

STATE CENTRALIZATION AND ETHNIC POLICY IN PAHLAVI IRAN: THE CASE OF AZERBAIJANI TURKS

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Abstract

In 1925, the reign of the Turkic-Qajar dynasty in Iran ended, and Reza Khan Pahlavi seized power with the support of foreign forces. During the Pahlavi regime, the Turkic peoples in Iran, especially Azerbaijanis, subjected to severe discrimination and oppression in all spheres of society. As result of systematic oppression policy, the use of the Azerbaijani language removed from all domains, including administration, schools, universities and newspapers, and a number of toponyms that historically located within the borders of Azerbaijan were replaced with Persianized names. The assimilation of Azerbaijanis into Persian culture has become a major state policy by the Pahlavi regime. In this regard, the history of Azerbaijan was denied and falsified at the state level (Kasravi strategy). At the same time, Azerbaijan was deliberately kept economically underdeveloped. The primary aim of these policies was to Persianize the regions inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijani people and to establish a Fars-Centric State. However, Azerbaijani Turks historically lived in these territories and constituted the majority.

Keywords: Pahlavi Iran, Iranian or Southern Azerbaijan, state centralization, ethnic policy, identity.

Introduction

From the spread of Islam to the early 20th century, Azerbaijani Turks in present-day Iran mostly lived under dynasties of Turkic-Azerbaijani origin. The northwestern part of present-day Iran, which

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is part of the historical territory of Azerbaijan, formed as a country with defined borders under the name of Azerbaijan more than a thousand years ago, and its name was mentioned in a number of historical sources. *For example*, in “Tarikhnameh-ye Tabari” by Muhammad bin Muhammad Balami (10th-century historian and vizier to the Samanids), the country of Azerbaijan was described approximately a thousand years ago as follows: “*The border begins from Hamadan, extends through Abhar and Zanzan, and reaches as far as the Khazar fortress of Derbent. Meanwhile, all the cities are called Azerbaijan.*” (Balami 1373, 529) The existence of Turks in Azerbaijan since ancient times has been also recorded in numerous sources. Valuable notes about Azerbaijan has been recorded in the work “Muluk Himyar wa Aqyāl al-Yaman” by Nashwan bin Said al-Himyari. In this text, it is noted that after Raish returned from a campaign in India, the rulers submitted to him and paid taxes. The text further describes how, for a long period, he remained in Yemen without embarking on any campaigns. To provoke this Yemeni ruler into attacking Azerbaijan, the emissaries of the Babylonian king brought gifts to Raish, including a letter from King Manuchehr (the period of Manuchehr’s rule referred in the article is presented in classical Islamic historiography not in terms of a specific calendar year, but within the framework of a narrative and genealogical framework of time) along with treasures, most of which came from a predominantly Turkic region (referring to Azerbaijan). These gifts included jewels, red-colored precious items, Tibetan musk, silk, multicolored fabrics, ornaments, and utensils. When describing Azerbaijan, the source notes that most of the gifts intended to encourage Raish to attack this Turkic homeland were weapons (Himyari 1978, 65). During the Arab Caliphate’s era, sources documenting the Arab invasions of Azerbaijan also recount the battles fought between Arabs and Azerbaijani Turks. For instance, in Al- Kamil fi al-Tarikh, Ibn al-Asir (1186-1233) describes events from the year 78 AH (697 CE): “*In that year, Maslama bin Abd al-Malik waged war against the Turks of the Azerbaijani region. As a result of the war, he captured their fortresses and cities.*” (Ibn al-Asir 1385, 540)

After the advent of Islam, Azerbaijan became part of the Arab Caliphate for a period of VII-IX centuries. Since the late 9th century, local states such as the Sajids, Salarids and Rawwadids started to rule Azerbaijan (Jannatov 2024, 142). However, with the westward migration of the Oghuz Turks, Azerbaijan came under the rule of the Seljuks and subsequently, it became part of the Azerbaijani Atabegs (Eldiguzids), Khwarazmian Empire, followed by the Mongols, Timurid, and later the local – Aq Qoyunlu, Qara Qoyunlu, Safavid, Afsharid, and Qajar states. Almost all these states and empires were of Turkic-Azerbaijani origin. However, they displayed notable tolerance and refrained from any discrimination against other ethnic groups or peoples under their rule. In fact, they

promoted the Persian language (*actually former Tajik language*), and supported its dissemination, contributing to the production of numerous works in that language (Jannatov, Safari & Mansimov 2026, 368).

