

# *Azerbaijan - Iran: History of Relations & Challenges*

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## 1. The History

*The history of Azerbaijan* could be traced to the Russo-Persian war of 1826-28 that resulted in Russia annexing the Caucasus region and stripping Persia (Iran) of its territories which were extended to the Southern Caucasus and upto few parts of the North Caucasus. Post **Turkmenchay treaty**, Russia became the dominant power completing the conquest of all the Caucasian territories from Persia including the regions of modern-day Armenia and Azerbaijan. Iran could not regain the territories lost and the Caucasus region remained under Russia till 1918 for about 160 years.

Post 1917, after the collapse of the Russian empire, the Trans-Caucasian Federation was formed by the Armenian, Azerbaijan and Georgian intelligentsia, however, it was short-lived. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was proclaimed in May 1918 by the Musawat. It was independent nation for a very short period from 1918 to 1920 before it was incorporated into the Soviet Union. The long period from 1920 to 1989 witnessed few futile attempts by the Azerbaijanis to raise their voices to be an independent nation.

On the disintegration of the erstwhile USSR in August 1991, there emerged 15 separate nations. Azerbaijan was one of the 15 countries to become independent republic along with Armenia and Georgia in the South Caucasus region. It started having formal relations as an independent Republic thereafter with its neighbours.

*The history of Iran* is a history of Persia with its empire stretched from Indus River in the east to Anatolia in the west; from Caucasus in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south while being centred in the modern day Iran. The Persian Empire had the arch rivals as Roman Empire followed by Byzantine empire. Despite having had its fair share of onslaughts by

Mongols, Turks, Arabs and Macedonians, Iran endured all these invasions and asserted itself as a distinct identity.

The Muslim conquest of Persia in mid-seventh century was a key turning point as it resulted in Islamisation of Iran leading eventually to the decline of Zoroastrianism. The Safavid dynasty brought Iran as a unified force and set Shia Islam as the official religion in 1501. Once again, Iran reasserted itself even in the face of its arch rival, the Ottoman Empire. Thus started the monarchy that lasted from 1501 till 1979 when the Iranian revolution took place and subsequently, Iran was declared as an Islamic Republic on April 1, 1979.

## **2. The ethnic & cultural imbroglio**

For both, Azerbaijan and Iran, the common most denominators are culture and faith. And, it is due to the fact that the region of modern day Azerbaijan was once a territory of Persia (Iran) for centuries, it has an umbilical cord still connected with Iran seeped in the historical legacy. Azerbaijan was initially a part of Persian empires such as Median, Parthians, Achaemenid and Sassanid and later of Iranian Intermezzo such as the Safavids, Afsharids, Zands and Qajars. It followed Zoroastrianism during the reign of dynasties of Persian empire and Islam after the conquest of Iran by the Arab and conversion of faith of its people to Islam. Subsequently, the settlement of nomadic Turkic origin people in the Caucasus region led to intensive inter-mingling of culture and language leading to phasing out of Persian language by the Turkic dialect, Azerbaijani.

The treaties of Gulistan in 1813 and the Turkmenchay in 1828 changed the political landscape of Azerbaijan as it was brought under the Russian Czarist empire, thus creating a boundary between the Azerbaijan and its parental land. Over a period of time, the cultural legacy started fading and was replaced by the sense of national identity of Azerbaijani. Post two decades of the twentieth century, the aspirations of Azerbaijanis came into being as the state of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was created in 1918. It was short lived as the Soviet forces invaded the country in 1920 and established the Azerbaijan Soviet Social Republic (SSR). It was part of Soviet Union till its collapse in 1991 when it became an independent Republic.

Post independence of Azerbaijan, the natural affinity between Iran and Azerbaijan could have easily and confidently grown because of shared history, culture and faith. The faith, in particular, as these are the two countries having majority of Shiite Muslim population as compared to other Muslim countries which have majority of Sunni Muslim population. It was

said to be a foregone conclusion that these two Islamic neighbouring countries would get along well. However, it turned out that cultural, religious and historical commonality could not forge into political bonhomie, rather, the countries are at logger-heads on various issues since the formal declaration of state of Azerbaijan. The irony is that the religion, ethnicity, historical legacy and the geographical proximity has just not been adequate enough to propel the two countries towards meaningful friendship. The deficit of trust, lack of bonhomie, national core interests and the idea of identity of the state has overshadowed the historical linkages.

