

Azerbaijan



GEOGRAPHY

Azerbaijan lies west of the Caspian Sea, covering 33,774 square miles. It has a population of approximately 8.5 million. This country, a little larger than Maine, separates Russia in the north, from Iran in the south. Azerbaijan is also bordered by Georgia to the northwest and by Armenia to the west. The eastern part of the country, which lies alongside the Caspian Sea, is semitropical, while an arid coastal plain stretches to the north. Both the greater and lesser Caucasus mountain ranges extend into the northern and western reaches of Azerbaijan. The climate features hot summers and mild winters.

Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, has a population of two million. This picturesque capital stands on a peninsula that juts into the Caspian Sea. Other major cities in Azerbaijan are Ganja, with 400,000 inhabitants, and Sumgayit, home to 235,000. Approximately 400,000 Azerbaijanis live in the United States, and 15 million live in Iran.



The oil industry—one of the oldest in the world—plays an increasingly important role in Azerbaijan’s economy. The republic holds huge oil reserves in the Caspian Sea, and the oil industry has been responsible for much of the growth in Azerbaijan’s economy since independence in 1991. The government plays an important role in the oil industry, but there has been foreign investment as well, and oil industry development has also fueled growth in the transportation and construction sectors. In the post-Soviet period, the arrival of Western oil companies has meant that deepwater oilfields that had been previously untouched could be explored and developed. With the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline in May 2006, Azerbaijan is able to export oil to Turkey’s Mediterranean coast through Georgia. With approximately three million acres under cultivation, however, Azerbaijan’s economy also has an agricultural base. Many people live in the Kura River valley, a region that produces cotton, wheat, rice, fruit, tobacco, and mulberry trees, which provide food for silkworms. Livestock and fishing are also important industries in Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan, and its neighbor Armenia, have troubled relations, due mainly to the struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian-dominated enclave inside Azerbaijan.

HISTORY

The roots of Azerbaijan can be traced back to the fourth century BC, with the emergence of the kingdoms of Caucasian Albania in the north, on what is essentially the territory of the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan, and the Atropatan in the south, which stood on land that is now in northern Iran. It is thought that the name Azerbaijan derives from Atropatan, which took its name from Atropat, a Macedonian who ruled the kingdom for Alexander the Great in 328 BC.

The region is referenced repeatedly by many Greek and Roman sources in the last century BC and the first centuries of the Christian era. Azerbaijanis in this northern kingdom were vassals of the Persians until the ninth century. During much of this time, the kingdom bore witness to successive waves of migrations of nomadic Turkish tribes, including the Huns and the Khazars. The Azerbaijani Turks today accept both these Turkish nomads and the Albanians as their ancestors.

By the ninth century, Albanian authority in the region began to wane, while the Persian Shirvan dynasty rose to power in eastern Caucasia. Its rule of the region had religious as well as political import. The Azerbaijani Turks adopted Shi'ism from the Persian Muslims, while the Ottoman Turks practiced Sunni Islam. The Shi'a Azerbaijanis were thus more closely tied to the Persian Shi'as than they were to fellow Sunni Turks. This caused difficulties during the 19th and 20th centuries, when Azerbaijani intellectuals tried to reunite the two Turkish strands, which shared a common language and culture, but were divided by religion.

Azerbaijan was ruled by a series of mainly Turkic empires from central Asia, a development that led to the turkification of the region. By the beginning of the 16th century, the Safavid dynasty of southern Azerbaijan assumed the throne in Persia and eventually incorporated the Shirvan kingdom, as well as Nakhichevan and Karabakh, into its rule. Wars between the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Safavid in this period, however, led to Ottoman occupation of eastern Caucasia, between 1578 and 1603.

The years 1700-1720 were pivotal in Azerbaijani history, marking the beginning of Russian influence in the area, as Peter I (the Great) brought the Caspian coast under his control. With the breakup of the Safavid dynasty in the mid-1700s, however, the remains of the empire fell not to the Russians, but to a number of independent, largely Turkic-Islamic khanates who fought with each other for control of the region.

During the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-1796), Russia initiated a new cycle of expansionism, balanced against continued hostilities with the Ottoman Turks. Catherine turned her attention to the small *khanates*, or kingdoms, of northern Azerbaijan; Russian interest in this area alarmed the Persians more than the Turks. Two Russo-Persian wars (1804-1813 and 1826-1828) decided the matter in Russia's favor. Henceforth, the Azerbaijani khanates north of the Araz River belonged to Russia, and those on the southern banks remain Iranian to the present day.