Since the 19th century, Britain laid the foundation for Oriental Studies centers, including Iranian Studies, and began to implement strategic plans for its colonial policy in the East. The major purpose of these centers was to train officials who would serve British interests (Mirzabayova 2025, 369). As result of efforts by British centers of Oriental Studies and the East India Company, the Iranian history was rewritten to provide a historical basis for Fars-Centric statehood. The role of British missionaries in this issue was aiming at the imperialist interests (Safari 2014, 261). Thus, Ardeshir Jay Reporter, educated in Britain until the age of 27 and specifically trained to support British colonial policies, arrived in Iran in 1893 as the political advisor to the British embassy in Tehran and as a representative of the Government of India. He significantly influenced the Constitutional Revolution and subsequent events. Reporter taught history at the School of Political Science, and in his memoirs noted: *“At every stage, including the Constitutional Movement and my time teaching at the Political School, I dedicated all my efforts to instilling Iranian nationalism (essentially Persian nationalism) and inciting the people in this direction.”* (Bagdelu 1380, 233-234) While Reporter openly advocated the promotion of Iranian nationalism, he did not explicitly portray this project as being directed against Azerbaijani identity; however, in practice, the centralizing and homogenizing interpretation of nationalism that emerged under the Pahlavis disproportionately marginalized non-Persian communities. In October 1917, Reporter met Reza Khan. However, since Reza Khan was uneducated, he needed to be groomed to become the “founder of modern Iran”. In his memoirs, Reporter wrote: *“I explained Iran’s history, geography, and socio-political situation to him in simple language... He would usually listen to me for long periods, then take a break to brew tea, which we would drink together.”* (Ardabili 1991, 256) Over four years, Reporter prepared Reza Khan to lead the new Iranian state. Following continued meetings, Reporter concluded that Reza Khan was the best candidate to establish a strong, centralized state in Iran in line with British objectives. For the first time, he introduced Reza Khan to Ayren Syed, a British official (Bagdelu 1380, 235).

It should be noted that Azerbaijan was divided into two parts by the Treaty of Turkmenchay of 1828 as a result of the wars between Russia and Iran during the Qajar period. After this division, Southern Azerbaijan remained within Iranian borders. Once a fabricated historical narrative was established and a suitable candidate was found, a coup was staged to overthrow the Turkic-Qajar dynasty, and replace it with a Persian one. Reza Khan was assigned as the ruler. Following this, the Azerbaijani

Turks who were the dominant population in the region were subjected to brutal oppression and repression. The objective of the policy of systematic oppression was aimed at to Persianize the Turks, who made up roughly half of the country's population and to erase any traces of Turkish presence in order to establish a greater Fars-Centric State (Safari 2025, 1011).

The Distortion of History and Denial of Turks in Azerbaijan

The denial of the Turkic presence in Azerbaijan and the falsification of history regarding the Azerbaijani population's Turkic identity began during the period when Reza Shah came to power. This was part of a plan to strip power from the Turks and transfer it to the Persians. To support this agenda, a fabricated 2,500-year history was created for the name "Iran", tailored to suit the Tajik ethnic group that had migrated from Afghanistan and Tajikistan into the current territory of Iran, gradually Persianizing the local population. This historical narrative was constructed by arranging the histories of various peoples, including the Slavic-speaking Achaemenids (Purpirar 1381, 59-60), the Pahlavi-speaking Sasanids (Rashidi 1387, 170), the Turkic-speaking Seljuks, Khwarazmians, Ilkhanids, Timurids, Safavids and Qajars into a chronological sequence, falsely presenting Iran as an ancient and continuous Persian state.

In fact, many ethnic groups from different cultural backgrounds historically lived in the territory of present-day Iran. Even in the Timurid period, the primary Persian city of Shiraz had not yet fully adopted Tajik language (*in the middle ages sources, instead of Persian, Tajik language was used in Iran*). For instance, poets like Hafez and Saadi wrote in multiple languages during this time, including Pahlavi and Tajik, demonstrating a multicultural linguistic environment (Rashidi 1387, 176). The adoption of Tajik as a common communication language dates back to the Ghaznavid period (977-1186) when the Turks facilitated its spread. Gradual Tajik migration westward from Afghanistan resulted in the Persianization (*Persianization* refers to the process by which non-Persian individuals, cultures, or regions are assimilated into Persian language, culture, and identity) of the central cities of present-day Iran, including Isfahan, Fars, Kerman, and Yazd. Approximately 400–500 years ago, this Persianized population was portrayed as the indigenous people of the entire Iranian territory, and a fictitious 2,500-year history was attributed to them (Razi 1347, 15-16).

Following the Persianization policy in Iran, the history of Azerbaijani Turks was distorted. It was claimed that they were Turkified during the Mongol rule and were not originally Turks (Kasravi 1304, 10). Under the order of Reza Shah Pahlavi, books by Ahmad Kasravi were published to distort

the ethnic roots of Azerbaijan's population and present them as of Persian origin. In Southern or Iranian Azerbaijan, Seyid Ahmad Kasravi propagated the theory of the "Azeri language" by describing the language of the population of several villages in the Harzand (Dash Harzand and Chay Harzand) and Galin Qayah and surrounding areas of the Garadagh and Marand regions, who migrated to this region from the Talysh region in recent centuries, as the language of local and ancient Azerbaijanis. However, the theory of the "Azeri language" propagated by S. A. Kasravi based on the fact that those villages spoke a non-Turkic language is refuted by the people of those villages about their ancestry (Jannatov 2022, 3). Seyid Ahmad Kasravi argued that if five or six villages out of thousands of Turkic-speaking villages in the region were non-Turkic, then these villagers represented the ancient and true inhabitants of Azerbaijan, and the Turks have migrated to the region in recent centuries. However, even today, when the inhabitants of those villages that Kasravi used to support his fabricated "Azeri language" theory are asked about their ancestry, they state: *"We are neither Azeris nor Tats. We are Talish, and our ancestors migrated to this area from the Talish region approximately 200–300 years ago."* (Asifi 1398, 29) As can be seen, the people of Harzand, based on the oral stories of their ancestors, state that they migrated to this region from the Talysh region about 200-300 years ago and settled in the village of Old Harzand (Dash Harzand), and then spread to Galin Qayah and Babira.

