

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	729
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	Minority Rights Group International
Titel:	World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Iran: Azeris
Udgivet:	december 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	29. juni 2018



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Iran : Azeris

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date December 2017

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Iran : Azeris*, December 2017, available at:
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/49749d0c41.html> [accessed 27 June 2018]

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Profile

Azeris compose around 16 per cent 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 the central government in Iran.

The Azeris' 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.

Nevertheless, there have been calls for greater autonomy in recent 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, went further as there was some support for political movements aiming at a united Azerbaijan. Although Azerbaijani police arrested demonstrators, Ayatollah Mojtabah-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.

Current issues

Azeris continue to report widespread discrimination, including at the hands of authorities. In November 2015, for example, Azeris protested over a state broadcasted children's television programme which made fun of Azeri accents and made offensive jokes. There is continued repression of Azeris by prohibiting the use of Azeri language in schools, as well a changing Azeri geographic names. Language rights issues remain hotly contested; for instance, a gathering to mark International Mother Language Day in 2016 led to the arrest of six Azeri activists on unsubstantiated charges of espionage; two of the detainees commenced a hunger strike in protest against their continued detention in June 2017 Further arrests and beatings took place at another peaceful demonstration demanding Azeri rights, also in June 2017 The gathering was held in order to protest the earlier detentions as well as call for an end to the ban on teaching the Azeri language in schools.

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