Two Shores: The Role of Iranian Azerbaijan in the Construction of Identity in the Republic of Azerbaijan

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On the cover of a fifth grade history textbook is a map of the Republic of Azerbaijan.[1] This map does not fall within the official boundaries of the Republic of Azerbaijan, but rather encroaches on the neighboring territories of Armenia, Georgian Borchali, the Derbent region of Dagestan, and above all north-western Iran. The space thus represented on the textbook forms *Greater Azerbaijan* or *United Azerbaijan*, a term invented by the nationalist political elites in Baku shortly after independence in 1991.[2]

This image reflects Azerbaijan's irredentist tendency to seek expansion to the detriment of its neighbors. As far as Armenia is concerned, irredentism is most clearly displayed. Apart from the question of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has been at a deadlock for several decades, the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan do not hesitate to verbally claim the entire territory of Armenia: Yerevan is regularly referred to as a historic Azerbaijani territory, both in official speeches and in school programs.[3] In the case of the territories situated in Russia and Georgia, these claims are never expressed by the Azerbaijani authorities, as the oil-rich republic prioritizes maintaining good relations with these two neighbors; the former having the capability of causing harm, and the latter sharing vital interests with the Republic of Azerbaijan, notably the routes of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) oil and gas pipelines[4]. The question is undoubtedly more ambiguous with regard to the territories of

the “South.”

In this paper I will focus on the construction of the national identity of the Republic of Azerbaijan with regard to its relationship with the history and culture of the neighboring territories to the south in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As we will see, Iranian Azerbaijan has, since the beginning of the 20th century, often been a reference for the manufacturing of the nationalist discourse. I will therefore try to evaluate the importance of this reference and the effects it had on the representation of national identity. While the regions mentioned above were once populated by, among others, Azerbaijanis (until the collapse of the Soviet system), the southern, Iranian part of the map is officially named Azerbaijan by the Islamic Republic of Iran.[5] This zone is mainly populated by *Azeri Turks* as they are referred to in Tehran, that is, Iranians whose mother tongue is a Turkic idiom. The homonymy of these two areas—separated by the Aras River since 1813 and the signing of the Treaty of Golestan by the Romanov and Qajar Empires — can easily lead to their identification. Released from Russian-Soviet tutelage, “Northern Azerbaijan” became a liberated, national space, unlike “Southern Azerbaijan,”[6] still under Iranian domination. This vision of an Azerbaijan colonized by Iran is widely in vogue among Azerbaijanis in the North. For many of them, Baku, Tabriz, and Ardabil are part of one and the same nation, whose destiny is to be, sooner or later, unified; or rather *reunified*, the national history curriculum of the Republic of Azerbaijan presenting the Treaties of Golestan and Turkmanchai as a forced divorce of the Azerbaijani nation from itself.

It is, however, significant to note that the name *Azerbaijan* was not really used to speak of the Turkish-speaking territories north of the Aras until the end of the 19th century.[7]Previously, the name *Arran* was more commonly used, a name of Persian origin referring to the territories located

between the Aras and Kura rivers and covering the former Caucasian Albania. The Turkic-speaking populations in question were simply called (and called themselves) *Turks* or *Tatars*. Until the dawn of the 20th century, *Azerbaijan* typically referred to the territories situated around the city of Tabriz, in the northwest of Iran.[8]

It might then seem difficult to speak of a historical Azerbaijani identity. If today the inhabitants of Tabriz or Ardabil, like those of Baku, call themselves *Azerbaijanis* or *Azeris,*[9] it seems reasonable to question the identification of one with the other. It is true that these two populations share cultural references and a common language. However, if it is possible to highlight what brings the Azerbaijanis of the North closer to those of the South, it is also possible to highlight what distinguishes them from one another. Divergent religious practices, for example: because of the Iron Curtain, Twelver Shiism has obviously not disappeared, but it has developed differently in the Azerbaijan SSR.[10] Moreover, the Azerbaijani language, or rather the Azerbaijani languages have developed in its different spheres during the last century on both sides of the border, and inter-comprehension is not always smooth.

Faced with the paradox of a certain but partial identification of the *two Azerbaijans*, it is therefore appropriate to question Azerbaijan's latent irredentism with regard to Iranian Azerbaijan. If it is not a clearly affirmed irredentism (the Republic of Azerbaijan makes no official claims to the territories of the Islamic Republic of Iran), we will see that it is not only by default, for lack of power, but also because, in fact, the two populations are not homogeneous, culturally or historically, and because they share different realities. What is this irredentism then? The question of *Southern Azerbaijan* carries such a symbolic charge that it seems difficult to reduce it to a simple tool in the

service of power. It should be placed in the more general context of a pan-Turkist vision, as it has (re)asserted itself following the collapse of the Eastern bloc in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

I will analyze the history of the relationship between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijan, in order to identify the evolution of concepts relating to Azerbaijani identity. My study can be divided into four parts, corresponding to four major Azerbaijani political periods (albeit of very different lengths) After discussing the beginnings of the questioning of Azerbaijani identity at the very end of the 19th century and the beginning of the twentieth, and then the construction, under the auspices of the Azerbaijan SSR and Moscow, of a pan-Azerbaijani identity, I will analyze the political grammar of President Elchibey's government, before examining the value that the governments of the last two presidents in power (Heydar Aliyev and his son, Ilham Aliyev) place on this question.

1880-1920: A sprouting national identity

Azerbaijani national sentiment did not develop much before the end of the 19th century. In earlier periods, the territories of Azerbaijan were a conglomerate of Khanates (lordships), more or less subject to the central authority of the Qajar Empire. With the Russian conquest at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the area north of the Aras River was attached to the Romanov Empire and formed a viceroyalty. At a time when nationalist ideas were beginning to emerge in Europe, the Azerbaijani nation obviously did not exist: there was never a unified and individualized Turkic-speaking space in the South Caucasus, especially since the northern part of the Aras was nominally distinct from Azerbaijan, which was situated further south and remained Iranian after the Treaty of Turkmanchai of 1828. Under Russian domination, the populations in question lived primarily as Muslims and possibly as Turks (because of

their language) or even Persians (because of their culture)[11].

The questioning of identity among Caucasus Muslims took root in the intelligentsia circles of the big cities (Baku and Tbilisi), where in the second half of the 19th century a pan-Turkic, or even pan-Islamist consciousness developed. The years 1875-1890 were the occasion for several publications in Turkic in the Caucasus, which will be vectors – among the literate, petty bourgeoisie – for the diffusion of a Turkic national consciousness.[12] However, this diffusion has not been steady, but is the consequence of debates that mainly opposed the proponents of a Caucasian Azerbaijani identity and those of a more global Turkish identity, leaning heavily on the Ottoman sphere. Those debates were mainly expressed in the following publications; *Äkinçi* (1875-1877), *Ziya* (1879-1881), and *Käşkül* (1884-1891). It was in the newspaper *Käşkül*, in 1891, that the term *Azerbaijanis* was used, apparently for the first time, to signify a regional identity, distinct from a more global Turkish or Muslim identity, and bridging the two banks of the Aras.[13]

In a small dialogue, a Caucasian Muslim tries to define his self-identity: Turkic but not. This dialogue is obviously based on the distinction between Azerbaijani identity and Ottoman identity (although both parts of a Turkic ensemble), but also on the identification of the populations of the northern part of the Aras with those of the south, as well as on the idea of a painful partition, experienced as an amputation: the character here feels dispossessed of his soul, because he is separated from the other half of his compatriots. There is thus a Turkic-Azerbaijani identity common to the inhabitants of both banks of the Aras. This vision of identity will not, however, meet with unanimous approval, and the nationalist thought of the Muslim Caucasus will not cease to oscillate, until the end of the First World War between an *Ottoman-centric* pan-Turkism and a more

regionalist vision, centered on the local space (the first position being embodied in the *Füyuzati* group and the second in the *Azerici* group).[14] This oscillation is perfectly illustrated by the paths of certain actors – such as Ağaoğlu, Huseynzadeh or Rasulzadeh – whose identity positions evolved over the years and circumstances, illustrating the idea of the "identity fluidity"[15] of the Caucasian Muslims of that time. It should be noted that, while it was suppressed during the Soviet era, this tension between global Turkish identity and local Azerbaijani identity reappeared with the independence of the country in 1991, so that – as we shall see – it never ceased to haunt the questioning of Azerbaijani identity.

In this context the reference to a culture common to both banks of the Aras then appears to be a means of affirming a singularity, in opposition to Turkish-Ottoman (or *post-Ottoman*) nationalism, which was institutionally asserting itself in Anatolia. If the Russian conquest could have been seen as painful for local populations, it does not mean that an impervious wall has been erected between the newly Russian territories and the Iranian territories to the south. The integration of the Turkic-speaking populations of the Caucasus into the Russian Empire did not dissolve the links with Iranian Azerbaijan; paradoxically, they were even strengthened, due to the advent of the industrial age in Baku. In the nascent era of black gold, workers circulated,[16] and with them, political ideas and hopes. Significant in this respect was the resistance, led by Sattar Khan, of the Tabriz Constitutionalists (1907-1909). Many sympathizers from the Caucasus joined the revolutionary struggle, which was an opportunity for them to develop a common revolutionary spirit with their Iranian brothers in arms. The Caucasian fighters brought with them a nationalist and anti-despotic political culture.[17] This episode will give rise on both sides to the hope that Iranian Azerbaijan will become independent from the Persian yoke and that the borders resulting from the Treaty of

Turkmenchai will be erased. The reunion of the two Azerbaijans on either side of the Aras was thus beginning to be envisaged. This Azerbaijani revolutionary grammar would be brought back to the North by the fighters who returned home and would bear fruit in the decade that followed.