The process of distorting historical truths about Azerbaijan that began during the Pahlavi era has continued up today. Even reputable historical sources were altered and reprinted with manipulated content. For example, one of the many sources distorted regarding the history of Turks in Azerbaijan is Tarikhname-ye Tabari by Muhammad bin Muhammad Balami. The original version of the work, as well as copies published during the Pahlavi period, mentions that during the Yemeni ruler's invasion of Azerbaijan, he fought against the "Azarbadgan Turks" (Azerbaijani Turks). In Tarikh-e Balami, a translation of Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir Tabari's work by Abu Ali Muhammad bin Muhammad Balami, it is explicitly stated that the Yemenis fought against the Azerbaijani Turks and killed many of them (Balami 1974). However, in the 1999 Tehran edition of Tarikhname-ye Tabari (edited by Mohammad Rowshan and published by Soroush Publications), the term "Azerbaijani Turks" was distorted and replaced with "bozorgane Azarbayqan" (literally meaning "the nobles of Azerbaijan"), thereby erasing the reference to the Turkic identity of the population. A similar distortion can also be observed in Rashid al-Din Fazlullah's Jami' al-Tawarikh-e Bargoziye (Balami 2013). In this work, references to the Azerbaijani Turks were similarly altered. Through such manipulations of historical sources, efforts were made to erase the Turkic identity of Azerbaijani

population from the historical record by falsifying key references in historical texts. After the advent of Islam, the Turkic dynasties that established states in the territory of Azerbaijan and the surrounding region—such as the Ghaznavids, Seljuks, Khwarazmshahs, Ilkhanids, Timurids, Safavids, Afsharids, Qajars, and others—were falsely portrayed as Persians in modern narratives. This distortion essentially served to deny the existence of Azerbaijani Turks and to erase their history (Rashidi 1387, 113).

Efforts to Erase the Language and Turkic Identity of Azerbaijanis

After the Pahlavi dynasty seized power through a coup, efforts were made not only to distort the history of Azerbaijani Turks but also to erase their language and culture entirely. Systematic policies were implemented to remove any trace of Turkic identity from Azerbaijani territory. The Azerbaijani Turkic language (*also Azerbaijani Turkish*) was portrayed as a foreign language, banned outright, and suppressed in every domain. Under the guise of Persian nationalism, the Iranian state enacted policies to marginalize Azerbaijani Turkic. As one of the sources highlights: *"In accordance with the dominant Persian nationalist policies of the Iranian state, all administration and judicial matters in Azerbaijan were conducted exclusively in Persian. Instructions in military units and education in all schools were also exclusively in Persian. Publishing books, journals, or newspapers in Azerbaijani Turkic was prohibited. There were no theaters, philharmonics, museums, or higher education institutions offering anything in Azerbaijani Turkic. The government's Department of Education in Azerbaijan focused more on spreading the Persian language in Azerbaijan than on actual education, employing measures to suppress Azerbaijani Turkic and its culture."* (Cheshmazer 1986, 37)

The Pahlavi regime also began a systematic campaign to erase Turkic identity from Southern Azerbaijan by altering the region's geographical names. Numerous cities, villages, districts, mountains, rivers, and historical sites with Turkic names were Persianized. According to historical records: *"Many of Azerbaijan's city, village, district, mountain, river, and historical site names were written in Persianized forms. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's historical monuments were deliberately neglected and left in disrepair."* (Cheshmazer 1986, 37) The extreme Persian nationalist policies of the Pahlavi era reached a point where, under Riza Shah's orders, all Turkic toponyms in Azerbaijan and other regions were translated and replaced with Persian equivalents (Rashidi 1387, 26). Even the calendar, which had evolved over nearly a thousand years and reflected Turkic traditions, was

altered to remove Turkish influence. After Riza Shah came to power, the names of months in Turkish and Arabic were changed to Persianized terms. For example, the 5th Parliament redefined the calendar that had included Turkic names for the 12 animals, replacing them with Persian names (Bagdelu 1380, 268). The adapted Persian names of the months by 5th Parliament of Iran are: 1. Farvardin 2. Ordibehesht 3. Khordad 4. Tir 5. Mordad 6. Shahrivar 7. Mehr 8. Aban 9. Azar 10. Dey 11. Bahman, 12. Isfand (Bidqoli and Javid 2019, 246-247).

The Pahlavi regime pursued policies aimed at destroying the Azerbaijani Turks as a distinct nation, banning all activities in their native language. Strict measures were enforced with extreme pressure and cruelty in the provinces where the Azerbaijanis live compactly. Following this policy, the publication of books and newspapers, theatrical performances, education in schools or administrative offices, and even conducting mourning ceremonies in their mother tongue were absolutely prohibited (Tagiyeva, Rahimli and Bayramzadeh 2000, 202). After Reza Shah seized power through a coup, the regime also sought to annihilate the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Turks to eliminate them as a nation. This politics included the confiscation and destruction of ancient Turkish books, lithographic works and manuscripts of Tabrizi poets. Many of those manuscripts were collected and burned. Furthermore, schools instilled hatred for the Turkic identity among the children by portraying Turks in the most degrading manner. Efforts were made in schools to depict Turks in the vilest forms in order to create self-loathing among Turkic children (Tagiyeva, Rahimli and Bayramzadeh 2000, 203). The burning of books written in the Turkic language constituted a cultural genocide, with the primary aim being to sever Azerbaijani Turks from their roots and assimilate them into Persian culture, ultimately erasing their identity. In addition to banning the Turkic language, the regime initiated efforts to purify the Persian language by removing words of Turkic and Arabic origin that had entered Persian over the course of millennia. This campaign began with military terminology. The first such term creation and replacement of Turkic-Arabic terms was initiated in the Ministry of War. Zebiullah Behrouz and Arbab Keykhosrow Shahrokh spearheaded this effort, replacing numerous Turkish and Arabic military terms with newly invented Persian terms (Bagdelu 1380, 258).

