



# UNISCI Discussion Papers

## THE CREATION OF THE AZERBAIJANI IDENTITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON FOREIGN POLICY

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The Azerbaijani identity is a quite complex identity: They are ethnically Turks and Muslims, although they follow the Shiite interpretation. They have also lived under Tsarist and Soviet rule, thus acquiring a Russian heritage. For all these reasons we can affirm that Azerbaijanis have received several and very different influences, all of which are reflected in the current Azerbaijani foreign policy.

### 1. The Azerbaijanis

Some days ago, one of my students asked what an Azerbaijani is. Another one, with Persian ancestors, replied that an Azerbaijani is like a *Gallego*<sup>2</sup> in Spain. At that moment I didn't agree with him, but after reflecting on this question I consider that it could be a good comparison.

The Azerbaijani people do not live exclusively in the current Republic of Azerbaijan. They live along a huge territory which goes from the Caucasus to Northern Iran, near the city of Zenjan. It comprises one independent state, Azerbaijan and three provinces under the sovereignty of the Islamic Republic of Iran: East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan and Ardebil. In the middle of those territories, we can find the dividing line, the Araz River. The break up of historical Azerbaijan took place in 1828 as a result of the Turkmenchay Treaty which buried the hatchet between Iran and Russia.

The Azerbaijani identity is a very sensitive and difficult issue. Azerbaijanis have some features that make them people with especial characteristics. There are some elements that we must take into account when we try to establish their identity:

- The Shi'ism in Azerbaijan is the religion of the majority. This element is the result of their Persian heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.

<sup>2</sup> Gallegos, in Spain, are people from Galicia. Galicia is a region in the North of Spain. Gallegos are similar to Portuguese. They share costumes and some words.



- The Azerbaijani language belongs to the Turkish family, a consequence of the Turkish influence.
- The Russian-style education established a bridge between Azerbaijan and the European continent. This issue is the most important aspect of the Russian legacy.
- Finally there are some Azerbaijani elements that belong to their own history and make the Azerbaijani people even more singular.

## **2. The Persian element in the creation of the Azerbaijani identity**

The beginnings of the Persian influence in Azerbaijan are quite remote. We must go back to the Persian empire to find the origin of this special relationship. From the beginning, Azerbaijani people were very involved with the Persian culture. They were against the Arab invasion alleging that they followed the Zoroastrianism as a religion because of their Persian influence<sup>3</sup>. This aspect was a key point during the Babak Revolt (816-817) which tried to prevent the islamization of Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani people only accepted Islam when the Safavid interpretation was established in the region. The Safavids united all the people under the Shiite branches of Islam<sup>4</sup>. In general, it can be said that Persia before and Iran now has a lot of influence over Azerbaijan in the religious and cultural fields. Even today, we could affirm where the Azerbaijani spiritual centre is located: south of the Araz river, exactly in Iran<sup>5</sup>.

They, the Safavids, decided to establish their capital in Tabriz<sup>6</sup> (1501) which is, even today, the traditional capital of Azerbaijan although it is located in the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was a gesture of affection with the Azerbaijani people living in both banks of the Araz River. The Safavid regime extended their dominance up to the pre-Islamic borders. During this period, Persian and Turkish people lived in harmony in this region without any ethnic problems. Although the Safavids' leader in Iran<sup>7</sup>, Shah Ismail, was a Turkish-speaking leader, he followed the Shiite faith. This aspect is another important element of the Azerbaijani national identity; they are Turkish-speaking people although they received other influences in other fields, for instance the Shiite faith.

During the same period, between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Tabriz<sup>8</sup> was victim of several Ottoman attacks launched from the Anatolian peninsula. The main consequence of

<sup>3</sup> "The prophet Zoroaster later known to Europeans as Zarathustra lived sometime between the tenth and seventh century b.C in what is now north-eastern Iran". Kinzer, Stephen (2003): *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the roots of Middle East Terror*. Honoken, John Wiley & Son, pp-18.

