

Article

THE RAISON D'ÊTRE OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN: A POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY ANALYSIS

Atta-ollah Abdi, Morad Kavianirad & Salar Seyfodini

Abstract: The establishment, endurance, and perpetuation of states necessitate a raison d'être. It serves as a direct response to the question of why a state should exist as an independent political entity. Various factors contribute to the raison d'être of nations, ranging from internally generated and self-defined principles to those shaped by colonial legacies or the fragmentation of vast empires into smaller states. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the "Republic of Azerbaijan" in the South Caucasus marked a significant development. This article seeks to explore the raison d'être of this nascent state and its relationship with its historical neighbor, Iran. The central thesis of this article posits that the cultural and geopolitical tensions between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan are rooted in a divergence of their respective raison d'être. Available evidence indicates that this discord has engendered a fragile diplomatic rapport between the two nations, susceptible to destabilization by any untoward incident. A considerable portion of this mutual distrust can be attributed to underlying theories regarding the raison d'être of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Keywords: raison d'être, Republic of Azerbaijan, Iran, Political Geography, National Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The disintegration of the Soviet Union precipitated a multifaceted geopolitical realignment, resonating globally as a seismic political upheaval. Its reverberations, particularly across Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America, engendered both perilous challenges to global stability and nascent opportunities for the genesis of new state entities within an evolving international order. The dissolution of a behemoth spanning 22.5 million square kilometers inevitably wielded profound geopolitical ramifications, underscoring the imperatives of navigating a recalibrated global landscape.

ATA-OLLAH ABDI and MORAD KAVIANIRAD are associate professors of Political Geography at Kharazmi University in Tehran.

SALAR SEYFODINI holds a Ph.D. in Political Geography from Tarbiat Modarres University.

(*See endnotes for complete contributor biographies.)

Iran, endowed with extensive frontiers contiguous to the erstwhile Soviet Union, found itself ineluctably entwined in the aftermath of this collapse. Among the foremost consequences was the emergence of novel neighbors along its northern periphery, comprising Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and Armenia. The ascendance of Azerbaijan, historically delineated as one of Iran's former provinces, imparted a milieu of cultural and identity-centric ramifications for Iran. While political relations between the two states have intermittently flourished over the preceding three decades, the specter of cultural and identity dissonance has perennially imbued their diplomatic interactions with acute sensitivity.

This article endeavors to analyze, through the prism of political geography, the intricate tapestry underpinning the interplay of non-political and historical determinants shaping the bilateral relationship between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan. By elucidating the contours of statehood and territoriality, this inquiry seeks to illuminate how ethnic, identity, and historical tensions crystallize within the geopolitical framework. Central to this analysis is the pivotal concept of the "raison d'être of the state," an elemental tenet of political geography. It is evident that the ostensibly latent discord does not solely emanate from disparities in political ideology or the secular vs political Islam models of governance; were that the case, Iran would ostensibly harbor analogous entrenched fissures with neighboring entities such as Armenia and Turkey, which demonstrably does not align with empirical realities.

2. THE CONCEPT OF THE RAISON D'ÊTRE

The "raison d'être" denotes a corpus of territorial and political imperatives, comprising legal documentation, empirical substantiation, and foundational justifications, which a nation proffers to assert its entitlement to autonomy and perpetuate its distinct existence vis-à-vis other political entities. When the *raison d'être* garners widespread endorsement among the populace, it engenders a stable foundation underpinning the polity, thereby fostering continuity within the prevailing political order. The optimal manifestation of the *raison d'être* is characterized by its intangibility, wherein its essence transcends mere governmental configurations and remains impervious to vicissitudes in political orders (Rashno 2015, 23). Conversely, the most tenuous manifestation of the *raison d'être* is epitomized by its overt visibility, indicative of a susceptibility to fluctuating political circumstances.

In a scholarly context, the term "raison d'être" encapsulates the profound and enduring sociopolitical underpinnings that furnish requisite conditions for the inception and enduring viability of a nation-state (Mojtahedzadeh and Hafeznia 2012, 6). Post-establishment, governmental entities necessitate a harmonious and cohesive national fabric for their sustenance, whereby an administration fortified by a salient *raison d'être* garners the allegiance of diverse demographic constituencies and engenders a cohesive national identity.

The *raison d'être* is the hardened core of legitimacy for a “state,” and it answers the question of “why do we exist as an independent state?” (Mirhaydar 2014, 118). It is discernible that a nation’s *raison d'être* must harmonize with entrenched historical and societal verities. The theory surrounding a state’s *raison d'être* constitutes the crux of its statecraft, imbuing political dynamics throughout the governmental apparatus and thereby laying the groundwork for its genesis and enduring viability. Crucially, the *raison d'être* must serve as the catalyst for engendering a robust national identity.

