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**Beyond the Millennial Turkic Power in Iran:  
A Historiographical Review of Azerbaijanis' Self-defense**

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**Abstract**

Many researchers studying the Turkic peoples have always referred to the Iranian Turks in their scientific activities and, considered Azerbaijan to be the center of Iranian Turkism. Therefore, it is extremely important to promote the issue of Iranian or Southern Azerbaijan when talking about Iranian Turks or Iranian Turkism. However, Azerbaijan is the center and thinking brain of Iranian Turkism not only during the millennial Turkic power but also today. Iran's political history has repeatedly shown that the Azerbaijanis living in Iran play a decisive role in society and it is taken as a paragon for all Iranian Turks. Definitely, the Tabriz environment, which has an ideological and cultural impact on all Iranian Turks, is the main center of Azerbaijan. After the overthrow of Ahmad Shah Qajar in 1925, the Pahlavi dynasty took the throne of Iran and began to pursue a policy of discrimination against the Turkic peoples in all spheres of society throughout his rule. This process took a different form after the overthrow of the Pahlavis. However, the Azerbaijanis never remained silent against national oppression and fought with honor to protect their rights. Both during the Pahlavi period and after the Islamic regime came to power, Azerbaijanis living in Iran made serious efforts to protect their rights.

**Keywords:** Iran, Azerbaijan, Iranian or Southern Azerbaijan, Turkic history, millennial Turkic power, national rights, self-defense.

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## **Introduction**

The rich history of Iranian statehood shows that the rule of the Turks lasted longer than that of the Persians. Some objective historians agree that this is a real fact. Even the popular historian Raymond Furon spoke about the centennial history of the Turks in Iran. Thus, the millennial Turkic rule in Iran, which began with the Ghaznavids at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, lasted until the overthrow of Ahmad Shah Qajar in 1925. Beginning with the reign of Fatali Shah, the Iranian monarchy gradually began to weaken, and the Russian threat from the north laid the foundation for Iran's future tragedies. At the same time, the invasions of Tsarist Russia divided Azerbaijan into two parts, thus separating a large nation. During the reign of Mohammad Shah Qajar (1834-1848), Iran, divided into Russian-British spheres of influence, became a battleground between the imperialist powers in the First World War. Taking advantage of the deplorable situation, Tsarist Russia controlled the north of Iran and Britain controlled the south. Only Tehran and its environs remained under the control of the Shah's forces. At the same time, the Ottoman state sought to establish a Muslim Union with Iran and Afghanistan (Tetik, 2019, p. 240). Of course, all the wars took place in the territory of South Azerbaijan. Therefore, the greatest damage in the wars was inflicted on the Iranian Turks, especially in South Azerbaijan. Ahmad Shah Qajar, who had become a toy in the hands of nobles and imperialist powers, spent his time traveling to Europe like the old shahs and never thought about rescuing the country from danger. This indifference eventually led to the tragedy of the Qajars and Iran.

The spiritual unity of the peoples of Azerbaijan and Farsistan (Persia), united under one flag during the Safavid rule, was broken with the coming to power of the Pahlavis. At that time, Reza Khan Pahlavi, an ordinary member of the Russian Cossack regiment, was able to take advantage of the situation. Supported by imperialist forces, Reza Khan proclaimed Shah of Iran in 1925 (Baykara, 1978, p. 205). Thus, the millennial Turkic rule in Iran officially ended. Reza Khan desired to prolong his rule and considered the Turks an obstacle in this way. Therefore, in the 1930's, he launched a policy of Pan-Iranianism or Aryanism. The Iranian Turks, especially the people of South Azerbaijan, suffered the most. However, Azerbaijan sacrificed itself for the benefit of joint Iran during the Turkic rule in the Iranian kingdom. Instead, the Pahlavis did nothing but cause material and moral damage to the Azerbaijanis.