In the 1930s, Iran, with a population of approximately 15 million, intensified its oppression of non-Persian peoples. Under the sponsorship of Reza Shah, discriminative policies degraded and insulted the national identity, language, and culture of these communities (Rahimli 2015, 22). The main goal of the Pahlavi regime's policy of humiliation against Azerbaijani Turks was to instill shame in their Turkic identity and pave the way for their assimilation into Persian culture. Even individuals who

dared to declare that “I am Iranian, but I am a Turk”, faced imprisonment for their courage (Tagiyeva, Rahimli and Bayramzadeh 2000, 203). In regions populated by Azerbaijani Turks, the Persianization of Turkic toponyms, the prohibition and destruction of books and sources written in their mother tongue was part of cultural genocide. These measures were designed to deny the existence of Azerbaijani Turks as a nation, erode their cultural heritage, and facilitate their assimilation into Persian identity.

The Institutionalization of Oppression and Humiliation Against Azerbaijani Turks

Persian chauvinism has become a cornerstone of state policy towards non-Persian ethnic groups including, the Azerbaijanis when Reza Shah came to power. This ideology emphasized the Persians' alleged superiority as members of the “Aryan race” and sought to establish a connection between the Persian and German cultures. The appointment of Mahmoud Jam, known for his pro-German stance, as Prime Minister was no coincidence. As the international situation grew tense and the threat of war approached Iran's borders, Reza Shah made several political maneuvers. He replaced Mahmoud Jam with Pan-Iranist Ahmad Matin Daftari, known for his anti-Turkish policies. Then, Parliament Speaker Danesh Mohtasham al-Saltaneh had been sent to Berlin to meet Hitler (Rahimli 2015, 16). At the same time, the oppression of Azerbaijani Turks became official state policy. As recorded: *“Reza Shah’s hostility towards the Azerbaijani population knew no bounds. He sent his most brutal and criminal officials to Azerbaijan to insult its proud and oppressed people, degrade their language, and devastate their cities.”* (Davarnia 1385, 18)

It should be noted that in the pre-Pahlavi period, Azerbaijani provinces were considered the leading region in almost all fields of the country. However, since 1925 during the Pahlavi dynasty, systematic oppression and destruction policies started to be imposed towards the Azerbaijani Turks. The national oppression and humiliation of Azerbaijani Turks reached extreme levels. For instance, *“Abdullah Mostowfi, appointed as the governor of Azerbaijan by the Pahlavi regime, referred to the population census in Tabriz as equivalent to counting donkeys. He even cruelly prohibited elderly mothers and fathers, grieving the loss of their children, from mourning in their native Turkish language.”* (Jami 1362, 271) Mostowfi himself admitted to these actions in his response to a piece by Sultanzade-yi Tabrizi, stated: *“Yes, I never allowed mullahs to recite elegies in Turkish during mourning ceremonies. In my speeches, I would say, ‘If you are the true descendants of Darius and Cambyzes, why are you speaking the language of Genghis and Afrasiyab?’* (Jami 1362, 271)

The Azerbaijani language and culture were banned as part of the Pahlavi regime's efforts to annihilate the Azerbaijani Turks as a nation. Those who spoke this language were subjected to racist insults and oppression by the authorities. After the Pahlavi regime seized power through a coup, Mohseni, appointed as the cultural director in Azerbaijan, openly opposed the Azerbaijani language, stated: *"If anyone speaks Turkish, tie a donkey halter around their neck and tether them to a stable."* (Davarnia 1385, 19) Such inhuman methods were used to destroy the Azerbaijani Turks' language. Even Azerbaijani children newly enrolled in schools faced unprecedented cruelty. After Mohseni, Zoghi was appointed as the cultural director in Azerbaijan. He implemented a "fine fund" in schools and ordered that Azerbaijani schoolchildren to be fined who spoke their native language (Jami 1362, 272).