The key event in the formation of Azerbaijani identity was, of course, the founding of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (ADR) by, among others, Mahammad Amin Rasulzadeh (1884-1955). In 1913 he joined the clandestine party *Müsavat* (meaning *Equality*; founded in 1911). *Müsavat* was above all a pan-Islamic, even pan-Turkist party, but in his early youth he attached little importance to Azerbaijani identity. Rasulzadeh, sensitive to the views of Al-Afghani (1838-1897) on pan-Islamism and nationalism, was to change Müsavat's political line and make it the Caucasian Azerbaijani national party and the founding element of the ADR. In 1917, thanks to the February Revolution, he was finally able to bring the party out of hiding and formulate its national line. On 28 May 1918, Caucasian Azerbaijan's independence was proclaimed. While the declaration of independence states that the ADR is "determined to establish friendly relations with all, in particular with neighbouring nations and states" (i.e. Iran), it determines the limits of its territory in an approximate manner. Article 1 states: "Azerbaijan is a fully sovereign state; it comprises the southern and eastern parts of the Transcaucasus, under the authority of the Azerbaijani people"; without giving a precise definition of the "Azerbaijani people". This proclamation of a Republic of Azerbaijan produced a thunderclap on the other side of the Iranian border, where the Iranian authorities, surprised by this toponymic choice, feared a pan-Turkic irredentism encouraged by the Ottomans.[18]

Whether or not there were irredentist intentions, it is clear that the use of this toponym is strongly connoted and the Iranian intelligentsia (of Tehran, but also of Tabriz) worked

to criticize it, and to demonstrate its *historical absurdity* (the young Republic should have been called, according to them, *Arran*, the historical name of the territories of the North of the Aras).[19] However, relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan warmed up the following year with discussions in Baku and Paris[20] between delegations from the two countries on the subject of a possible federal union. The English protectorate over Iran (a consequence of the Anglo-Persian treaty of 1919) had enough to seduce the ADR, who were looking for solid allies in the face of the Bolshevik upsurge. On the brink of being concluded, this agreement would not survive the fall of Baku to the Bolshevik forces.

A final episode before the integration of Northern Azerbaijan into the Soviet Union was about to revive the pan-Azerbaijani problem: the epic struggle of the Democratic Party of Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani (1920). This member of the Tabriz intelligentsia, a former companion of Sattar Khan, took a dim view of the treaty concluded in 1919 by Prime Minister Vosough ol-Dowleh with the British; he then took the lead in a revolt in Iranian Azerbaijan and instituted an autonomous zone which he christened Azadistan (The Land of Freedom). The choice of a new toponym was motivated by the desire to distance himself from the ADR, which Khiabani saw as subordinate to foreign interests, British in particular. This event is an opportunity for Iranian nationalist historians to insist on the fact that the Azerbaijanis of Iran do not recognize any particular solidarity with those of the North. But Khiabani's project was certainly not a separatist one – it was intended to serve as an example for the liberation of Iran from despotism and foreign domination. For many left-wing activists from the *Müsavat, Hümmät*, and *Ädalät* parties, it represented a new opportunity for expression of pan-Azerbaijani solidarity. Once again, they crossed the border to take part in the Sheikh's anti-imperialist struggle, thus reactivating the consciousness of belonging to a common entity. For these activists, the Aras could not constitute a limit to their struggles and Azerbaijan

as a whole appears as a unified national space.

The years preceding the formation of the Soviet Union were therefore an opportunity for the Muslim elites of the Caucasus to question their identity, in the general context of the development of pan-Turkism, which allowed the contours of an Azerbaijani identity to be defined. However, these contours became blurred as identity oscillated, depending on the actors and circumstances, between Muslim, Turkish, Iranian and European reference points. In any case, an Azerbaijani national idea flourished and affirmed its specificity in the face of those who were henceforth perceived as foreigners (albeit to different degrees): the Ottomans, the Iranians, the Russians, and the Christian peoples of the Caucasus. To build and strengthen itself, this idea of the nation relied on Iranian Azerbaijan, from whom it borrowed its name and prestigious references. National construction here is undeniably made possible by travel and migration from one space to another, movements that nourished the awareness of belonging to a common cultural system. Paradoxically, it is the Soviet Union that will complete the construction of the Azerbaijani nation, with constant reference to Iranian Azerbaijan, a space on which dreams and struggles were projected.

The USSR and the question of South Azerbaijan as a vehicle for national production

After the founding of the Soviet republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, the central Soviet authorities were wary of any expression of pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic identity because they were perceived as "bourgeois and democratic nationalism" in disguise.[21] However, well aware of the fact that Soviet ideology had to be able to adapt to local contexts in order to be accepted on the margins of the Union, the Soviet authorities proceeded to a true national construction in the Muslim republics.[22] It is a question of blocking the road to

any pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic project, but also of exalting the revolutionary pride of the Muslims under the banner of the Communist Party of the Union. Azerbaijani national construction became more substantial after the Soviet occupation of Northern Iran.

In 1941, as Soviet troops penetrated Iran,[23] the leaders of the USSR were faced with the need to encourage the exaltation of Azerbaijani national pride for two main reasons. First of all, Baku and its oil companies were the object of Nazi predation; it was therefore appropriate to motivate the Azerbaijani population to participate in the *great patriotic war* and to rule out any attempt by the Germans to seduce it in order to keep this strategic territory in the Soviet fold. The second reason was that the Azerbaijanis seemed to the Soviet authorities to have an "identity deficit"[24]: the aim was to make them emerge as a nation, while distinguishing them from the Turkish world in general, but also from the Iranian Shiite world. The Soviet leaders in Moscow and Baku were going to work to forge new identity resources, whose references, invested with new meanings compatible with Soviet ideology, were largely drawn from the other side of the Aras, which provided the USSR with the auxiliary advantage of being able to exercise soft-power in occupied Iranian Azerbaijan.

The Soviet archives[25] highlight the concern, as early as 1941, for the USSR to gain acceptance for its presence in Iran, by adopting a conciliatory approach, respectful of local political specificities, able to make room for future Soviet influence in the post-war period. The hypothesis of relying on purely communist forces will be discarded and a more ecumenical card, with anti-despotic and nationalist tendencies, will have to be played. The role of Mirza Ibrahimov (1911-1993), future President of the Assembly of the Azerbaijani SSR and a great standard-bearer of the *South Azerbaijani* cause throughout the Cold War, should be stressed here. A writer born in Iran, he produced many writings and

publications with nationalist tendencies. In 1941, he published the periodical *Vatan Yolunda* (*On the Way to the Fatherland*), intended both for locals and occupying troops. Written in Azerbaijani, and composed of short stories and articles on various themes (politics, history, literature), its aim was to magnify Azerbaijani culture and exacerbate the feeling of national pride.[26] Other newspapers, bilingual or entirely in Azerbaijani, will subsequently be published, such as *Azärbaycan* or *Yumruq*. These articulated a critique of Pahlavi despotism and international fascism in general, with the promotion of Azerbaijani culture and the defence of provincial autonomy; there is no hesitation in praising the heroic struggles of Babak Khorramdin or Javanshir, who were considered precursors of the collectivist movement, and who were even compared to Stalin, for example in the collective poem *Azerbaijan.*[27] In addition, institutions are being created, either on the initiative of Azerbaijan SSR and of Iranian Azerbaijanis who emigrated to the North. One thinks of the *Azärbaycan Cämiyyäti* (*Azerbaijan Society*), founded in 1941, or the opening of a House of Soviet Culture in Tabriz in 1944, in which artists of all kinds performed, disseminating a *Sovietized* Azerbaijani cultural model. Azerbaijan, both Soviet and Iranian, thus equipped itself with new identity resources with an anti-fascist flavor and on an unprecedented scale on the occasion of the Soviet penetration south of the Aras.

The occupation of Iranian Azerbaijan was not only a means of forming a protective glacis along its Caucasian borders, but also of intensifying the pressure on the Iranian authorities in order to obtain precious oil concessions. As early as July 1945, the Soviet authorities proposed to form and support separatist movements in the north of Iran, as attested by a document classified as “very secret”[28] at the time. The leader of the Azerbaijan SSR, Mir Jafar Baghirov (1896-1956), and his team tried to bring about the emergence of an Azerbaijani autonomist movement, oriented to the left, but distinct from

the traditional left-wing parties of Iran. Indeed, the Soviets were aware as early as 1941 that relying on purely communist forces would be a mistake which would only lead the occupying troops to alienate an additional part of the local population. Baghirov, already the author of a policy of national identity production in the Azerbaijani SSR, was continuing the work begun north of the Aras: it was a question of building a national *South Azerbaijani* movement that could serve as a relay for Soviet policy in the north of Iran.