With the collapse of tsarist rule in Russia at the end of World War I, Azerbaijan—with Armenia and Georgia—declared independence on May 28, 1918, a day which is still celebrated today. The Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, ruled by the Azerbaijani Muslim Democratic Party, or Mussavat, enjoyed popular support, particularly among the urban élite. When its important rural support base began to erode, however, and as the Soviet Union gained strength, the Azerbaijani state was overthrown by the Bolsheviks, who seized power on April 28, 1920. With the Red Army

occupying its territory, Azerbaijan was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union with the signing of the Treaty of Formation of the USSR on December 30, 1922.

POLITICS

Since 1988, politics in Azerbaijan have been dominated by the often violent and ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (Mountainous Karabakh). This region, while located inside the territorial borders of Azerbaijan, has been populated by an Armenian majority throughout the 20th century. Since a 1994 cease-fire, nearly all of the Karabakh region as well as six surrounding regions—approximately 15 percent of Azerbaijan’s land area—have been occupied by Armenia, despite four United Nations Security Council and General Assembly resolutions condemning this action. A tenuous cease-fire continues as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) “Minsk Group,” co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States, directs peace talks. Several peace plans calling for the cessation of hostilities, removal of military forces from the Karabakh regions, return of all internally displaced people (IDP), and the placement of international peacekeeping troops in the region have been put forward but to date, none have been mutually accepted by Armenia and Azerbaijan. With approximately 800,000 refugees and IDPs in the country, about one out of every eight Azerbaijanis lacks proper food, clothing, or shelter. Azerbaijan seems unlikely to reach a settlement until its refugees and IDPs are repatriated, the Armenian army is removed, and the occupied territory returned.



Flag of Azerbaijan

The presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia have held several meetings, including one in Florida in 2002, to try to end the deadlock over Nagorno-Karabakh. In the meantime, the region’s ethnic Armenian population has attempted to establish many of the attributes of an independent state. The “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic,” as some Armenians have declared the region, has elected a president and prime minister, and claims Armenian as its official language. The “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” has not been recognized internationally, and its internal elections have not been supported by the OSCE.

This type of conflict is sometimes referred to as a “frozen conflict.” Despite the cease fire, thousands of people have been killed in this conflict in recent decades. Both countries continue to invest in their military, and politicians in both countries continue to use the rhetoric of war for political positioning.

Successive governments, beginning with the one headed by the last Communist party chief, Ayaz Mutalibov, have been toppled as a result of this issue. Mutalibov was elected president by the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet (Parliament) in May 1990, but resigned his party position after a failed coup attempt in August 1991. He then ran unopposed in the September presidential election, but, as a result of his mishandling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, together with the collapse of the

Soviet Union in December 1991, was forced from office in March 1992. He attempted a coup to regain power, but was unsuccessful.

Abulfaz Elchibey succeeded Mutalibov, becoming the first democratically elected president of Azerbaijan in June 1992. A former academic, Elchibey remained in office until June 1993, when he, too, was ousted, following a succession of brutal defeats in the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. He fled to his native region, Nakhichevan, and was replaced by Heydar Aliyev, the former first secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist party, Politburo member, first Deputy Prime Minister of the USSR, and a KGB general, who was elected president in October 1993. In the November 1995 elections, in which OSCE election monitors found substantial irregularities, Aliyev's party Yeni Azərbaycan (YAP) gained control of the Parliament.

Aliyev, who turned 80 in 2003, was in frail health, but remained in control and ran for re-election in October 2003. President Aliyev spent most of the campaign period under medical treatment in the U.S. Days before the election, Heydar Aliyev, clearly near death, withdrew from the campaign, replacing himself with his son Ilham Aliyev. Ilham Aliyev won easily and has held the presidency of Azerbaijan since 2003. The passing of the presidency from father to son was smooth and aroused relatively little controversy at the time. In December 2008, a measure passed through the parliament of Azerbaijan abolishing term limits, and as of this writing, Ilham Aliyev remains President of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has experienced a relatively quiet political scene over the past ten years. While there have been opposition leaders, many were sidelined by the government. For example, four high-ranking ministry officials were sentenced to jail for economic crimes such as smuggling and tax evasion. The former economic development minister, potentially a popular opposition figure to President Aliyev, was charged with corruption, abuse of power, and economic crimes. The press has been hampered in covering these situations, and several prominent journalists have been jailed. Notably in 2009, two young journalists/political bloggers were arrested and jailed for approximately one year after creating and posting a video parody on YouTube that focused negative attention on Azerbaijan's president.