Why did Reza Khan Pahlavi target Azerbaijanis in ethnic politics?! South Azerbaijan has been the center of the Iranian kingdom and Iranian Turkism since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, after the end of the millennial Turkic rule with the Qajar dynasty, South Azerbaijan and Khorasan were the most resistant to Reza Khan in formalizing his rule in all of Iran. There is no coincidence that the regions of South Azerbaijan and Khorasan are still among the

territories dominated by Iranian Turks. Another reason for discrimination against the Azerbaijanis was the threat of South Azerbaijan uniting with Turkey. In 1923, at the paper of conference dedicated to Azerbaijan by the “Turk Ocagi”, published in Istanbul by “Yeni Mecmua” Journal and the inhumane treatment of the Iranian state towards Azerbaijanis was condemned and South Azerbaijan was proposed to unite with the newly established Turkish Republic (Sola, 2009). This issue was also on the agenda of the Constitutional Revolution. Mirza Agakhan, one of the Iranian revolutionaries gathered in Istanbul, openly expressed the unification of Iran and Turkey under one administration (Ağaoğlu, 1941, p. 92). Therefore, Reza Shah considered the Iranian Turks living on the border with Turkey as his main rival and tried to forget the identity of the Azerbaijanis by all means.

### **National oppression against the Azerbaijanis during the Pahlavi period**

With the coming into power of the Pahlavis, Iran's political structure and ethnic-national policy towards the local people completely changed. Reza Shah Pahlavi, thinking that the Persians came from the Aryan race, tried to Persianize the whole country, to make Persian the only language for all the peoples of Iran, and to eliminate other nations, languages and cultures (Mədətli, 2020, p. 84). The Persian nationalists, who accepted the superiority of the Aryan race, used this to intensify their propaganda against the Turks. Persian nationalists, who accepted the elimination of local languages and the development of only Persian for the territorial integrity of Iran, gained the support of the Pahlavis. Modern Persian nationalists considered Turkism and Islam to be the greatest threats in this direction (Keskin, *İranda Fars Milletçiliğinin Üç Dalgası: İranlığa Giden Yol*, 2005, p. 27). Of course, when we said Iranian Turkism, we first meant the territory of South Azerbaijan inhabited by Azerbaijanis. That is why extensive propaganda work was carried out to forget the ethnic and national identity of Azerbaijanis. At the same time, they tried to justify the fact that the population of North and South Azerbaijan had no ethnic ties with each other. In this regard, "Azeri" and "Aran" theories were developed by Persian nationalists in Iran in the 1920's. Both theories were based on the falsification of the historical past of the Azerbaijanis and the forcible assimilation of the local population of Azerbaijan by the Seljuks. The Pahlavi dynasty supported these racist theories and was hostile to Azerbaijanis. The Azeri theory was put forward by Ahmad Kasravi, an Iranian historian of Azerbaijani origin. According to Kasravi, Azeri is a language of Aryan origin, and Azeris became Turkic after the arrival of the Seljuks in these lands (Kesrevi, 1304, p. 10). This theory was imitated by many Iranian historians after A. Kasravi and voiced wrong opinions about the ancestry of Azerbaijanis. After the Russian occupation in 1918, the establishment of an independent state in Northern Azerbaijan and the naming of a state founded

by a group of intellectuals, led by M. E. Rasolzade, Azerbaijan angered the Persian nationalists. The Aran theory, created against the name of Azerbaijan, was strongly supported by Reza Shah in Iran. Proponents of this theory believed that the name of Northern Azerbaijan was given to this geography (Aran or Albania) after 1918, and the Arani language spoken in this geography is also a language of Aryan origin (Isali, 2005, p. 48). Even today, Persian nationalists openly support Azeri and Aran theories in Iran. Of course, these two theories have one thing in common. Both theories considered the Azerbaijanis to be an Aryan people forcibly Turkified by the Seljuks, and sought to force the use of Persian in South Azerbaijan. However, these views are beyond objectivity and do not reflect the historical reality. Even in ancient sources, important information can be found showing traces of the Turks in Azerbaijan and Iran. Anti-Turkic Persian nationalists do not have to forget that the Turks did not forcibly adopt their language in the lands they historically owned. At the same time, it should be noted that a new language usually comes with the emergence of a religion. The Turks did not bring a new religion to these lands and served to spread Islam throughout their rule. There is no coincidence that Firdovsi's "Shahnameh", considered the most magnificent work of the Persian literary language, was also written during the millennial Turkic rule in Iran.