The leadership of the movement was entrusted to Jafar Pishevari (1892-1947), former Minister of the Interior of the Soviet Republic of Gilan (1921), and candidate for the socialist party *Tudeh* in the legislative elections of 1944. He had considerable political and organizational experience and, in addition to being sensitive to the Azerbaijani identity cause, was also a pious man, probably capable of uniting a large population behind him, and not only the strata of the socialist intelligentsia. After leaving Tehran for Tabriz, he founded *Ferqeh-ye-Demokrat-e-Azerbaijan*, (*Democratic Front of Azerbaijan*) on September 3, 1945, taking the name of Sheikh Khiyabani's movement.

On November 21, the 724 delegates of the party, which then had more than 65,000 members, proclaimed themselves the *Constitutional Assembly of Azerbaijan* in Tabriz and declared Azerbaijan an autonomous territory. They organized elections on November 27, which were largely won by the *Ferqeh*. On December 12, 1945, the *National Government of Azerbaijan* was born, of which Pishevari was Prime Minister, with all the attributes of an autonomous government (with the exception of foreign affairs, which was left to the Iranian authorities in Tehran), and decided to implement a policy directed towards the *Azerbaijani nation* of Iran. It should be stressed here that this government does not present itself as separatist, at least in principle. From the first moments of the movement, Pishevari insists on the attachment of the *Ferqeh* to Iran, on

the inviolability of Iranian borders[29], and places his struggle within an anti-despotic logic. Iranian Azerbaijan is then presented as the vanguard of the Iranian struggle against the tyranny of the Pahlavis, a vanguard which will turn into an independence movement if its legitimate right to self-determination is not respected.[30]

The national government of Iranian Azerbaijan placed the language issue at the heart of its policy.[31] Teaching was offered in Azerbaijani, which became the official language of Iranian Azerbaijan by decree on January 6, 1946. Numerous institutions were created (schools, a theater, a university) with the support of Soviet power. The latter provided the national government with books and teaching manuals in the Azerbaijani language – written in the Arabic-Persian alphabet, readable by the literate inhabitants of the region, but also by workers, artists and teachers. Azerbaijani national culture in Iran therefore developed under Soviet supervision. A campaign to *purify* the language was launched, aimed at purging Azerbaijani of its Persian vocabulary, which was to be replaced by words of Turkic or even Russian origin used in Baku.

If the autonomist episode quickly came to an end when the Iranian Army took back Azerbaijani territory, evacuated by Soviet troops in December 1946, it fed the national historiography in the same way as the resistance odysseys of Babak Khorramdin, Javanshir or Sattar Khan. In addition, the return of Soviet soldiers and workers to the Soviet Azerbaijan, as well as the immigration of members of the *Ferqeh* to Baku, gave new depth to the question of Southern Azerbaijan. Used as an identity resource by the Soviets, the question of the South gradually became independent of Soviet channels – sometimes even coming into conflict with them. It is here important to remember that any study of the building of a the identity should combine a *top-down* approach and a *bottom-up* one: as Hobsbawn pointed it out, nationalism cannot

be understood without taking into account “the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people.”[32] Here, Soviet policies, together with migrations, linguistic or cultural practices and the revolutionary experience, would produce an everyday or banal nationalism, that is to say some “ideological habits,”[33] which are outside the control of the authorities and which cause the national reality to be “taken for granted.”[34] Those everyday practices are seen by the recent literature[35] on nationalism as means for the people (in spite of the will of political authorities) to differentiate the self from the other, and to maintain this differentiation.

If the *Ferqeh* episode is an extraordinary event, it involved daily experiences of territorial, linguistic and cultural unity that would produce effects long after it terminated.[36] Only a few months after their arrival in the USSR, most members of the *Ferqeh* were arrested and deported to Siberian camps, while Pishevari was the victim of a suspicious car accident in 1947. According to some sources,[37] Stalin ultimately perceived the integration of the *Ferqeh* activists into the Azerbaijan SSR as a threat and as a potential source of political unrest. Despite the loss of strategic value of the *South Azerbaijan* issue and Stalin’s indifference, the national theme in Baku retained the vigor it had during the Soviet occupation. The latter, by bringing many Azerbaijanis from the North into contact with those from the South, appears to have been a powerful vector of national consciousness, and gave the problem of the partition of the two Azerbaijans a central place in the nationalist grammar. The latter was in fact widely expressed in a series of literary productions that David Nissman groups together under the name, “literature of longing.”[38] In these writings, memories of the autonomist adventure of the *Ferqeh*, the places frequented during that time (the city of Tabriz, the Mughan plain around Mount Savalan), are mixed together with the great heroic figures of

Azerbaijan. This literature of longing carries a discourse of national unity and depicts the partition of the nation (a partition concretely embodied by the river Aras, the motif of many literary or musical works).

The two great figures who dominated this literary party were Mirza Ibrahimov (publisher of *Vätän Yolunda*) and Suleyman Rustam. The former published the novel *Gäläcäk Gün* (*The Day Ahead*) in 1949. Rapidly translated into Russian, the work depicts life in the National Government of Iranian Azerbaijan, insisting on the local vocation of this government, as well as on its universal (or rather Iranian) anti-fascist pretension. That same year Suleyman Rustam published *İki Sahil* (*Two Shores*), a collection of poems depicting the regrets and nostalgia evoked for the poet by the city of Tabriz, a collection whose name refers to the two banks of the Aras, a river that has definitively become the umbilical cord of the Azerbaijani nation. However, and contrary to what the term *literature of longing* might suggest, the tone of these writings is not only elegiac, but also praises the struggle for the liberation of the homeland. The following poem by Suleyman Rustem, entitled *Mücahidler mahnısı* (*The Song of the Mujahideen*), which sings of the sacrifice of the freedom fighter, bears witness to this:

We're going to fight for freedom,

Mothers, don't explode with pain!

Don't cry if we become martyrs,

Mothers, don't cover yourself in black

Mothers, do not prolong the mourning of

Those who once laughed,

The ones who were forcing their way into the enemy's yards,

Those who died for those days;

Those who, unforgettable, will die for freedom…

Those who will come soon after us,

Appreciate our value

Mothers, don't cry, don't cry.

These literary works are part of the great Soviet discourse at the beginning of the Cold War on national liberation struggles against the colonial powers. However, they are also part of the nation-building process in Soviet Azerbaijan that had already begun before the war. They were the work of writers who were extremely well integrated into the Azerbaijani Communist Party (AzCP), and were not intended to challenge the Republic's integration into the Soviet Union, itself a colonial power. They will, however, give the South Azerbaijani question a central place in the nation-building process, even though the Soviet authorities have ceased their policy towards northern Iran. This identity mechanism, put in place by the AzCP, is based on various institutions[39] and thus officially has its eyes turned towards the South, and the question of partition will remain at the heart of Azerbaijani identity discourse until the end of the USSR.

In the post-Stalinist period, the identity drive will continue. However, a subversive current will emerge within this officially condoned form of nationalism, a current which was a reasonable development of the nationalist discourse of the post-war period, strongly tinged with regrets about the South. Some works from the 1960s and 1970s bear witness to a detachment from the post-war doctrine: the discourse of liberation is no longer addressed solely to the South, but to the whole of Azerbaijan, whose unification is desired. Russia was presented as co-responsible for the misfortune of all Azerbaijanis, in the same way as Iran (whereas in the *official* writings of Mirza Ibrahimov, for example, Russia still appears as a vector of progress, which has wrenched the country from

Eastern obscurantism).

In 1957, Ali Salimi, a composer born in Baku but whose father was originally from Ardabil (and who returned to Iran in the 1930s to escape Stalinism), composed *Ayrılıq* ("*Separation*"). His goal was to sing about the pain of the separated Azerbaijani people, separated from themselves, as he confided in an interview given in 1994 to an online newspaper:

For a long time I had been looking for the right lyrics to compose a song on the motif of "separation" since it was such a painful part of the lives of so many Azerbaijanis. For many, including myself, it meant separation from family members, relatives and loved ones – separation from home town and home villages over on the other side of the Araz River. During the period that followed neither the Soviet regime nor [the] Shah's regime allowed us to visit the other side. [40]

The lyrics of the song, composed by Iranian Azerbaijani Farhad Ibrahimi, were at first too political to be broadcast. The lyrics then became a love poem, insisting on the pain caused by disunity from the loved one. Although it was initially an *Iranian* work, it gained international recognition thanks to the Soviet Azerbaijani singer Rashid Behbudov. In 1962, he went to Iran and met Ali Salimi. Seduced by the song, he proposed to perform it, disregarding Salimi's warnings (for the latter, neither the Iranian nor the Soviet authorities would accept the broadcasting of such a song). It is probably the notoriety of R. Behbudov, which allowed *Ayrılıq* to become a great success. It is obviously not presented as a nationalist poem; it will find this theme again in 1989, when Yaqub Zurufçu, an Azerbaijani from Iran but living in Germany, will perform it. This new version, coupled with a video clip depicting the barbed wire on the Aras border, will become a symbol of the Azerbaijani cause in the years leading up to independence.