<sup>4</sup> "By 1500 the Safavids had converted to Shi'is and Esmail, the thirteen-year-old son of a killed Safavid leader, Sheikh Heydar, decided to expand territory and avenge his father's death". "The history of the Safavids", in *The Persian Mirror*, <http://www.thepersianmirror.com>.

<sup>5</sup> "In fact, Azerbaijan has been at odds with Iran for the most part of 1990s, due to Tehran's funding of various Islamic groups and parties in Azerbaijan". Ismailzade, Fariz: "New survey in Azerbaijan shows rising influence of Islam", The Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 2, Issue 37, 23 February 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Shaffer, Brenda (2002): *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*. Washington, D.C., MIT.

<sup>7</sup> The name "Iran" comes from the *Aryans* who populated Iran coming from Central Asia.

<sup>8</sup> Tabriz is still a controversial topic in the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan: "The ambassador pointed out that both Iranian and Azerbaijani officials were exerting real efforts to make bilateral relations even better". *The Baku Today*, 13 January 2003, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.



these actions was the pre-eminence of the Persian language over the Turkish one. The Ottoman language was seen as the enemy's language and therefore it was rejected by the Azerbaijanis for a long period.

From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Persians coexisted with Armenians, Kurds and Azerbaijanis. There was no official national identity and all these people strongly believed that they belonged to the Persian Empire. The Persian Empire became a multicultural and tolerant entity where people from different places lived together in peace and harmony.

Another important element in the Persianization of Azerbaijan was the Constitutional Revolution of 1908. Azerbaijanis from the North and the South supported the democratic claims against the Shah, who was accused of being an authoritarian and corrupt ruler. Even some of the reformist leaders were Azerbaijanis. This was the case of Khiyabani, a cleric with a Turkish education who paradoxically could speak Persian properly<sup>9</sup>. Thus, most of the enemies of the Qajar Shah, Mohammad Ali, in the Constitutional Revolution were Azerbaijanis. Indeed, the democratic demands of this movement were reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan during the short period of independence during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nevertheless, the rise of the Pahlavi<sup>10</sup> dynasty meant the identification of Iran as an ethnically Persian State. A tendency confirmed later by the following Iranian governments including the current one. Nowadays, relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Armenia are excellent<sup>11</sup>. Tehran is taking advantage<sup>12</sup> of the problems between Ankara and Yerevan who are highly affected by the question of the genocide of 1915.

For this reason, the following Persian dynasty, the Pahlavi, decided to abolish the autonomy of Southern Azerbaijan and started the Persianization of their Azerbaijani regions. Even during the 1930s, several Azerbaijanis changed their surnames into Persian.

This policy is also followed by the current regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran, from the Islamic Revolution of 1979 onwards. They try to stress the Persian identity although there are Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Nowadays, the ethnic and cultural links between Iran and Azerbaijan could be used as a bridge to re-establish the diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran. Washington has excellent relations with Baku<sup>13</sup>. Azerbaijan needs to count on Tehran's favour to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In turn, Tehran<sup>14</sup> could use the Azerbaijani channel to improve its

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<sup>9</sup> Shaffer, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> "The new dynasty he announced would be known by the family Pahlavi after a language that Persians spoke before before the Muslim the Muslim conquer". Kinzer, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> "As to relations with Armenia, Qazayi said Iran had positive attitude towards bolstering ties with all the neighboring countries, including Iraq that had waged war against Iran earlier". *The Baku Today*, 13 January 2003.

<sup>12</sup> "Iranian Foreign Ministry's Director General for Consular Affairs Rasoul Mohajer met with Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Gegham Gharibjanian in Yerevan on Friday evening, discussing expansion of consular ties". *IRNA*, 16 April 2005

<sup>13</sup> Azerbaijan is one of the best Allies of the United States in the fight on terror "Azerbaijan has always supported and supports all measures aimed at combating terrorism" *The Baku Today*, 16 September 2004, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>14</sup> To improve the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, Tehran has named a new ambassador in Baku. "Suleymani, who acted as charge d'affaires of Iran in 1995-1996, was held in great respect among Azerbaijani authorities and public". *Ibid.*



relations with the United States<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, the relationship is not so easy; Azerbaijan and Iran still have problems. The last incident erupted when two Iranian fighters violated Azerbaijan's air space<sup>16</sup> last September.