In May 2007, President Aliyev signed the first official national security concept. The concept calls for Azerbaijan's integration into Euroatlantic structures, while maintaining geopolitical balance. Azerbaijan's location between Russia and Iran places it in a complex position. Azerbaijan shares its common Soviet heritage with Russia. It shares its Shi'a Islamic traditions with Iran. Azerbaijan is a member of the Council of Europe and a partner in NATO's Partnership for Peace. In many ways, Azerbaijan has not yet firmly established its international identity.

The troubles associated with the war in Armenia absorbed most of the energies of the government in the early 1990s. The gross domestic product (GDP) declined every year between 1988 and 1995. Agriculture and industry, including the oil and gas sectors, were particularly hard hit, but Azerbaijan is clearly now on the road to recovery. In September 1994, the state oil company (SOCAR) signed a 30-year production-sharing agreement with an international consortium of oil companies, the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC), to develop the oil fields of Chirag, Azeri, and the deep water portion of Gunashli, located offshore in the Caspian Sea. GDP increased approximately ten percent annually in both 2008 and 2009 to an estimated \$55.9 billion in 2009, but flattened to five percent in 2010. Inflation rates were estimated at five percent in 2010, with unemployment at less than two percent.

The main challenge that Azerbaijan faces today is to diversify its economic growth to avoid reliance on a single industry, which has been a major impediment to the economic development of other resource-rich growing economies. Azerbaijan's economic growth in the past ten years is due largely to an increase in oil production. Economists fear that increasing oil revenues will cause the currency, the *manat*, to overextend, thereby making imports cheaper and undermining the competitiveness of the national economy. To minimize the risks of underdevelopment, the government is being urged by specialists to invest its windfall revenues in education, machinery, and high-tech sectors. Foreign investment remains high and an extensive network of refineries and petrochemical plants are scheduled to be built, creating jobs and serving as an additional boost to Azerbaijan's economy. The major international oil companies are represented in Azerbaijan and have offices in Baku.

Export routes, however, have proven to be controversial for Azerbaijan. Until recently, it had used two separate pipelines to export its oil reserves for sale on the world market. Crude oil was transported from Azerbaijan through Russia and Georgia; from these Black Sea ports, it was then shipped through Turkey's Bosphorus Straits to the Mediterranean. The Russian route was shut down in 1999 for repairs, and Turkey has encouraged Azerbaijan not to reopen the route. To relieve some of the congestion in the Bosphorus, Azerbaijan and Turkey signed an agreement in 1999 to build a pipeline from Baku to the Turkish city of Ceyhan, just north of the Mediterranean. This project, commonly called the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline project (BTC), began in 2002 and was completed and fully functioning in 2006. Additionally, a parallel gas pipeline has been constructed from Baku to Erzerum, Turkey to carry the massive gas reserves of the Shah Daniz and Apsheron fields in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea.

RELIGION

Before converting to Islam, the peoples inhabiting the area that is now known as Azerbaijan practiced Christianity or, alternately, Zoroastrianism. In Baku, ancient rituals, such as the lighting of torches, are still practiced at the Temple of the Fire Worshipers, a famed Zoroastrian site.

In Azerbaijan, religious beliefs vary according to location, age, and in some cases, education and economic standing. Most would agree that over the last ten years, there has been greater recognition of the role the Islamic faith has played in shaping holiday celebrations, world views, and collective and individual identity. As religion is practiced in the United States, so too is it practiced in Azerbaijan, with a spectrum of practitioners ranging from atheist and secular to conservative and orthodox. Belief is generally considered a choice of the individual and tolerance of different practices and degrees is appreciated.