The most telling example of this internal challenge to Soviet

discourse is that of Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh. In 1958, he wrote *Gülüstan*, a poem referring to the Treaty of Golestan, attributing the territories of the Caucasus to the Russian Empire. It tells the story of two brothers who find themselves separated by history. The cause of the tragedy, of this partition, is obviously the Russians (and even the Iranians), called here the "Masters" ("Aghalar" in Azerbaijani):

The masters didn't know that this territory is only one

Both Baku and Tabriz are Azerbaijan.

Separating a nation from its soul and its language can only be done on paper.

Vahabzadeh had difficulty in publishing his poem; it was only in 1960 that he was able to get it published in a newspaper in Shaki, outside the major media channels. The publication of the poem attracted the attention of the Soviet security organs, and the author was dismissed from Baku State University in 1962. One of Vahabzadeh's main struggles concerned the language issue: he deplored the russification resulting from Soviet domination over Azerbaijan. This struggle, which got him into a lot of trouble, is perfectly crystallized in the poem *Latın Dili* (*Latin Language*) in which he deplores the fact that Moroccans were forced to use French rather than their mother tongue; obviously, Morocco is used here to symbolize Azerbaijan, culturally colonized by Soviet Russia.

This theme of reunification finally took a more official turn following the Iranian Revolution, which offered a new prospect of penetration for the USSR. The Iranian Revolution was interpreted by the ideologues of the AzCP as the explosion of the lead weight that had stifled the expression of the rights of Iran's ethnic minorities. Iranian Azerbaijanis, finally freed from *Persian chauvinism*, could envisage a new future, far from the tutelage of Tehran, and thus a possible rapprochement with its northern neighbor. Mirza Ibrahimov,

however communist he may have been, seems to retain only the cultural and linguistic aspect of the Iranian Azerbaijani claims of the Revolution (thus forgetting the economic, and even Islamic nature of the claims).[41] In order to occupy the political space offered by the collapse of the monarchical regime, Soviet Azerbaijan will again support separatist movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and re-engage in a propaganda effort, which this time fully integrates the theme of reunification. The young activist, Sadegh Hosseini, founded *the Society of Writers and Poets of Azerbaijan* with financial aid from the USSR, a left-wing literary association, one of whose objectives was to write textbooks for teaching the Azerbaijani language in post-revolutionary Iranian schools. In addition, the Soviet neighbor passed on books, magazines, and textbooks on the history of Azerbaijan to Iran, and even distributed copies of Bakikhanov's *Näsihät* (*Advice*), a 19th century modernist call for the education of the Muslims of the Caucasus, as much as a criticism of Russian imperialism. Similarly, *Radio Baku* was stepping up its cultural and patriotic programs broadcasting to Iranian Azerbaijan, major patriotic films were being produced (*Babak* or *Od içinde – In the Fire*), and Azerbaijani-language magazines produced for Azerbaijanis in Iran.

The USSR thus seems to have played the role of a producer of the Azerbaijani nation[42] through the efforts of Azerbaijani communist officials. Soviet Azerbaijani elites finally occupied and filled an imagined space conceded by the central Soviet authorities: a national territory which extends on either side of the Aras, but which remains cut off from the Turkish and Shiite or Iranian worlds. *Southern Azerbaijan*, as it was christened under Soviet rule, appeared as a reservoir of identity resources, used to build an idea of the Azerbaijani nation. For the Azerbaijan SSR, the *South* was a space that crystallized nostalgia for national and revolutionary struggles, a space to be liberated from the

Persian tyranny of the Pahlavi. As a provider of identity resources, this inaccessible space (except in rare moments of crisis) is also filled with dreams and hopes: the Azerbaijani people will only be whole, and will only be content, once reunited with its southern half. This vision was initially encouraged by the Soviet authorities; it was then a question of creating a means of pressure on Iran; however, from the 1960s onwards, a shift from the official line was felt. Some artists began to perceive Russia as co-responsible for the Azerbaijani rift, heralding the developments that occurred during the Glasnost years.

The Popular Front of Azerbaijan: South Azerbaijan as a horizon of identity

In 1989, the Popular Front was formed, a political movement which brought together groups of diverse tendencies[43], but which were all part of the nationalist upsurge following the Armenian demands for Karabakh. It took their political inspiration from Rasulzadeh's Müsavat party and from the ADR of 1918, which symbolized the ideal of a democratic and secular state governed by the rule of law. Although the Karabakh question, the confrontation with Armenia, and of course the country's autonomy (a prelude to the objective of independence) occupied a large part of the APF's discourse, the *Southern Azerbaijan* question was not ignored. It was an object of interest for the local branches of the APF[44] which discussed the best way to achieve union, and was given special attention when the Front took power in 1992. The program of the Front, moreover, displayed the unification of the two Azerbaijans as one of its objectives:

While recognizing the indisputable nature of the borders between the USSR and Iran, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan supports the ethnic reunification of Azerbaijanis living on both sides of the border. The Azerbaijani people should be recognized as a united entity. Economic, cultural and social

ties between our divided nation should be restored. All obstacles to the creation of direct contacts (visits to families and friends) should be abolished.[45]

While the wording was prudent in respecting the territorial integrity of the USSR and Iran, it nonetheless called for the recognition of a unified Azerbaijani nation, as well as for the lifting of the Iron Curtain, which in fact prevented this unification. If the period in which the APF emerged was marked by violence and tensions, they mainly stemmed from the question of Nagorno-Karabakh and the confrontation with the Armenian communities living on Azerbaijani territory. However, the question of the union of the two Azerbaijans was raised by an event marked by the use of violence and of great symbolic value. In December 1989, inhabitants of Nakhchivan, and local activists of the APF, met along the Soviet border with Iran to demonstrate their desire for unification between the two Azerbaijans. Although the atmosphere was festive from the start with songs and bonfires, it became even more festive on December 12, an emblematic date, since it was the anniversary of the founding of Jafar Pishevari's *National Government of Azerbaijan*. On that day, several thousand demonstrators gathered, and the Nakhichevan AFP issued an ultimatum: on December 31, if freedom of travel across the Aras river was not guaranteed, border crossings and fences along the river would be destroyed. There was violence by December 31, but the demonstrations gradually petered out.

Similar demonstrations were organized by APF in the districts of Jalilabad and Lankaran, as a result of which APF took control of the local authorities. These incidents were echoed in Baku, where a demonstration of support, calling for the opening of the borders between Nakhchivan and Iran, was attended by around 150,000 people on January 4 of the following year. Meetings between the Nakhchivanis and their southern neighbors were organized, notably at Iran's initiative, but the question of union was soon eclipsed by the

events in Baku in January 1990, which led to the independence of (former) Soviet Azerbaijan.

The question of union raised here concerns in particular the inhabitants of Nakhchivan. This question seems much more vital for them, who, stuck in a small territory, are historically well integrated into Iranian Azerbaijan (family ties are important, which is moreover explained by the linguistic proximity of populations sharing the same dialect), but cut off from the *two Azerbaijans* by Soviet territorial delimitations. This vital character of the union is well illustrated in the words of this young activist of the time:

For decades, we have been cut by barbed wire from our homeland: southern Azerbaijan, which is located in Iranian territory. For decades, we have not been able to see our loved ones. And, you know, a lot of people have sisters and brothers on the other side of the Aras. We don't want to hurt the border guards, but they have forbidden us to set foot on our land and enjoy it – after all, there are 17,000 hectares of land beyond that barbed wire, land that our rocky Nakhchivan sorely lacks! It was very difficult for us to visit the graves of our ancestors and to see our ancient monuments.[46]

According to this activist, Nakhchivan is part of Southern Azerbaijan; the problem of partition is therefore redoubled here. In a general manner, this *Nakhchivan specificity* was used by the Soviet authorities who, in order to circumscribe the demands for union, did not hesitate to qualify the activists of the APF of Nakhchivan as Islamic fundamentalists seeking to organize the attachment of the region to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Supreme Soviet of Nakhchivan had officially requested secession from the USSR after the events of *Black January* in Baku, thus becoming the first region to free itself from the Soviet yoke, a few weeks before being followed by the Lithuanians.[47]

Let us return to the Popular Front itself. Just as with the

nationalist leaders of the turn of the century, the most influential and active personalities of the Front were recruited from among the intellectuals, mostly historians and orientalists. There is no doubt that their academic backgrounds played an important role in forging the nationalist ideas of these intellectuals, who re-examined the question of Azerbaijani identity, anchoring it in an *oriental* space; but this is particularly true of the orientalists, who became standard-bearers of pan-Turkism, and representatives of more nationalist fringe of the APF, such as Elchibey.[48] There was an interest in Azerbaijani heritage and architecture and their preservation, and in language reform, whose Russian imprint they sought to erase. Finally, identity resources were renewed through the publication of several historical novels,[49] referring, for example, to the Safavid era, emphasizing the crucial role of the Azerbaijanis in the construction of Iranian empire. In the same way, a shift in national historiography took place. Some historians of the 1980s set out to challenge the dominant discourse on the Turkification of Azerbaijan. According to this discourse, expressed in particular by Ziya Bunyadov, the Turkish influence dates back to the 11th century and the Seljuk conquests. However, researchers such as Mahmud Ismayilov and Suleyman Aliyarov sought to demonstrate the indigenous character of the Turkic motif in Azerbaijani culture. This need to draw on references in the Eastern domain can probably be explained by the renewal of ties between the *two Azerbaijans*, momentarily made possible by the Iranian Revolution of 1979;[50] this re-actualization of family or intellectual links would have generated a new nostalgia (after the nostalgia resulting from the *Ferqeh* episode) for a *historical Azerbaijan* integrated into the Iranian world, or Muslim in general. Lakin şərq mövzusunun Cəbhənin əsas şəxsləri üçün əhəmiyyətini şişirtməməliyik. However, we should not exaggerate the importance of the oriental theme for the main personalities of the Front.

