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IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF IRANIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE AZERBAIJAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC: ANALYSIS OF THE TURKISH FACTOR

Sevinj Mammadova*

Abstract. The article examines the political bias factor in Iran's attitude toward the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–1920) and the role of Turkism in shaping this bias. The study reveals that the geopolitical transformations of the early 20th century, the rise of national ideologies, and emerging state-building initiatives in the region conflicted with Iran's security and administrative interests. When the ADR's policies on national self-identification, language, and cultural identity are compared with the existing ethnic and political dynamics within Iran, the Iranian government's cautious approach to regional developments becomes more evident. By analyzing Iran's diplomatic actions, contemporary press rhetoric, and the ideological discourse of the period, the article identifies the underlying causes of this biased stance. The findings demonstrate that the Turkism factor was influential in Iran's regional policy; however, it emerged as a complex element shaped by multilayered geopolitical and domestic political dynamics.

Keywords: Iranian politics, Ottoman Empire, Turkism, national ideology, ethnic dynamics

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ИДЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ ПОЛИТИКИ ИРАНА В ОТНОШЕНИИ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНСКОЙ НАРОДНОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ: АНАЛИЗ ТУРЕЦКОГО ФАКТОРА

Севиндж Маммедова*

Абстракт. Статья анализирует фактор политической предвзятости в отношении Ирана к Азербайджанской Демократической Республике (1918-1920) и роль тюркизма в формировании данной предвзятости. Исследование показывает, что геополитические изменения, рост национальных идеологий и новые государственных инициативы в регионе в начале XX века вступали в противоречие с интересами Ирана в сфере безопасности и управления. Национальная политика Азербайджанской Демократической Республики в области самоидентификации, языка и этнокультурной принадлежности, сопоставленная с существующей этнической и политической динамикой внутри Ирана, делает более очевидной осторожную реакцию иранского правительства на происходящие в регионе процессы. Анализ дипломатических шагов Ирана, риторики в прессе и идеологического дискурса эпохи позволяет выявить причины формирования данной предвзятой позиции. В результате исследования установлено, что фактор тюркизма являлся значимым, но формировался во взаимосвязи с многослойными геополитическими и внутривосточными процессами, что придавало ему комплексный характер в региональной политике Ирана.

Ключевые слова: Политика Ирана, Османская империя, тюркизм, национальная идеология, этническая динамика

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AZƏRBAYCAN XALQ CÜMHURİYYƏTİNƏ DAİR İRAN SİYASƏTİNİN İDEOLOJİ ASPEKTLƏRİ: TÜRKÇÜLÜK AMİLİNİN TƏHLİLİ

Sevinc Məmmədova*

Abstrakt. Məqalə İranın Azərbaycan Xalq Cümhuriyyətinə (1918–1920) qarşı siyasi münasibətində qərəz yaradan amillərdən biri türkcülük faktorunun rolunu araşdırır. Tədqiqat göstərir ki, XX əsrin əvvəllərində regionda baş verən geosiyasi dəyişikliklər, milli ideologiyaların yüksəlişi və yeni dövlətçilik təşəbbüsləri İranın təhlükəsizlik və idarəetmə maraqları ilə toqquşurdu. Azərbaycan Xalq Cümhuriyyətinin milli özünüdərk, dil və kimlik siyasəti İran daxilində mövcud etnik və siyasi dinamika ilə qarşılaşdırıldıqda, İran hökumətinin bölgədəki proseslərə ehtiyatla yanaşması daha aydın görünür. Məqalə həmçinin İranın diplomatik addımlarını, mətbuatdakı ritorikanı və dövrün ideoloji diskursunu təhlil etməklə, bu qərəzli mövqenin yaranma səbəblərini müəyyənləşdirir. Aparılan analiz nəticəsində türkcülük amilinin İranın regional siyasətində təsiredici, lakin çoxşaxəli geosiyasi və daxili siyasi faktorlarla qarşılıqlı əlaqədə formalaşan kompleks bir element olduğu qənaətinə gəlinir.

