

Article

AZERBAIJAN AND IRANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Nemat Ahmadi & Ali Derazi

Abstract: For years, a debate has persisted among certain Iranian circles, particularly among residents of Iran's Azeri provinces, regarding the racial classification of the people of Azerbaijan. Are they ethnically Turkish or Azeri? The significance of this issue appears to have intensified with the emergence of pan-Turkism and pan-Turanism ideologies in Iran. This question is also evident in the works of some contemporary historians and political scientists. This research, conducted through analytical and comparative methods utilizing primary sources, reveals that referring to Azeri provinces' inhabitants as ethnically Turkish largely stems from the prevalence of the Turkish language in the region. Conversely, some authors, predominantly foreign and affiliated with pan-Turkist political movements, attempt to ascribe a Turkish identity and ethnicity to Iranian Azeri speakers through historical revisionism. However, research from reputable global academic centers, even in some neighboring Turkic-speaking countries, acknowledges fundamental racial differences between Iranian Azeris and Turkic peoples, demonstrating essential similarities between Azeris and other inhabitants of the Iranian plateau.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Iran, nationalism, Azeri, Iranian identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Geographically, Iran has occupied a strategic position throughout human history. Spanning arid and semi-arid regions, snow-capped mountains, and lush forests, Iran has nurtured civilizations, consistently serving as a focal point of human civilization. Consequently, it has often been the object of envy and covetousness. The centuries-long confrontations between Iranians—during the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid eras—and the Greeks and Romans, followed by the Muslim Arab invasion of Iran, exemplify this dynamic.

Post-Islamic Iran continued to experience significant migrations of foreign peoples, such as the Central Asian Turks from the Ghaznavids to the Seljuks, followed by the Mongol and Timurid invasions, which ravaged Iran until the rise of the Safavid dynasty.

NEMAT AHAMDI was a lawyer and a professor of history at Islamic Azad University. His interests included the study of Iranian history as well as legal and political issues in contemporary Iranian history.

ALI DERAZI is a graduate with a master's degree in history from Islamic Azad University, Tehran Central Branch.

It was during these migrations and conflicts that the legendary Achaemenid capital of Persepolis was destroyed out of Greek and Macedonian spite and envy. Alexander's conquest led to forced marriages between Iranian maidens and Macedonian soldiers and commanders (Cambridge History of Iran 1985, 2:349-350).

Although Alexander died two years after these events in 323 BCE, Iran remained under Greek influence. The establishment of the Seleucid Empire by one of Alexander's generals ensured the continued dominance of Hellenistic culture in Iran, as evidenced by Hellenistic motifs in architectural remains from this period.

The Arab Muslim invasion, like Alexander's conquest, came from the west, and in both instances, the Persian king was assassinated. In both cases, the conquerors initially advanced only to the central borders, temporarily halting where Sassanid Iran had long defended the frontiers of Near Eastern culture and civilization against the Hephthalites and invading Turks (Spuler 1986, 2-3).

Despite these similarities, the impact of the Arab invasion was far more profound and extensive than Alexander's conquest. In the wake of the Islamic conquests, Arab tribes began migrating to Iranian territories. These migrants would settle near springs or cities, erecting their tents made of goat and camel hair. They interacted with locals, sometimes peacefully, sometimes violently, occasionally killing Zoroastrians and dividing their properties. They would then invite relatives and acquaintances to join them, gradually populating the surrounding areas with new settlers living alongside Iranians (Zarrinkub 1987, 367-368).

Arab dominance and continuous migration to Iran persisted for two centuries until Iranian patriotic movements began to emerge across the country. The rebellions of Abu Muslim Khorasani and later Babak Khorramdin exemplify this historical period. As a result of these uprisings, the Abbasid Caliphate was compelled to recognize semi-autonomous and nominally Iranian rulers such as the Tahirids and Saffarids to rule over Iranian territory.

Upon a cursory examination of Iran's fate in past centuries, particularly the events that transpired during the ninth and tenth centuries, we discern that the occurrences and incidents of this era predominantly consisted of conquest, plunder, and the successive transfer of cities and territories within this nation. These events were precipitated by nearly localized and protracted power struggles arising from chaotic turmoil, with the exception of periods when Iranian dynasties such as the Saffarids, Buyids, and Samanids governed portions of Iran. Consequently, it is unsurprising that contemporaries and subsequent generations regarded the reign of the foreign (Turkic) Seljuks as an era of deliverance from perpetual strife and emancipation from fruitless devastation and brutal bloodshed (Spuler 2007, 233-234).

Thus, with the establishment of Turkic polities in northeastern Iran, initially commencing with the Ghaznavids, reaching its apex with the advent of the Seljuks and their dominion over Iran, and subsequently followed by the Mongols, continuing through the Timurids and culminating with the Safavids, each of these dynasties was accompanied by migrations and impacts on the social fabric of Iranian society. This

influence occasionally manifested through migration and settlement within Iranian territory, exemplified by the migration of certain Turkic tribes during the Seljuk and Safavid periods, and at times through overt violence and massacres.

Having established this context, we shall endeavor to address inquiries concerning the relationship between the race and Turkic language of Iranian Azeris and their Iranian national identity, as well as Iranian nationalism. Accordingly, we elucidate that due to the predominant use of the Turkic language by the inhabitants of Azerbaijan, which resulted from historical developments, the term “Turk” has been colloquially applied to citizens residing in Iran’s Azeri-speaking provinces. However, this appellation does not denote a specific race or nationality.

Furthermore, a review of Iranian historical events, particularly from the Constitutional period onward, demonstrates that Azeri freedom advocates have consistently been at the forefront of struggles aligned with Iranian nationalism, standing alongside their fellow compatriots.