Various rationales have been proffered to elucidate the *raison d'être* of states, encompassing historical profundity, the imperative for autonomy, aspirations for liberty, and emancipatory nationalism. For instance, the United States might predicate its *raison d'être* upon the tenet of liberty, France upon vibrant French nationalism, and post-colonial nations upon the indomitable yearnings for national self-determination. Nationalism has functioned as the *raison d'être* for myriad states, encompassing exemplars such as Ireland, India, and beyond. However, it becomes evident that for a state to endure, an impetus beyond nationalist sentimentality becomes requisite, with the *raison d'être* transcending simplistic and elemental reliance on nationalism and national fervor.

Numerous former colonial entities, which had embraced independence or anti-colonial nationalism as their lodestar, encountered existential challenges after independence, as demonstrated by the fracturing of initial unity due to ethnic schisms, culminating in internal strife and fragmentation into smaller political units. The Indian subcontinent furnishes a salient illustration, evidenced by the partition into Pakistan and India, followed by subsequent fissiparous tendencies giving rise to additional states. In general, the *raison d'être* engenders the genesis of states, but the idea of state governance sustains it (118).

From the view point of political geography, the robustness of a state’s *raison d'être* theory mirrors the strength of its national foundations, while any deficiencies therein render the country inherently susceptible (118). Consequently, specific historical and cultural constituents serve as pivotal determinants of the credibility of a nation’s *raison d'être*, foremost among them being the “national nomenclature,” “genesis and historical trajectory of the nation,” “national culture and identity,” and “political ideals.”

Drawing from extant definitions, the authors distill four primary metrics to gauge the stability and veracity of the *raison d'être* theory:

1. The theory’s coherence must exhibit a substantive cultural resonance and align with established historical verities.
2. The theory’s legitimacy, durability, and defensibility are paramount considerations.
3. The theory’s influence on fostering unity among the populace and fortifying national identity warrants scrutiny.

4. The optimal *raison d'être* theory endures and maintains credibility independent of shifts in governments or political systems, necessitating governmental adaptation to its precepts.

3. THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The first instance of the emergence of states in the Southern Caucasus and Eastern Russia occurred after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, as a result of the power vacuum left by the fall of the Tsarist Russian Empire. One of these newly formed states suddenly declared itself the “People’s Republic of Azerbaijan” (Kazemzadeh 2015, 203). The Republic of Azerbaijan was established between 1918 and 1920.

The peoples of the Southern Caucasus initially formed an autonomous federation consisting of Georgians, Armenians, and Muslim Tatars (the future Azerbaijanis) in Tiflis, with a consultative assembly called the Sejm, in which each of the member political units had representatives. The Musavat Party, led by Mohammad Amin Rasulzadeh, formed an alliance with the “Turkish non-centralization” faction in the same year. Meanwhile, Baku was under the control of the Bolsheviks loyal to Lenin.

The “Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic” was established for a few months from February to May 1918. This republic remained loyal to democratic Russia, believing that Bolshevik rule would not last long. The Ottoman Empire immediately recognized its existence, but in multiple conferences demanded more territory in western Caucasus and the passage of its military forces through the republic’s territory. On May 21, the Caucasian Republic was on the verge of collapse, as the Tatar representatives were unwilling to resist the Ottoman demands, especially the passage of Ottoman military forces through their territory (Kamali 1997, 13). A few days later, the Ottomans dispatched their forces to Baku without awaiting a response from the Caucasian Republic authorities. Finally, this fledgling republic collapsed after two months due to Ottoman political pressure.

The representatives of the other member countries, especially Georgia, have attributed the collapse of this republic to the “Muslim/Azerbaijani faction,”¹ which had no desire to resist Ottoman pressures (Hasanli 2011, 82). On May 27, the Muslim faction in the Sejm decided to form the independent “Republic of Azerbaijan,” and the next day, in one of the hotel rooms in Tiflis, they drafted the declaration of independence. Consequently, Mohammad Amin Rasulzadeh was appointed as the president, and Fatali Khan Khoyski as the prime minister, both of whom were members of the Musavat Party. Since Baku was at the time under the control of the Armenians and Bolshevik-loyal forces, and was essentially an “island of Bolsheviks in the sea of anti-Bolsheviks” (Kazemzadeh 2015, 203), the primary concern of the Musavat Party was to transfer the capital from Ganja to Baku. Therefore, the Ottomans dispatched a new military force called the “Army of Islam of the Caucasus” under the command of

¹ During that period, they were still known as the Muslim faction.

Nuri Pasha², who was summoned from Mosul to organize this army (Hasanli 2011, 95-96). This force, composed of joint Ottoman and some Tatar troops, advanced from Tabriz, crossing the Aras River towards Ganja, and by the end of 1918, reached Baku.