Açar sözlər: İran siyasəti, Osmanlı imperiyası, türkcülük, milli ideologiya, etnik dinamika

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1.Introduction

As a result of the Second Russo-Iranian War in the first half of the 19th century, the signing of the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) divided Azerbaijani territories between Russia and Iran. The southern part of the Aras River came under Iranian control, while the northern part was incorporated into the Russian Empire. For Iran, which had gained dominion over southern Azerbaijan, developments in the northern part of the territory were of significant strategic interest. These developments could assume a particularly sensitive character if they were linked to a national awakening. The February Revolution of 1917, by stimulating the national movement in Azerbaijan, created precisely such a political context. The overthrow of Tsarist rule in Russia catalyzed the rise of the national-democratic movement in Azerbaijan. Under the influence of the revolution, the peoples of the South Caucasus increasingly sought autonomy, and the activities of national parties and organizations were legalized. Consequently, the February Revolution provided broad opportunities for socio-political organizations in Azerbaijan to operate more freely.

During this period, the primary issue that attracted the attention of Iranian political and social circles was the question of Azerbaijani autonomy. The discussion of “Azerbaijani autonomy” following the February Revolution generated significant resonance in Iran from the outset. On April 2, 1917, during a rally organized in Ganja by N. Yusifbeyli, slogans such as “Long Live Azerbaijani Autonomy!” and “Long Live the Democratic Republic!” were raised [16, p.48]. The issue of autonomy was also highlighted in the first section of the nine-point program adopted by the Turk Adami-Center Party, established in Ganja by Nasib bey. Following this, on April 10–15, 1917, the Congress of Caucasian Muslims convened in Baku, and from May 1–11, the All-Russian Congress of Muslims took place in Moscow. At both congresses, Mahammad Amin Rasulzadeh delivered reports addressing the future state structure of Russia and the rights of oppressed peoples [15, 48]. He advocated the establishment of a “democratic federative republic” in Russia and called for the recognition of national-territorial autonomy for regions inhabited by Muslim populations within this republic. The progressive representatives of Russia’s Muslims adopted both proposals by majority vote, presenting them as resolutions reflecting the exigencies of the time. At the Moscow congress in particular, Rasulzade outlined the specific goals and tasks of the Turkish peoples’ struggle for national statehood. Following these congresses, the issue of “Azerbaijani autonomy” continued to be supported by Azerbaijani socio-political leaders and remained prominent on the political agenda. At the beginning of the 20th century, Yusif Vezir (Chaman Zaminli), a prominent socio-political activist, emphasized the community’s aspiration for autonomy:

"We, Azerbaijani Turks, being a single nation with a vast territory, seek to construct the framework of autonomy" [4, p.26]. The demand for autonomy remained relevant until the end of 1917. Alongside the discourse on "Azerbaijani autonomy," ideas regarding the broader Turkish peoples also resonated strongly in Iran from the outset.

2.The Post-October Revolution Context

Following the October Revolution in Russia, Rəsulzadə further articulated the historical and political identity of Azerbaijanis in his articles published in "Achig Soz". He repeatedly emphasized that the territories inhabited by Azerbaijanis had historically been referred to as "Azerbaijan." The national-democratic movement in Northern Azerbaijan was increasingly oriented toward the realization of the idea of autonomy. The first significant official reaction to this development came from Iran's diplomatic missions in the Caucasus. In early November 1917, Ali Mohammad Sharif-ed-Dowleh, the Iranian consul in Tiflis, reported in a telegram to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "For some time, the Muslims of the Caucasus, alongside Armenians and Georgians, have sought to maintain their internal independence while also establishing a Turkish government. Presently, the question of Azerbaijani autonomy is under discussion in certain circles. In the future, the orientation of this Turkish Muslim polity is expected to resemble that of the Ottoman Empire. Propagandists continue to promote this idea tirelessly" [2, p.45] The prospect of establishing a Turkish polity resembling the Ottoman Empire in the southeastern Caucasus was contrary to Iran's strategic interests. To counter the ideological influence of the Musavat Party, Sharif-ed-Dowleh proposed that Iran support Iranian populations and political parties in the Caucasus. He emphasized the need to cultivate relations with segments of the Caucasian Muslim population and to implement measures aimed at promoting the Persian language in Azerbaijan and the wider Caucasus region. In debates concerning Turkism, Rasalzade was the most active in countering the Iranian position, responding to every accusatory article in the Iranian press with documented evidence. Having resided in Iran during the Constitutional Revolution, he was well acquainted with Iranian perceptions and modes of thought, and he was recognized by most Iranian political figures.