A respected teacher in Azerbaijan recounted an incident during Zoghi's tenure: *"A teacher named Mirza Qanbar Nami was teaching Persian to elementary school students as usual. He explained: ab means water, nan means bread, and Baba ab dad means father gave water."* At that moment, Zoghi entered the classroom with an inspector from Tehran and the school principal. After observing Mirza Qanbar's teaching method, Zoghi asked the principal, *"why is your teacher speaking Turkish?"* The principal replied, *"the children don't understand the words, so the teacher explains their meanings in Turkish."* Zoghi said, *"This is unacceptable. To explain the meanings of words, he should show them. For example, to teach the word nan, he should bring a piece of bread and show it to them. To explain the sound of a rooster, he should mimic the crowing of a rooster. By this way, children will learn Persian as their mother tongue."* (Davarnia 1385, 19)

The Pahlavi regime's colonial and discriminatory policies in Azerbaijani provinces extended beyond language and culture, affecting social, economic, and industrial sectors. In the 1930s, Azerbaijan was deliberately excluded from the state's industrialization programme. As a result, there was no progress in Southern Azerbaijan due to the lack of attention in the industrial fields. Of the 365 industrial enterprises established nationwide during the 1930s, only 12 were located in Azerbaijan. Of these 12, only two—the Miyandab Sugar Factory and the Tabriz Elevator—were funded by the state. All other industrial enterprises were small-scale facilities funded by local capital and limited to light industry." (Rahimli 2017, 70)

In the summer of 1940, the governor of Azerbaijan, Mustowfi, exacerbated the suffering of Tabriz's population by forcibly purchasing grain at far below market value. Without considering the grain needs of Tabriz's residents, he seized grain worth 350–400 rials per khalvar (*a unit of weight in Iran*)

for just 140 rials and sent it to central Iran. When winter arrived, Tabriz faced a grain shortage. In response, the Pahlavi regime brought years-old, rotting grain from the Shah's private reserves in Gorgan to Tabriz via Astara and sold it to the desperate population for 600 rials per khalvar. The grain was unfit for human consumption, leading to widespread illness and death among the impoverished population forced to consume it. Even the Iranian military refused to feed the spoiled grain to their horses. When the commander of the Iranian army in Tabriz informed Governor Mustowfi that the grain was unsuitable for the horses, Mustowfi shamelessly replied: "*There is no problem. If the army's horses would not eat it, we'll give it to Tabriz's donkeys.*" (Jami 1362, 269)

One of the governors appointed to Azerbaijan by Reza Shah, who considered humiliation as his official duty to insult Azerbaijani Turks, said: "*Azerbaijanis are Turks. They ate clover and carried out the Constitutional Revolution, and now they can eat hay and develop Iran.*" (Davarnia 1385, 18)

Alongside social challenges, deliberate economic hardships against Azerbaijani provinces were imposed as part of the Pahlavi regime's discriminatory policies. For instance, during the years 1941–1945, Iran's government intentionally caused severe difficulties in Azerbaijan's economy: "In the fall of 1941, construction of the Mianeh-Tabriz railway and the exploitation of Zanjan's copper mines and Qaradag's iron mines were halted. The Tabriz tobacco factory was shut down. In early 1943, American advisors, *Vion* in the economic administration and *Allen* in the food administration, took over operations. They extracted large quantities of wheat and food supplies from Azerbaijan while deliberately disrupting the supply of essential goods, such as sugar, tea, and textiles, to the region. This destructive activity of the government then caused famine and inflation in most of Azerbaijani cities, including Tabriz, Urmia, Ardabil, and Maragha." (Cheshmazer 1986, 32)

During the Pahlavi era, the industrialization efforts were primarily concentrated in Persian-speaking central cities and, to some extent, in the Khorasan province. Research and documentation from this period demonstrate that the Pahlavi regime made Azerbaijan entirely dependent on the central government, turning it into one of Iran's most neglected regions. The discriminatory policies implemented by the Pahlavi regime reduced Azerbaijan to one of the most backward provinces of Iran, with significant declines in its industry, agriculture, and infrastructure (Rahimli 2017, 71). The extent of the regime's comprehensive discrimination against Azerbaijani-populated provinces was so severe that the treatment of Azerbaijan soon left it far behind the central provinces, creating industrial, agricultural, and infrastructural stagnation (Tagiyeva, Rahimli and Bayramzadeh 2000, 210). The colonial policies of the Pahlavi regime inflicted such devastating consequences on Southern Azerbaijan that the region remained in the shadow of its former development. Compared

to the Qajar period, Azerbaijan under the Pahlavis fell into ruins. Despite heavy taxation on Azerbaijan, no efforts were made to improve or modernize its cities (Jami 1362, 268).

The Pahlavi regime politically marginalized Azerbaijani Turks and deprived them of basic human rights. Despite being nearly equal in population size to Persians, Azerbaijanis were denied participation in the administration of the country. The authorities implemented exploitative and oppressive national policies, subjecting other ethnicities and peoples to severe discrimination. The Iranian state denied the Azerbaijani people their constitutional right to form Provincial and Local Councils and deprived them of democratic freedoms. By this way, the regime used all its resources to prevent the Azerbaijani people to form becoming politically organized (Cheshmazer 1986, 35-36).

During Reza Shah's reign, Iran further sought to weaken the unity and integrity of Azerbaijani people by dividing its territories into several provinces. This deliberate fragmentation was designed to disrupt the political, economic, and cultural cohesion of them. By September 1941, Southern Azerbaijan had been divided into multiple provinces: "The 3rd Province consisted of Tabriz and Ardabil. The 4th Province included Urmia, Khoy, Maragha, Bijar, and Mahabad. Zanzan was annexed to Iran's 1st Province. Surrounding regions of Qazvin, Hamadan, Qom, Malayer, Tuyserkan, and Sanandaj, along with over 2,500 Azerbaijani villages, were added to the 1st Central Province and the 5th Province." (Cheshmazer 1986, 36) This policy aimed to reduce Tabriz's significance as a political, economic, and cultural center and to facilitate the broader Persianization agenda.