The direct result of this military intervention was the collapse of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic and the emergence of the People's Republic of Azerbaijan (Yekdeli 2016, 8). However, after the defeat of the Ottomans in World War I, the control of Eastern Caucasus fell to the British forces representing the Allies. After the withdrawal of the British troops from the region, the Bolshevik forces led by Nariman Narimanov entered Baku and destroyed the Musavat Republic. The Musavat leaders, including Rasulzadeh, had left Baku before the arrival of the Bolshevik forces. Except for the Ottoman Empire, no other country, neither Iran nor the European powers, recognized the existence of the newly formed People's Republic of Azerbaijan, and this republic failed to gain international recognition in 1919 (Kazemzadeh 2015, 411). Although there were meetings and interactions between the Musavat government and European countries, these interactions cannot be considered as recognition. Ali Quli Khan Moshaver al-Mulk, the Iranian representative at the Paris Peace Conference, had demanded the return of 17 Caucasian cities to Iran (409), and the French Foreign Minister had announced in the official newspaper that the French government did not recognize the Caucasian republics *de facto* or *de jure* (416). The Allies paid little attention to the disappearance of the People's Republic of Azerbaijan from the international scene and did not provide the slightest support to the Musavat government in the face of the growing power of the Soviet Union.

3.1. ADOPTION OF A NAME EX NIHILO

The adoption of the name "People's Republic of Azerbaijan" for the southeastern Transcaucasus regions marked a departure from historical precedent, inciting immediate protest from the Iranian government and elite, particularly through Iranian newspapers. Rasulzadeh, well-versed in Iranian intellectual circles from his time during the Persian Constitutional Revolution, engaged in a series of press dialogues with critics, prominently featured in publications like *Nobahar* and *Iran*.

From a historical lens, the selection of such a name encountered numerous challenges, as the territories north of the Aras River had not been historically referred to as "Azerbaijan," and the term itself was absent from the provincial delineations of the Safavid, Afsharid, and Qajar epochs.

3.2. A COUNTRY AT THE CIVILIZATIONAL CROSSROADS

² On April 5, 1918, the order to establish the Islamic Army of the Caucasus was signed by Anwar Pasha.

The declaration of independence by the Republic of Azerbaijan in August 1991 marked its entry onto the global stage as a fledgling state vying for territorial expansion against its neighbors and international recognition. Concurrently, Armenia and Georgia, as entrenched entities in the Southern Caucasus, harbored millennia-old historical assertions regarding their presence in the region and the cultivation of distinct cultures and civilizations over time. The Armenian and Georgian scripts, alongside their national languages, architecture, and religion, underscored their cultural and civilizational distinctiveness. Even surnames in Georgia and Armenia bore unique markers, delineating national identity in a manner not mirrored in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The Republic's statesmen found it imperative to manipulate history to assert territorial claims over Georgia, Armenia, and Russian Derbent, seeking to establish historical and philosophical legitimacy for their political aspirations.

3.3. THE RAISON D'ÊTRE OF THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

In probing the *raison d'être* of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the central question emerges: what underpins the existence of this state? And why should this republic persist as an independent entity? The response proffered by Baku authorities crystallizes the theoretical hardened core of the state's *raison d'être*—albeit, as later elucidated, the ideologues of the Republic of Azerbaijan, bereft of historical and cultural moorings, resort to ideological constructs rather than theoretical frameworks to justify the republic's *raison d'être*. Thus, what is presented under the guise of the “theory” of the Republic of Azerbaijan's *raison d'être* is, in essence, “ideology.”

This theory, dubbed in the Republic of Azerbaijan as the “theory of historical and independent Azerbaijan,” constitutes the linchpin of the republic's *raison d'être*. According to this tenet, “Azerbaijan” has endured in the annals of history, save for a hiatus following the Treaty of Turkmenchay, as an “independent and historical” state and a global actor. Therefore, upon the removal of impediments (the collapse of the Soviet Union), Azerbaijan's historical statehood resumed its course. Government institutions have curated works by Ramiz Mehdiyev chronicling the statesmen of the Republic of Azerbaijan in this vein.

The notion of a “united Azerbaijan” or “integral Azerbaijan” serves as a complementary facet to the aforementioned theory, positing that Azerbaijan's territories were bifurcated into northern and southern segments along the Aras River subsequent to Tsarist Russia's incursion. The entirely fabricated terms “Northern Azerbaijan” and “Southern Azerbaijan” were coined by the Red Army and Pan-Turkist factions to evoke Azerbaijan's unity, albeit the country's official authorities refrain from overt statements and terminology usage for diplomatic considerations. Nevertheless, political parties, social institutions, and state historiographies extensively propagate “literature of separation”(hijran) and the ideal of a “united Azerbaijan”. The political aspiration of establishing a united Azerbaijan has been

ingrained in citizens' consciousness through official and unofficial propaganda channels, with copious materials disseminated across academic, political, and media platforms to advance this long-term objective.

Consequently, according to this theory, the independent Republic of Azerbaijan has come into existence solely because it has existed throughout history! From Baku's vantage point, "Azerbaijan" has perpetually existed throughout history as an independent "political entity" and state. Indeed, any narrative deviating from this would ostensibly contravene nationalist principles and the Turkic-centric ideology. Thus, the ruling nationalist elite elected to anchor their identity in the "Turkic world" from the composite identity prevailing in the country.