Between 1908 and 1911, Rasalzade actively participated in significant socio-political developments in Iran, leading to important shifts in his political outlook. As a result of his political and journalistic activities, in 1912 he published a series of articles in Istanbul under the title "Iranian Turks". This work provided a detailed account of Iranian Turks and, for the first time, offered a comprehensive analysis of the role of Turks in Iranian statehood, emphasizing that for centuries Iranian monarchs had belonged to Turkish tribes. Addressing this issue with particular rigor, Rasalzade wrote: "For five

hundred years, the rulers in Iran have been of Turkish descent. Even today, the ruling Qajar dynasty originates from the Turkmen tribes. Nonetheless, the fact that Iranian nobility were Turks did not confer any special privilege upon the Turks, nor did it occasion oppression by the Persian population.” Rasulzade further clarified the legal and social status of Turks in Iran: *“In Iran, Turks are neither serfs, as in Russia, nor a ruling nation, as in Turkey. Iranian Turks share equal legal status with native Persian Iranians; they possess equivalent rights and privileges and are not subject to discrimination”* [13, p.100].

Professor S. Rustamova-Togidi, in her monograph, explains Rasulzade’s perspective on the “Iranianization” of Turks in Iran, noting that Turkish rulers did not challenge the national identity of Persians and were thus recognized as “national Iranian shahs,” while Turks, in turn, accepted Persian culture and language as the national literary standard [16, p.78]. In his writings, Rasulzade consistently referred to Iranian Turks as “Azerbaijanis,” highlighting their historical and cultural continuity.

3.The Issue of Turkism in the Official Meetings of Iran-ADR Diplomats

Iran’s biased policy towards the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) stemmed from its national and ideological interests. This policy was primarily based on opposition to Turkism and attempts to deny the national identity of the Azerbaijani people. Iran’s Persian-oriented ideologues perceived the emergence of the ADR not only as a political phenomenon but also as a social threat. These ideologues refused to acknowledge the Turkish identity of Azerbaijanis. They considered the use of the name “Azerbaijan” and the identification of Azerbaijanis as Turks as a cultural challenge to Iran. Iran openly expressed concern over the existence of a Turkish-speaking state in its neighborhood. Although the Qajar dynasty, of Turkic-Azerbaijani origin, was in power in Iran at the time, the state pursued a Persian-oriented policy. This made any softening of Iran’s stance toward the ADR impossible.

From the outset, Iran formally refused to recognize the independence of the ADR, a position it maintained in diplomatic interactions. For instance, when the head of the Azerbaijani delegation, A. Topchubashov, traveled to participate in the Paris Peace Conference, he met on November 16, 1918, in Istanbul with Mahmud Khan Ehtesham os-Saltaneh, Iran’s ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. During the meeting, Topchubashov introduced himself as the extraordinary plenipotentiary envoy of Caucasian Azerbaijan, at which point the Iranian diplomat raised the issue of the name “Azerbaijan” and asked: “You have named your state ‘Azerbaijan’; what does this mean? Does it imply a claim to the ‘real Azerbaijan’ within the borders of Iran?” Although Topchubashov clarified that Azerbaijanis did not make any such claim and used the term merely as a geographic designation, the Iranian diplomat regarded the use of the name for the state as a deliberate affront to Iran [17,

p.111]. Since the Iranian political elite associated the name "Azerbaijan" with Ottoman policy, the ambassador further remarked, "...this is not your fault; the tone has been set from there [i.e., Turkey – S.M.]" [17, p.110].

