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## Origins of Nation-Building in Azerbaijan

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### Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the origins of the nation-building in Azerbaijan focusing on the discourses of nation-building, role of religion in defining national identity, and multiculturalism. It argues that Azerbaijanism embraces a civic understanding of citizenship identity acknowledging Turkish roots with a particular value and importance to secularism, multiculturalism and tolerance. Azerbaijan consolidated both its nation and state-building processes after the Second Karabakh War in 2022 and is in the process of re-defining its place in a geo-political context challenged by security concerns over the last decades.

### Introduction

Nation-building is an evolving process in the former Soviet region. Both statehood and nationhood have been challenged in the South Caucasus due to interethnic conflicts and wars, which have posed serious threats to the consolidation of both sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in particular has been a serious threat to the security and stability in the region, and it has had dramatic consequences. The aim of this article is to discuss the origins of nation-building in Azerbaijan by focusing on discourses on national identity, the significance of secularism and multiculturalism in shaping the nation-building process and the impact of the Karabakh conflict on Azerbaijani nationhood.

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of nationalism was a driving force behind the establishment of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) as the political organisation asking for independence under the leadership of Ebulfez Elchibey. The Karabakh conflict was the major factor that paved the way to the reassertation of the Turkish identity and significantly contributed to the expression of the will for independence and regime change. The PFA's programme made a special reference to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's heritage, namely, its three colour flags representing modernisation, Turkism and Islam. The PFA considered the struggle with the Soviet regime not only as a quest for independence and democracy but also offered a new vision for defining nationhood on the basis of Turkism.

### Nation-Building in the PostSoviet Period

In the early postSoviet period, Azerbaijanism and Turkism were the major discourses of government and opposition that shaped the discussion on how to define the nation and national identity. Under the presidency of Elchibey (1992–93), the Popular Front Government of

Azerbaijan sought to replace the name of the national identity from Azerbaijani to Turkish as a major priority for the recognition of Turkish origins. Since national identity constituted the main stimulus of the demand for independence, Turkism as an ideology became a tool for state building.

President Heydar Aliyev was a strong advocate for the discourse of Azerbaijanism. With the Azerbaijani Constitution (1995), Azerbaijani became the official name for the national identity, citizenship and language. Reaffirmation of the accustomed identity name from the Soviet times was believed to unify all ethnic groups and potentially prevent any disturbances. The main argument behind this was that the term covers all peoples living in Azerbaijan regardless of their ethnicity and left no room for disturbances among the ethnic minorities (i.e., Lezgins, Talishs, Udins, Avars, Tats, Ingilois, Kurds), aiming to realize the unification and cohesiveness of people living in the territory of Azerbaijan so that stability would be secured. The use of Azerbaijani does not deny the Turkish origins of the majority's ethnic identity, yet it does not particularly highlight it either.

Ilham Aliyev, who came to power in 2003, further embraced the notion of Azerbaijaniness with even more emphasis on secularism and the promotion of discourses on multiculturalism and secularism. The victory after the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and liberation of the previously occupied territories not only consolidated his rule as a leader and commander-in-chief but also increased his popularity. The existing understanding of sovereign, glorious and empowered Azerbaijan paves the way for increased patriotism among citizens who had to psychologically cope with defeat for almost 30 years.

### *Secularism and Multiculturalism in Azerbaijan*

Secularism is an integral dimension of Azerbaijani national identity.<sup>1</sup> Both propagators of Turkism and

1 For an extended discussion, see Ergun, A & Citak Z, 2020, 'Secularism and National Identity in Azerbaijan', *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 62, no. 3, pp. 464–483.

Azerbaijanism embrace secularism as an indispensable component of state and nation-building. The frequent reference to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) (1918–1920) as “the first secular and democratic republic in the Muslim world” is not only a source of pride but also modern Azerbaijan’s preference for modernisation. The historical heritage of the ADR and the legacy of the Soviet Union resulted in an emphasis on secularism over religious or sectarian identities. Moreover, it is a choice of the political elite, both government and opposition, who are strong advocates of secularism and consider it a way of life and do not intend to integrate the religious dimension into their political agenda and discourse in either the preindependence or postindependence period. Issues related to the war over Karabakh were treated with reference to national rather than religious terms. On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the PFA portrayed the conflict as an ethnic one rather than religious one. Although Elçibey was known as a conservative believer, he purposefully chose Turkism as the core concept of national identity inspired by the ADR’s heritage. President Aliyev, an experienced Soviet leader, promoted secularism as an integral part of his state-building discourse. The continuum was secured under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev with a new touch: that is, the promotion of multiculturalism with reference to peaceful cohabitation of all ethnic and religious groups acknowledging diversity in heterogeneous Azerbaijan. Both Heydar and Ilham Aliyev reconsolidated and strengthened secular institutions and committed to the regulation of the state-religion relationship through the establishment of the Committee on Religious Affairs. What Bashirov called “Azerbaijani Islam” is a “part of secular identity of the Azerbaijani people”, reassuring “the supremacy of secular values over religious ones” (Bashirov, 2018:34). This also refers to “downplaying the Shi’a-Sunni differences” (Swietochowski, 1999:424). Thus, the idea of secularism has been one of the main pillars of both national and citizenship identities.

