maintained a measured distance from Israel and displays a general lack of interest in NATO membership (although it is not averse to cooperation.) Even when former Iranian President Ahmadinejad openly denied the Holocaust in 2005, a move that would seem likely to provoke a nation focused on gaining recognition for its own genocide, Armenia continued to voice support for him and the Iranian government. One reason for this disinclination to join the international chorus condemning Ahmadinejad was that Israel has yet to recognise the Armenian genocide, preferring to protect diplomatic relations with Turkey (Zarifian 2008: 131–2). For Armenia, isolated in its western and eastern borders, positive relations with Iran is an economic and geopolitical necessity. Since 2008, Iran and Armenia have signed approximately ninety Memorandums of Understanding on expansion of mutual cooperation, mostly concerning economic ties (Zarifian 2008: 133). For Iran, Armenia is a stable and agreeable state to share a border with, and as Iran becomes increasingly isolated by US sanctions, such relations become ever more valuable.

Georgia’s relationship with Iran is largely predicated on the fact that, with its extremely fraught relationship with Russia, it needs to diversify its regional alliances. While pursuing comparatively few bilateral relations with Iran when compared to Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran represents an important alternative source of gas for Georgia. When Russia cut off its gas exports to Georgia in 2006, Iran helped alleviate the energy crisis with an export of gas to the country (Koolaee and Hafezian 2010: 407). Though a dedicated United States ally, Georgia maintains diplomatic relations with Iran because of the potential economic and geopolitical benefits they could produce.

**Iranian and Azerbaijani soft power**

Beyond existential threats, Iran and Azerbaijan both serve as sources of domestic instability for each other. In the Iranian case, the existence of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan threatens to stir separatist tendencies in Iranian Azerbaijan. For the stridently secular government of Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran feeds a growing Islamist movement that the government is anxious to suppress. Thus, while certain populations in the two states see the exchange of ideas and movement of peoples between them as highly productive, neither government is pleased with the results of these exchanges.
Iran has tried to make religious inroads into Azerbaijan since the early nineties, initially with little success. Azerbaijani women in the nineties had been educated in the secular Soviet system and dressed much the same as their non-Muslim Soviet counterparts. When a delegation of 22 Islamist women missionaries from the Women’s Society of the Islamic Republic arrived in Baku in the summer of 1992 dressed in heavy black chadors (full-body veils), Azerbaijani women were horrified. The chador proved so counterproductive as a missionary symbol that male Iranian Islamists began encouraging their female counterparts to abandon it as an issue, something they were reluctant to do (Tohidi 2011: 210–11). Despite their efforts, the chador has never been widely adopted in Azerbaijan, but Iranian efforts have led to a slow increase in visible religious expression in Azerbaijan. More moderate versions of Islamic dress have become more common in Azerbaijani society, however, much to the government’s chagrin. Many secular Azerbaijani women view younger women’s adoption of hijab (a headscarf) as a fashion trend more than a true expression of religion (Heyat 2002: 184; see Chapter 25). Protests in support of women’s right to veil in public schools, meanwhile, tend to consist entirely of male protesters. Whatever their motivation, women who adopt Islamic dress in Azerbaijan face discrimination in employment and the judgment of the still solidly secular ruling class.

Religious sentiment has increased in Azerbaijan, resulting not just from Iranian influence but also Islamic Turkish and Wahhabi proselytising. Iran’s role in the resurgence of religious activity in Azerbaijan is the most pronounced, however, and the most concerning for the government. Under the Aliyevs, the government has been quick to suppress religious groups linked to Iran. Heydar Aliyev revoked the registration of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, closely linked to Iran, in the mid-1990s, and stepped up crackdowns following the 1997 murder of the academic Ziya Bünuyadov, purportedly by Iranian Hezbollah affiliates (Altstadt 2017: 187). Iran has since finessed its approach to spreading religious influence in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani religious students regularly seek training in Iranian madrasahs, and many prominent Shi’a clerics in Azerbaijan are Iranian-trained (Altstadt 2017: 187). Through these clerics and their congregations, Iran maintains a network of influence in Azerbaijan.

The emergence of an independent, ethnically Azeri state on the border of Iranian Azerbaijan has proved worrying for Iran. Although many Iranian Azeris are proud Iranian nationalists who view the Azeri population as every bit as Iranian and persophone, other Azeris do hold separatist tendencies. The Republic of Azerbaijan is often happy to stoke these tendencies, and, while protests near the Israeli embassy are forbidden, has allowed protests in support of greater Azeri cultural autonomy to be held outside the Iranian embassy. Contemporary Iranian fears of Azerbaijani separatism are supported by historical experience, and Iranian authorities are anxious to discourage too much rhetoric around a ‘Greater Azerbaijan’.