Iranians also sought to argue that the Azerbaijani people's use of the Turkish language and Turkish-language education had no connection to Turks. An illustrative example is the conversation between Mirza Mahmud Khan, the Iranian consul of Turcic-Qajar origin in Istanbul, and A.M. Topchubashov on November 16, 1918. During the meeting, the ambassador claimed that he understood everything in Turkish but deliberately refrained from speaking it himself. Regarding the ethnic composition of the population, he stated: "...You consider yourselves Azerbaijani Turks, yet there are no Turks in Azerbaijan, the Caucasus, or Iran; everyone is Iranian, and your ancestors were all Iranian." He explained that although the Ottomans claimed that the population in these regions was Turkish, one cannot find Turks where they do not exist. He identified himself as pro-Iranian and affirmed that he represented Iranian interests [17, pp.109-110]. Iranian politicians consistently regarded the Azerbaijani-Turkish ethnonym as a source of potential threat. Another notable fact concerns Aliqulu Khan, son of the Iranian Foreign Minister of Azerbaijani origin, Moshavir al-Mamalik. In an interview, he asserted, "We do not speak Turkish" [17, p.203].

The key point is that despite the presence of ethnic Azerbaijanis in high-ranking positions, they adopted even stricter positions than the Persians regarding Azerbaijani nationalism. Azerbaijani officials in power considered the development of these issues a threat and did not hesitate to deny the Turkish identity of Azerbaijanis.

It should be noted that the genuine ethnic interests of the Persians toward Azerbaijanis began to manifest only after the establishment of the ADR government. At this time, Iran's attitude toward the ADR reflected the anti-Azerbaijani policy that had already been forming within the Iranian public sphere. Iranian Persian nationalists frequently accused the Ottoman state regarding the issue of the name. Such accusations could also have been used to turn Iran-oriented forces against the Ottoman state and thereby strengthen Iran's influence in the region.

However, the Azerbaijani side had clearly articulated its position on this matter. During the Istanbul Conference held in June 1918, the head of the Azerbaijani delegation, M. A. Rasolzade, provided extensive information to the Istanbul press about Azerbaijan and offered the following explanation regarding the territories encompassed by the ADR: "The territory of our established government consists of the provinces of Baku, Ganja, and Erivan, along with part of the Tiflis district and several other districts" [8, p.19]. Nonetheless, Iran's stance remained largely unchanged for an extended period.

In general, Iran's official representatives in Azerbaijan acted not on the basis of their state's real interests but according to the principles of the emerging Persian nationalist ideology, orienting their government toward a hostile stance against Azerbaijan. This is corroborated by the words of Isa Khan, deputy of the Iranian consul in Baku: "It should be understood that the Azerbaijani question is that ancient Turanian issue which for a long time has compelled our exalted state into wars and conflicts" [2, p.108]. In fact, Isa Khan, who held a prejudiced position against Azerbaijan, contributed to the emergence of confrontation in the developing Iran-Azerbaijan relations. Iranians used the word "Turan" as a regional concept, a geographical term. By "Turan", they meant Iran's northeastern territories- more precisely, the regions of the Caspian Sea, the Iranian Plateau, and Central Asia. "Turanism", on the other hand, refers to the unification of the Turkic peoples living in these regions. The term "Turanism" has been used in Hungary since 1830 and is understood to mean "the distant motherland" [18, p.140].

Based on Iranian Foreign Ministry documents, Iranian historian Kaveh Bayat, while examining Iran-ADR political relations, erroneously characterizes the struggle as a "Persian-Turkish conflict." Pan-Persianist forces in Iran viewed Iran-Azerbaijan relations as a new stage in Turan-Iran relations- or more precisely, in their enmity- and sought to interpret the situation through this prism. This dangerous approach was soon applied against the South Azerbaijani Turks [10, p.67].