Per the "official narrative" of Baku's government on history, disseminated across various sources, including textbooks, "Azerbaijan" has been a bastion for Turkic-speaking ruling dynasties spawning the Safavid, Afsharid, and Qajar empires, with Iran also subsumed within this domain, formally designated as the "Turkic Empire of Azerbaijan." In the historical rendition of the Republic of Azerbaijan, a polity named Iran essentially lacked independent political existence throughout history, with its territory forming part of "Azerbaijan," and its sovereigns reigning under the mantle of kings of Azerbaijan.³

3.4. THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME "REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN"

The selection of a country's name is a matter of great sensitivity and political significance, as it helps to define the state's *raison d'être* (Hafeznia, 2013: 11). A meaningful name that can create a comprehensive umbrella and inclusive coverage for the people of the nation, so that most or all of the population consider themselves belonging to it, is a fundamental necessity.

According to historical sources from Iran and Greece, as well as geographical sources from the Islamic era, the name "Azerbaijan" can be traced back to Atropates, a Achaemenid general who resisted Alexander. Based on various geographical sources, the approximate historical region of Azerbaijan was generally attributed to the area south of the Aras River and, in addition, the modern-day Nakhchivan region.

However, the debate over the selection of the name "Republic of Azerbaijan" on a territory north of Aras River dates back to the establishment of a short-lived republic in the region previously known as Caucasus, Arran, Albania, Shaki Khanate, Shirvan, Karabakh, and Nakhchivan, founded by Mohammed Amin Rasulzadeh. Prior to this,

³ In the domain of ideological discourse, one can turn to history textbooks in the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as to works penned by Ramiz Mehdiyev, a prominent politician revered as the country's second most influential figure. Notable publications include "Political Correspondence of Nader Shah Afshar" (2015) and "Shah Ismail Khatai" (2014), which enjoy widespread promotion and dissemination within the state's educational institutions. Moreover, the book "Ilham: Portrait of a President," (Wilson 2011) published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and translated into numerous languages, presents the ideological narrative of the regime's history.

there was no serious historical map or document indicating that the area north of the Aras River was called Azerbaijan. The application of the name "Azerbaijan" to the region of Arran and Shirvan, known as the eastern Transcaucasia at the time, was related to the annexationist intentions of the Musavat Party and its Turkic-oriented allies, who received support from the Ottoman Empire and the Committee of Union and Progress. Shortly before the Musavat Party declared independence, the initial plan was to name the new republic the "Republic of Southeast Transcaucasia," as prominent Orientalist Barthold indicated (Galichian 2010, 12). However, the Musavat Party used its influence to propose the name "Azerbaijan," and overnight, all populace and the Muslim minorities in the region, including Turkic, Talysh, and Lezgin populations, were referred to as Azerbaijanis.

From the very beginning, the selection of the name of one of Iran's provinces as the name for an independent country north of the Aras River drew multiple protests from Iranian intellectuals and politicians. While Iranians of the time welcomed the independence of their historical brethren, what was contested was simply the name they had chosen. Writers and scholars such as Malik al-Shu'ara Bahar, Ahmad Kasravi, Mohammad Qazvini, and Dehkhoda, as well as publications like *Ershad*, *Iran*, and *Nowbahar*, published writings in the years 1918-1920 demonstrating that the area north of the Aras River had not historically been called Azerbaijan. Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani also strongly opposed this name selection, aware of the Musavat Party's intentions. The newspaper *Jangal*, the organ of the Mirza Kuchak Khan movement, also attacked this naming in its publications. However, Rasulzadeh, known for his activities in the Constitutional Revolution and as the editor of the newspaper "Iran-e Now," wrote notes in response to his former Iranian friends, which were also published in Iranian newspapers.⁴

The name "Republic of Azerbaijan" was chosen in a way that, firstly, lacked historical relevance to the region, and secondly, raised suspicions from the outset due to the use of the name of one of Iran's important provinces, potentially paving the way for territorial claims by the new republic over the area south of the Aras River as part of an "independent Azerbaijan". Although the Rasulzadeh repeatedly stated in his notes and letters that the choice of the name "Azerbaijan" for the new republic was not intended to imply any territorial claims over the Iranian province of the same name (Rasulzadeh 2000, 80). As Rasulzadeh clarified,

It is necessary to remind all Iranians that when we say 'Azerbaijan,' we mean the Azerbaijan that is within the territory of the Russian state, not the state of Iran, and we have no right or authority to interfere in the affairs of Iranian Azerbaijan (35).

⁴ Enaiatollah Reza conducted extensive research on this topic, published as *Azerbaijan and Arran from Ancient Times to the Mongol Era*, based on primary historical and geographical sources, demonstrating the lack of historical validity in applying the name "Azerbaijan" to the region north of the Aras River.

However, these assurances were soon forgotten. Following the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party in 1945, individuals such as Baghirov and Mirza Ibrahimov began devising detailed long-term plans to annex what they referred to as “Southern Azerbaijan” to the “North”.