### **3. The geo-strategic importance of Azerbaijan & Iran: A regional power nexus**

Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran share a 620 km long border and are the two major countries in the Caucasus and the Middle Eastern region. Azerbaijan is strategically located in the Caucasus region connecting the Eastern European countries to the Central Asia as also it holds the key to the approaches to the Caspian Sea and thus controls the entries/exits of the nations which are oil and energy-hungry to the resources of Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan. Few political scholars describe Azerbaijan as a geo-political pivot of Eurasia as it sits at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Russia and the Middle East.

Iran on the other hand, is a major country in the Middle East region with northern territories in proximity to the Caucasus region. It considers Azerbaijan as a natural extension of its Azerbaijani region in Northwest.

The regional geopolitical dynamics have a significant impact on the Azerbaijan-Iran relationship. Iran has historically maintained close ties with Azerbaijan's ethnic Azeri population, particularly those living in Iran's northwestern regions. The presence of this ethnic group has led to concerns in Iran regarding pan-Turkic sentiments and potential separatist movements, making Tehran cautious in its dealings with Azerbaijan.

The complex web of regional politics, including Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia and its involvement in Syria and Iraq, also affects the dynamics between Azerbaijan and Iran. Azerbaijan seeks to balance its relationships with Iran, Russia, and Turkey, taking into account their competing interests in the region.

The geo-strategic importance of Azerbaijan and Iran cannot be overstated in the context of regional dynamics and global affairs.

### **3.1 Azerbaijan's Geo-strategic Significance and Energy Resources**

Azerbaijan's abundant energy resources, particularly its vast oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea, contribute significantly to its geo-strategic importance. It serves as a key supplier to Europe through the Southern Gas Corridor, diversifying the continent's energy resources and reducing dependence on traditional suppliers. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline are vital components of Azerbaijan's energy infrastructure, allowing it to export its resources to global markets.

#### **3.1.1 Transport and Trade**

Azerbaijan's strategic location makes it a crucial transit hub connecting Europe and Asia. The country's well-developed transportation infrastructure, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Baku International Sea Trade Port, facilitates trade between China, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe. Its role as a transit corridor enhances its regional importance and strengthens its economic ties with neighbouring countries.

#### **3.1.2 Regional Security**

Azerbaijan's military capabilities and geographic position influences its regional security dynamics. Its military modernization, coupled with its strategic alliances, particularly with Turkey, enhances its influence in regional security affairs.

### **3.2 Iran's Geo-Strategic Significance and Energy Resources**

Iran possesses one of the world's largest proven oil and gas reserves. Its access to the Persian Gulf gives it significant control over global energy supply routes. Iran's energy resources provide it with economic leverage and geopolitical influence, attracting the attention of major powers. Its ambition to become an energy hub is evident in projects like the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline and plans to connect with European markets via pipelines passing through Iraq and Syria.

### **3.2.1 Regional Stability**

Iran's central position in the Middle East, along with its historical and cultural ties, has enabled it to exert influence over regional dynamics. The country's involvement in neighbouring countries, such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, has shaped the balance of power in the region. Iran's support for various non-state actors. Such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, adds to its strategic significance, giving it leverage in regional negotiations and conflicts.

### **3.2.2 Nuclear Program**

Iran's nuclear program has been a topic of international concern and controversy for many years. The program, which began in the 1950s with the help of foreign assistance, has been a source of tension between Iran and the international community. The primary objective of Iran's nuclear program, as stated by the Iranian government, is to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes such as electricity generation and medical research.

However, there have been widespread suspicions that Iran's nuclear program has military dimensions, particularly regarding the development of nuclear weapons. This has led to numerous negotiations, sanctions, and international inspections in an attempt to monitor and control Iran's nuclear activities. The United Nations Security Council, along with the United States, European Union, and other countries, has imposed economic sanctions on Iran to pressure it into cooperating and limiting its nuclear ambitions.

In 2015, Iran and a group of world powers known as the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States plus Germany) reached a landmark agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to curb its nuclear program and allow inspections in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. The agreement aimed to ensure that Iran's nuclear activities remained peaceful and transparent.