The Shiite faith of the Azerbaijanis is quite important in the current relations with the United States. The Bush Administration is using this particular element to pacify Southern Iraq<sup>17</sup>. The Azerbaijani troops deployed in Iraq are protecting the Shiite holy and historical<sup>18</sup> places, Nayaf and Kerbala<sup>19</sup>.

### **3. The Turkish element in the creation of the Azerbaijani identity**

The other key element in the formation of the Azerbaijani identity is the Turkish heritage<sup>20</sup>. Nowadays, contacts between the Turkish and the Azerbaijani governments are very frequent and fluid<sup>21</sup>. Some years ago, Heyder Aliyev even considered recognition of the Northern Cyprus Republic as a gesture of friendship to Turkey.

In general, it can be said that the roots of the Turkish influence are in the massive migration coming from Anatolia during the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries. When they arrived in Azerbaijan, the Ottomans found Persian inhabitants living there. For this reason, during a long period there was a bilingual situation in Azerbaijan where both Turkish and Persian languages were used. Indeed, most of the intellectual personalities, like Nizam Ganjevi<sup>22</sup>, wrote in Turkish and Persian, thus creating a tolerant society.

During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries, after the Mongol invasion, the Qara Qoyunlu and the Aq Qoyunlu dynasties decided to establish their capital in the famous city of Tabriz. From this moment up to the division of Azerbaijan in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Tabriz became the most important Azerbaijani cultural centre. For this reason, we can say that Azerbaijanis have mystified the city of Tabriz which is located in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Tabriz is a clear example of the existence of an Azerbaijani cross-boundary community.

When the Safavids were replaced by the Qajar dynasty, the Turkish culture gained influence in the Azerbaijani area. Turkish was used in their relations and the use of Persian was confined to literature. The biggest mistake of the Qajar dynasty was the clash with the

<sup>15</sup> Last September Azerbaijani President visited USA to hold a number of meetings including one with President Bush. "President Aliyev to visit", *The Baku Today*, 21 September 2004, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>16</sup> "Violation of Azerbaijan's Air Space by Iranian Planes not confirmed", *ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> "Azerbaijan became the only predominantly Muslim state to send troops to support the U.S.-led military engagement in Iraq. Around 150 Azeri troops are deployed in Iraq". *Reuters*, 8 December 2004.

<sup>18</sup> "Their Muslim heritage and culture will serve them well while protecting cultural and holy sites in Iraq and help to bring peace and stability to the region in which they serve", *The Baku Today*, 14 August 2004, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>19</sup> "As of now, 150 Azerbaijani soldiers undergo service in Iraq", *The Baku Today*, 6 December 2004, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>20</sup> "This was anathema to the secular Kemalist, the apostles of Turkish modernism, who saw it as an imperialist vision belonging to the past (...) A chain of new states with Turkic or partly Turkic populations of about 42 million people, had been created from the eastern border of Turkey through the Caucasus- independent Azerbaijan, Dagestan and Tajikistan- and beyond, towards China". Pettifer, James (1997): *The Turkish Labyrinth: Atatürk and the new Islam*. Penguin, London, p. 200.

<sup>21</sup> President Aliyev received a Turkish delegation headed by Minister of Energy in December 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Shaffer, *op. cit*.



interests of the Tsarist Empire. Thus, during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russians and Persians were involved in a great number of confrontations for hegemony in the Caucasus.

For this reason the Azerbaijanis tried to be closer to the Turkish culture rather than to the Persian one. They tried to find a counterbalance in response to the Russian colonization of the whole Caucasus. Besides, Turkish nationalism itself played an important role in the creation of the Azerbaijani identity. In this sense, the most important contribution was the publication of the newspaper *Kashkul*, which introduced the word *millet* in Azerbaijani society. *Millet* has a very concrete meaning: the whole Azerbaijani community of both banks of the Araz River, which even today constitutes a threat for Iran.