The Pahlavi regime's discriminatory policies against Azerbaijani territories quickly produced disastrous results. Regions such as Tabriz, Urmia, and Ardabil, which had been among Iran's most prominent provinces during the Qajar period, were turned into some of the most underdeveloped regions during the Pahlavi era. While central Iranian cities benefited from infrastructure projects such as railways, highways, tunnels, ports, and palaces, these developments were often built with the backbreaking labor of Azerbaijani workers who were forced to migrate south in search of employment (Rahimli 2015, 47-48).

Iran pursued a systematic policy of hostility toward Azerbaijani Turks in all spheres. In Iran's 13th and 14th parliaments, several speeches were delivered denying the Azerbaijani nation and language. In line with the dominant Persian nationalist policies of the Iranian state, all administrative and judicial affairs, military training, and education in all schools in Azerbaijan were conducted

exclusively in Persian. Publishing books, journals, newspapers, and other materials in Azerbaijani Turkish was prohibited. Not a single theater, philharmonic, museum, or higher education institution existed in the Azerbaijani language. The government's Department of Education in Azerbaijan focused more on promoting the Persian language in the region than on education itself, implementing measures to suppress Azerbaijani language and culture (Cheshmazer 1986, 26).

In addition to the systemic oppression and discrimination mentioned earlier, Azerbaijani social and political activists were also imprisoned during Reza Shah's 16-year rule. Although Reza Shah was deposed and replaced by his son, and there was a brief period of relative relaxation, oppression against Azerbaijanis and other ethnic groups continued unabated. In August and September 1941, after the fall of Reza Shah's dictatorship, the Iranian state continued to subject Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Turkmens, and other ethnic groups to severe national oppression. Revolutionary uprisings periodically broke out in Azerbaijan against Iranian reactionary forces and the lawlessness of the ruling classes. The harsh national oppression of the Azerbaijani people persisted even during the years 1941–1945 (Cheshmazer 1986, 35). As the facts demonstrate, following the Pahlavi dynasty's usurpation of power from the Turks, Azerbaijani Turks were subjected to intense oppression and discrimination in their own homeland.

The Impact of the Pahlavi Regime's Colonial Policies in Southern Azerbaijan on the National-Democratic Movement

The systematic oppression and discrimination policies against Azerbaijani Turks by the Pahlavi regime created significant dissatisfaction among the population. Despite the severe dictatorship, the people of Southern Azerbaijan did not remain silent in the face of such oppression and discrimination and periodically rose in rebellion. Shortly after Reza Shah seized power and began implementing his policies of national oppression against the Azerbaijanis, protests erupted. In 1927, there were repeated demonstrations in Tabriz against the Persianization of the education system (Tagiyeva, Rahimli and Bayramzadeh 2000, 208). A year later, in October 1928, an uprising took place in Tabriz. This rebellion lasted 10 days and was only suppressed when military forces attacked the city on the final day. One of the key reasons for this uprising was Reza Shah's aggressive Persianization policies (Tagiyeva, Rahimli and Bayramzadeh 2000, 208).

The Pahlavi regime's policies of oppression and discrimination against Azerbaijani Turks in all aspects of life drove them to rebellion and to fight seriously for their national rights. As a result, on

the eve of World War II, a national-democratic movement emerged in Southern Azerbaijan in opposition to the Pahlavi regime's colonial policies. Under the leadership of Seyid Jafar Pishevari, significant efforts were made to establish the Azerbaijan National Government. With the regime unable to exert heavy pressure due to the presence of Soviet troops in Iran, and with a period of relative relaxation following Reza Shah's deposition, the national movement in Southern Azerbaijan transitioned to open activity. Immediately after Reza Shah was deposed, the 'Azerbaijan Society' was established in Tabriz, and on October 22, 1941, the Azerbaijan newspaper began publication under the leadership of Ali Shabustari and with Ismail Shams as editor-in-chief. The newspaper was published in both Turkish (Azerbaijani) and Persian (Jami 1362, 273). Following this, many other societies and organizations were formed, though some only lasted for short periods.

The Iranian government's oppressive policies against Azerbaijan continued during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, just as they had under Reza Shah. During this time, Pishevari emerged as one of the most active leaders in Southern Azerbaijan. He ran as a candidate in parliamentary elections. However, in February 1944, Seyid Jafar Pishevari, who had won 16,000 votes from Tabriz for the 14th Parliament, was cunningly prevented from taking his seat. This incident accelerated the national awakening in Azerbaijan and further mobilized the people to fight for their freedom (Rahimli 2015, 39). This event solidified Pishevari's conviction that the Pahlavi regime's chauvinistic policies would never allow Azerbaijanis to achieve their rights within Iran.

The continuation of the Pahlavi regime's policies of oppression and discrimination against Southern Azerbaijan left Azerbaijani freedom fighters with no option but to demand at least autonomy. Protests that erupted across various regions of Southern Azerbaijan against the Pahlavi regime's oppression gradually created the conditions for a larger movement and even a revolutionary climate. At the same time, the persistence of these oppressive and discriminatory policies after 1941 further radicalized the movement. By 1945, the social, political, and economic situation in Azerbaijan had reached a critical point. The nation had come to the realization that resisting the regime's oppression was the only way forward. In such circumstances, there was a need for an organization capable of leading the people's struggle and directing it toward a primary goal. This organization was the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, founded under the leadership of Seyid Jafar Pishevari on September 3, 1945 (Rahimli 2009, 107).

