

Azeris

Profile

Azeris compose some 16 million people, or 24% of the overall population of the Islamic Republic of Iran and 3 times the population of neighbouring Azerbaijan. Azeris are mainly Shi'a and because of this, as well as their population and vicinity to the centre of power in Tehran, have generally been the least troubled of Iran's minorities.

Historical context

Despite a history of political expression in the early-mid 1900s, Azeris have tended to identify with the central government Iran. A number of Azeris played an important role in events leading to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, in the National Front of Mossadegh, 1950-53, and in the revolution of 1978-79. Common Shi'a identity, involvement with the wider economy of Iran and the presence of many Azeris in Tehran all mean that Azeris have primarily sought to influence Iranian politics rather than call for autonomy. There has been little to indicate a desire amongst the Azari majority to reunite with Azerbaijan, although that has long been the fear of central government in Iran.

Their ongoing grievances against the government have primarily been for some linguistic and cultural rights and, as part of that, some calls for a more decentralised form of government from the Islamic Republic. Some Azeris are reluctant to identify themselves as such, and for many others their distinct Azeri consciousness does not find nationalist expression.

Current issues

There have been calls for greater autonomy over the past few years, and clashes with Iranian security forces. September - October 2006, for example, saw demonstrations both in Iran and Azerbaijan for the uniting of the Azeris. These included the September demonstrations in Urumiyeh in Iran, calling for greater linguistic and educational rights. Demonstrations in Azerbaijan near the Iranian Embassy in Baku, however, have gone further as there was some support for political movements aiming at a united Azerbaijan. Although Azerbaijani police arrested demonstrators, Ayatollah Mojtahid-Shabestari, representing the Iranian Supreme Leader in Iran's East Azerbaijan Province, responded that the Azeris could only be reunited if Azerbaijan was to be incorporated into Iran.

In February 2007 Iranian security forces arrested dozens of Azeris peacefully protesting for Azeri-language education in towns across the north-west. According to Amnesty International, some of those detained allegedly were mistreated in custody. In May, Azeris again demonstrating for language rights were arrested in their hundreds; these protests were timed for the one-year anniversary of a cartoon in a government newspaper that depicted a cockroach speaking Azeri.