As a dictator, Reza Khan Pahlavi did not like the country's constitutional rule. On the other hand, the Assembly could do nothing but approve the shah's orders and applaud the shah. The struggle of the Iranian people in the constitutional revolution was for the democratization of the country. Reza Khan was well aware that (Southern) Azerbaijan played a decisive role in the Constitutional Revolution. There is no coincidence that it was South Azerbaijan and Khorasan that resisted Reza Khan to the end in formalizing his rule throughout Iran. Reza Khan, who formalized his rule in all of Iran with the support of imperialist forces, tried to hinder the economic development of those regions in order to punish Azerbaijan and Khorasan. The Pahlavi's continued policy of economic discrimination led to economic decline and rising unemployment in South Azerbaijan (Tağiyeva and others, 2000, pp. 201-202). As a result, Azerbaijanis began to move to Tehran and the central provinces of Iran in search of work under hard conditions. Surely, these migrations also affected the demographic indicators of the population of South Azerbaijan. However, the number of Azerbaijanis also increased in many provinces of Iran. Today, it is safe to say that Tehran is a Turkic (Azerbaijani) city. Even the Persians themselves admit this. However, it is important to note that the Azerbaijanis of Tehran do not show the same zeal in preserving their mother tongue as the Azerbaijanis of Tabriz. This does not mean that they are Persian or that they are Persianized. Because the Azerbaijanis of Tehran do not hide that they are Azerbaijanis. Of course, in many cases the Iranian ruling circles try to underestimate the number of Azerbaijanis and other Turkic peoples living in Iran. The fact is that the Turks in Iran do not lag behind the Persians in terms of numbers.

Reza Khan, who pursued a policy in line with the wishes of the imperialist powers, did not like the Turks at all and even showed Turkic hostility by secretly supporting Kurdish separatism in relations with Turkey. At the same time, the step of the Shah of Iran also served the interests of Soviet Russia and Britain. Reza Shah's hostility to all Iranian Turks, including Azerbaijanis, in the 1930's crushed the rights of the Muslim Turkic community and prevented the joint development of Turkic and Persian literature and language (M. Ören, 1980, p. 79). However, for centuries, Turks and Persians coexisted in Iran and worked together for the common good of Iran. With this policy of discrimination against the Turks by the Pahlavi dynasty, it created a deep spiritual gap between the Turks and the Persians and completely Persianized the Iranian identity. Reza Khan, who increased Turkic hostility under the influence of "Shahnameh" and at the instigation of Armenians, pursued this policy against the local population in South Azerbaijan at the same time in all spheres of society.

### **"21 Azer" Movement and the National Government of Azerbaijan**

On the eve of World War II, Reza Shah Pahlavi's desire for rapprochement with Germany jeopardized the interests and security of the great powers. Therefore, when the war broke out, Soviet Russia, Britain and the United States sent troops to Iran. The influx of foreign forces into Iran has created a new environment for local peoples (Ünal, 2019, p. 61). The racist policies of the Pahlavis against the indigenous peoples, Soviet Russia's control of northern Iran, and Stalin's plans for Azerbaijan provided an opportunity for a national movement in South Azerbaijan. This movement, called "21 Azer", played a very important role in the formation of the national consciousness of the population in South Azerbaijan.

With the entry of foreign forces into Iran and the overthrow of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the national movement in South Azerbaijan was rekindled. After that, a large number of revolutionaries, patriots, democrats and political prisoners, victims of Reza Shah's racist policies and imprisoned, were released (Mustafayev, 1998, p. 108). The leader of this movement was national activist Seyid Jafar Pishevari. Thus, starting from 1941, various organizations began to act openly in South Azerbaijan against the policy of national oppression pursued by the Pahlavis. These organizations include the Azerbaijan Society, the Azerbaijan Workers' Organization, the Azerbaijan Trade Union, the Azerbaijan Anti-Fascist Society and the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP). The 21 Azer movement was led by the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, established on September 3, 1945 under the leadership of Pishevari. Immediately after the ADP became operational, it began to awaken the national consciousness of the population in South Azerbaijan and completely eliminate the problems created by the

Pahlavis. A large number of soldiers came from Soviet (North) Azerbaijan to help South Azerbaijan. Each of them fought for the whole Azerbaijan.

