Political and Cultural Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan: A Review

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to study the bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan from past to present. We try to have a positive look at their relations. In this regard, first we briefly discuss the political relations between two friendly countries, and then we review some cultural commonalities between them. Given the previous related events, this paper suggest that Azerbaijan–Iran bilateral relations is gradually improving with the advent of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, and both have tendency to grow their relations by signing more treaties for cooperation in many sectors.

Keywords: International relations, cultural relations, political relations, Iran, Azerbaijan.
1. Introduction

Iran and Azerbaijan share, to a large extent, the same history, religion, and culture. The territory of what is now called the Republic of Azerbaijan was only separated from Iran in the first half of the 19th century. Iran and Azerbaijan have had modern diplomatic relations since 1918. Iran recognized Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, and diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1992. Both countries are full members of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). A very large amount of ethnic Azerbaijanis live in the northwest of Iran and both are Shia majority countries. According to Swietochowski (1995), the territories of Iran and the republic of Azerbaijan usually shared the same history from the time of ancient Media and the Persian Empire. With the advent of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran in late 2013, relations between the two neighboring countries have gradually but significantly improved. Figure 1 illustrates the geographical location of two countries.

The studies on the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan in the recent period indicate that the necessary researches have been carried out in this field and many resources are now available. In the field of political relations between two countries, several books have been authored by Azerbaijani scholars. For example: Soltanzadeh and Vardiev (2003) about the evolution of bilateral relations of two countries in the past two decades; Abbasbeyli (1995) about relations between the two countries on the international issues; Safarali and Alibeyoglu (1994) about Heydar Aliyev's official visit to Iran in 29 June 1994, and the results of interviews and press conferences of the leaders of the two countries; Mahmudlu (2006) about the history of Azerbaijan as well as various social-political circles; Abdullayev (2000); Musayev (2001); Hassanali (1993); and Piriiev (2002) each investigated the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan and International Relations. There are also some Persian books written by Iranian authors in this field. For example: Amir Ahmadian (2005) about political, economic, cultural and strategic position of the two friendly and neighboring countries; Mollazadeh (1994) about political commonalities between the two countries; Zoley (1998); Esmaeilzadeh (2004); Koolaee (1997); Haji Yousefi (2005); Moghtader (1978), and many other works.

In addition to political relation, there are several books written in national and international level discussing various aspects of ancient and strong bilateral relations between Iran and Azerbaijan including cultural heritage, religion, language, customs, etc. For example: Huart (1997) studied the composition of the plateau, culture, and Persian Empire; Mollazadeh (1994) pointed to the culture, Nowroz, friendship and cultural commonalities between Iran and Azerbaijan; Fawcett (1995) explored the causes, course and consequences of the Azerbaijan crisis from an Iranian perspective. Herzig (1995) examined Iran's economic and ideological interests in the new states across its northern borders including Azerbaijan. Considering the previous studies, in this paper first we discuss the political relations and then we study the cultural relations of the two countries.

2. Political Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan

The emergence of some events in the twentieth century such as the collapse of the socialism including the Soviet Union influenced the structure of international relations. The newly independent states of the former Soviet Union in terms of number and isolation from the socialist system, found a new place in international life and entered into the international political, economic, and cultural arena. This unexpected process that quickly rose in the republics of the

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Soviet Union, not only created the new impacts on the new independent states and neighboring countries, but also established a series of problems in those countries. One feature of this period was that strong and skilled actors in international relations, to achieve their interests and economic, political, military and strategic objectives, benefited from the political gap on the territory of the former Soviet Union and created a better place for themselves.

The republic of Azerbaijan as one of the states of former Soviet Union declared their independence in October 18, 1991 and hereby entered into the international community as a sovereign state. In this transitional period, South Caucasus and Central Asia attracted the attention of Iranian government, which had its own very fruitful and long-standing governance practices. It is obvious that in such circumstances, the position of Azerbaijan in foreign policy of the Iran was of special importance because first, they were neighbors with common borders, and second, there were several commonalities bind the two countries together including: religion, language, rich cultural heritage, and tradition. These factors in relations between Iran and Azerbaijan were considerably effective since leaders believe that relations between the two countries was formed based on the principle of good neighborliness, friendship and international rules and is still growing.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries was begun since the independence of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic during 1918-1920 AD. In 1919, Qajar Iran and Azerbaijan Democratic Republic did have some exchanges at governmental level. On 16 July 1919, the Council of Ministers appointed Adil Khan Ziatkhan, who had up to that time served as Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic representative of the republic of Azerbaijan to the court of the Persian King of Kings. A Persian delegation headed by Seyyed Zia'eddin Tabatabae came to Baku, to negotiate transit, tariff, mail, customs, and other such agreements. Speeches were made in which the common bonds between Caucasian Azerbaijan and Iran were stressed (Kazemzadeh, 1951), but these relations were interrupted until 1991 after the occupation of Azerbaijan by the Red Army in 1920.