Probably, the strongest Turkish element in the Azerbaijani identity is Pan-Turkism. This secular movement tried to achieve a balanced relationship between the state and Islam. Nowadays, this is still one of the most important elements in the Azerbaijani identity. That is why the Turkish influence in Azerbaijan is incompatible with the Persian one. The more influence Turkey exerts over Azerbaijan, the less space it leaves for Iran<sup>23</sup>.

The pioneer in this approach was Huseynzade with his popular poem *Turan*. In *Turan*, there were three important words that defined what an Azerbaijani is: *Turklashntirmak*, *Islamilashtimak*, *Avrupalashtirmak*<sup>24</sup> which means Turkify, Islamicize, Europeanize. The Turkish approach is very important because it gives Azerbaijanis three elements:

- Their European identity<sup>25</sup>.
- Their Turkish ethnicity.
- Their Islamic religion (although the Azerbaijanis are Shiites).

Likewise, in 1911, as a consequence of the Pan-Turkish movement, a group of young Azerbaijanis created an important party: The Musavat (Equality). This political party has an important element: *their commitment to Turkish secular nationalism*.

The Musavat party played a key role in the independence of Azerbaijan and the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. This regime was the first Muslim State where women had the right to vote. Although the Musavat party was not legal during the Soviet period, it was very important especially for the Azerbaijani Diaspora.

The influence of the Musavat party in the struggle with the Soviet Union was really important. Some years after the clash with the Soviet Union, the Musavat party recovered power in Azerbaijan. In 1993, Elchebey was proclaimed president of Azerbaijan following the traditional Musavat ideological line. He adopted a European, pro-Western and Pan-Turkish policy. This tendency was jeopardized by two main obstacles anchored in Azerbaijani society:

- a) The anti-Western sentiment derived from the Russian nationalism which was the heritage of the Danilevski doctrine.

<sup>23</sup> In the 1930s Reza Shah visited Turkey to meet Kemal Atatürk: "Shah became frustrated and depressed as he realized how quickly was progressing towards toward the democracy". Then he decided he should cut any possibility of Revolution in Iran: "He launched an oppressive campaign to obliterate this identity of minority group especially Kurds and Azeris". Kinzer, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Shaffer, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> "When European Union leaders agreed on December 17<sup>th</sup> to open membership talks with Turkey, the country's future looked better than it had for decades". *The Economist*, 26 March-1 April 2005.



- b) The traditional rivalry between Turkey and Iran for the control of both banks of the Araz River<sup>26</sup>.

The Musavat party, today in the opposition, supports a secular model in Azerbaijan<sup>27</sup>. The other model is the Iranian one, more religious and based on fundamentalism preached from Tehran. Its leader, Isa Gambar<sup>28</sup>, is against the islamization of Azerbaijan for two main reasons<sup>29</sup>:

- Iran would increase its influence in Azerbaijan at the expense of the Turkish option.
- The Musavat party<sup>30</sup> preference for a Kemalist policy even if these values are in crisis in Turkey itself.

Although the Aliyev clan has maintained privileged relations with Turkey, Azerbaijan also wants to keep a diversified foreign policy. Nowadays, Turkey is a very important partner but not the most important, 19the United States<sup>31</sup>.

Besides, nobody could know that the United States was going to have problems with Turkey on the Iraq issue. The Bush Administration would have needed a Turkish ally taking into account that Turkmen are very numerous in Northern Iraq. Here again Azerbaijan becomes important. Nowadays, Azerbaijani peacekeepers in Iraq are also in the North of the country<sup>32</sup> where, first Saddam Hussein and later the Kurds attacked the Turkish population<sup>33</sup>. Azerbaijan's peacekeepers are protecting the Turkish population from the Kurdish attacks and thus earn the affection of the Iraqi population<sup>34</sup>.

This is another example of the complexity of the Azerbaijani identity and how it reflects on its foreign policy. The US has understood it properly and Washington is trying to take advantage of it turning Azerbaijan into a new Turkey.