The more moderate fringe, embodied by Zardusht Alizadeh or Leyla Yunus, for whom the question of identity remains after all secondary, did not rejoice at the election of Elchibey to the leadership of the Front, which consecrated the victory of the radical and nationalist fringe.[51] The coming to power of Elchibey and his comrades in the APF revealed the public's preoccupation with questions of identity and a general attraction to a *pan-Azerbaijani* identity, integrated into a more global Turkic identity. Here, in fact, the debates of the 1880-1920 period, which opposed *Azerbaijanism* and *Turkicness*, were re-enacted: it was a question of defining an idiosyncrasy, of knowing where the *self* ends and where *the other* begins, in a context of renewed interest in an *oriental* culture, detached from Russian influence. For Elchibey, northern and southern Azerbaijanis and Turkic peoples in general share the same identity; with him, it is first of all the Turkic character of the nation that was celebrated, at the expense of the non-Turkic populations.

It should be recalled that the main place for the expression of the Azerbaijani independence movement became Iranian Azerbaijan. Since the revolution of 1979, groups expressing cultural, linguistic or social demands on behalf of Azerbaijanis (or even Turkic-speaking minorities in general) were organized in Tabriz, but especially in Tehran. In 1979, Javad Heyat (born in 1925 in Tabriz and died in 2014 in Baku), a wealthy and talented doctor, founded the quarterly review *Varlıq* (*Presence* in Azerbaijani), which was initially the organ of the *Society of Azerbaijan*, a discussion group founded in 1978. It published articles, in both Persian and Azerbaijani, on the Turkic-language folklore, culture and literature of Iran, but also on contemporary societal problems encountered by these communities. Due to the financial comfort, as well as the prestige of Heyat (he was Ali Khamenei's personal physician), the journal continues to be published to this day (that said, since the death of Heyat in 2014, it is published in Ankara). No doubt in the manner of

Vätän Yolunda, *Varlıq* played the role of standard-bearer of the Azerbaijani cause on both sides of the Aras. Generally speaking, since these movements had already been in existence for several years at the time of Glasnost, it is undeniable that they served as an example, both ideologically and organizationally, for the leaders of the Front. Let me note that Elchibey was a pupil of Mohammad Zehtabi, a former member of *Ferqeh* and an active member of the Azerbaijani movement in Iran, and that one of the founding groups of the Front was named *Varliq*,[52] in reference to Heyat's magazine. The Popular Front thus developed a nationalist discourse turned against the Soviet authorities, which were seen as deniers of Azerbaijani identity.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, most leading politicians expressed their solidarity with Iranian Azerbaijanis. In the short period between independence and the election of Elchibey, and in line with the pre-independence period, the question of *southern Azerbaijan*, like that of national identity, was of central importance. Many discussions took place in various political and intellectual circles on how to achieve union, or even on its feasibility: for some, independence from the Soviet Union was only a first step on the road to true emancipation, while for others, less idealistic, union was not an achievable goal in the near future. Elchibey clearly falls into the first group; he called, during his campaign, for the unification of the two Azerbaijans, and even predicted the Islamic Republic of Iran to collapse in the next few years.[53] He then became an emblematic figure of the pan-Azerbaijani movements, which he encouraged even after his presidency, and a source of inspiration for the activists of Iranian Azerbaijan.[54] In 1999, he declared: "The problem of a divided Azerbaijan exists, and it is our historic task to resolve this problem."[55] During his short term, Elchibey focused part of his rhetoric on Iran, whose implosion he longed for and

predicted (in favour of the southern Azerbaijanis).[56] However, the speech of the new President was not directed solely towards a Greater Azerbaijan area. It was also and more generally pan-Turkic, which was not to everyone's taste. His decision to choose, along with Isa Gambar, the *Turkish language* (*Türk dili* in Azerbaijani) as the national language was strongly criticised, since, in the eyes of most of the citizens of the new Republic, it reduced their language to the status of a dialect of the Turkish spoken in the Republic of Turkey. The Elchibey government defended itself against this criticism by claiming that *Turk* here refers to *Turkic* and not to *Turkish*, which does not imply any symbolic subordination to the great western neighbor.

Because of his short term in office, and perhaps also because of his lack of strategic vision, the achievements of Elchibey's government with regard to Iranian Azerbaijan are almost non-existent, and boil down mainly to an ideological stance. I would underline, however, the appointment of Nasib Nasibli, an academic and a former student of Elchibey, who is particularly attached to the theme of the union of the two Azerbaijans, as ambassador to Iran. Given the *ideological CV* of Nasibli, his nomination was almost a provocation to Iranian government. During his stay there, he organized meetings with Azerbaijani students[57] at a time when the movement of Iranian Azerbaijanis was beginning to take shape.

Unable to resolve the Karabakh conflict, and facing an increasingly deleterious context, Elchibey left Baku for Nakhchivan, and handed over de facto power to Heydar Aliyev, who was elected President on October 3, 1993. Elchibey's nationalist and pan-Turkish ardor probably enabled him to win the elections, but finally weakened him: as Svante Cornell[58] writes, if Mutalibov (first President of independent Azerbaijan) was perceived as 'too Russian', Elchibey was seen as 'too Turkish' (Heydar Aliyev had a much more 'Azerbaijani' policy). His departure put an end to the power of the APF,

synonymous with a withdrawal of the question of Southern Azerbaijan from the official institutional sphere. This does not mean, however, that the problem had fallen out of favor with the population; however, it will be expressed mainly through unofficial channels, groups more or less linked to the opposition.

After Elchibey: stability and appeasement in relations with neighbors as goals

Heydar Aliyev's government never formulated a verbal attack on Iran but it had some tensions with Iran. The question of the division of the exclusive economic zones of the Caspian Sea[59] and the financing of Islamic groups by Iran (the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan was created in 1995, in Nardaran, in the outskirts of Baku, under the patronage of the Iranian regime) arose. Also, according to some sources, the Aliyev government very discreetly supported separatist movements from Iranian Azerbaijan, and even hosting some of the prominent members of those movements until the early 2000s, after which they were merely tolerated, or even encouraged to migrate to other destinations.[60]

In May 1994, Piruz Dilanchi, founder of CAMAH in 1991 (*Cänubi Azärbaycan Milli Azadlıq Häräkatı – Movement for the National Liberation of Southern* Azerbaijan), and exiled in Baku since 1990, presided over the movement's second congress, in which he stressed the persecution suffered by Azerbaijanis in Iran, while warning of the risk, for Baku, of an Islamic Revolution fomented by Iran. On the other hand, he asserted that his movement was "not opposed to the regime of Tehran, but rather to the artificial – or fictitious – entity called Iran" thus marking a deepening of the Azerbaijani struggle: it is no longer a question, as with Pishevari, of seeking to obtain rights inside Iran, but rather to demand independence and separation from Iran. This radicalization corresponds to the rapid development of the national consciousness of the

Azerbaijanis in Iran in the 1990s. Tensions between the two countries persisted until 2007, before giving way to a thaw, without ever giving rise to serious confrontation.[61]

Aliyev took the necessary steps not to aggravate the still tense situation with Iran. In an attempt to calm relations, he made a pilgrimage to the Iranian city of Mashhad, one of the holy places of Shiism, which is home to the tomb of Imam Reza. Also when he referred directly to the treaties of Turkmenchai and Golestan in a decree of 26 March 1998, which concerned the genocide of Azerbaijanis, he did so only to introduce the Armenian question which, according to the official historiography, resulted from the Russian conquest, which encouraged Armenian populations to come and occupy historically Azerbaijani territories.[62] Generally speaking, he refrained from any frontal reference to the question of the South Azerbaijanis, preferring to speak of an international Azerbaijani community or even of a diaspora.[63] The Azerbaijani Republic is, moreover, trying to organize this diaspora through various organizations whose visible face is the Congress of Azerbaijanis of the World. Although the existence of a strong Azerbaijani community in Iran is recognized by the Congress, the question of Southern Azerbaijan is only very rarely raised.[64] Contrary to what some Iranian authors may think,[65] by instituting this Congress, the Azerbaijani authorities did not have Iran in their sights, but rather Armenia. According to the website of the State Committee for Work with the Diaspora, the aim of such policies is “to develop relations with the Homeland of the world Azerbaijanis, to preserve the national identity of our compatriots, to benefit from the diaspora’s potential to safeguard our national interests, to expand our inter-diaspora relations and protect their cultural and political rights.”[66]

The homeland is clearly identified here: it is the Republic of Azerbaijan, whose national interests must be protected.