Considering the historical events and profound political and religious disparities between the centers of pan-Turkist ideology dissemination in the contemporary era and Iran’s Azeri provinces, pan-Turkist ideologies have failed to find substantial fertile ground in this region.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the significance of the Azerbaijan issue (throughout this article, “Azerbaijan” refers to the historical territory of Iran’s northwestern provinces south of the Aras River, not the Republic of Azerbaijan that emerged in the twentieth century) and the presence of ethnonationalist and pan-Turkist elements in neighboring countries, a considerable body of work has been produced on this subject. As it is not feasible to enumerate all of these works here, we shall only reference a select few.

Jacob Landau’s scholarly work, *Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation* (Landau 2003), can confidently be regarded as one of the exemplary works in the field, particularly concerning the subject of nationalism and pan-Turkism within the scope of the present research.

In his book *Pan-Turkism and Iran*, Kaveh Bayat (2008) primarily addresses the causes of pan-Turkism’s failure in Iran, elaborating on the subject through references to historical events and occurrences. This work is particularly noteworthy and significant in this domain, as it approaches the topic free from prevailing biases and relies entirely on historical documentation.

Novin (2011), in his book *The History of the Azeri Language in Azerbaijan*, provides a concise examination of Azerbaijan’s history from ancient times to the present. Although his primary objective in this book was to address the history of the Azeri language and the introduction and proliferation of the Turkic language among Azerbaijan’s inhabitants, he also offers a brief overview of the region’s history. This book is a valuable contribution to the history of the Azeri language and the evolution and reasons for the Turkification of the Azerbaijani people’s language. However, the

present article focuses on examining the racial aspects of Azerbaijan's inhabitants and their connection to Iranian nationalism, which differs from the subject matter of Novin's book.

Firouzi (2010) investigates the findings of genetic science on this subject, including the affinity of the Azeri-speaking group with other Iranian linguistic groups. The results indicate a significant similarity and kinship among the various linguistic groups present in Iran. While Firouzi's article presents highly valuable findings, some of which have been utilized in this research, it approaches the subject solely from the perspective of genetic science, neglecting other dimensions.

The collection of articles *Azerbaijan and Arran*, compiled by Hossein Ahmadi, is a commendable research endeavor that examines Azerbaijan from various angles. However, the specific topic of this research is not addressed therein.

Similarly, the collection of articles *The Role of Azerbaijan in Consolidating Iran's Identity*, compiled by Nikbakht, examines the history and role of Azerbaijan in Iranian history from diverse perspectives, constituting a valuable scientific and research work. However, this compilation also does not address the article on Azerbaijan and national identity.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. THE INHABITANTS OF AZERBAIJAN THROUGHOUT IRANIAN HISTORY

The historical geography of Azerbaijan attests that this region has been considered part of the Median province since the Achaemenid era. Based on extant documentation, the first clear account of the renaming of Lesser Media to Media Atropates or Atropatene, which is the original form of the name Azerbaijan, comes from Strabo, the Greek geographer. Born around 63 BCE in Amasya in Asia Minor, Strabo provides information about Media Atropatene in his Geography, stating that "When the Achaemenid dynasty ended and Alexander conquered Iran, a commander named Atropates arose in Azerbaijan, preserving that land, which was part of the Median territory known as 'Lesser Media,' from falling into Greek hands, and that land came to be called 'Atropatene' after him" (Nikbakht 2008, 34). Aliev presents a similar translation of this text, noting: "The Medes are divided into two separate parts: one part is called Greater Media, and the second part is called Media Atropatene, which took its name from its military leader Atropates, who prevented his country from falling under Macedonian rule (like Greater Media) (and until Strabo's time) this inheritance continues in his family. For his ancestors married into Armenian and Syrian royal families, and later with the Parthian Iranians" (Kasravi 1977, 314; Aliev 1977, 105).

In addition to Strabo, Arrian, the 2nd century CE historian, in the section concerning Alexander's campaign to Iran, separately mentions Caucasian Albania and Azerbaijan, referring to Azerbaijan as "Media Atropatene" (Nikbakht 2008, 38). Zeki Velidi Togan, a Turkish scholar, also citing Strabo's writings under the entry "The

Name of Azerbaijan and Its Historical Boundaries” in the Istanbul edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, writes: “The name Azerbaijan is tied to Alexander the Great. This name is derived from the name of one of the commanders of the Kayanian dynasty [Iranian kings] called Atropates, who in 328 BCE administered some provinces of the land of Media on behalf of Alexander. To distinguish it from Greater Media, this part of the [Median] territory, which also included some of the former, was called Media Atropatene (or in other words, Lesser Media) or Atropatene. The pronunciation of this word in the third century CE was Azarābādīgān, and among the Byzantines it was seen in the form of AOO. The Arabs changed the ‘g’ to ‘j’, and this word became ‘Azarbijan’, and finally this name found its way among Iranians and Turks in this form” (Diakonoff 1996, 541).

Zaryab Khoi also corroborates the above account in the *Great Islamic Encyclopedia* under the entry “History and Historical Geography of Azerbaijan” (Zaryab Khoi, n.d., 194). The author of the “Turkish Dictionary of Proper Nouns” shares a similar view with the aforementioned scholars and many other experts, such as Vasily Vladimirovich, regarding the origin of the name Azerbaijan (Sami 1927, 28; Barthold 1996, 162).

Despite the abundance of historical documentation regarding the name Azerbaijan and its historical roots recorded in academic centers worldwide, there are circles today—especially outside Iran—that sometimes under a scientific guise, but all with political aims and motives, attempt to propose other historical roots for the name Azerbaijan and its inhabitants. The documentation from these circles mostly tries to suggest that the identity of Iranian Azeris, especially the inhabitants of Azerbaijan in Iran, has been and continues to be “Turkish” and non-Iranian throughout history, and therefore, they constitute a nationality separate from the Iranian nation. On this basis, some of these ethnonationalist circles today attempt to justify their beliefs by attributing the roots of every cultural and racial movement to the concept of “Turk,” including claiming a Turkish origin for the word “Azerbaijan.” For instance, a writer from these circles writes about the etymology of Azerbaijan:

... Research by some scholars shows that the name Azerbaijan is also derived from the name of this tribe [Az - As - Qas]. The Az added the Turkish suffixes ‘er’ and ‘bay’ to their name, calling their area of residence Azerbaijan, which later became Azerbaijan. The suffix ‘gan’ in Turkish is a locative suffix, which has also entered the Persian language (cf. Niayesh 2001, 16).