The Democratic Party of Azerbaijan planned to hold a large people's congress in Tabriz to resolve the national issue. For this purpose, the People's Congress of Azerbaijan began its work in Tabriz on November 20, 1945 with the participation of 724 delegates invited from different regions of South Azerbaijan. Many issues were discussed at the congress, including the future of South Azerbaijan. In this regard, the People's Congress of Azerbaijan has made an important historic decision. The resolution said: *“The people of Azerbaijan, in order to manage their internal affairs and ensure their national autonomy, have expanded the organization of the Provincial Assembly and given it the image of the Milli Majlis (Parliament). It forms its own National Government within Iran and without compromising Iran's territorial integrity and independence. The People's Congress of Azerbaijan declares itself the Assembly of Enterprises”* (Tağıyeva and others, 2000, p. 219). Although some modern Iranian historians consider the National Government of 1945-1946 to be contrary to Iran's territorial integrity, this historic decision shows that the Azerbaijani National Government remains committed to Iran's territorial integrity. The Democratic Party of Azerbaijan tried to unite all Azerbaijani Turks around the party without any discrimination (Swietochowski, 1995, p. 142). The Azerbaijani National Government has been committed to the integrity of Iran throughout its activities.

As a result of these efforts, on December 12, 1945 (*Persian calendar: 21 Azer 1324*) the solemn opening of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan took place in Tabriz and the National Government of Azerbaijan was established. Mirzali Shabustari was elected chairman of the Milli Majlis and S.C.Pishevari was elected head of the National Government. The National Government of Azerbaijan has adopted a 20-item work program and has done a great job during its tenure. After that, the principle of justice was ensured in the elections, the right of women to vote and be elected was recognized, and it was determined that everyone to know the Azerbaijani (Turkic) language in the parliamentary elections. A very necessary step was taken in building the army. The establishment of the People's Army, which will serve to protect the National Government and the people of Azerbaijan from danger, has begun. For this purpose, mercenary groups were abolished and the people's army was created. The People's Army was formed mainly of Azerbaijanis, Armenians and Caucasians who served in the Iranian army (Akşam, 1946, p. 203).

Thus, the wrong policy-making of Reza Shah Pahlavi led to the deterioration of the socio-economic situation in Iran, the occupation of Iran by foreign forces and the beginning of the national movement. As a result, Reza Shah was dethroned from Iran and died in exile in 1944. After Reza Shah, his son Mohammad Reza ascended the throne of Iran. Towards the end

of World War II, the political situation in the world changed. It was the first time that the Azerbaijani national movement had won and formed its own national government. On January 28, 1946, the head of the National Government of Azerbaijan, S.C.Pishevari, appealed to the UN General Assembly for the de facto recognition of the existence of the National Government in accordance with the Atlantic Charter. Unfortunately, this appeal was not seriously evaluated. Mohammad Reza Shah agreed with the USSR to defeat the National Government of Azerbaijan. For this purpose, on April 5, 1946, a secret oil agreement was signed between the USSR and Iran (M. Ören, 1980, p. 98). The USSR, which received oil privileges, then agreed to withdraw its troops from Iran, following the principle of Iran's inviolability. The United States has also supported this issue and reached a secret agreement with Iran about 10 million dollars of sale of weapons to ensure its security. Soviet troops gradually evacuated Iran.

The international political situation has jeopardized the existence of the National Government in South Azerbaijan. However, Azerbaijan did not give up easily and started an armed struggle with the Pahlavi regime. The Azerbaijani National Government, which received no support from anywhere, fell victim to the betrayal, as Pishevari thought. A year later, on December 12, 1946, the Shah's troops occupied Tabriz, and the National Government of Azerbaijan collapsed. After the fall of the Azerbaijani National Government, the Pahlavi regime again began to torture against national activists. As a result, about 25,000 Azerbaijanis lost their lives, 2,500 were executed, 8,000 were sentenced to severe punishments, 3,600 Azerbaijani villagers were forcibly relocated to Persian-populated areas for assimilation, and 70,000 took refuge in Northern Azerbaijan (Bayır, 2019, p. 146). Although the 21 Azer movement was ruthlessly suppressed in December 1946, it dealt a deadly blow to the future of the Pahlavi regime.