However, a door is left open for support for the cause of the southern Azerbaijanis: the question of the "cultural and political rights" of the Azerbaijanis is not raised anywhere else but in Iran, and certain groups present at the various editions of the Congress give pride of place to the question of unification, or at least to the promotion of human rights in Iran. The presence of Iranian Azerbaijanis in these Congresses is explained by a desire to attract Azerbaijani immigrant communities from Iran. In the United States, the Azerbaijani diaspora comes mainly from Iran, and diaspora policy cannot work without relying on it. This attempt to integrate émigrés from Iran has met with limited success: they are much more prompt to approach Iranian community organizations.[67] In the straight line of the policy of appeasement of Aliyev, the Congress of World Azerbaijanis thus does not present itself directly as an objection to Iranian territorial integrity.

The diaspora policy in fact symbolically testifies to the nation-building policy of the Aliyevs, father and son. In the end, the intervention is rather minimalist[68]: pan-Azerbaijani speeches are permitted to be expressed on the margins (as one does for pan-Turkist speeches), while the *homeland* is clearly limited to the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan[69]. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Azerbaijanis who come from Iran and live in the Republic of Azerbaijan do not find it any easier than others to obtain residence permits or citizenship.

In the academic field, however, Iranian Azerbaijan is not ignored, and a department of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences is devoted to it. Similarly, a new institute devoted to the folklore of *South Azerbaijan* was opened in 2015, with the aim of grouping and classifying cultural resources from the South (stories, fairy tales, epics). These two institutes are in fact the heirs of institutions created during the USSR, and above all, study the

past of Iranian Azerbaijan. The publications of the Institute of Oriental Studies are essentially devoted to the glorious revolutionary episodes (the struggle for the Constitutional Revolution, or the government of Pishevari, which is the central object of the work of the former director of the Institute, Akram Rahimli, as well as of the present director, Samad Bayramzadeh). The Folklore Institute is engaged in an undertaking of heritage conservation. Metanet Abbasova, the head of this Institute, also told me that her work was "disconnected from all politics." However, it is worth mentioning the publication of a work with an encyclopedic vocation in 2014 by Akram Rahimli and Samad Bayramzadeh, which was published with the support of the *National Revival Movement Party* (*Milli Dirçäliş Häräkatı Partiyası*). One of the objectives of this publication is to allow the awakening of a common national consciousness (*ergo* this consciousness does not yet fully exist).[70]

This process of delimiting an independent, essentially Caucasian Azerbaijani national space was undoubtedly Heydar Aliyev's fundamental innovation, which was different from Soviet policy, but also from the APF's radical policy. If, in the days of the USSR, national construction had its eyes fixed on the south, in the post-Soviet period Heydar Aliyev was building a modern, Caucasian Azerbaijani identity, distinct from Iranian Azerbaijan, without, of course, denying the historical and cultural links with the latter. This policy responds, as I have said, to a geopolitical imperative: it was a question of not clashing with neighboring states. But the aim was also to distinguish it from the policies of the APF, which were not always well understood by the population and did not take into account the country's non-Turkic minorities. The Republic of Azerbaijan wanted to be an independent, non-threatening, officially Turkic-speaking state, but concerned about respect for ethnic-linguistic minorities.

This construction of a 'Self' by the Republic is largely based

on official historiography, expressed in particular by the work of the historian Ziya Bunyadov, who was charged with providing academic support for the program of the ruling *Yeni Azärbaycan* (*New Azerbaijan*).[71] Bunyadov centers the questioning of Azerbaijani identity on the Caucasian space, making Caucasian Albania (a pagan, then Christian civilization, whose traces in the Caucasus stretch from the 4th century BC to the 9th century AD) the precursor of Azerbaijan. This historiographical device makes it possible both to anchor national identity in the local space, to challenge Armenia's appropriation of the historical narrative relating to this Caucasian space, and to distance itself from the more radical and global discourse of the APF.

During the Aliyev presidencies, the question of Southern Azerbaijan has been taken up mainly by the alleged opposition parties. It appears on the political agendas of the various parties, such as the Bütov Azärbaycan Xalq Cäbhäsi (Popular Front Party of Whole Azerbaijan) Faraj Guliyev's National Revival Movement Party and Fazil Mustafa's Böyük Quruluş Partiyası (Party of the Great Order). These three parties, like their leaders, are all part of the continuity of Elchibey's struggle, which they consider to be their main source of inspiration. In addition, certain media outlets deal with problems relating to Iranian Azerbaijan, but these are treated as foreign events – a foreigner to whom one has a certain affection. The Axar information website[72] is significant in this respect. It has a page in Azerbaijani written in Arabic-Persian script, in addition to its page in official Latinized Azerbaijani. The news given in the former is very different from that given in the latter, and concerns only – or mainly – Iranian Azerbaijan, which is almost never mentioned in the section in official Azerbaijani, which focuses on local themes.

If Baku hosted many activists from Iranian Azerbaijan in the 1990s – and in particular the CAMAH of Piruz Dilanchi – this

is no longer the case today. They prefer to move to North America or Turkey. A GAMOH activist confided to me by telephone that the activist and associative life centered around Azerbaijani or Turkish solidarity was much more lively in Istanbul or Ankara than in Baku, although the Turkish government is obviously not very interested in these issues. Piruz Dilanchi, who chaired CAMAH from Baku beginning in 1991, now lives in Canada. After more than 10 years in Baku, he seems to have been encouraged to leave the country: in 2000, when he had collected the 3000 signatures needed to run for the parliamentary elections, he was rejected by the electoral commission without justification; worse still, in 2001, he was the target of an assassination attempt (suspected of being carried out by forces loyal to Iran, but for which there is no evidence). Similarly, Mahmudali Chohraganli, whose presumed victory in the Iranian parliamentary elections in 1999 was annulled, left Iran in 2002, after a stay in prison, to go to Baku. He did not stay there for long, however, and now resides in the United States. The Azerbaijani authorities thus seemed rather embarrassed by the activist movements of the South. In the end, they seemed only capable of provoking their Iranian neighbor, or even threatening internal stability (in general, extra-official political engagement is not encouraged by the Azerbaijani government). This was still the case in 2007, under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev, when Seyyed Javad Musavi, a GAMOH activist who came to request political asylum in Baku, was expelled to Iran, despite protests from various human rights organizations.

Ilham Aliyev is in fact following his father's footsteps. He has shown himself to be prudent facing Iranian provocations and has sought to multiply links with neighboring powers in a context of a slight loss of American influence[73] (the country's principal ally under Heydar) in the region, and at a time when Turkey is no longer necessarily an unconditional *big brother*.[74] He thus undertook extending Azerbaijan-Iranian collaboration, whether in terms of security (a non-aggression

pact was signed in 2005) or energy (Ilham Aliyev and President Ahmadinejad inaugurated a gas pipeline to supply Nakhchivan with Iranian gas in 2005 and signed a gentleman's agreement in the energy field in 2010). It should also be recalled that the authorities of each state have, over the last decade, greatly facilitated border crossings by simplifying the protocol on the allocation of visas – or even cancelling it in the case of Iran. The non-aggression pact was extended to the media domain in 2007, with a media cooperation agreement, each party undertaking not to broadcast content hostile to the regime in place in the neighbour's country.[75] The relations between the government of Ilham Aliyev and those of Hassan Rouhani are relatively good and promised to be fruitful in terms of future cooperation, but the coming to power of Trump in the United States and his rejection of the agreement on nuclear energy for 2015 has cooled them somewhat, given that the new sanctions over the Islamic Republic has lead Azerbaijan to suspend oil and gas trade with Iran.[76]

The question of *Southern Azerbaijan* is therefore not really important to the Aliyev government, which is anxious to play the card of pacification both in its relations with Iran and also within its own territory. Over the last three decades an independent, Caucasian country has been built up, distinct from its neighbors, Turkey and Iranian Azerbaijan. This attitude of prudence and conciliation, which can be seen in the linguistic and religious policies, has no doubt contributed to making Azerbaijan the stable and independent country it is today.[77]

Conclusion

The South Azerbaijani question was one of the key issues in the construction of national identity during the twentieth century. If before the advent of the USSR, the distinction between the two Azerbaijans was a source of questioning and identity uncertainties, it was subsequently used as a

mobilizing resource by the Soviet authorities, both in Moscow and in Baku, particularly in the context of the Second World War. However, in the post-war period, the issue took on new importance. The reason for partition (and its corollary, that of union) gradually became a major theme in the cultural productions of the Azerbaijani SSR, despite the sometimes unfavorable ideological climate. During this period, for some artists and authors, the *South* embodied an ideal of resistance and emancipation, as well as a link with a national culture from which they felt cut off. The *South Azerbaijani* theme came to have a *function* for the populations of the SSR – and in particular for the intelligentsia: it represented both a past that had somehow been confiscated by the Russian and Soviet powers, as well as a teleological perspective (crystallized in the paradigms of liberation and union). In the end, it would be an *Other*, which we know essentially through memories, and on which we would be able to project desired futures; a projection that would in turn nourish the construction of the *Self*, of the image we have of our own identity.