Mohammadzadeh Seddiq also presents a similar view, believing that “Azar” means “righteous person” and has Turkish roots (16). He also considers the root of this word to be “Sumerian”! Some also consider the word Azerbaijan to be composed of “Az,” the name of a Turkish-speaking tribe, “ar” meaning man, “bay-ob” the same as “bey,” and “ajan,” “ajn” (khan, father), thus the word Azerbaijan means “Khan-bey, man from the Az tribe” (cf. Reza 2001, 78).

The ignorance and unscientific nature of such opinions are so evident that they are apparent to anyone familiar with historical sources, etymology, and linguistics, and

who understands on what basis documents and evidence can be considered credible. Such claims regarding the Turkish origin of the name Azerbaijan are incomparable to scholarly research based on Greek, Iranian, Ottoman, Arabic, and Russian sources about the Iranian origin of the name Azerbaijan. Therefore, they should be considered under the category of political propaganda.

After examining the historical roots of the name Azerbaijan, we now turn to investigating the race and ancestry of Azerbaijan's inhabitants in terms of their affinity or lack thereof with the people of the Iranian plateau.

This research, as can be observed in the examination of the historical roots of the name Azerbaijan, aims to present historical facts rooted in historical sources and books and the results of modern scientific researchers, which are also credible in global academic centers. Where necessary, the arguments of ethnonationalist circles will also be addressed.

Examining the historical vicissitudes and bitter events such as major invasions of Iran, one might boldly say that in these events, any people other than Iranians would have been assimilated into the cultures and nationalities of the Greek, Turkish, Mongol, and Arab invaders by now, just as the people of Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, the Levant, Sudan, and elsewhere met such a fate after the Islamic conquests. Each of these peoples had an independent ethnicity, history, culture, and language before the Muslim Arab invasion, but after they came under Muslim Arab rule, they were assimilated into Arab culture and history. In addition to their religion and language, even racially, they came to consider themselves Arab, and the historical memory of the people of these countries gradually forgot that they had an identity separate from the people of the Arabian Peninsula.

However, Iranians, despite all their historical adversities, from Alexander's invasion to the Muslim Arab conquest and then the Mongol invasion, still maintained their identity, nationality, culture, language, and national history. They accepted the divine message of Islam from the Muslim Arabs, but unlike the people of the western Arabian Peninsula, they were not assimilated into Arab culture and history.

3.2. THE INHABITANTS OF AZERBAIJAN ACCORDING TO HISTORICAL SOURCES

Historical sources indicate that until recent centuries, the people of Azerbaijan were of Aryan or Iranian origin, and their language was derived from the Azeri Pahlavi root. Even until the sixth century and later, Azeri remained the predominant language of the region. Thus, one must inquire: How and when did the Turkish language find its way into Azerbaijan?

Historically, Turks reached the Iranian border in large numbers during the Parthian era, settling there and establishing kingdoms. However, at that time, the Parthians, and subsequently the Sasanians, with their power, consistently repelled them. Later, when the Sasanians fell, the Arabs took their place in opposing the Turks and continued to hold them back for three hundred years.

Although the path for Turkish migration opened during the Seljuk reign, it should be noted that groups had arrived in Iran and reached Azerbaijan prior to this period. Apart from the tribes that followed the Seljuks from Turkestan and dispersed everywhere, and because Azerbaijan has abundant pastures and is more suitable for pastoral life than other places, Turkish tribes became more numerous and prevalent here. From that time until the Mongol invasion of Iran, as the Turks held power and control over affairs, and people were compelled to interact and converse with them, it is evident that ears gradually became accustomed to the Turkish language, and it gradually gained prominence in Azerbaijan.

From the middle of the Mongol domination period, we have Marco Polo's travelogue, who came to Tabriz in 1293 CE (693 AH) and, when speaking of the people there, makes no mention of Turks. Although Marco Polo's account may not have been based on meticulous observation, as undoubtedly some Turks were residing in Tabriz at that time, they were not numerous enough for Marco Polo to become aware of their presence (Azari 1981, 60).

Similarly, Ibn Battuta's travelogue also mentions the presence of Turks alongside Tajiks (60). From that era, we also have Ibn Bazzaz's *Safwat al-Safa*, which, in recounting the life of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili, reveals through numerous anecdotes that Turks were present in Azerbaijan at that time, but they were in the minority compared to the native population. This book also indicates that during this period (from 14 CE onwards), Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili himself spoke in the Azeri language, which was a branch of the Persian language. In this regard, the following evidence is noteworthy:

In Sheikh Safi al-Din's time, there was a province south of Baku and on the Caspian Sea coast called Gashtasfi, where the people's language was "Pahlavi related to Gilani." Perhaps the author of *Safwat al-Safa* means to say that the people of Gashtasfi spoke Pahlavi, which was related to the Gilani, and we know that the Gilani dialect is also a branch of the Persian language.

When Sheikh Safi al-Din went to Sheikh Zahed Gilani, Sheikh Zahed said to him in the Ardabili dialect, "*Kar bemande kar tamam beri*," meaning "O prosperous one, the work was complete, but it remained unfinished due to the master's admonition."