As the Iranian economy suffers from continued sanctions and government mismanagement, the risk of increased separatist sentiment in Iranian Azerbaijan grows. As a minority population with a state to look out to, Iranian Azeris who grow dissatisfied with Tehran’s policies can look to the Republic of Azerbaijan for alternative models of governance. Although recent drops in oil prices have proved devastating to the value of the Azerbaijani manat, Azerbaijan maintains a growing economy and a glittering capital built up by oil money, populated by a superficially more socially freewheeling population that might prove attractive to many Iranian youths. The extent to which the idea of a united Azerbaijan has taken hold in the Azeri Iranian imagination is on full display at the football matches of the popular Tabrizi team Traktor Sazi. Fans of opposing teams often heckle the Azeri fan base by braying like donkeys (‘Turk-e kher’ – ‘Turkish donkey’ – being a common ethnic insult for Azeris in Iran.) Traktor Sazi fans respond with a call and response chant: Azerbaycan varolson! Istemeyen kor olsun! –

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‘May Azerbaijan be united, may the opponents go blind!’ And yet, the challenges that such unification of the two Azerbajans would pose is immediately betrayed in the second part of that chant, ‘Azerbaycan var olsun, Tabriz paytakht olsun!’ — ‘May Azerbaijan be united, may Tabriz be the capital!’ It seems unlikely that the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan could ever imagine giving up Baku as their capital, revealing the fundamental differences the two populations hold on their ideas of the meaning of Azerbaijan, and where it is centred. The reality of the unlikeliness of an Azerbaijani unification is small comfort to Iranian authorities, however, and openly separatist rhetoric is dealt with harshly.

**Conclusion**

Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia share an intimate history. Such intimacy can be called upon to strengthen ties, as in the case of Iran and Armenia, but contributes to the contentious nature of Iranian-Azerbaijani relations. The divergent manner in which shared histories and cultural ties affects Iran’s policies toward the two states is a function of how national identities have evolved over the past century.

As Iranian national identity developed along ethno-religious lines, Christian Armenians, despite being a population with a long history in Iran, became increasingly excluded from Iranian identity. Russian Armenians developed their own national identity, and with the foundation of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, the future Republic of Armenia embraced a Soviet understanding of nationalities as primordial and territorial. Armenia thus became a ‘homeland’ to all diasporic Armenians. With the 1978–79 revolution and the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in which Shi’ite identity became a foundation to Iranian identity, Iran’s dwindling Armenian population became even further excluded. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran readily accepted the sovereign nationhood of Armenia. Shared imperial histories and a common cultural language became a productive foundation for contemporary relations, and Armenia and Iran consistently find themselves with shared geopolitical and economic interests. How this relationship will change in light of the recent revolution and ascent to power by Nikol Pashinyan, who has expressed interest in closer ties to the European Union and the United States, remains to be seen.

Without a shared border and with a small diasporic community that, having converted to Shi’a Islam centuries ago, shares more culturally with the majority of the Iranian population than it does with contemporary Georgians, Georgia’s historical ties to Iran have grown thinner over time. Today, it views Iran primarily as an alternative source of natural gas to Russia. As Georgia attempts to wean itself off Russian gas, it must also respect its ally the United States, especially after the Trump administration re-imposed sanctions on Iran in 2018. Caught between Russia and its US ally, Georgia proceeds cautiously with Iran.

The numerous vectors of shared identity and history between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan have fuelled anxiety and suspicion. The majority Shi’ite Azerbaijan immediately faced Iranian interest and cultural intervention upon independence, and Azerbaijan’s leadership, shaped by their Soviet heritage, naturally clashed with Iran’s theocratic government. The idea of Azerbaijani nationhood, something that had persistently vexed generations of Iranian rulers, was now fully realised directly to the north of Iranian Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani and Iranian leaders both appeal to their common histories more often as a means to antagonise one another and assert their rights to intervene in each other’s domestic affairs than as a means of cooperation. With the Aliyevs firmly entrenched in power and more interested in the benefits of cooperation with Israel than friendly relations with a government that, occasionally, denies the Republic of Azerbaijan’s right to exist, things appear unlikely to change.
Notes

1 Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944), founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty in 1925. A former general in the Qajar Dynasty’s elite Cossack Brigade, he seized power in a British-assisted coup d’état in 1921 and officially deposed the last Qajar shah in 1925.

2 The Democratic Party was the more radical of the two major parties that arose during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–12).

References