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<sup>26</sup> "The Iranian border is not a friendly place, not at least because of the difficult climate, but it I not somewhere death seems to be waiting in the acacia bushes with the AK or laying a mine behind a carob tree". Pettiifer, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>27</sup> "Ankara was a symbol of the dynamism and achievement of the new Turkey, which was knocking away the props of absolutism and the clerical state, and building a new society with an industrial and secular ethos." Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> For the last presidential elections, see Priego, Alberto: "Continuidad en Azerbaiyán tras el cambio presidencial", *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No. 5 (May 2004), in <http://www.ucm.es/info/unisci>.

<sup>29</sup> "The refrain 'Islam is on the rise' lately seems to be on the lips of many politicians and policy analysts in Azerbaijan. While opposition chairmen Isa Gambar of the Musavat party and Ali Kerimli of the Popular Front party warn Western observers that the rising tide of Islam might threaten the western integration of Azerbaijan". Ismailzade, Fariz "The Rise of Islam in Azerbaijan", *Energy Security*, 28 March 2005.

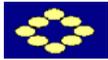
<sup>30</sup> Shaffer, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> "US is Azerbaijan's 'closest military partner' – Defense Minister", *The Baku Today*, 16 April 2005, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>32</sup> "150 Azerbaijani peacekeepers are currently protecting historical and cultural monuments, and maintaining peace in Najaf and Kirkuk cities of Iraq", *The Baku Today*, 5 January 2005, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>33</sup> "Musavat party leader Isa Gambar has stressed the necessity for ensuring safety of Turks and protection of their interests during post-war restoration of Iraq", *The Baku Today*, 19 April 2003, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>34</sup> "Iraqis are satisfied with the Azerbaijani military contingent fulfilling a peacekeeping mission within the coalition troops in this country, the Iraqi ambassador to Azerbaijan Arshad Ismayil Omar has told local Leader TV", *The Baku Today*, 5 January 2005, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.



#### 4. The Russian element in the creation of the Azerbaijani identity.

The Russian Empire started the takeover of the Caucasus region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this century there was a struggle between Iran and Russia for the control of this area. The clash point was Azerbaijan, where, even today, Russia and Iran keep conflicting interests in this area. We have to emphasize two important milestones to understand the special relationship between Iran and Russia.

- When the first Iranian-Russian war finished they signed the Gulustan Treaty (1813).
- In 1825 Iran was defeated again by the Russian Imperial Army and some years later, in 1828, Moscow and Tehran signed the definitive peace agreement, the Treaty of Turkmenchay. This document meant the breaking up of the Azerbaijani territory into two sides, the Russian and the Iranian one.

The division line was the Araz River. The Northern area, the current Republic of Azerbaijan established its capital in Baku and remained under the Russian sphere of influence. This is the reason why the inhabitants received a modern Russian education. The Russian empire retained some economic rights over Southern Azerbaijan although it was part of Iran.

In general, it can be said that the Tsarist period was a very difficult one for Azerbaijan. One of the cruellest points was the repression against the Azerbaijan Nationalist Movement. The Russian Empire did not tolerate either Persian or Turkish symbols in Azerbaijan in order to avoid any possible Revolution against the Tsar. They closed several newspapers which tried to promote the Persian or the Turkish language, for example, the *Akinchi* or the *Kashkul*.

In 1905, the Winter Revolution was unleashed in the territory of the Russian Empire. This revolution helped the creation of left-wing movements in Azerbaijan. These movements would be the main support of the Red Army in establishing a Communist Regime some years later. The fact is that those groups were the precedent of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, which would be led by Heydar Aliyev for some decades. The most important of these groups was "*Himmet*", which gathered Iranian and Azerbaijan people together under a common project. *Himmet* had links with the Russian Communist Party and its contribution to the Soviet Revolution was really significant.

During the Stalinist period, he attempted to freeze all the ties between Northern and Southern Azerbaijan. This policy was also followed by the Pahlavi regime who tried to create an Iranian identity on the base of the largest ethnical group, the Persians. After the Second World War, Moscow encouraged a Soviet Revolution in Southern Azerbaijan.