In *Safwat al-Safa*, a story is recounted from a woman who was a follower of Sheikh Safi, and a poem in the Azeri language is reported: "Khaje Agha says that there was a woman named Banu, a devoted follower who worked as a gardener. One day, the fire of longing flared up in her, and it occurred to her that the Sheikh did not remember her. She opened her mouth and composed this Pahlavi [Pahlavi]:

Direkin sar be sowdaye te giji
Direkin chash chu khunin asre riji
Dire sar be astane ach na daram
Khod navaji kur bakhti chu giji

In the *Silsilat al-Nasab Safaviyya*, many poems in the Azeri language are seen in the form of Fahlavi... The aforementioned Fahlavis indicate that Sheikh Safi al-Din spoke the Azeri language.

Another piece of evidence showing that Sheikh Safi al-Din did not speak Turkish but rather Azeri is that he distinctly identified those who spoke Turkish as Turks. Many stories in *Safwat al-Safa* attest to this (Ghaffari Fard 2006, 99 and 105).

3.3. THE INHABITANTS OF AZERBAIJAN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GENETIC STUDIES

Regarding the Iranian plateau, one of the current challenges for researchers in history, archaeology, and anthropology is the issue of Aryan migration to the Iranian plateau and its timing. The fundamental question in this narrative is whether these people were the original inhabitants of the aforementioned land or if people of other lineages lived on the Iranian plateau before them. The prevailing notion has been that the Iranian plateau had non-Aryan, indigenous inhabitants, and the Aryans entered the plateau from the north during the middle of the second millennium and the late third millennium BCE.

To examine the race and ancestry of Iranians and determine the affinity or lack thereof among people residing in various parts of the country, including Azeris, we can now utilize genetic science due to its advancements. In this regard, we can refer to the results of a scientific study conducted by a group of heredity and genetics researchers on the linguistic groups of Iran. This research states: "In general, the inheritance of genetic material in humans is divided into three categories: nuclear, mitochondrial (maternal), and paternal. If we study samples from today's population (obtained from blood samples of individuals), we should investigate mitochondrial inheritance. This is because specific racial markers in it remain intact even through historical invasions of foreigners to a nation (which can cause changes in paternal inheritance markers). However, if our research is focused on ancient times and the power of ancient civilizations, due to the likelihood of less mixing with others, we can also explore the markers of the Y chromosome. Despite human similarity in 99% of their genomic content, each racial group has a number of specific genetic markers. These indicators in the mitochondrial genome and Y chromosome are technically called haplogroups.

In this scientific study, which is based on human samples from the Elamite civilization dating back to 2000-1500 BCE, the research foundation is on the search for the paternal haplogroup R1a. R1a or M17 is a specific genetic marker for Indo-European (Aryan) peoples. DNA remnants in ancient samples can remain intact over long periods. Based on these molecules, geneticists and anthropologists can obtain abundant information about ancient populations. Data such as the migration path of these people or their ancestors, their evolutionary history, and the like, are among the useful data obtained through the study of ancient DNA. Analysis of an ancient DNA sequence has been made possible through PCR and sequencing.

Analysis showed that Indians living in the north of this country (the white people of this land who are likely to be Aryan), inhabitants of northern Afghanistan (Tajiks) and inhabitants of Tajikistan, inhabitants of Khujand, Serbs (Slavs living in eastern Germany), Hungarians, Poles and Ukrainians (Eastern European Slavs)—white groups that have been classified as part of the yellow Altaic group solely due to speaking the Turkish language of yellow-skinned people—Pashtuns, Russians and Belarusians, as well as the people living in Iran, have a very high proximity in terms of the presence and frequency of this indicator, which means they share a common ancestral root (the same Aryan race) with each other. To prove this claim, we observe an increase in the frequency of the marker in question from western Iran towards its east. So much so that its rate in the population of Iran is 35%, but this rate is higher among the inhabitants of former Iranian-inhabited lands (current Afghanistan (Pashtuns) 51% and also among Tajiks and Khujandis 64%). The reason for this issue is quite clear. The invasion of Arab foreigners has taken place from the west of Iran, and therefore, the further the samples are from the center of the invasion, the higher the racial purity and frequency of the desired indicator. This not only reveals the common ancestry of all Iranian-born inhabitants of the former Greater Iran territories but also indicates the common ancestry of these people with the mentioned European groups.

	Similarity					
	Persian-speaking / Kurd	Persian-speaking / Lor	Persian-speaking / Azeri	Lor / Kurd	Kurd / Azeri	Lor / Azeri
Enzyme						
Hea III	88%	90%	86%	77%	95%	75%
MSP I	87%	90%	85%	75%	92%	80%
Tap I	85%	87%	89%	88%	87%	75%
Hinf I	85%	92%	77%	78%	90%	77%
Ecor I	74%	89%	84%	80%	86%	78%
Close to percentage (not provided in the source)	83.8	89.6	83.4	79.6	90	77

Table 1. Percentage Similarity of Enzymatic Profiles among Different Iranian ethnical groups

It should be added that the issue of frequency fluctuations of the R1a indicator is also seen in Indo-European (Aryan) speaking Slavic and Eastern European populations. So much so that the further we move from Eastern Europe (the center of the yellow-skinned invasion to the west) towards the central regions of this continent, the frequency of the indicator increases (from Hungarians with 20.4% to Poles with 56% and above).

Regarding the genetic proximity of Aryan groups, it should be noted that Iranian sub-racial groups, based on a series of tests, also have a high proximity to each other.

What is obtained from the above table is very important and complements the results of this research. Because the above results clearly report that all four major current tribes of Iran have a very high kinship with each other, in other words, they are of the same origin and race. On the other hand, the closer proximity of Kurds and Azeris to each other, as well as the greater affinity of Persian speakers and Luri dialect speakers to each other, shows that the heirs of Media are Azeris and Kurds. On the other hand, Persians have presented the middle ground between Azeris and Kurds with the Lur-speaking population. An issue that can bring forth this idea that, considering historical observations about the proximity of ancient Persian and Elamite lands, Lur people can be considered as heirs and remnants of Elamite urbanization or Aryans of that era in the Khuzestan region and its north and northeast” (quoted from Firouzi 2010, 170).