Efforts to exclude Azerbaijanis from governance, to nullify their votes in elections, and to deny the legitimacy of Seyid Jafar Pishevari's parliamentary mandate sparked widespread dissatisfaction.

This discontent manifested in continuous demonstrations, protests, and even acts of resistance across Southern Azerbaijan. From February 1944 to mid-1945, almost every region of Southern Azerbaijan witnessed ongoing demonstrations, rallies, and occasional resistance against state officials, police, and gendarmerie. This was particularly evident in cities such as Sarab, Qaradagh, Marand, Maragha, Meshkin, and others (Rahimli 2015, 39).

Since 1941, various societies, organizations, and leading political figures in Southern Azerbaijan recognized the need to establish a unified and nationally focused organization to oppose the regime within the revolutionary atmosphere. To this end, several individuals, many of whom had endured harsh struggles against the Shah's regime and spent up to a decade in prison, sought counsel with Seyid Jafar Pishevari, who was then residing in Tehran. In these consultations, not only those who had come from Azerbaijan but also Azerbaijani activists gathered around the 'Ajir' newspaper in Tehran participated (Rahimli 2015, 51). The ongoing process in Southern Azerbaijan gained further momentum following the annulment of Pishevari's parliamentary mandate.

At the end of August 1945, Pishevari's mandate was rejected. He returned to Tabriz and, with the help of former comrades from the Communist Party and fighters from the Khiyabani movement, announced the formation of the new Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADF) (Abrahamian 1384, 267). The establishment of the ADF formally began on September 3, 1945 (Shahrivar 12, 1324), with the signing of a declaration by 77 prominent Azerbaijani figures. This declaration announced the creation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party as a new political organization (Rahimli 2015, 62). In the September 3 declaration, the founders of the ADF clearly communicated the party's goals to the public, emphasizing that the Pahlavi dictatorship had left no viable alternatives for Azerbaijan: *"There is no other way. It is imperative to urgently work toward the implementation and perfection of constitutional law and to build a national government from the ground up, based on the needs of the people and the characteristics of the communities living in the provinces and regions."* (Cheshmazer 1986, 50-51)

Faced with persistent national oppression and discrimination, the primary demand of the people of Southern Azerbaijan was to achieve at least autonomy. This autonomy aimed to free Azerbaijanis from oppression and discrimination, while also declaring the Azerbaijani language as the official language of Southern Azerbaijan, with education conducted in that language. However, to avoid provoking further antagonism from the Iranian state, the leaders of the national movement in Southern Azerbaijan emphasized their commitment to preserving Iran's territorial integrity. This

intention was explicitly stated in the September 3, 1945 (Shahrivar 12, 1324) declaration: *“We wish to preserve the independence and territorial integrity of Iran while also remaining autonomous and free in managing our internal affairs... We will recognize Persian as the state language but will ensure that our national schools teach in our own language alongside Persian.”* (Bayramzadeh 2015, 155)

Seyid Jafar Pishevari, as the driving force behind the movement, articulated the necessity of creating the ADF. He argued that the oppressed people of Southern Azerbaijan had no choice but to follow one of two paths. Freedom fighters seeking to guide the people to liberty were forced to choose between two options. The first was to accept the current situation, while the second was to channel the people’s dissatisfaction into a strong organization and begin a serious struggle to crush reactionary forces. Since organizations like the Hezb-e Tudeh (Iranian People's Party) and other political societies in Azerbaijan failed to address this issue, the necessity of creating a new, powerful organization emerged (Pishavari 2016, 51).

After the founding of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADF), the party held its 6th Congress on October 4, 1945. In this congress, through open voting, the Central Committee and the Central Audit Commission of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party were elected. The congress elected 42 members to the Central Committee and 12 members to the Central Audit Commission of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (Cheshmazer 1986, 62). Following its establishment, the ADF continued its work toward state-building. One of its significant milestones was the 2nd Plenum held on November 18, 1945 (Aban 17, 1324), which played a critical role in shaping the direction of political events in Southern Azerbaijan, preparing for the People’s Congress, and, ultimately, organizing armed volunteer groups known as ‘Feda’i’ units (volunteer armed groups) (Rahimli 2015, 67). Based on directives issued by the 2nd Plenum, party organizations in various regions organized continuous meetings and rallies across Azerbaijan from November 10 to November 20. Considering the overall political situation, the ADF leadership decided to convene a mass public assembly—the People’s Congress. The elections for representatives to the People’s Congress were held under three main slogans: To prevent the violence and lawlessness of regime officials; To enable the democratic functioning of provincial and local councils (Anjomans); To grant autonomy to Azerbaijan within Iran. A total of 724 representatives were elected from all regions of Azerbaijan to participate in the Congress. The Azerbaijan People’s Congress convened on November 20, 1945 (Aban 29, 1324), in Tabriz. The Congress lasted two days, during which representatives from various regions delivered speeches and adopted a resolution consisting of 14 articles (Rahimli 2015, 67-68).