3.5. THE NATIONAL CULTURE

Iran's cultural and human landscape is defined by its position amidst various neighboring realms: the Turko-Turanian domain to the north, the Russian-Slavic sphere to the northeast, Chinese and Indian cultures to the east, and Arab-Semitic influence to the south and west. Despite these diverse influences, Iran has managed to maintain its distinct cultural and civilizational identity. At the boundaries where Iran's domain intersects with neighboring realms, regions of synthesis or combination have emerged, characterized by shared cultural traits (Hafeznia 2013, 15).

Prior to its incorporation into the Tsarist Russian political and administrative system, the Republic of Azerbaijan was part of Iran, both politically and in terms of religion and civilization. However, it had established strong linguistic ties with the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey, primarily due to the migration of Turks to the region in the 11th century. Nevertheless, given the historical and civilizational linkages, the Republic of Azerbaijan appears to have been more a part of Iranian civilization than the Ottoman-Turkish one. Even if the linguistic element is considered, their language was closer to the Azeris of Iran than to Turkey. Culturally and in terms of popular culture, there were also greater affinities between them and Iranian civilization.

With the rise to power of Pan-Azerism in this country, the composite nature of society was denied, and the state's policies were solely planned with an emphasis on Turko-Turanian civilization. In this context, many elements of Iranian culture and civilization were either eliminated or, through the distortion and falsification of history, appropriated under the name of Turanian culture. However, to achieve a complete historical distortion, Baku still has a long way to go. Prominent Persian-speaking poets, architectural landmarks, historical dynasties, and geographical features such as the Mughan Plain, Baku, and Shirvan all contribute to the civilizational memory of Iranians. As Tadeusz Swietochowski notes, this region was part of the Iranian plateau with an ancient Iranian identity, deriving its name from the Persian word “Azer” (Swietochowski 2002, 13). Even after the Arab Muslim conquest in the mid-7th century, the Iranian character of the region was preserved⁵, and it was only with the influx of Oghuz Turks in the 11th century (the Seljuk period) that a large part of the population became Turkic. The intermingling of Turkic immigrants with the native population, who mainly spoke Talysh, Tati, and Lahiji, and used the Persian literary language in their correspondence, led to the emergence of a new language now known as Azeri or Azerbaijani.

⁵ Robert Kaplan, after traveling to the Caucasus, reported on the Persian character of the region's architecture, which is still visible in the ancient walls (Kaplan 2014, 7).

The Twelver Shia Islam, which became the official religion of Iran during the Safavid era, is another link between the Muslim-populated Southern Caucasus and Iran. Apart from this, the two-century-long Russian domination over this region has also significantly influenced the culture of its people.

Despite its diverse cultural heritage, the Republic of Azerbaijan, especially after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, has shown a tendency to recognize only the Turkic aspect of its identity while downplaying or rejecting other aspects, including its Iranian identity. Moreover, its Islamic-Shia identity is often suppressed or regulated due to ideological conflicts with Baku's governing secular ideology. From a Pan-Turkist perspective, Shia Islam connects the Republic of Azerbaijan to Iranians, setting it apart from the predominantly Hanafi Turkic world.

3.6. THE POPULAR PARTICIPATION IN THE FORMATION OF THE NATION

The expression of national will is often observed through the active involvement of citizens in pivotal historical events like revolutions and wars. However, contemporary historical evidence suggests that the populace of the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan did not exert significant influence in key political developments over the past century. Rather, it was the political figures and elites who, in 1918, established a fledgling state in Ganja amid the power vacuum left by Tsarist Russia (Kamali 2007, 15). The establishment of the Azerbaijan People's Republic, which took place in a hotel room in Tbilisi, far from Baku, transpired without any involvement of the populace. The declaration of independence for that republic, outlined in six paragraphs, cited the abandonment of the Caucasus by the Russians as the primary impetus for the Republic of Azerbaijan's existence, rather than stemming from the people's desire for independence or expression of popular will through revolution or elections. An excerpt from this document reads:

Following the Great Russian revolution and the disintegration of the state body into separate components, and after the withdrawal of the Russian army from the Caucasus, the existing political situation was created. The Caucasian nations, who had been left to their own special forces, formed the United Republic of the Caucasus by taking control of their own destiny. In the course of the existing political processes, the Georgian nation deemed it appropriate to secede from the United Republic of the Caucasus and form the independent Republic of Georgia... (Hasanli 2011, 84).

The Musavat Party, after declaring its cooperation with the Ottoman Empire and inviting the Army of Islam of the Caucasus, which was to pass through Tiflis, relocated to Ganja. This was because the Bolshevik-loyal and Armenian forces controlled the city of Baku. It was only with the help of the Ottoman forces that the Musavatists were able to enter Baku. After the end of World War I and the defeat of the Ottomans, resulting in the withdrawal of their forces from the Caucasus, the Allied forces, led by the British, entered Baku and took control of its fate. During this period, the control of the police, transportation, and appointments was largely in the hands of the British, not the

Musavat government; at this time, until the withdrawal of Britain, the Musavat government took on a ceremonial character and derived its legitimacy from its cooperation with England. Apart from the Ottomans, practically no other major state recognized the existence of this government. Even Britain avoided the formal or de facto recognition of the Republic of Azerbaijan until the final determination of the war and the Paris Peace Treaty.