### **The role of South Azerbaijan in the overthrow of the Pahlavis and the Islamic Revolution**

The wrong policy of the Pahlavis led to a social explosion in Iran in late 1977. This deplorable situation has resulted in protests by students in various parts of Iran. At the same time, a group of intellectuals appealed to government officials regarding the socio-economic situation in the country. But this did not change anything. As in all Iranian revolutions, the first signal of the Islamic revolution came from South Azerbaijan. In late 1977, students staged street demonstrations in Tabriz. Then, in the first days of January 1978, protests began in the city of Gum. The use of force by the Shah's forces against the protesters resonated throughout Iran. The city of Tabriz rose in protest of these events. The following events were the beginning of the Iranian revolution.

On February 18, 1978 (29 Bahman 1356), at the urging of Kazim Shariatmadari in the city of Tabriz, the clergy revolted against the Pahlavi regime. Thus, this event, which is remembered as the “29 Bahman” uprising, resounded throughout Iran. Tens of thousands of people joined the uprising. Seeing the tense situation, the Shah's regime sent additional troops to Tabriz. Thousands of protesters were killed in the uprising. The urban population, represented by almost all social groups, supported the uprising. Although the Shah's forces quickly put down the revolt, they were unable to prevent the revolution. Forty days after the 29 Bahman uprising, protests flared up again in Tabriz. Mass protests began in Tehran, Gum, Yazd, Zanzan and other major cities in response to the Shah's sent troops to Tabriz. The 29 Bahman uprisings were in fact the beginning of the Islamic Revolution. Even while abroad, Ayatollah Khomeini called on the Tabriz rebels and the Azerbaijani people to continue the uprising. The ruthless policy pursued by the Shah's regime against the Azerbaijanis led to their fierce struggle against the regime. A number of Azerbaijani religious and political figures considered the Tabriz uprising to be the beginning of the Iranian revolution (Tağiyeva and others, 2000, p. 299). All these were the first stage of the revolution.

In September 1978, the second phase of the revolution began in Iran. Protests flared up again in many major cities across the country. These protests were led by a religious group. Khomeini, who was deported, openly called on the people in Paris to overthrow the Shah's regime in “Le Figaro” journal and on French television, and said that regime forces would respond with weapons if they used weapons against protesters (M. Ören, 1980, pp. 160-161). Inspired by Khomeini's call, university students began street protests in Tehran in October, chanting “either Khomeini or death.” Soon, more protests broke out in Tabriz, and the regime was left in a state of confusion. All forces were called in to quell the uprising. However, it was never possible to stop the people's movement. The Shah's regime fearful of this released some political prisoners and made false promises that justice would be restored. Numerous people were killed and injured in the protests. Protests resumed in December, and fearing that, M. Reza Pahlavi fled Iran on January 16, 1979. Clashes between the Shah's forces and the protesters continued. Police used brutal torture, especially in Tabriz. On February 1, 1979, Khomeini arrived in Tehran from Paris. With Khomeini's arrival in Tehran, the protests intensified. Protests continued in Southern Azerbaijan, especially in Tabriz. There were many casualties in the clashes between the police and the crowd. However, the protest was the final stage and victory over the Shah's forces, ending the revolution.

The anti-Turkic policy of the Pahlavis continued throughout almost all their rule. Of course, such a racist policy could not last long. Because, half of the population of Iran was Turks. On the other hand, the Pahlavi regime did not want to accept the existence of Turks



during all the years of its rule, and especially to settle accounts with Azerbaijanis. At the end of a failed social, economic and ethnic policy, the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown in 1979. Thus, the monarchy in Iran was abolished and the Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed. With the abolition of the monarchy, Persian nationalism was also hit hard. South Azerbaijan played a decisive role in this case. The overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty, which pursued a policy of discrimination against indigenous peoples in Iran, was a success for all Iranian peoples, including Azerbaijanis.

Thus, the Islamic revolution ended in victory for all of Iran, and Azerbaijan played the biggest role in achieving victory. The wrong policy of the Pahlavi regime against the Azerbaijani language and identity led Azerbaijanis to take an active part in the revolution (Haghdar, 2019, p. 70). Khomeini's pre-revolutionary statement on the rights of ethnic groups also played a very effective role in this matter. Although the Islamic Revolution overthrew the anti-Turkic Persian regime, it did not guarantee the right of Azerbaijanis and all Turkic peoples living in Iran to receive education in their mother tongue. The main goal of the Azerbaijanis in this revolution was to democratize Iran and ensure the national rights of the Iranian people. However, the new regime did not take the right step in resolving the national issue.