4.The Promotion of Turkism Ideology in the Iranian Press

During this period, articles in the Iranian press that reflected the position of the Iranian authorities were generally hostile to the ideology of Turkism. The long history of Iran-Ottoman rivalry and the possibility of Ottoman consolidation in the region caused concern for Iran. Being a semi-colonial state and unable to engage in open confrontation, Iran opted for ideological struggle. The historic Persian-Turkish confrontation, which once existed in legends, was revived by nationalist Iranian intellectuals through the press, generating significant tensions between Azerbaijani and Iranian intellectuals. On the other hand, from the early 20th century, the leading direction of the national liberation movement in Azerbaijan promoted the ideas of national unity and, simultaneously, the unity of the entire Turkic world. As a result of these ideas, the increasing prioritization of Turkism over Islamism and the consolidation of Turkism as the dominant ideology in Azerbaijani society inevitably attracted the attention of both the Iranian government and Iranian public opinion.

On January 16, 1918, in the "Novbahar" newspaper, Malikushshuar Bahar published an article titled "What is the Musavat Party and What Does It Say?" in which he openly criticized the ideology of Turkism more than the party's activities. The Musavat Party, one of the main ideological pillars of the ADR,

promoted both the ideas of independence and Turkism. Iranian nationalists, however, perceived this ideology as a threat. Persian nationalists adopted an uncompromising stance toward the Musavat Party, viewing it as part of the Persian-Turkish conflict. Bahar, anticipating that Musavat might unite with the Ottomans to create a Turkish state, argued that the creation of a great Turkish state would remain an unrealizable aspiration for the Turks. While the Ottoman Empire could retain millions of Arabs, Christians, Armenians, and Jews as part of the Turkish polity, linguistic and dialectal unity alone could not serve as a unifying factor. Although Azerbaijanis spoke Turkish, their blood was not Turkish. Bahar claimed that historically Azerbaijan had been the center of the Median state. By criticizing the Musavat Party's ideas of Turkism, he did not regard them as appropriate for restoring an independent identity. He imagined that one day Azerbaijanis might hand over their government to Turkey. Bahar suggested referring to Azerbaijanis not as "Azerbaijanis" but as "Caucasian Muslims," declaring them Turkish in language but Persian in origin [11].

In order to change the negative opinion that had formed in Iranian public opinion about the Musavat Party, the Rasht branch of the party's Musavat Committee published an article in the newspaper "Rad". The author first addressed the territorial concerns troubling Iran, providing Iranian officials with a detailed account of the borders of Caucasian Azerbaijan. According to the declaration adopted by the committee in 1917, the borders of Caucasian Azerbaijan extended east to the Caspian Sea, west to Georgia, north to the Dagestan mountains, and south to the northern bank of the Aras River. In other words, the declaration made clear that the demand for independence over Baku, Ganja, Erivan, and surrounding areas did not imply any territorial claim against Southern Azerbaijan or Iran. The main purpose of publishing the declaration was to refute rumors about Iran's Azerbaijan being annexed to the Caucasus [12].

During this period, the Iranian press frequently highlighted the issue of linguistic differences in Iran and drew attention to its purported "harmful consequences." According to pan-Iranist ideologues, although Azerbaijanis spoke the "Azeri" dialect, considered a variant of Persian, they were of Aryan stock like the populations of other Iranian regions. During the Mongol invasions, these territories were occupied, and the population was forced to speak Turkish instead of their native language. According to this view, the only factor distinguishing Azerbaijanis from Iranians was the Turkish language. From the very first day of its declaration, the ADR's adoption of Turkish as the official language and the shift of education from Russian to Turkish did not satisfy Iran.

5.Persian Authors' view on the Turkish Language and Azerbaijanis

According to Iranian authors, it is incorrect to label any people as “Turks” solely because they speak the Turkish language. Haji Ali Chorabchi exemplified this argument with Hulagu Khan. He explained that since Maragha had once been the residence of the Hulaguids, the local Iranians were compelled to learn Turkish to conduct trade and communicate with the invaders. Over time, they became accustomed to speaking Turkish. In another example, he referred to Armenians: the Greeks living in Istanbul and along the Sea of Marmara, Armenians in Anatolia, and even the Qaisar Armenians were in a similar situation and could not speak a single word of their mother tongue. Thus, even if peoples living in the Ottoman Empire spoke Turkish, they were not Turks. According to Haji Reza Chorabchi, knowing a language does not equate to belonging to a people [6].