However, in 2018, the United States withdrew from the JCPOA under the Trump administration and reimposed sanctions on Iran. This move further strained relations between Iran and the international community and increased tensions in the region. In response, Iran

gradually began to exceed the limits set by the JCPOA on uranium enrichment and stockpiling, raising concerns about its nuclear ambitions.

Efforts to revive the JCPOA and address Iran's nuclear program have continued in recent years. In 2021, negotiations took place in Vienna between Iran and the remaining parties to the JCPOA, including the United States under the Biden administration. The talks aimed to bring all parties back into compliance with the agreement and address concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program.

The future of Iran's nuclear program remains uncertain, as it continues to be a complex and contentious issue. The international community, including the United Nations and major world powers, will continue to closely monitor Iran's nuclear activities and engage in diplomatic efforts to ensure that Iran's program remains peaceful and transparent, without posing a threat to regional stability and global security.

#### **4. The friction & fissures**

Even with the shared history and common faith, and being members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference both Azerbaijan and Iran do not have good relations, but both countries share values from their mutual past and some elements of a common culture. Azerbaijan has the second largest Shi'ite population in the world, after Iran. The membership of both countries in Muslim and regional organisations like the Organisation of Islamic Conference and ECO, is an indicator of the countries' affinities in terms of geography and religion.

The two neighbours, Azerbaijan and Iran have been accusing each other for the past few months over a number of issues and escalating the response matrix. The act of a gunman storming the Azerbaijan embassy in Baku in January this year and killing the head of security and wounding a few others has been taken seriously by Azerbaijan and it lashed out at Baku for the security lapse. In response, Azerbaijan has shut down its embassy in Iran stating the act as a terrorist act. Tehran, on the contrary, considers it as an act by a lone gunman with a personal motive and agenda and that in a larger perspective, the diplomatic relations between the two countries should not be impacted by this.

Baku has been linking covert terrorist and anti-national activities on its soil sponsored by Iran and its secret service. It has arrested a few Azerbaijanis linking with the terrorist activities.

Iran, on the other hand, has been accusing Azerbaijan of inciting and whipping the separatist sentiments amongst the Turkic Azerbaijanis inhabiting the Northwest regions of the country.

In addition, Azerbaijan has been blaming Iran for its blatant support to Armenia on the issue of century-old Nagorno-Karabakh.

At the international relations level, the issue of a close alliance of Azerbaijan with Turkey and Israel is pricking Iran the most. With the embassy of Azerbaijan being opened in Tel Aviv and the first-ever ambassador nominated, the ties between the two countries are getting strengthened. Baku needs the support of Israel in terms of armament and a counter-balancing factor to the US-Armenian alliance. In return, Azerbaijan is a major oil supplier to Israel.

There are other challenges which persist between the Azerbaijan-Iran relationship. One such challenge is Iran's nuclear program, which has raised concerns among Azerbaijan's international partners, including the United States and Israel. Azerbaijan, as a secular Muslim-majority country, strives to maintain a delicate equilibrium, avoiding taking sides on sensitive issues while seeking to protect its national interests.

Moreover, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh has implications for the Azerbaijan-Iran relationship. Iran has a sizable ethnic Armenian population and maintains close ties with Armenia. However, it also shares a long border with Azerbaijan and has economic interests in the region. Balancing these factors requires careful diplomacy on both sides.

## **5. The road ahead**

The Azerbaijan-Iran relationship is a complex interplay of history, economics, regional dynamics, and geopolitical considerations. Both countries recognize the importance of cooperation while navigating various challenges and maintaining a delicate balance in their interactions. As regional dynamics continue to evolve, the future of Azerbaijan-Iran relations will depend on the ability of both countries to adapt and find common ground to promote stability, economic development, and mutual understanding.

Despite these challenges, Azerbaijan and Iran have also maintained various levels of cooperation. They share cultural ties, including a common Turkic heritage, and have engaged in trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges. Efforts have been made to improve diplomatic relations and address some of the challenges between the two countries, although progress

can be slow and difficult. Overall, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Iran remains in flux and with a complex mix of cooperation, competition and occasional tensions.

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