### **National Movement in South Azerbaijan after the Islamic Revolution**

On December 2-3, 1979, a referendum was held in Iran to adopt the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. Article 110 of the proposed new constitution provided for the granting of unlimited rights to the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. It should be noted that there were two important people in the victory of the revolution: Ayatollah Khomeini, who ruled the revolution from abroad, and the other was Haji Mohammad Kazim Shariatmadari of Azerbaijani origin, who ruled the revolution from within. Shariatmadari was the most influential religious leader of the Muslim People's Party, which was founded in 1979 and is headquartered in Tehran and has organizations in many cities of South Azerbaijan. The dispute between Khomeini and Shariatmadari over Article 110 of the Constitution gave rise to a new national movement in South Azerbaijan. The non-fulfillment of Articles 15 and 19 of the Constitution also encouraged the masses to participate in the national movement. Article 15 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran states: *“the official language and script of Iranian people, is Persian. The documents, correspondence, and official texts, as well as textbooks, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian”* (UNHCR). Nevertheless, the Islamic regime discriminated in this matter.

However, Article 19 of the Iranian Constitution provides a legal basis for the development of local and ethnic languages.

Thus, the Muslim People's Party was dissatisfied with the results of the referendum and on December 5 called on the people of Tabriz to protest. As a result, an uprising broke out in Tabriz on December 6, many government offices and television stations fell into the hands of the rebels, and Azerbaijan was declared the Islamic Republic (Tağıyeva and others, 2000, p. 310). Tehran has sent mercenaries to Tabriz to prevent the insurgency from spreading. Although the rebels invited Shariatmadari to Tabriz, he did not come because of his conciliatory position. The Tehran press, on the other hand, created a social psychosis in the public opinion about the foreign-led Tabriz uprising (Wimbush, 1980, p. 4). The beheaded Tabriz rebels could not continue. This allowed the suppression of the uprising and the suppression of the national movement. As a result, the Muslim People's Party was closed and in 1980, 12 of its members were executed (Haghdar, 2019, p. 70). Although the rebels were defeated, the activists operated in secret and always sought a just solution to the national question. However, the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war in 1980 completely froze the national question.

### **National movement in South Azerbaijan after the independence of Northern Azerbaijan**

On the eve of the end of the Iraq-Iran war, new political processes were taking place in the world. Gorbachev's shortcomings in governance gave impetus to the beginning of the national movement of people in the Soviet Union, and in 1988 the national movement ignited in Northern Azerbaijan, which was part of the USSR. In November 1989, the national movement in Azerbaijan reached its peak. On October 18, 1991, North Azerbaijan adopted the Constitutional Act on State Independence. At the time when the USSR officially existed, on December 31, 1989, the border fences between North (Soviet) and South (Iran) Azerbaijan were destroyed by Azerbaijanis, and this entered the history of Azerbaijan as the “Day of Solidarity of World Azerbaijanis”. All this affected the reactivation of the national movement in South Azerbaijan. Factors influencing the national movement in Southern Azerbaijan can be grouped as follows:

- The collapse of communism and the spread of new political currents in the world;
- The collapse of the USSR and the state independence of Northern Azerbaijan;
- Elchibey factor and the concept of "Whole Azerbaijan";
- Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Naturally, these factors gave impetus to the activation of national activists and the struggle for their rights in South Azerbaijan. Inspired by the independence of their compatriots in Northern Azerbaijan and concerned about the situation of their compatriots with the outbreak of ethnic conflict between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Karabakh, a significant number of South Azerbaijanis have entered a new stage in the struggle for national rights. It is important to note that the ongoing political processes in the world and the liberal steps taken by Rafsanjani, who was elected President of Iran in 1989, also had an impact on the rise of the national movement in South Azerbaijan.

Elchibey's coming to power in the Republic of Azerbaijan in June 1992 and raising the issue of the whole of Azerbaijan caused a serious discussion among the Iranian ruling circles. Therefore, Rafsanjani government tightened security measures on the Iranian-Azerbaijani border and turned the city of Ardabil, located on the border with the Republic of Azerbaijan, into an independent province (Afşarlı, 2005, p. 100). All these led to the beginning of a national movement among the Azerbaijanis. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Azerbaijanis began protesting in Tabriz, Urmia, and other large cities. In these protests, most of them were organized by students. The main demands of Azerbaijanis were official permission to use their mother tongue, recognition of their national identities as Azerbaijanis, and autonomy (Elling, 2008, p. 486). Although these protests did not achieve their goal, they did have a result. It was after this that the Azerbaijanis made greater demands and did not allow the national movement to die out. Some groups of national activists even voiced their views on the independence of South Azerbaijan. There are those who support this idea today.