The three allied powers had agreed they would withdraw their troops from Iran six months after the end of the hostilities. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union did not want to respect the agreement. Moscow fought for the establishment of a Communist regime in the Iranian Azerbaijan using the *Firqueh Dimokrat Azerbaijan*<sup>35</sup> and the *Tudeh* party. Moscow tried to promote the Azerbaijani identity in Southern Azerbaijan as a means to pursue its interest in the area. Finally, in May 1946, the Soviet troops withdrew from Iran and the Azerbaijanis who stayed in Iran suffered brutal repression by the Pahlavi regime.

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<sup>35</sup> Shaffer, *op. cit.*



On the North bank of the Araz River, the Soviet Union granted identity rights in exchange for loyalty to the Soviet cause. This was a very similar agreement to others signed by Moscow with other ethnic groups that belonged to the Soviet Union such as Kazakhs, Uzbeks etc...

The current regime has a contradictory relationship with the Russian Federation. On one hand, the Aliyev family wants to remain on good terms with Moscow as they are neighbors and Russia still retains some vital tools for the future of Azerbaijan, for example the Gabala radar station. On the other hand, the more and more important US presence<sup>36</sup> in Azerbaijan makes the relations between Moscow and Baku<sup>37</sup> difficult.

In the economic field, Moscow may understand that Azerbaijan would prefer the Americans rather than the Russians. In the security field, however, Russia will never accept a US military base in Azerbaijan all the more so since Baku decided to withdraw from the Tashkent Treaty in 1999 to be able to join the GUUAM.

Summarizing, Azerbaijan wants to keep a good relationship with Russia but at this moment its priority is the United States, which means two main things:

- A counterbalance to the historical Russian presence in Azerbaijan.
- The socioeconomic rise of the country, highly dependant on the BTC project. The pipeline is mainly supported by the US and UK.

Nevertheless, the relationship with Russia is not comparable with the relations with Turkey or Iran. In these cases there are historical, religious or ethnic ties and that is the reason why Azerbaijan looks after both relationships. In the case of Russia, Baku feels that the only tie they have is an imperial one. Besides, Azerbaijan feels that Russia has supported Armenia in the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict.

## **5. The Azerbaijan contribution to the formation of its own identity**

Finally, I would like to stress the purely Azerbaijani elements in the formation of their collective identity. The first step in this process is the Babak Revolt (816-817). In historical Azerbaijan, after some years of Arab dominance<sup>38</sup>, a protest movement unleashed against the occupation of Azerbaijan. From this point onwards, Babak was considered a national hero, and even today, it is very common as a given name.

For example, after the Second World War, during the short period of autonomy in Southern Azerbaijan (Iran), they created a volunteer group of citizens to protect them from Tehran. It was the military branch of the *Firqueh Dimokrat Azarbayjan* and this militia was called the Babak Army. Proof of the importance of the Babak myth in the Azerbaijan history.

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<sup>36</sup> “The United States is ‘the closest military partner’ of Azerbaijan, Defense Minister Safar Abiyev said in a meeting with the US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at the international airport of Baku on Tuesday”. *The Baku Today*, 17 April 2005, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>37</sup> “This is Rumsfeld’s third visit to Baku over the last year and a half”, *ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> “The invasion by the Arabs who, to the cultivated Persians seemed no more that barbarians was a decisive turning point in the nation’s history”. Kinzer, *op. cit.*, p. 20.



Another important element in the creation of the Azerbaijani identity is the liberal interpretation of the Muslim religion. We must say that the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1921) was not only an example of tolerance, where people from Russia, Turkey and Iran lived, but also an example of freedom. We have to take into account that women had the right to vote. Nevertheless, this experiment came to an end owing to the Soviet Revolution and the pressure of the Red Army.

One of the main elements in the rise of the Azerbaijani identity was the conflict with Armenia for the control of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. After several years of fighting, this Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>39</sup> conflict is the main source of unity for the Azerbaijani identity. Even today, the conflict is used by both sides to hide their own internal problems.

In some contexts, authoritarian movements have used the conflict of Nagorno Karabakh to make liberal governments fall. This has been the case of Elchibey in Azerbaijan and Ter Petrosian in Armenia. Either Heydar Aliyev or Robert Kocharian represented a step backwards on the way.