The two major branches of Islam are the Sunni, which forms the majority of Muslims, and the Shi'a. The majority of Azerbaijanis today are Shi'a Muslims, while much of the Islamic population of the rest of the former Soviet Union is Sunni Muslim. The religion's founding is conventionally dated to 610 AD, by the Prophet Muhammad, who is its central figure. He preached the word of God as revealed to him by the angel Gabriel. Islam is the Arabic word for submission; those who practice it are called Muslims, or "those who submit" (to God). The *sunna*, the "saying and doings" of Muhammad, serves as a guide to spiritual, ethical, and social life and consists of the *Qur'an* (Koran), a compilation of the word of God spoken to Muhammad, and the *hadith*, the saying and teachings of the Prophet.

Traditionally, Muslims practice what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam: reciting the creed, praying daily, giving alms, fasting, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Prayer is conducted five times a day, while facing in the direction of Mecca, and Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Islam accepts what its adherents are able to practice under given circumstances, which allowed Muslims to adapt to the restrictions Soviets placed on religion. Under communist rule, only a few Muslims each year made the pilgrimage. Since the collapse of the USSR, a resurgence of interest in Islam has seen many mosques restored or rebuilt. On a note of mutual tolerance, the remaining mosques in Baku serve both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims.

When worshipping, men typically pray together at a mosque, while women pray at home. Women are allowed to worship in mosques, but must do so in areas separate from men. The ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar year is Ramadan, when adherents fast during daylight hours, but may eat after the sun goes down. (Neither children nor the sick are expected to participate in this ritual.)

CULTURE

From a linguistic and cultural standpoint, modern Azeris are a Turkic people, who historically practice Islam and follow some of the cultural traditions of Islamic countries. The national language is Azeri-Turkish, which is written using the Latin alphabet. The language was written in the Cyrillic alphabet until 2001.

Azerbaijani cuisine is a mixture of Turkic, Iranian, and Mediterranean cultures. The most common main dish is *plov*, or pilaf, which is made of rice and other foods that are cooked and served in separate dishes, then combined at the table. Over 100 varieties of *plov* come from Azerbaijan. *Plovs* are often both sweet and sour; pomegranate juice, dried lemons, or sour plums add a little tartness, while the sweetness comes from apricots, raisins, or cherries. Kebabs and other meat and poultry dishes are often accompanied by thin slices of onions and fresh herb sprigs on a flatbread called *lavash*. Braised quail in a walnut and pomegranate sauce is another enticing Azeri dish. Herbed feta cheese is often found on an Azeri table, as well as cucumber-and-yogurt dip. A special Azeri soup contains meatballs stuffed with sour plums. Meals are often accompanied by a light and refreshing fruit sherbet drink. Desserts in Azerbaijan are often made with honey, such as the layered pastry, baklava. Another favorite dessert is silky saffron pudding.



Baku, Azerbaijan

Pastimes vary depending upon several factors, including location and economic conditions. One activity maintaining its popularity is sitting at a “caykhana” (tea café), discussing life, and often playing backgammon or dominoes. This activity remains largely gender segregated: women are rarely seen playing backgammon at a tea café. Increasingly popular are computer games and chat, and not only in Baku, as the number of Internet cafés is steadily increasing in major towns and cities throughout Azerbaijan. At approximately 70 cents per hour, many people find Internet cafés

affordable. An estimated 44 percent of Azerbaijanis have Internet access, with more than 750,000 Facebook users.

Especially in the capital Baku, shopping along the main closed pedestrian walkway remains popular in the afternoons and evenings, and all day on the weekends. The summer months are especially observed with visits to seaside dachas, outdoor barbecues, strolls along the city's seaside boulevards, and an increasing vibrant selection of outdoor restaurants and dance clubs.

Uzeyir Hajibeyov (1885-1948) is considered Azerbaijan's most brilliant and beloved composer. The first Azeri to be awarded the title People's Artist of the USSR, Hajibeyov combines Azeri traditional instruments such as the *tar*, *zurna*, and *kamancha*, with western traditional musical instruments and compositional forms to create Azerbaijani modern music. Azerbaijan was also the first country of the Caucasus region to produce an opera, Hajibeyov's "Leyli and Majnun." The composer produced a total of seven operas and three musical comedies.

Famous Azerbaijanis include prominent scientists such as Dr. Lotfi Zadeh, the developer of "fuzzy logic," a form of logic that tries to account for the "gray" areas of human behavior and perception and has been used by scientists and engineers in the design of hundreds of everyday items, such as air conditioners, computers, microwaves, televisions, washers, and dryers; and Dr. Ali Javan, who invented the gas laser in 1960, which is instrumental in the telecommunications industry.

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