During the presidency of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, new reforms began in the country, and these reforms were reflected in ethnic politics. Using President Khatami's phrase "Iran belongs to all Iranians", he showed some warmth toward ethnic groups (Afşarlı, 2005, p. 101). Of course, this new period was the first in the history of Iran. This idea voiced by Khatami brought up the national issue. Azerbaijani intellectuals have decided to make demands to ensure their national rights enshrined in the Constitution. A letter addressed to Khatami in 1998 was signed by the popular scientist and surgeon of South Azerbaijan, Dr. Javad Heyat, writer Mohammadtaghi Zehtabi, Hasan Rashidi, professor Hamid Mahammadzade, Mahammadali Farzana, lawyer Behzad Behzadi and 64 other intellectuals. The letter demanded that the constitutional rights of Azerbaijani Turks, along with other peoples of Iran, be ensured and treated with respect. The letter contains the following 4 demands:

1. Teaching Azerbaijani Turkic in schools in all settlements inhabited by Turks in Iran;
2. The use of Turkic as well as Persian in radio and television;
3. Teaching Azerbaijani language and literature in the country's universities;

4. Publication of children's literature in Azerbaijani (Tağıyeva and others, 2000, p. 315).

The letter addressed to President Khatami by Azerbaijani intellectuals went unanswered and the demands set out in the letter were not resolved. Protests erupted in Khuzestan in April 2005 over the neglect of Arab intellectuals. Protests were brutally suppressed by the ruling circles, several people were killed and about 300 were arrested (Afşarlı, 2005, p. 101). In fact, this was a true indication of the attitude of the ruling circles towards non-Persian ethnic groups, and Khatami's statement years ago that Iran was an all-Iranian statement was a blatant lie.

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the national movement in South Azerbaijan intensified. Violation of national rights and discrimination against Azerbaijanis are among the reasons for this. Thus, a caricature published in one of the newspapers affiliated with the IRNA News Agency in Tehran on May 12, 2006, described the language of Azerbaijanis as a cockroach language. This humiliating cartoon has earned the hatred of all Azerbaijanis and has rekindled a wave of protests in South Azerbaijan. The main hateful expressions in the cartoon are: *“Unfortunately, cockroaches do not understand human language and the grammar of their language is so difficult that 80% of them prefer to speak in the language of others. How do you expect cockroaches to understand us when they don't understand their language? That's when the dialogue ends and you have to take more drastic measures”* (Sefizadeh, 2013, pp. 56-57). This article, which touches on the national feelings of Azerbaijanis, became a basis for the ignition of the national movement. Mass protests began in Tabriz, as well as in many cities of South Azerbaijan. At first, the authorities did not pay much attention to the protests. Taking advantage of this, the protesters continued to demonstrate. Seeing the tense situation, Tehran used force to quell the uprisings. There were dead and injured in these demonstrations that lasted for several days. At the request of Azerbaijanis, the newspaper was suspended (Souleimanov and others, 2013, p. 77). But this did not calm the people.

The events in South Azerbaijan during Ahmadinejad's rule did not end there. Azerbaijanis living in Iran constantly called for their rights and sometimes organized demonstrations. The main demands of these demonstrations were the implementation of Articles 15 and 19 of the Constitution and the restoration of the right of Azerbaijanis to education in their mother tongue. The population was also dissatisfied with the lack of Azerbaijani (Turkic) language in television programs. In response to popular protests, the head of Zanjan Province's Radio and Television said in April 2010 that 50% of television programs should be in Persian (FIDH, 2010, p. 16). However, in the programs broadcast in the Azerbaijani language, the language sounds very bad.

One of the events that led to the re-ignition of the national movement in southern Azerbaijan was the drying up of Lake Urmia. Although the economic stagnation that began

during the Pahlavi period in the provinces where Azerbaijanis live compactly was eliminated by the Islamic regime, the threat of drying up of Lake Urmia has led to environmental problems in the area around the lake. During Rafsanjani's presidency, the construction of water dams on rivers over Lake Urmia reduced the amount of water flowing into the lake (A. Ören, 2019, p. 85). This process, which began in the 1990s, led to an environmental catastrophe in the region in 2010.