3.4. IRANIAN NATIONALISM AND AZERBAIJAN

Nationalism is a preference that individuals, as members of society, place on the constituent elements of this totality, both material and spiritual. It is an attachment to the past and present belongings of society and a belief in its continuity into the future. It is a doctrine that distinguishes, and sometimes considers superior, social traditions in the realm of politics, art, literature, and in essence, all manifestations of identity-creating elements from other societies and countries. Historical, geographical, cultural, moral commonalities, and mental forms that have intermingled over time are the primary ingredients of the concept of nation. This concept is alive and prominent for each member of society, consciously or unconsciously, as they feel it in their mental world and consider themselves part of it and it part of them. Linguistic unity, empathy, like-mindedness, shared memories of victories and defeats all contribute to the formation of this feeling. The “nation” has been shaped in the crucible of past events, is manifest in the present, and its continuity is destined for the future (Cottam 1992, 11-12). A reality that should not be overlooked here is the difference between nationalism as a modern political movement that emerged in Western Europe in the late 18th century and then in other parts of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the formation of national consciousness and nationhood in Iran, which is a much older phenomenon predating nationalism in the world. In other words, Iranian nationality had formed without the need for nationalism as an ideology belonging to the era of the state system (see Attarzadeh 2024), and in the modern era, the 19th and 20th centuries, the movement called “Iranian nationalism” was a movement to protect Iran against the vicissitudes of international events and conflicts, foreign and colonial interventions, and to revive the power of the national state of Iran.

The emergence of nationalism as one of the major political and intellectual developments in the Middle East dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. Among these, three nationalist currents had the most significant impact on the course

of regional developments: Arab nationalism, Turkish nationalism, and Iranian nationalism. One of the main differences between these three nationalist currents was that Arab and Turkish nationalism initially had an ethnic nature, that is, a kind of intellectual tendency in the Ottoman Empire, which consisted of various ethnic groups with different political, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Each of these two currents, in their initial stages, sought to establish a new state based on the Arab and Turkish ethnic groups. This sense of Arabness and Turkishness, especially in its political form, emerged from the mid-19th century, and before that, both groups lived based on Islamic identity within the Islamic caliphate system. Iranian nationalism, unlike these two intellectual currents, did not have the ethnic nature of a member in a larger society to seek the establishment of a new state from within a larger empire. On the contrary, Iranian nationalism was in fact a kind of awakening of national consciousness that existed to varying degrees, albeit more culturally and then politically, among various strata of Iranian society (Landau 1995, 7)

Given that the subject of discussion in this research is Azerbaijan, the issues related to the relationship between Iranian nationalism and Azerbaijan are examined here. Nationalism is, in a way, indicative of a sense of unity and commonality among people who accept it, and in the case of Iran, since the foundations of nationality were strong before the modern era, the ground was prepared for the formation of nationalism based on the elements of Iranian national identity. Based on our study, at least four elements can be identified as foundational to Iranian identity, which has sustained Iranian nationality from the depths of history to the modern era. These elements are a common homeland, a shared national history and ancestry, a common language, and religion (for a synthesis of scholars' views on the elements of Iranian national identity, see Attarzadeh 2022).

Examining the above cases among Iranians living in Azerbaijan (historical Azerbaijan which now consisted four provinces in Iran) with other parts of the Iranian plateau, apart from the Turkish language, which is currently the local language of the majority of Azerbaijan's inhabitants, no other point of divergence is seen. Therefore, this seemingly divergent category in Iranian nationalism and Azerbaijan is examined below.

3.4.1. LANGUAGE

Among the commonalities of a nation for nationalism, the local language was mentioned as the only non-common component between the inhabitants of Azerbaijan and other parts of Iran—It is clear that the national language among all Iranians, including Azeris, is the common language of Persian. Here, without considering the history of the prevalence of this language in Iran, which was mentioned above, the opinion of one of the most famous experts in this field is quoted. Richard Cottam believes that most definitions of nationalism in the past considered the existence of a common language as its essential tool. Scholars usually added to this definition that this necessity, like in the case of Canada and Switzerland, is not absolute, and then

continued that these exceptions rarely occur. However, today, the interesting linguistic diversity that exists in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and other countries that are on the path of nationalism growth, shows that for national unity, it is necessary to reduce the emphasis on the language element. Ignoring this factor is also a big mistake, because nationalism still requires people to consider themselves of the same essence, and undoubtedly, a common language helps to create such a view. When people in a country speak different languages, convincing them that they have unique national characteristics is indeed a difficult task (Cottam 1992, 60).

Linguistic diversity is not unique to Iran; in most countries of the world, linguistic diversity exists, but as mentioned above, this issue has not become a problem in nationalism in many countries. About the language issue in Iran, Cottam notes that there are no reliable statistics to know the percentage of Iranians in different language groups, but the theory that everyone agrees on is that the majority of Iranians speak Persian. However, Azerbaijan is an important Turkish-speaking province of Iran. Also, Qashqais, Turkmens, and some of the Khamseh and many smaller tribes and scattered villages speak Turkish. In part of Khuzestan province, and on the coast of the Persian Gulf, Arabic is common. Kurdish, a cousin of Persian, is spoken by Kurdish tribes. Other Persian dialects, such as Lori, Tabari, Gilaki are prevalent in local areas.

Nevertheless, "if the linguistic problems that Iranian nationalism faces are compared with the problems that Indian nationalism is grappling with, the conclusion is that for Iran, there is no major issue in this regard" (Cottam 1992, 60-61).