In late 1919, the British forces left the region, and when a few months later, on the evening of April 27, 1920, the Red Army forces quietly entered the city of Baku, the main members of the Musavat Party had already left, and there was no resistance from the people or the army. The short-lived republic was established with the decline of Russian power, and in a critical situation, it easily collapsed with the return of that power. Apart from the street tensions caused by the Karabakh crisis, which had re-emerged in 1988 due to Glasnost, there was no significant street gathering for independence from Russia by the general public. Furthermore, based on evidence, the presence of the people on the war fronts against Karabakh from 1991 to 1993 has been described as weak and unmotivated, and some sources report the flight of military forces from the war fronts.

3.7. LACK OF A DISTINCT ETHNIC IDENTITY

The choice of the name “Azerbaijan” for the region north of the Aras River by the Musavat Party, and its subsequent use during the Soviet Union era, overshadowed all identity equations in this territory. It could be argued that many historical distortions were to protect this initial big lie.

For many decades, the Tsars referred to the Muslim population of the southeastern Caucasus as “Tatars.” From their perspective, anyone who spoke a Turkic language was a “Tatar,” which was also due to their coexistence with the Tatars of Russia. The Russians and the British used the term “Tatar” for the the Turkish-speaking Muslims, later Azeris. This name appears in all the sources and censuses of the Tsarist era (Swietochowski 2002, 18).

On the other hand, the people of the region themselves used the term “Muslim” to refer to themselves, which was likely chosen in contrast to the Armenian Christians (Yekdeli 2016). As mentioned earlier, the Musavat Party in the Transcaucasian Federative Republic, in fact, represented the Muslims of Transcaucasia, not the “Azerbaijanis.” Furthermore, the name of their faction in the parliament of this republic (Sejm) was the “Muslim Faction,” not the “Azerbaijani Faction” or the “Turkic Faction.”

Rasulzadeh had previously referred to the issue of national identity among the Muslim Tatars and the need to nation-build them: “Sometimes when a Turkic Tatar is asked about his nationality, he answers: I am a Muslim! This way of thinking is wrong...” (Hasanli 2011, 19).

The people of this region with diverse ethnic roots lacked a defined national identity and simply used the term “Muslim” to refer to themselves. With the selection of the name “Azerbaijan” for this region, the people were suddenly considered

Azerbaijani citizens! With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of parties like the Popular Front, influenced by Pan-Turkism, the term “Turk” also became prevalent for referring to the people, but the constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan officially uses the term “Azerbaijani” to refer to the language of the people of this region.

4. EVALUATING THE RAISON D'ÊTRE THEORY OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

From the perspective of cultural resonance and consistency with historical facts, the theory of the *raison d'être* of the Republic of Azerbaijan (historical and independent Azerbaijan, and unified Azerbaijan) lacks historical backing. Although there has never been an independent state or empire named Azerbaijan throughout history before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baku's historiographical apparatus has repeatedly attempted to portray the Iranian Safavid, Afsharid, and even Qajar dynasties as the national governments of the Azerbaijanis, a project that has been condemned to failure at the global and academic levels. On the other hand, the “unified Azerbaijan” theory rests on the premise that a semi-independent country called Azerbaijan was divided between the Russian Empire and Persia in the Turkmenchay Treaty (Nasibzadeh 2002, 72). (Of course, such a contradictory claim does not answer questions such as how the Qajars can be both the Turkic Azerbaijani government and the Persian government that usurped Azerbaijan!)

The untenability of such theories becomes apparent when considering that even the academic and political establishments of Turkey treat such historical narratives not seriously. For instance, figures like Babak Khorramdin, celebrated as a hero in the Republic of Azerbaijan, lack credibility within Istanbul's historiography. This skepticism stems from the understanding that the Khorramdinan movement was essentially a continuation of the Abū Muslim Khorāsānī uprising and an offshoot of the Shu'ubiyya movement (Momtahan 1991, 300). The latter rebelled against the Arab caliphate and the emerging Turkic forces in the Iranian plateau and the Islamic caliphate system. Thus, endorsing the Khorramdin movement would amount to opposing the caliphate, in which the Turks held significant influence. Furthermore, considering that Babak Khorramdin also enjoyed support from the Eastern Roman Emperor (Heidari 2008, 117), there are numerous reasons behind the reservations within Turkish historiography regarding Babak. This skepticism extends to various other distorted figures within the ideological historiography of Baku. Additionally, there is a lack of consensus between these two historiographical traditions regarding the timing of Turkic migration to the west of the Caspian Sea. While Turkish historiography accepts the theory of Turkic migration from Central Asia to Anatolia (Javadi 2016, 308), Pan-Turkist theories in Baku maintain that the Turks are indigenous to the region, rather than migrants (Wilson 2011).