When Azerbaijan restored its independence during the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Iran was one of the first countries that recognized Azerbaijan's independence, and upgraded its consulate in Baku. Inauguration of embassies in the capitals of the two countries evolved their relationship and nevertheless, prepared the conditions for potential practical solution of problems that were in the way of the development of relations. In addition, a valid legal procedure that had the necessary condition for the development of relations between the two countries was put on the agenda, and therefore, according to the Charter of the United Nations, they signed almost 100 cooperation documents. Progress and development of communication technology provided favorable conditions for mutual visits of heads of governments which were very effective on the Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. Official visits of former presidents of Iran Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Azerbaijan, and official visits of Heydar Aliyev and Ilham Aliyev to Iran was the reason for in the development of relations between the two countries. One of the issues facing relations between Iran and Azerbaijan is Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. In this regard, the Islamic Republic of Iran has always recognized Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and believes that the conflict can be solved only through negotiations, and at the same time, Iran has announced its participation in the settlement.

With the advent of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran in late 2013, relations between the two neighboring countries have improved. Launching a bus service between the cities of Ardabil and Baku (Niayesh, 2014), forming a joint defense commission (Lomsadze, 2015),
the prospects for cooperation in the petrochemical sector, cooperation in tourism (Orujova, 2015), and several more treaties and accords related to the expansion of cultural, economical, strategical were signed as of 2015, or were announced to be signed in the near future (Fars News Agency, 2015; Rajabova, 2015; ABC.Az Agency, 2015). Speaking about relations with Iran in May 2015, President Ilham Aliyev said the Iranian-Azerbaijani friendship is unbreakable and no extraneous force can split it (Orujova, 2014). In May 2015, the Ambassador of Iran to Azerbaijan announced that it doesn't recognize the self-proclaimed “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic”. He further stated that: “There is no country called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and the Islamic Republic of Iran does not recognize such “a country”. Of course, we don’t recognize the “elections held there” (News.Az Agency, 2015).

3. Cultural Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan

One of factors that have had an acceptable impact on the development of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan is cultural commonalities. Cultural relations between two countries have a long history, and since it originate from the vast masses of people called “Public diplomacy”, it has been more lasting relationships and have overcome prohibitions and pressures during Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Two neighboring countries have many cultural commonalities in celebrations and rituals of the ancient Nowruz, the Iranian ancient relic. Azerbaijan is a land where Iranian music and its Dastgahs (i.e. musical instruments) such as Chahargah, Segah, Homayoun, Bayat-e Tork, and Shur have come to immortality. Poems of Persian poets like Nizami Ganjavi, Khagani Shirvani, Ferdowsi, Rumi, Hafez, thousands of Persian words, geographic names are used by Azeri people; their physical body and faces is similar to Iranians; their intimacy with Iranians all indicates a deep cultural affinity between them. In terms of diplomacy, Iran always supports Azerbaijan civilization before and after its independence in micro and macro levels and welcomed the agreement in communications media, and believes that cultural and political tension between the its north neighbors in the shadow of negative propaganda the shadow of negative propaganda of other countries, have adverse effect on Iran and Azerbaijan. Iranian leaders emphasize that the Islamic culture of Iran helps the development of international relations and regional stability, especially the development of two friendly countries. “For Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not just an ordinary country. First of all, Iran is the Azerbaijan Republic's southern neighbor. The 2 states share about 618 kilometers of land borders. These two countries border each other in the Caspian Sea as well. Both countries share values from their mutual past and some elements of a common culture. Azerbaijan has the second largest Shi'i population in the world, after Iran. The membership of both countries in Muslim and regional organizations like the Organization of Islamic Conference and ECO, is an indicator of the countries' affinities in terms of geography and religion” (Nassibi, 2014). In development of relations between the two friendly and Muslim countries which are based on the principles of good neighborliness must not interrupted by minor and solvable problems and challenges in securing national interests among them in order to establish peace, stability, trade relations, and economy based on mutual interests in the Near East, the Middle East and South Caucasus region.

4. Conclusion

In this research we gave a positive look at the relation between Iran and Azerbaijan in terms of policy and culture. By reviewing the recent cultural relations of two countries from past to presents, we can find out that the development of cultural relations between the two countries
has a long history and both have many common cultures in terms of art, language, heritage, religion, and customs which can play a decisive role in relations. Also, study of political relations between two friendly countries showed that their bilateral relations is gradually improving with the advent of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, and both have tendency to grow their relations by signing more treaties for cooperation in many sectors such as energy, transportation, defense, tourism, and investment. Various mutual elations and existing contracts dictate that in order to advance relations between two countries, legal practice in all areas of diplomacy should be observed properly, and all forms of barriers to expansion of bilateral relations should be eliminated.
References


Figure 1. Location of Iran and Azerbaijan