However, as mentioned about the very close affinity between the Kurdish language and the Persian language, and the non-problematic nature of the linguistic difference of the Turkish language in the issue of Iranian nationalism, given the many commonalities in terms of religion, culture, traditions, and history between the inhabitants of Azerbaijan and other inhabitants of Iran, it has caused some foreign currents and states, with the plan of Pan-Turanism—the unity of Turkish speakers—to try to influence the people of Azerbaijan with the idea that with this issue, they can cut off all the commonalities between the Azeris and the Iranian nation and only by means of language, separate Azerbaijan from Iran. The same shared history that also includes violent wars with the Ottoman Turkish Empire, in which the province of Azerbaijan, from the Safavid era to World War I, has repeatedly witnessed the plunder and crimes of the Ottoman army. Throughout history, the Ottoman Turks have always had their eyes on Iran, as in the case of the extinction of the Safavid dynasty, they sat down with the Russians to negotiate the complete removal of Iran's name from the world map and the division of Iranian cities and regions between them, and each started to reach out to Iran from one side.

The historical memory of the Iranian people, particularly those in Azerbaijan, is indelibly marked by the murder and plunder perpetrated by Ottoman troops during their predatory attacks on cities and villages. Despite this, nearly a century after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey—now grappling with numerous identity issues—a faction of Turkish

nationalists still harbors aspirations to revive the grandeur of the Ottoman Empire, this time under the banner of Pan-Turanism. This sentiment has been particularly pronounced following the independence of the 'Republic of Azerbaijan.' However, due to the diplomatic relations and security considerations between Iran and Turkey, Turkish politicians, unlike the government in Baku, have generally refrained from overt and robust actions in this regard. Thus, while the theoretical and ideological roots of Pan-Turanism lie in the Ottoman Empire (modern-day Turkey), the principal center for the implementation of Pan-Turkism policies has been Baku.

3.5. PAN-TURKISM

Ármin (Hermann) Vámbéry, a Jewish-Hungarian traveler and orientalist, was among the first to popularize the concepts of Turan and Pan-Turkism. Through his numerous books and articles, Vámbéry introduced the languages and folk cultures of Central Asia to a broader audience. In his book *The Life and Adventures of Arminius Vámbéry*, published in 1868, he dedicated an entire chapter to the role of Central Asian imagery among the Turanians. Vámbéry argued that all Turkic groups belonged to one race, divided into subgroups based on physical characteristics and customs. In another book, "Travels in Central Asia," published three years earlier, Vámbéry (2002) proposed a grand plan for a Pan-Turkic empire stretching from the Adriatic coast to China.

Although Vámbéry later retracted and labeled Pan-Turkism as an illusory phenomenon, he had already popularized the image of a Pan-Turkic empire. Vámbéry's close relationships with several Young Turk leaders likely played a crucial role in their advocacy of Pan-Turkism principles (Landau 1995, 21-22). Hassan Taqizadeh, exiled from Iran during the tensions of the Second National Assembly and residing in Istanbul as an eyewitness to these developments, later described the widespread influence of Léon Cahun's works. Cahun, a Jewish-French traveler who authored *Introduction to the History of Asia*, had his ideas described as follows by Taqizadeh:

Those familiar with the strange idea of Pan-Turkism or Pan-Turanism may not be aware that this odd and ridiculous notion of reviving the Genghis Empire, absolving the Mongols of any faults, and exaggerating the number, virtues, and historical glories of the Turkish people to the point of delirium, was largely derived from a fictional book by a French Jew. This book was translated into Turkish at the beginning of the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution. The unfortunate Ottoman public and their shallow, glory-seeking elites, believing Mr. Léon Cahun to be one of the great scholars, philosophers, and renowned researchers of Europe, cited and relied on him in every instance, absorbing his arguments and exaggerations" (Bayat 2008, 8-9)

Ziya Gökalp (1874-1924 CE) emerged as the foremost ideologue of Turkish Westernizers during this period. Opposing "Pan-Islamism," he considered Turkish nationalism and the complete adoption of Western civilization as essential to breaking the chains of oppression and ignorance for the "Turkish nation." Like Taha Hussein, Gökalp claimed that his nation belonged to Europe, not the Islamic world, and thus Turkey should sever all cultural, intellectual, and social ties with the East and connect

to the West. Gökaltp insisted that Turkey should fully embrace Western technology, industrial products, spirit, systems, and values while discarding old traditional values. Concurrently, Turkish "nationality," "Pan-Turkism," and the ancient myths and legends of the Turkish people should be revived. To disguise his modernism in Islamic terminology, he resorted to sophistry, interpreting some principles of jurisprudence to claim that custom, presented as a principle in jurisprudence, referred to the national value system of a people. He insisted that according to Abu Yusuf, a Hanafi jurist, custom could invalidate Quranic text and tradition, thus giving the Turkish nation the right to discard many Islamic rulings it deemed unhelpful. Gökaltp stated, "We are Turkish in nationality, Muslim in religion (i.e., worship rituals), and European in culture and civilization." He argued that Islam should only retain certain religious beliefs and customs related purely to the human-God relationship, while other legal, social, political, and economic teachings of Islam had become obsolete and should be replaced by Western systems. However, Gökaltp did value Islam in some respects; at one point, he defined the Turkish race as "Turkish-speaking Muslims," contradicting some of his other ideas (Naqavi 1998, 67-68).

In conclusion, considering the above discussion, Pan-Turkism can be defined as an ideology and political practice within the following framework:

1. Pan-Turkism is inherently a racist ideology.
2. Pan-Turkism is as much a racist ideology as it is highly romantic and imaginative, emphasizing the unity of the Turkish race across different countries with various Turkish dialects and envisioning a utopian empire.
3. Pan-Turkish elitist groups, whether in Turkey or elsewhere, were small in number and had limited support.
4. Pan-Turkism is also an annexationist ideology and movement. The writings of Pan-Turkists and the actions of their leaders indicate that annexing territories with Turkish-speaking populations has been a primary objective of the Pan-Turkish project.
5. Pan-Turkist groups have pursued their annexationist plans towards Azeri-populated regions of Iran and neighboring countries like Iraq and Afghanistan since the early 20th century and have occasionally been active in these regions (Landau 1995, 8)

The birthplace of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Turanism was Turkey, where these ideologies continue to persist to some extent. However, given the developments in the international arena and political and security considerations, this ideology has been marginalized in Turkey, with only a few Turkish politicians still harboring aspirations of actualizing Pan-Turanism. Accordingly, the formation of political, economic, and cultural assemblies of Turkic-speaking countries, predominantly centered around Turkey, is pursued in line with these objectives.