The theory of “historical and independent Azerbaijan” is not a unifying one for all population groups in this country. This theory rejects the Tat and Talysh peoples, whose

roots reach to Iran, and also considers the Shia faith, which is the religion of more than eighty percent of the country's population, as an obstacle to unity with the Turkic world. The theory of "historical and independent Azerbaijan" is only reinforced by governmental agencies and textbooks, and has little meaning outside of them. Therefore, it is natural that, like the political propaganda of Iraq's Baath Party, it will disappear or fade with the collapse of the political system.

The identity confusion between the four identity terms of Azerbaijani/Azeri, Turk, Tatar, and Muslim in the past century is due to the lack of a specific territorial identity. Part of the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan do not consider themselves Turks and differentiate themselves from the Turks. On the other hand, the religious identity has been weakened in this country due to the experience of the communist system over several decades. The term "Tatar" is also no longer used and is only applied to a specific ethnic minority. In the meantime, when all the people of this country realize the historical lie of the Musavat Party in naming the region north of the Aras River as "Azerbaijan," the basis of its *raison d'être* will logically become unstable.

Geographical confusion is another serious flaw in the theory of the *raison d'être* of this country. The Republic of Azerbaijan is situated on a civilizational fault line, inheriting a "composite culture" from Iranian and Shia civilization, Russian civilization, and Turkic civilization. Therefore, the geographical location and historical conditions have placed this country in the position of a "civilizational gap." Each of the three countries of Turkey, Iran, and Russia, for certain reasons, tends to consider the Republic of Azerbaijan as the "outer periphery" of their civilizational chain. On the other hand, the Republic of Azerbaijan is unwilling to accept the multiple nature of its culture and civilization and, by fleeing from its own identity, considers itself part of "Turan" and at the same time part of the "West and Europe." But how can one be both Turanian and European, both Muslim and a combination of Caucasian and Iranian races? It is obvious that this fragmentation and confusion between "East-West-reality" entails a complex equation of cultural and political behaviors, which is a mixture of contradictions.

5. CONCLUSION

In examining the formulation of the state's *raison d'être* theory in the Republic of Azerbaijan, an review of Baku's textbooks, the official accounts of the regime's history like the works authored by Ramiz Mehdiyev (Secretary of the National Security Council), and publications from the State Academy of Sciences and the Ganja Military Institute reveals the adoption of the concepts of a "united Azerbaijan" and a "historical and independent Azerbaijan" by the government as the foundational theories underpinning the state's existence. However, while these theories may not be explicitly stated in official policies, their implementation by the regime is evident.

This article scrutinized the credibility of the Republic of Azerbaijan's *raison d'être* theory from four perspectives, with emphasis on two key aspects. It concludes that both the theory of a historical and independent Azerbaijan and the theory of a historical

united Azerbaijan lack validity and cultural depth, making them inherently indefensible. Moreover, considering that the most robust *raison d'être* often transcend political systems and remain unchanged despite shifts in governmental system, the theory espoused by the Republic of Azerbaijan appears to be a construct of the government, devoid of intrinsic value beyond the confines of the ruling political regime. Its continued relevance hinges fundamentally on the fate of the political establishment.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

AUTHORS' NOTE

This article is an excerpt from the Master's thesis authored by Salar Seyfodini, entitled "Iran's Geopolitical Strategy towards the Republic of Azerbaijan," which was completed in the year 2018 at Kharazmi University.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ata-ollah Abdi is an Associate Professor at Kharazmi University, specializing in Political Geography. His research interests encompass Iranian Political Geography, Nationalism, and Ethnic Politics. He is recognized as the co-author of *Research-Based Scientific Theories in Political Geography and Geopolitics* and as the author of "Theoretical Explanation of Ethnic Divergence in Political Geography."

Morad Kaviani rad is an Associate Professor at Kharazmi University, specializing in Political Geography. His research interests span Political Geography philosophy, Electoral Geography, and Environmental Security. He is the co-author of *New Horizons in Political Geography* and *Philosophy of Political Geography*.

Hosein Salar Seyfodini earned his Ph.D. in Political Geography from Tarbiat Modarres University. Over the years, he has contributed as a researcher and policy analyst in both academic and public institutions. He is the author of *The Geopolitical Perspective of Azerbaijan and Karabakh*.

REFERENCES

- Bennigsen, Alexandre. 1992. *Mosalmānān-e Šūravī: Gozašte, Hāl va Āyande* [Muslims of the Soviet Empire], translated by Kaveh Bayat. Tehran: Office of Islamic Culture Publications.
- Yekdeli, Alireza. 2016. *Mizgerd-e ruykardhā va rahbardā'ihā-ye jomhūrī-e eslāmī-e Īrān dar Qafqāz* [Roundtable on the Approaches and Strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Caucasus]. Tehran: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of Political and International Studies.