The environmental problem in Lake Urmia, a pearl of Azerbaijani nature, has given a new impetus to the national movement in South Azerbaijan, and in 2010 the national movement resumed. The protests, which lasted at different times, began on April 2, 2010. Thousands of Azerbaijani protesters gathered on a bridge over Lake Urmia to condemn the lake crisis and demand that the government take serious action (A. Ören, 2019, p. 92). The lake crisis was not only an environmental disaster for Azerbaijanis, but also a national threat. Because the complete drying of the lake can cause dust and salt storms in the region, which can destroy the vegetation and economy of the region. The protests in the southern Azerbaijani cities of Tabriz, Urmia, Ardabil, Maragha, Marand, Sulduz, Goshachay and others continued at different times for two years. The protesters demanded that the government respect the rights of Azerbaijanis and resolve the lake crisis (Denghan, 2011). The protests were suppressed by the use of force by the government, and there were deaths and injuries.

After the protests, Tehran realized how serious the situation was. The prevention of the drying up of Lake Urmia was also the focus of the UNDP. To this end, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Japanese government have provided financial assistance to the Iranian government. One of the first steps taken in this area was the construction of a dam on the Araz River and the discharge of water into Lake Urmia. However, the measures taken by the government did not bear fruit. In the last year alone, an increase in annual rainfall in the region and floods have increased the water level in the lake. It should be noted that the threat has not completely subsided.

After the Pahlavis took the throne of Iran in 1925, the Iranian Turks began to fight for their national rights, and this struggle has continued to this day at different intervals. Of course, the center of the national struggle of the Iranian Turks, as always, is South Azerbaijan. It is also important to note that the voice of Azerbaijanis in the protests in Iran in recent years is heard not only in Tabriz, but also in Tehran. According to unofficial data, the largest majority of ethnic groups living in Tehran belong to Azerbaijanis. At the same time, the national movement in South Azerbaijan is divided into “Independent and United Azerbaijan”, “Federal Iran” and “Iranian Turkic state” (Keskin, *İranda Azerbaycan-Türk Milliyetçiliği ve Karikatür Krizi*, 2005,

p. 7). In recent years, the resurgence of Persian nationalism and the violation of the national rights of all Iranian Turks have increased the sense of independence among nationalists in South Azerbaijan.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Khomeini's promises to the Iranian people at the beginning of the Islamic revolution have not been resolved, and Articles 15 and 19 of the Iranian constitution have not yet been resolved. Undoubtedly, such a situation undermines the unity of the Iranian people and creates a historical basis for the deepening of the national movement. Although the Iranian constitution enshrines the right of people to education in their mother tongue, the Azerbaijanis have been deprived of this right. Activists of the national movement, which has expanded and deepened in southern Azerbaijan since 1989, can be divided into two groups:

- Group I - supporters of "independent and united Azerbaijan". This position is mostly supported by nationalist Azerbaijanis inside Iran and South Azerbaijani intellectuals living abroad.
- Group II - supporters of "Federal Iran" and "Iranian Turkic state". Those who support this position are also in the majority.

In Iran, which has a different language and culture, it is not an easy task to govern three great nations and unite each of them around the same idea. Adopting the experience successfully implemented during the millennium of Turkic rule, the Islamic regime was initially able to unite the Iranian people with the idea of a "single Islamic nation" on the principle of nationalism. This policy of identity, in contrast to the Persian nationalism pursued by the Pahlavis, to some extent eliminated the enmity between the peoples of Iran. However, the idea of a unified Iranian nation is still based on Shiism, and it should be noted that nationalism was a thing of the past. In a country where all the peoples of Iran have shed blood for the sake of republican rule, the policy of nationalism unites some people, but displeases others. At the same time, this identity policy has some shortcomings. Although there has been a softening of Tehran's ethnic policy since the proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the constitutional rights of local peoples to language and education have not been guaranteed. The Iraq-Iran war completely forgot about this issue. However, the national movement, which began in the 1990s, is now deepening, and this process is likely to come to an end.

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