Nowadays, Azerbaijani nationalism is one of the cohesive elements in a country divided by political and religious differences. For this reason, the current government tries to foster Azerbaijan nationalism in order to hide other problems that the country suffers<sup>40</sup>. President Aliyev used to mention the disputes in every speech<sup>41</sup>, meeting or interview.

## **6. The situation in Azerbaijan and the question of the identity.**

Heydar Aliyev created a new foreign policy using the four elements of the Azerbaijani identity — the Persian, the Turkish, the Russian and the Azerbaijani — and adding the American one. He tried to maintain a diverse and balanced foreign policy. He attempts to keep on good terms with Tehran, Ankara, Moscow and Washington although it is not very easy.

The cultural nearness with Turkey allows Azerbaijan to replace the former as the main American ally in the Middle East. This element is especially important now that Turkey is changing its position concerning the United States. The Turkish refusal to allow the Americans to use their territory for the Iraqi invasion has provoked the most important crisis in the history of American-Turkish relations.

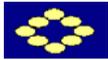
Because of the Turkish attitude, Washington needed another Turkish partner to control the population in Northern Iraq where the Turkmen are a majority. In this sense, the Azerbaijani troops, sent from Baku, are working as a peacekeeping force in order to stabilize the situation in a very problematic area. In the future, not only Azerbaijan could follow Turkey as a US ally, but also Washington could replace Ankara with Baku as its closest partner in the area.

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<sup>39</sup> “It (Armenia) largely surrounded by ex-Soviet republic which have population of partly or wholly Turkish culture an Islamic religion and has fought a long and bitter war with Azerbaijan for the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh”. Pettifer, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>40</sup> “The law requires all official documents to be written in Azeri, which uses the Latin rather than the Cyrillic alphabet, and makes Azeri information and dubbing mandatory for all television broadcasts”. *The Baku Today*, 26 July 2002, in <http://www.bakutoday.net>.

<sup>41</sup> “Azerbaijan repeatedly expressed, that is ready to give the high status of autonomy to Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh. But we never shall agree the infringement of our territorial integrity”. Speech of The President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev at the Summit of Heads of States of Member Countries of GUUAM in Kishinev, 23 April 2005, in <http://www.president.az>.



Besides, there is another incentive for the United States to improve their relations with Azerbaijan: the oil issue. At the end of the current year, the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC) will be finished. The oil will flow directly from the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea avoiding the Turkish straits. This energy project plus special security alliance with the United States will mean the integration of Azerbaijan into the Euro-Atlantic Community.

Another factor to take into account is the Persian heritage. Although Azerbaijan maintains several disputes with Iran, it cannot avoid sharing a common history. Thus, Azerbaijan could be very important in case the United States and Iran make a bid for reconciliation. This would occur eventually in the future as nowadays Tehran-Washington relations are simply non-existent, among other reasons due to Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

Concerning the Russian Federation, we have to say that Azerbaijan tries to keep a good relationship with Moscow. However, Baku does not want to be dependent on Moscow because Azerbaijan still feels colonial resentment towards Russia. It was precisely this issue which led Azerbaijan to withdraw from the CSTO in 1999 and support other initiatives closer to the American sphere of influence such as the GUUAM<sup>42</sup> or the Partnership for Peace.

In connection with Europe, Azerbaijan has chosen the Turkish model of integration. Thus, Baku will follow the rounds of negotiations between Ankara and Brussels very closely. Nevertheless, nobody can forget that the Musavat party would have adopted a more European policy owing to its ties with the Kemalist idea. In this sense, any Azerbaijani option to become a member of the European Union in the future will be linked to the Musavat party.

I would venture to suggest that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will be solved when the United States, the Russian Federation and France allow the United Nations to solve this problem without interference. Especially France and Russia are blackmailing both sides of the conflict for their own objectives. On one hand, Russia supports Armenia or Azerbaijan depending on its interests in the Caucasus. On the other hand, France takes advantage of the conflict to increase its leverage in the international Community.

As a final conclusion we have to say that Azerbaijan could play a key role in the Greater Middle East and its future will be a model for several countries in the region. Azerbaijan will be the *heartland* of the Greater Middle East.

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