- Galichian, Rouben. 2010. *Ja'l-e Tārīkh-e Āzərbayjān, Armanestān va Jedāl bar Sar-e Awham* [Falsification of the History of Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Struggle over Illusions], translated by Babak Vahedi. Tehran: Nashr-e Hoor.
- Hafeznia, Mohammad Reza. 2013. *Jogrāfiyā-ye Siyāsī-ye Īrān* [Political Geography of Iran]. Tehran: Samt.
- Hasanli, Jamil. 2011. *Sīyāsāt-e Khārijī-e Jomhūrī-e Khalq-e Āzərbayjān 1918-1920* [The Foreign Policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan 1918-1920], translated by Hossein Sharqi. Tehran: Haram-e Elm.
- Heidari, Asghar. 2008. *Bābak-e Khordāddīn, dar Naqsh-e Āzərbayjān dar Tahkīm-e Hovīyat-e Īrānī* [Babak Khorramdin, on the Role of Azerbaijan in Strengthening Iranian Identity], edited by Rahim Nikbakht. Tehran.
- Javadi, Abbas. 2016. *Īrān va Āzərbayjān dar Bāster-e Tārīkh va Zabān* [Iran and Azerbaijan in the Context of History and Language]. London: HND CM Media.
- Kamali, Habibollah. 1997. *Estīmār-e Englis dar Māvarā-ye Qafqāz 1918-1921, bar Pāye-ye Asnād-e Maḥramāne-ye Vezārat-e Khāreja-ye Britaniyā* [British Colonialism in Transcaucasia 1918-1921, Based on Confidential Documents of the British Foreign Office]. Tehran: Department of Political and International Studies.
- Kaplan, Robert. 2014. *Entiqām-e Joghrafiyā: Ānche Nagše-e Joghrafiyā darbāre-e Dargīr 'hā-ye Āyande va Jang be mā Mīgūyad* [The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About the Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate], translated by Mohammad Hasan Khezri and Mahboubeh Niknam. Tehran: Entekhaab.
- Kazemzadeh, Firuz. 2015. *Qafqāz dar Kešāķēš-e Jang va Enqelāb (1917-1921)* [The Caucasus in the Turmoil of War and Revolution (1917-1921)], translated by Sirvan Khosravizadeh. Tehran: Nashr-e Shirazeh.
- Mirheydar, Dorreh. 2014. *Mobānī-e Joḡrāfiyā-ye Sīyāsī* [Fundamentals of Political Geography]. Tehran: Samt.
- Mojtahedzadeh, Piruz, Mohammad Reza Hafeznia, and Abolfazl Kateb. 2012. "Tab'een-e bonyan'ha-ye Ellat'e Vojudi va Baqa'e Keshvar: Motale'e-ye moredi-ye Iran [Explaining the Foundations of the Raison D'être and Survival of the State: A Case Study of Iran]." *Quarterly Journal of National Studies Institute* 13(49): 28-3.
- Momtāhen, Hasanali. 1991. *Nehzat-e Šu'ūbiyā, Jombešhā-ye Mellī-e Īrānīān dar Barābar-e Ḥelāfat-e Umavī va 'Abbāsī* [The Shu'ubiyya Movement, the National Movement of Iranians against the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates]. Tehran: Sherkat-e Sahāmī-e Ketābhā-ye Jībī.
- Nasibzadeh, Nasib. 2002. "Mas'ale-ye Āzərbayjān dar Īrān yek Mas'ale-ye Asāsī barā-ye Āyande-ye Īrān" [The Azerbaijan Issue in Iran, a Fundamental Issue for the Future of Iran]. *Quarterly of Dialogue* 33: 71-77.
- Nissman, David. 2001. "Artesh-e Sorkh va Chegūnegī-e Ebdā'-e Āzərbayjān-e Janūbī" [The Red Army and the Invention of South Azerbaijan]. *Quarterly of Dialogue* 33: 37-46.
- Qalqashandi, Abu al-Abbas. 2005. *Joghrafiyā-ye Tārīkhī-e Īrān* [Historical Geography of Iran], translated by Mahjoub al-Zawiri. Tehran: Center for Diplomatic History and Studies.
- Rashno, Nabi'allah. 2015. *Zheopolitik va Sīyāsāt-e Khārijī-e Jomhūrī-e Eslāmī-e Īrān* [Geopolitics and Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran]. Tehran: Ave-ye Gostare-ye Danesh.
- Rasulzadeh, Mohammad Amin. 2000. "Āzərbayjān va Īrān" [Azerbaijan and Iran], in Kaveh Bayat (ed.), *Āzərbayjān dar Mowj-e Khīz-e Tārīkh: Negāhī be Mobāḥeṭ-e Malīyūn-e Īrān va Jarā'ed-e Bākū dar Taḡyīr-e Nām-e Ārān be Āzərbayjān* [Azerbaijan in the Wave of History:

A Look at the Debates of Iranian Nationalists and the Baku Press on the Change of the Name of Arran to Azerbaijan]. Tehran: Shirazeh.

Swietochowski, Tadeusz. 2002. *Āzarbāyjān-e Rūsīye, Sheklgīrī-e Hovīyat-e Millī dar Yek Jāme'e-ye Mosalmān* [Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of a National Identity in a Muslim Community], translated by Kazem Firouzmand. Tehran: Shadan.

Wilson, Graeme H. 2011. *Ilham: Portrait of a President*. Media Prima.