Following the People's Congress, on December 12, 1945 (Azar 21), the Azerbaijan National Assembly convened in Tabriz. At its first session, attended by 75 of the 100 elected representatives, the Assembly adopted its internal regulations (Cheshmazer 1986, 90). The regulations outlined the establishment of autonomy for Azerbaijan and the formation of a National Government within the territorial integrity of Iran (Rahimli 2015, 73). On December 12, 1945, the National Assembly officially adopted a resolution to establish the Azerbaijan National Government and entrusted Seyid Jafar Pishevari, the leader of the ADF, with forming the government (Rahimli 2015, 74). In accordance with this mandate, Pishevari presented the ministers of the Azerbaijan National Government to the National Assembly for approval. After gaining the Assembly's approval, the Azerbaijan National Government was formally established in Southern Azerbaijan.

Forces aligned with the Iranian state and anti-Azerbaijani elements have repeatedly sought to discredit the Southern Azerbaijani national liberation movement, which emerged in response to oppression. They accused Seyid Jafar Pishevari and Azerbaijani freedom fighters of being mere Soviet agents, blindly carrying out orders from Moscow. These claims aimed to tarnish the legitimacy of the Azerbaijani people's struggle for freedom. Pishevari's trip to the Azerbaijan SSR and his consultations with Mir Jafar Baghirov were often cited as evidence to dismiss the movement as being orchestrated by external forces. However, it is essential to recognize that revolutionary conditions in Southern Azerbaijan would not have existed without the people's desire to fight for their rights. Even with significant Soviet support or agents, no movement could have been created without a population willing to rise up against oppression. If those advancing these accusations were correct, then why did the Pahlavi army invade Southern Azerbaijan as an occupying force after the movement's leaders and tens of thousands of feda'i fighters were forced to seek refuge in Northern Azerbaijan? Why did the Pahlavi forces massacre approximately 30,000 people, imprison tens of thousands, and exile many others? The absurdity of these accusations is confirmed by contemporary observations, including those from the U.S. consul in Tabriz at the time, who wrote: *"The opposition movement here might collapse without Soviet support. However, this movement enjoys widespread popular backing, which proves the population's dissatisfaction with the central government"* (Abrahamian 1384, 268). Similarly, the British consul in Tabriz, after observing the region, noted in his report: *"It would be difficult for this movement to succeed without Russian support, but the Russians are supporting this movement for their own purposes. Among the workers and peasants of this province (Southern Azerbaijan), there exists what I would call a natural anger against the incompetence and corruption of the Iranian government. At the same time, there is such widespread*

injustice and misery that it would result in rebellion in any country. To believe that this movement is entirely the work of the Russians is misguided. In reality, the Russians are attempting to exploit the revolutionary conditions already present here.” (Abrahamian 1384, 268) The major reason for the withdrawal of Soviet troops’ support from the Azerbaijani National Government was the signing of an oil agreement between the USSR and Iran that grants privileges to Moscow. Thus, during the 1946 Iranian crisis, the USSR, under international pressure and negotiations with Iran on oil privileges, agreed to withdraw its troops and recognize Iran's territorial integrity (Westad 2007, 61).

Conclusion

As can be seen, the Pahlavi state’s project of modernization was inseparable from a rigid centralization policy grounded in Persian ethnonationalism. Following the 1925 coup that brought Reza Shah to power, the Iranian state systematically sought to dismantle the political, cultural, linguistic, and economic foundations of Azerbaijani Turkic society in Southern Azerbaijan. Far from being an unintended consequence of state-building, these policies constituted a deliberate strategy aimed at assimilating non-Persian peoples and constructing a Fars-centric nation-state.

The research has shown that the Pahlavi regime employed multiple and interconnected mechanisms to achieve this goal. Historical narratives were distorted to deny the Turkic identity of Azerbaijanis, while educational institutions, administrative structures, and cultural spaces were used to impose Persian as the sole legitimate language. The banning of Azerbaijani Turkic from public life, the Persianization of toponyms, and the destruction of cultural and literary heritage collectively amounted to cultural repression. At the same time, Azerbaijani-populated regions were subjected to economic marginalization, political exclusion, and administrative fragmentation, further weakening their capacity for social and institutional development.

These policies not only deepened socio-economic disparities between central Iran and peripheral regions but also generated profound resentment and resistance among Azerbaijani Turks. As demonstrated, the emergence of the national-democratic movement in Southern Azerbaijan during the 1940s was a direct response to decades of systematic discrimination, humiliation, and denial of basic collective rights. The demand for autonomy and cultural recognition reflected not separatist ambitions, but rather an attempt to secure dignity, equality, and self-governance within the framework of Iran’s territorial integrity.

In conclusion, the Pahlavi experience illustrates how authoritarian centralization and ethnic homogenization can undermine social cohesion and provoke long-term instability. Notably, these dynamics unfolded in a context where Azerbaijani Turks and Persians largely shared the same Shi'a religious identity, which historically had served as a unifying foundation of the Iranian state. The absence of a significant sectarian divide indicates that the conflicts of the Pahlavi period were not driven by religious differentiation, but rather by policies of linguistic suppression, cultural marginalization, and exclusionary ethnonational state-building. This case demonstrates that a shared religious framework alone is insufficient to guarantee social integration or political legitimacy when cultural and linguistic rights are denied. Understanding this historical legacy remains essential for any meaningful discussion of ethnic relations, state legitimacy, and democratic governance in contemporary Iran.

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