3.6. THE DIFFICULT PATH OF PAN-TURKISM'S INFLUENCE AMONG AZERIS

Regarding the influence of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Turanism on the Azeri-populated regions of Iran, Cottam's perspective is noteworthy. He posits,

The Turkic-speaking people of Azerbaijan share the same Islamic sect [Shi'ism] with Persian speakers; they have a common culture, traditions, and history, including a history of violent conflicts with Turkey [Ottoman Empire]. Azerbaijan is the province that has suffered the most from contact with the Turks among all Iranian provinces and harbors unforgettable and vivid memories of their depredations. If Pan-Turanism were to succeed in Iranian Azerbaijan, the period of World War I would have been the best opportunity. The Young Turks, who held power, advocated for a Turkic-speaking empire stretching from the Aegean Sea to the Great Wall of China. However, the behavior of Turkish soldiers in Tabriz completely dispelled the allure of this dream. The conduct of Turkish soldiers in no way resembled that of liberating brothers; rather, it evoked bitter memories of invasions, murders, and plundering by Turkish aggressors. Naturally, few Azerbaijanis were inclined to support Pan-Turanism. The most popular and powerful Azerbaijani leaders also fought against the Turkish conspiracy. The Turks' other attempt to bring the Turkmen tribes of Khorasan under the banner of Pan-Turanism proved even less successful than their previous effort. The Turkmens were too tribal for Pan-Turanism to hold any appeal for them (Cottam 1988, 197-198).

After long periods during which the majority of the population in most parts of the Iranian monarchy, including Azerbaijan, were familiar with the divine teachings of Zoroastrianism, Islam spread to Iran in 643 CE. Gradually, Iranians became acquainted with Islamic teachings and knowledge. Following their conversion to Islam and throughout the Islamic era of Iranian history, Iranians, compared to other Muslims, devoted the most effort to Islamic sciences and jurisprudence, with Azerbaijani scholars playing a distinctive role. The influence of eminent jurists, renowned figures, and spiritual personalities extended throughout Iranian society. From Mulla Ahmad Moqaddas Ardabili (d. 1585) to Seyed Abol-Qasem Khoei (d. 1992), and from Seyed Ali Qazi, Mohammad Hosein Tabatabai, and Abdol-Hosein Amini to Mohammad Taqi Jafari, each held an exalted and lofty position in the scientific life of the Islamic world and Shi'ism (Aqiqi Bakhshayeshi 1996, 36). In major Azerbaijani cities such as Tabriz, Ardabil, Urumia, and Maragheh, various schools and seminaries exist where students from across the region study religious sciences. Among the most renowned are the Talebiyya, Sadeqiyye, Mulla Safar Ali, Hasan Padshah, and Khaje Ali Asghar schools (Encyclopedia of Shi'ism 1990, 29). Throughout history, the seminaries of Azerbaijan and the great scholars of this region have always been considered one of the pillars of Shi'ite religious authority worldwide.

On this basis, the unifying spirit of Islam and the Shi'ite sect has been a crucial factor in deepening the bond between Azeris and other Iranians. The power of the close connection between religion and nationalism in Iran surpasses any comparable examples in the West. Therefore, with the deep historical and religious ties between the

people of Azerbaijan and other inhabitants of the Iranian plateau, the divisive factor of the Turkish language has had little influence throughout history. As Edward Browne states, the thread of a common religion was so strong that before the twentieth century, no one considered attachment to Iran and attachment to the Shi'ite sect as two different types of loyalty (Cottam 1988, 202).

Conversely, the sense of belonging to Azerbaijan among Iranians is very clear and evident. For a typical Iranian patriot, Azerbaijan is a vital and inseparable part of Iran. In this regard, a noteworthy quote from Major General Razmara is worth mentioning. During the Iranian army's advance into Azerbaijan in 1946, he reportedly told his officers, "The army will restore the spirit of Iran to the nation" (Pesyan 1948, 237).

4. CONCLUSION

Azerbaijan and Azeris have always been considered an integral part of Iran since ancient times. Due to the strong capabilities and capacities that exist in the relationship between Iranian nationalism and the shared religion, culture, traditions, and history among the majority of Iranians, including Azeris, it is clear that the Iranian national spirit existed among Azerbaijanis even before the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Tabriz was one of the most combative cities in Iran during the Tobacco Protest, and it was this struggle that, through operations in 1900, forced the government to expel Belgian customs agents. When the revolution triumphed in 1906 and the first parliamentary elections were held, the twelve representatives from Azerbaijan formed the center of gravity for nationalist freedom-seekers in the parliament. Additionally, Azerbaijan, especially Tabriz, was highly influential in the victory of the Islamic Revolution. The Tabriz uprising on February 18, 1978, held to commemorate the fortieth day after the deaths of political protesters in Qom, marked the beginning of other widespread uprisings across the country, leading to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Based on this history, one can affirm that Pan-Turkism, as a branch of ethnic nationalism in recent years, is a phenomenon without roots in the province of Azerbaijan's history and has only emerged during the last century. It originated from an ideology that arose in the late Ottoman Empire and was subsequently promoted through foreign interventions, both in the form of direct military intervention—such as the Soviet-backed establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party government from 1945 to 1946—and through political, propaganda, and espionage tools.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

REFERENCES

- Ahmadi, Hossein. 2010. *Azerbaijan and Arran* [Āzarbāyjān va Arrān]. Tehran: Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies.