The *South Azerbaijani* question could thus be perceived as a moment in the creation of national identity, a necessary but outdated moment, as shown by the indifference—albeit largely strategic—with which it is regarded by the Aliyevs' governments. For the latter, the problem seems more embarrassing than anything else, and it is a matter of hiding it under the carpet, without however giving up on it entirely. National historiography only includes the question at the margin, and Iranian Azerbaijan becomes an *Other*, admittedly relatively close, but excluded from the sphere of the *Self* which is deployed above all in a Caucasian territory; this territorially grounded perception of the nation allowing non-Turkic minorities (the Tats, the Talysh or the Lezgins, for example) to feel part of the Republic of Azerbaijan's national whole. To summarize the construction of local identity, one could then imagine three concentric spheres, the first of which would refer to a properly national identity, the second

to a more global Azerbaijani identity, and the last to a Turkic or even Muslim–identity. The Republic of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijan of Iran somehow form the same nation, but come under two different states, and therefore two different identities, somewhat like what Heydar Aliyev may have meant when he pronounced his famous sentence "bir millät, iki dövlät" ("one nation, two states") in the Turkish Parliament: real emotional solidarity, but limited by very different institutional realities.

While it is true that most Azerbaijanis take on a sentimental attitude as soon as one speaks with them about their *brothers* from the south, it seems that the question is now *out of fashion*, as one local interlocutor told us. The question of union has not disappeared from people's consciences, but generally seems to be expressed moderately, as something that we know is impossible anyway. The Azerbaijani communities in Iran and those in the Caucasus share very different institutional and socio-economic realities and experiences, and their aspirations are obviously not the same, at a time when crossing the Aras has never been easier. As Mostafa Khalili, a Tabrizi who has made many trips to the 'north,' points out, each of the communities has built a separate identity over the last few decades, so that full identification between the two is impossible, which is generally clear in the minds of most Azerbaijanis, both North and South.[78] It should also be noted that the face-to-face encounter between the two communities has undoubtedly been damaged by the emergence of a third term: Turkey. The western neighbor shows an impressive power of attraction for many Azerbaijanis, from the South as well as from the North. This is a real success story for Turkey, which has been able to use its soft power (via schools of all kinds, television series, music) to create for itself the attractive image of a great regional power. Because of its influence, Turkey represents for many Azerbaijanis a model of success *at home*, which does not depend on foreign (Russian, Iranian or Western) tutelage.

The *Southern Azerbaijani* question is therefore at rest today, even if it has not been definitively removed from the agendas: it could always resurface to serve as a mobilizing resource—even if this seems highly unlikely in the current context.

Notes and References:

[1] *Mahmudlu, Yaqub Mikayıloğlu; Hafiz əkbəroğlu Cabbarov; and Leyla əhlimanqızı Hüseynova. Ümumtəhsil məktəblərinin 5-ci sinif üçün Azərbaycan tarixi fənni üzrə. Bakı: Azərbaycan Təhsil Nazirliyi, 2016.*

[2] As I will discuss further, nationalist elites of that time were torn between *Turkism* (insisting on the Turkic character of the Azerbaijani language and culture) and *Azerbaijanism* (a more locally grounded vision of the national identity; also a more inclusive one considering that Azerbaijan is home for some non-Turkic minorities). See: Cornell, Karaveli, Ajeganov, *Azerbaijan's formula: secular governance and civic nationhood,* Silk Road Paper, November 2016, 43-46

[3] History textbooks refer to the Yerevan region as 'Western Azerbaijan'; on several occasions, current President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly affirmed the historically Azerbaijani character of the former territories of the Khanates of Karabagh and Yerevan. See for instance: https://en.president.az/articles/26998

[4] Both commissioned in 2006, the BTC oil pipeline and the BTE gas pipeline bring fossil fuel resources from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean.

[5] Strictly speaking, this region is formed by the three provinces of Western Azerbaijan, Eastern Azerbaijan and Ardabil. It could also include the provinces of Zanjan and Qazvin.

[6] I use this expression with the awareness of its special connotation. The term Southern Azerbaijan was first introduced in the Soviet Union; it obviously refers to the idea of a territory cut in two, which would have to be reunited. Similarly, after independence, the term "Western Azerbaijan" was coined to refer to the territories of present-day Armenia.

[7] The magazine *Käşkül*, in 1891, speaks for the first time about "Azerbaijani Turks" and "Azerbaijani nation".

[8] The use of the term "Azerbaijan" for the areas south of the Aras is attested since the time of the first Islamic Caliphate, and reconfirmed by Muslim geographers (such as Ibn Hawqal or Al Muqaddasi – who, moreover, clearly distinguish Arran from Azerbaijan. See: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/azerbaijan-iv

[9] However, the name "Azeri" is rejected by regionalist or pan-Turkic activists from Iranian Azerbaijan. In my interviews with a member of GAMOH, "Movement for the National Awakening of South Azerbaijan", I was able to see that it was extremely awkward to use this term, perceived as a term forged during the 20th century by "chauvinists" or "Persian fascists", aiming to deny the real, Turkish identity of the inhabitants of the region (who should therefore be called simply "Turks" and not "Azeris"). Indeed, the term took on this connotation after the work of Ahmed Kasravi – an Azerbaijani Iranian champion of Persian nationalism. In 1925, Kasravi published *Azeri or the Ancient Language of Azerbaijan*, where he set out to demonstrate that Azeri was originally an Iranian language, 'turkified' by the various waves of Turkish migration which took place from the tenth century onwards. This highly questionable work is part of a desire to assert the Iranian – and not Turkic – character of the people of Azerbaijan.

[10] For a full account of Islamic movements in Azerbaijan, see:

Bayram Balci, “Islamic Renewal in Azerbaijan between Internal Dynamics and External Influences”, *CERI Studies* No. 138 – October 2007.

See also: Altay Goyushov and Kanan Rovshanoglu, “A history of political Shiism in post-soviet Azerbaijan,” *Baku Research Institute*, 2020.

[11] One thinks of the playwright Mirza Fath Ali Akhundov (1812-1878) who defines himself as “almost Persian”, or Ahmed Ağaoğlu who, before becoming a pan-Turkist, was keen to depict himself as a Persian intellectual. See: Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, 24; Ali Kalirad, “From Iranism to Pan-Turkism: a less known page of Ahmet Ağaoğlu’s Biography” in *Iran and the Caucasus*, 22(01):80-95, March 2018.

[12] Let us recall with B. Anderson that the development of the national idea is inseparable from the development of a literary language, written according to established standards. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London, 1983, 37-46.

[13] Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan,* 32.

[14] See Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan,* 60-61.

[15] See A. Kalirad, *From Iranism to Pan-Turkism*, 81.

[16] Swietochowski claims that 312,000 visas were issued by the Russian Consulate in Tabriz between 1891 and 1904 – which does not include illegal migrants; see *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, 21.

[17] Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan,* 67.

[18] Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan,* 32.

[19] Kaveh Bayat, *Azerbaijan dar mowj khize tarikh: negahi be mabahese mellion Iran va jarayede Baku dar taghire name Aran be Azerbaijan 1296–1298*, Shiraze, Tehran, 1990.

[20] Within the framework of the Paris Peace Conference.

[21] A judgment widely shared by Iran's nationalist elites to this day.

[22] Olivier Roy, *La nouvelle Asie-centrale ou la fabrication des nations*, Seuil, Paris, 1997.

[23] Iran then represents a strategic corridor that could be used by recent allies to supply arms and military equipment to the USSR. Reza Shah's regime's links with and admiration for Nazi Germany, as well as the strong presence of German experts on Iranian territory, will justify his forced abdication. The occupation of Iran by the Allies will be legalized and must end six months after the end of the war.

[24] Victor Schnirelmann, *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan, 2001

[25] Available at the Wilson Center for digital archives: https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/199/iran-soviet-relations

[26] He later refers to *Vatan Yolunda* as a "shining light in the darkness" for southern Azerbaijanis whose identity was oppressed by the Reza Shah regime; see David Nissman, *The Soviet Union and Iranian Azerbaijan. Use of Nationalism for Political Penetration,* Boulder, Westview Press, 1987, 32.

[27] Sakina Berengian, *Azeri and Persian Literary Works in*

Twentieth Century Iranian Azerbaijan, Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1988, 149.

[28] https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112018

[29] As stated in the *Ferqeh* programme of 21 November 1945

[30] The letter sent by the Assembly to the Iranian central authorities mentions this principle of self-determination, which is "in accordance with the Atlantic Treaty." See, Jamil Hasanli,
At the Dawn of the Cold War: The Soviet-American Crisis Over Iranian Azerbaijan, 1941-1946, Harvard, 2006, 97; Gilles Riaux, *Ethnicité et nationalisme en Iran, La cause azerbaïdjanaise*, Karthala, Paris, 2012, 89.