This example was also applied to Azerbaijanis. Ismail Minur Mazandarani, supporting H. R. Chorabchi, explained in his article why Iranians had spoken Turkish for a period: “After Hulagu Khan declared Maragha his capital, the population had no choice but to speak Turkish. Even the people of Kerman and Shiraz began to speak Turkish. Although they were Iranians, over time they forgot Persian. If Azerbaijanis cannot speak Persian, their use of Turkish will not in any way affect their belonging to the Persian race. Such cases occur frequently in the world.” The author used this argument to demonstrate that Azerbaijanis’ use of Turkish does not imply that they are Turks [5].

It should be noted that during such a heated period of debates on Turkism in the Iranian press, an article published in June 1919 (June 9 and 10) in the newspaper “Iran” by Ismail Afshar Taremi Azerbaijani- who was unknown to everyone at the time- attracted widespread attention. Observing the biased stance of Iranian newspapers regarding Azerbaijan, I. Taremi approached the issue scientifically, relying on historical documents, and highlighted the centuries-long unity of Azerbaijan and its status as a Turkic homeland over several millennia. His article effectively challenged the prejudiced narratives in Iran about Azerbaijan and the Turks.

A particularly notable aspect of Taremi’s work was its alignment with ADR interests. The historical facts presented in the article supported Rasulzade’s claims. For this reason, Rasulzadeh translated the article from Persian to Azerbaijani and published it with such an introduction: “With this article, I will open history to everyone. Even if the ‘historical truths’ published in Iranian newspapers are known to all, let us not forget that the Azerbaijanis themselves have preserved the name of their homeland” [14] These historical facts remain relevant not only for that period but also today. Taremi detailed Azerbaijan’s territory extensively, citing Western scholars.

In addition to the geographical aspect, Taremi addressed moral and linguistic issues, explaining how Azerbaijanis managed to preserve their language over

the centuries. He noted: “If someone travels from Qazvin to Guba as a guest, one would observe not only shared customs and language but also identical dialects and accents” [7] In other words, northern and southern Azerbaijanis have always been able to understand each other perfectly in the Azerbaijani language. Furthermore, citing Professor Nikolay Grablis, Taremi emphasized that the founders and architects of Azerbaijan were entirely Turks, and Iranians never held significant influence in these territories. Regarding the Turan issue, he highlighted that Turks had settled in Azerbaijan long before the Aryans.

Overall, Taremi’s article devoted considerable attention to the antiquity of Azerbaijani history and the history of Azerbaijani Turks. By providing a detailed account of Azerbaijan’s history and geography across various periods, the author offered a highly coherent and comprehensive rebuttal to all publications printed in Iran that were hostile to Azerbaijan.

6. Conclusion

The initial struggle of Iranian intellectuals against the Musavat Party and Turkism began in 1917 with M. A. Rasulzade’s demand for autonomy. After the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) achieved independence, this struggle intensified. According to the Iranians, historically, Azerbaijan was the homeland of Persianized Turks, and Azerbaijanis had never constituted a distinct people separate from the Persians. The Persian-Turkish confrontation emphasized by Iranian intellectuals reflected their fear of the emergence of a second Turkic state in the neighborhood. The fear that a united Azerbaijani state might emerge with Ottoman support was, in fact, an unrealistic position of the Iranian government. Under the existing political conditions, with Iran in a semi-colonial situation under British influence, the state resorted to ideological warfare from the very beginning. Iranians used the press as a political tool to propagate their unfounded claims that Azerbaijanis belonged to the Persian race and had no connection to Turks. In this regard, the negative stance of Iranian official circles and the press toward the idea of Turkism aligned with the state’s official interests.

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