- Aliyev. 1999. *History of Aturpatkan* [Tārīkh-e Āturpātakān]. Translated by Shadman Yusef. Tehran: Balkh.
- Aqiqi Bakhshayeshi, Abdolrahim. 1996. *Prominent Figures of Azerbaijan* [Mofākher-e Āzarbāyjān]. Tehran: Azerbaijan Publishing.
- Attarzadeh, Behzad, Hossein S. Seyfodini. 2022 'National identity, transnational ideology, and cultural policy in Iran', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 29(7), pp. 807–827. doi: 10.1080/10286632.2022.2151591.
- Attarzadeh, Behzad. 2024. *The Spirit of the Iranian Nation: Dynamics and Permanence throughout History*. *Iranian Journal of Politics and Law* 2(1) 57–78
- Barthold, Vasily Vladimir. 1997. *History of the Turks in Central Asia* [Tārīkh-e Torkhā-ye Āsiyā-ye Meyāneh]. Translated by Ghafar Hosseini. Tehran: Toos.
- Bayat, Kaveh. 2008. *Pan-Turkism and Iran* [Pān-Torkīsm va Irān]. Tehran: Shirazeh.
- Cameron, George Glenn. 1977. *Iran at the Dawn of History* [Irān dar Sepideh Dam-e Tārīkh]. Translated by Hasan Anusheh. Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi.
- Cottam, Richard. 1992. *Nationalism in Iran* [Nāsiōnālīsm dar Irān]. Translated by Fereshta Sarlak. Tehran: Goftar.
- Diakonoff, I.M. 1996. *History of the Medes* [Tārīkh-e Mād]. Translated by Karim Keshavarz. 2nd ed. Tehran: Payam.
- Durant, Will. 1988. *The East, the Cradle of Civilization* [Mashreq Zamin Gahvāreh-ye Tamaddon]. Translated by Ahmad Aram and Pashae. Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi Publishing.
- Enayatollah, Reza. 1981. *Azerbaijan and Arran* [Āzarbāyjān va Arrān]. Tehran: Iran Zamin.
- Encyclopedia of Shia Islam*. 1990. Volume 1. Tehran: Institute of Shia Encyclopedia with cooperation of Yadavaran Publishing.
- Ghafari Fard, Abbasgholi. 2006. *History of Iran from the Sassanids to the Afsharids* [Tārīkh-e Irān az Sāsāniān tā Afshāriyeh]. Tehran: Ferdows.
- Ghirshman, Roman. 2009. *Iran from the Beginning to Islam* [Irān az Āghāz tā Eslām]. Translated by Mohammad Moeen. Tehran: Moeen.
- Great Islamic Encyclopedia*. 2004. Edited by Seyed Kazem Mousavi. Volume 1 [Dā'irat-ol-Ma'āref-e Bozorg-e Eslami]. Tehran: Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia.
- Gremyatsky, Ilya. 2008. *The History of Iran* (Cambridge University Study) [Tārīkh-e Irān (Pazhuhesh-e Dāneshgāh-e Cambridge)]. Translated by Morteza Sāqebfar. Tehran: Amir Kabir.
- Kasravi, Ahmad. 1977. *78 Essays and Articles by Ahmad Kasravi* [78 Resāleh va Goftār az Ahmad Kasravi]. Edited by Yahya Zakā. Tehran: Sahami Ketābhā-ye Jibi.
- Landau, Jacob. 2003. *Pan-Turkism: A Century of Seeking Unification* [Pān-Torkīsm yek Qarn dar Takāpū-ye Elhāqgarī]. Translated by Hamid Ahmadi. Tehran: Ney.
- Naqavi, Ali-Mohammad. 1998. *Sociology of Westernization* [Jāme'e Shenāsi-ye Gharbzadegī]. 2nd ed. Tehran: Amir Kabir.
- Nikbakht, Rahim. 2008. *The Role of Azerbaijan in Strengthening Iranian Identity* [Naqsh-e Āzarbāyjān dar Tahkim-e Hoviyat-e Irān]. Tehran: Social Planning and Cultural Studies Office, Payam Noor University.
- Niyayesh, Omid. 2001. *Azerbaijan and Identity* [Āzarbāyjān va Hoviyat]. Tehran: Omid Niyāyesh – Zufa.

- Niyazmand, Reza. 2008. *Reza Shah: From Birth to Monarchy* [Reza Shāh: az Tavalod tā Saltanat]. Tehran: Hekāyat Qalam-e Novin.
- Novin, Hossein. 2011. *History of the Azeri Language in Azerbaijan* [Tārīkh-e Zabān-e Āzarī dar Āzarbāyjān]. Tehran: Islamic Civilization Publishing.
- Pesyan, Najafgholi. 1948. *Death Also Had a Return* [Marg Būd Bāzgasht Ham Būd]. Tehran: Sahami Press Company.
- Sami, Shams al-Din Mohammad. 1898. *Dictionary of Turkish Names* [Qāmūs-e A'lām-e Turki]. Volume 2. Istanbul.
- Spuler, Bertold. 2007. *History of Iran in the Early Islamic Period* [Tārīkh-e Irān dar Qorūn-e Nosikh-e Eslāmī]. Translated by Javad Falaturi. Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi Publishing.
- Zarrinkoub, Abdolhossein. 2008. *History of Iran after Islam* [Tārīkh-e Irān Ba'd az Eslām]. Tehran: Amir Kabir.
- . 2009. *History of the Iranian People (From the End of the Sassanids to the End of the Buyids)* [Tārīkh-e Mardom-e Irān (az Pāyān-e Sāsāniān tā Pāyān-e Āl-e Booyeh)]. Tehran: Amir Kabir.