[31] G. Riaux, "Les modalités de l'engagement dans le nationalisme azerbaïdjanais en Iran: de la tutelle soviétique à l'autonomisation progressive », Cahiers d'Asie centrale, 19-20/2011, 246. It should be noted that this same language issue is still at the center of the demands of Azerbaijani movements in Iran, such as the GAMOH, alongside, it is true, economic demands or the defense of human rights.

[32] Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, 10.

[33] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, SAGE Publications, London, 1995, 6.

[34] *Ibid,* 10-11.

[35] I am here referring to contemporary theoreticians of *everyday* or *banal nationalism*, that follow the path opened by Michael Billig in 1995. See: M. Skey, *National Belonging and Everyday Life*, Palgrave, London, 2011; see also: Jon E. Fox,

Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Everyday Nationhood. Ethnicities*, SAGE Publications, London, 2008.

[36] Everyday nationalism can be experienced in “banal and mundane processes” as well as in hotter conflicts, the first being able to be induced by the second, as in the case which interests us. See: R. Jones, P. Merriman, “Hot, banal and everyday nationalism: bilingual road signs in Wales”, *Political Geography*. 2009; 28(3), 166.

[37] A. Bennigsen, S. E. Winbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire*, Indiana University Press, 1986.

[38] David Nissman, *The Soviet Union and Iranian Azerbaijan*, 197-207. In its original Azerbaijani form, we would speak of *həsrət ədəbiyyatı*.

[39] The Azerbaijan Writers’ Association published articles on Southern Azerbaijan in its journal *Ädäbiyyat vä İncäsänät*; similarly, the Nizami Institute was interested in *Southern* literature, and translated poems from Iranian Azerbaijan into Azerbaijani written in Cyrillic, such as those of the activist teacher Samad Behrengi. Finally, in 1955, a department of Iranian Studies was created, attached to the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, whose program included the study of national liberation movements in southern Azerbaijan.

[40] http://www.azeri.org/Azeri/az_latin/latin_articles/latin_text/latin_24/eng_24/24_salimi.html

[41] Quoted in Gilles Riaux, « Les modalités de l’engagement dans le nationalisme azerbaïdjanais en Iran », *in La définition des identités*, Cahier d’Asie centrale, 19-20, 2011, pp.235-260.

[42] For an in-depth study of national creation by the USSR, see Olivier Roy, *La Nouvelle Asie centrale ou la fabrication des nations*, Seuil, Paris, 1997.

[43] These tendencies are distinguished by their interest in one or another feature of national culture: *Azerbaijanity*, Turkishness or *Islamity* (some members would later leave the Front to join small groups more or less involved in Islamic activism).

[44] Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, MIT Press, 2002, 136.

[45] "Program of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan", found in Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren*, 132-133.

[46] Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren,* 137

[47] https://en.azvision.az/news/118600/-how-nakhchivan-seceded-from-the-ussr-january-19,-1990-the-beginning-of-the-end-.html

[48] Altay Göyüshov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, for their part, were interested in the attraction of certain orientalists to Islam at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union. They take into account the nationalist movement through the evocation of the career of Abulfaz Elchibey. See: "The transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic thinkers after 1991"; in Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann, *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, Routledge, New York, 2011, 306-318. Moreover, the reader will gainfully refer to Georgi Derluguian's article which seems to explain the commitment to independence by the lack of perspectives felt by these young and talented intellectuals. See: "Azeri orientalists as mirror of the postsoviet revolution", https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/azeri-orientalists-as-mirror-of-the-postsoviet-revolution/viewer.

[49] *Xudafärin Körpüsü* from Farman Karimzadeh (which evokes the bridge, built in the 13th century, which made it possible to span the Macaw), or *Qızılbaşlar* from Alisa Nijat, which tells the story of the Confederation of the Qizilbash, from which the Safavid dynasty emanated.

[50] Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren*, 109.

[51] Sara Crombach, *Ziia Buniiatov and the Invention of an Azerbaijani Past*, Doctoral thesis defended at the University of Amsterdam in October 18, 2019, under the supervision of M. Kemper, 150

[52] A group including Elchibey, Sabir Rustamkhanli and Panah Huseynov.

[53] Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan since independence*, 311.

[54] A GAMOH member told that Elchibey was a symbolic example of courage and integrity for his association.

[55] Cameron S. Brown, "Wanting to Have Their Cake and Their Neighbor's Too: Azerbaijani Attitudes Toward Karabakh and Iranian Azerbaijan," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Autumn 2004), 588.

[56] Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers, Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Routledge, 2000, 314.

[57]Hamid Ahmadi, "The clash of nationalisms, Iranian response to Baku's irredentism", *in* Mehran Kamrava, *The Great Game in Eastern Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 111; In a phone call I had with Nasib Nasibli in April 2020, he confirmed that he met with Iranian Azerbaijanis students when he was ambassador in Tehran.

[58] *Ibid*, 111.

[59] Before the fall of the USSR, the Caspian was considered a lake, shared equally by Iran and the Soviets. Following independence, some countries, including Azerbaijan, demanded a change of status (which they obtained in 2003): the Caspian should be considered a sea, with a division of territorial waters proportional to the linear milage of coastline; a decision that disadvantages Iran, which in particular had to give up the exploitation of the *Shah Deniz* field, which it disputed with Azerbaijan (it nevertheless managed to integrate 10% of the project).

[60] Hamid Ahmadi, *The clash of nationalism*, 111. According to H. Ahmadi, Azerbaijani authorities were backing Azerbaijani student associations in Iran and hosting meetings of nationalist activists from Iranian Azerbaijan; this was confirmed by a GAMOH member during a conversation we had in Spring 2020.

[61] *Cf*. Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 326-332

[62] See https://un.mfa.gov.az/files/file/N1542382.pdf, 4: "The dismemberment of the Azerbaijani people and the division of our historical lands began with the treaties of Gulistan and Turkmanchay, signed in 1813 and 1828. The national tragedy of the divided Azerbaijani people continued with the occupation of their lands. As a result of the implementation of this policy, a very rapid mass resettlement of Armenians in Azerbaijani lands took place. The policy of genocide became an integral part of the occupation of Azerbaijani lands."

[63] On this point, see Bayram Balci, "Politique identitaire et construction diasporique en Azerbaïdjan postsoviétique" 2011. https://journals.openedition.org/asiecentrale/1451?lang=en#ftn4.

[64] In the voluminous dossier that brings together the proceedings of the 2001 Congress, like various texts on

Azerbaijani identity, the notion of the union of the two Azerbaijanis is only rarely mentioned (it is, in poetic form, by the Iranian-born writer Gholam-Reza Sabir Tabrizi), and the term "South Azerbaijan" (*Cenubi/Güney Azerbaycan*) is barely mentioned 25 times in more than 800 pages. See: http://files.preslib.az/site/diaspora/gl1.pdf

[65] Amid Ahmadi, *The clash of nationalisms.*

[66] http://diaspor.gov.az/en/tarix/

[67] Cf Gilles Riaux, "La diaspora, un instrument de la politique étrangère de la République d'Azerbaïdjan," https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-et-strategique-2013-4-page-28.htm#

[68] As is the case for language policy; as such see the article by Kyle L. Marquardt, "Framing language policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan: political symbolism and interethnic harmony", *Central Asian Survey*, 30:2, 2011, 181-196.

[69] Independent Azerbaijan is repeatedly defined by Heydar Aliyev as the "homeland of all Azerbaijanis of the world", without him making a clear attempt to determine who these "Azerbaijanis of the world" are.

[70] https://apa.az/az/edebiyyat/xeber_____guney_ve_quzey_azerbaycan__ensiklopedi_-345786

[71] *Cf.* Sara Crombach, *Ziia Buniiatov and the Invention of an Azerbaijani Past*, 169

[72] See : https://ca.axar.az/

[73] *Cf*. Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 104-126

[74] Especially after President Abdüllah Gül's visit to Yerevan in 2008; that visit was a real trauma for the Azerbaijanis, who then felt betrayed by their most loyal ally.

[75] Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren,* 199

[76] http://www.turan.az/ext/news/2018/11/free/politics%20news/en/76358.htm

[77] Kyle L. Marquardt, *Framing language policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan*; Altay Goyushov and Kanan Rovshanoglu, *A history of political Shiism in post-soviet Azerbaijan.*

[78] In his article, Mr. Khalili evokes anecdotes or dialogues that testify to this awareness of being foreigners (although brothers); let us cite one: originally from Tabriz, the author goes to a wedding ceremony in Nakhchivan, during which he is invited to practice a "Persian dance", his hosts perceiving him as a representative of a Persian, foreign culture. See: M. Khalili, "A comparative study of ethnic identity among Azerbaijani speakers in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan", http://www.apu.ac.jp/rcaps/uploads/fckeditor/publications/journal/RJAPS34_14_Khalili.pdf.

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