It should be noted that religion is not unimportant for Azerbaijani society, and one cannot neglect its cultural significance. Although some analytical accounts observe the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period as a time of religious revival (Bedford & Souleimanov, 2016; Jödicke, 2017; O’Rear, 2012), for others, it was religiosity rather than religiousness that was increased (O’Rear, 2012: 81). Along the same line, what Valiyev calls the “shallowness of Islamic revival” in Azerbaijan refers to the peculiar importance of Novruz celebrations, a pre-Islamic shamanic tradition, as a public celebration (Valiyev, 2005). Therefore Islam is an integral and important part of Azerbaijan’s cultural and historical heritage and constitutes a cultural component of national identity (Valiyev, 2005:5).

The promotion of secularism by the political elite also became an integral part of the discourse of multiculturalism and facilitated its internalisation in Azerbaijan. It can be argued that it is not ‘inserted’ since it has its roots in Soviet heritage. In 2014, Ilham Aliyev founded the service of the state counselor on multiculturalism, and the Baku International Multiculturalism Center was established (Azerbaijani multiculturalism, 2016). Acknowledging the fact that Azerbaijan “is a country of rich cultural and spiritual heritage and tradition of tolerance”, multiculturalism is argued to be not only a “state policy” but also considered an “invariable lifestyle of modern Azerbaijani society” (Azerbaijani multiculturalism, 2016). Moreover, the promotion of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan serves as a tool for its image building in the international arena, where “multicultural, tolerant and secular Azerbaijan” has been promoted particularly through hosting international events in Baku as part of national branding (Ismailov, 2012; Rojo-Labaien, 2018). The value attributed to secularism and multiculturalism is an important asset for Azerbaijan, which embraces a civic understanding of national identity through the discourse of Azerbaijanism.

#### *Karabakh War as the Past Challenge to Nation-Building and Second Karabakh War as the Main Factor in Consolidated Nationhood in Azerbaijan*

The Karabakh conflict was the biggest factor complicating both nation- and state-building in Azerbaijan. At the same time, it has a major role in the redefinition of national and citizenship identities to foster the sense of unity and solidarity for a consolidated nation and statehood. The importance of the Karabakh conflict for Azerbaijani domestic and foreign policy can be explained with reference to a number of factors. First, it was the main impetus for the nationalist independence movement and resulted in the expression of a need for a regime change. In other words, it not only paved the way to the rise of nationalism but also to the will of emancipation from Soviet rule and the will for a new regime type. Second, the conflict itself is the root cause of identifying the main “others” in terms of domestic and external friends and foes. Armenians and Russians emerged as the main foes in the entire process of the postSoviet period. Although the Russian Federation took the lead in signing the truce between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, the Azerbaijanis still have suspicions for Russia’s intentions in the region. Third, the long-lasting conflict has seriously damaged the nation-state building process of Azerbaijan due to the violation of its territorial integrity by Armenians.

The Second Karabakh war and Azerbaijan’s victory paved the way to empowered state-building and con-

solidated nation-building processes. Frequent visits are occurring by officials, representatives of the state institutions and individuals to the formerly occupied territories of the Karabakh region. Diplomatic missions in Azerbaijan and representatives of foreign universities and think tanks are also invited to visit the region for various occasions. These have a symbolic importance in showing Azerbaijan's ownership of the territory and strong commitment to the reconstruction of the occupied territories.

### Conclusion

After the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan almost restored its territorial integrity over its formerly occupied territories, consolidated its sovereignty and enjoyed the strengthening of its statehood. Fast reconstruction efforts in formerly occupied territories signify the desire for immediate reintegration and renewal of the region and the return of the refugees. The rise of patriotism with the feeling of glorified statehood is a significant pattern of creating a sense of solidarity and commitment to the national goal in the postwar period with a stronger sense of Azerbaijani citizenship identity. It can also be argued that the emphasis on ethnic origins, i.e., the Turkish

identity has also increased. Obviously, the signing of a peace treaty will not only contribute to peace and security building in the region but also contribute to regional connectivity allowing for strengthened economic cooperation and collective economic development. However, the persistence of historical memory along with hostilities and increased prejudices in both Azerbaijani and Armenian societies should not be neglected. Overcoming hatred is a major task for both governments to establish enduring stability in the region. Although Azerbaijanis and Armenians had the previous experience of living together under Soviet rule, this coexistence has been challenged by memories of the war. The Azerbaijani government's emphasis on multiculturalism and tolerance with high value and importance attributed to secularism provides a strong basis for a future reintegration of both communities. However, this requires a very strong commitment by not only political elites but also societal actors. Therefore, negotiations between leaders should be backed with two-track diplomacy where non-state actors, including civil society organisations, intelligentsia, the academy and media representatives, should actively be included in the process.

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