

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

tcg-22

May 22, 1992

Dear Peter,

It has been pretty hectic around here, and so rather than delay my next epistle to you any longer I thought I would send this out-of-sync, stop-gap offering lest you start thinking I have fallen asleep.

I have not.

I have been in high-speed over-drive on an un-tracked roller coaster course for the past month.

You will hear all about it once I have time to breath.

But just to give you a sense of what has been going on since our last communication I will provide the following summary.

My last letter to you was an offering with the title: Everything You Never Wanted To Know About Azerbaijan.

Typically for a Goltz ICWA epistle, it started as an eight page idea and grew into a monster manuscript. And it wasn't even finished. I had planned on sending two more installments.

But in the midst of the editing of Part Two I received a freak visa to Iran, and had to drop everything to get there before the visa limitations closed.

I was, in effect, the first American tourist to the Islamic Republic in a decade. I had a wonderful time and kept a daily notebook that I plan to turn into another monster manuscript.

The report that follows, cast as an article, is but a fraction of the ICWA letter I was working on, but it will give a taste of what is to come.

Anyway, I was editing the manuscript on the hoof and had just left Iran to do a loop around Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey to return to Baku via Nakhichivan when the poop hit the fan:

The Armenians were attacking the obscure Azeri enclave, and once more Young Truly was in a hot-spot by accident.

Sometimes, Peter, I think I have been divinely assigned (or condemned) to being in the Right Place at the Wrong Time or vice versa to record ugly little details from the Other Side of this ugly little war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

I think you know what I mean, and if you don't, let me tell you quite clearly:

I am getting pretty tired of reporting about the other face of Armenia, the one the world doesn't like to see: the suffering victims acting as blatant aggressors, and killing lots of people in the process.

A lot of people don't like to hear this sort of news.

I can give you examples of self-censorship in the western media that will make you doubt all news you hear and see.

But of that later when I see you in June.

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Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow researching the Turkic-speaking nations of the (former) USSR, with an emphasis on Azerbaijan

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

So I stayed in Nahichivan a few days until the fighting cooled down and then came back to Baku--and just in time for the next Big Bang.

The Armenians (love 'em!) had taken advantage of the cease-fire signed that very day in Tehran to attack Shusha, the last Azeri settlement in Nagorno Karabakh.

Typically, their rational was that the Azeris had mounted a massive attack on Stepanakert, and they were obliged to silence the guns in the mountain fortress after having driven off a land assault of 1,000 Azeri soldiers.

Will you permit me a grim smile over this effective disinformation?

Anyway, their up-hill assault was a cake-walk: the Azeris abandoned the place almost without a fight, leading to charges of treason between the old communist acting president and the ultra-nationalist minister of defense.

Then there was a coup and counter-coup in Baku.

The first was by the 'crocodiles', or old communist elite, who managed to put ex-president Ayaz Mütalibov back in power for some 24 hours. The second by the Popular Front, whose blistering but bloodless attack on the parliament building and television station sent Mütalibov scurrying into exile and left Front in control of the country.

Or most of it: in addition to the alleged 'Islamic' forces who took credit for restoring Mütalibov to office by chanting Allahu Akbar outside parliament who remain at large, there are also small sulking pockets of mafia groups with their own private armies who are now threatening civil war...

In the meanwhile, the Armenians took advantage of the chaos in Baku to punch through the long-awaited Lachin corridor linking Karabakh to Armenia.

Publically, their rational was to assist local Azeri Kurds in their revolt against the nasty Azeri Turks,

Really, the propaganda ministry in Yerevan is a fine-tuned and well-oiled machine!

'We are only defending Kurds from Turks.'

Brilliant, bright shining lie.

I currently have a mass of some 200 refugee Azeri Kurds from Lachin in my courtyard. The women are trying to smash into vacant apartments while their men-folk, who just formed their own volunteer brigade, are shipping out to retake the town.

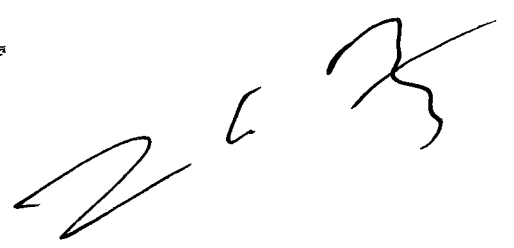
In the meanwhile, in a high-stakes diversion, the Armenians have renewed their attack on Nakhichivan--apparently trying to provoke Turkish intervention so that Russia would intervene on the side of Armenia and lead us all into World War Three, if you will allow me that bit of hyperboly.

Well, as I said, it has been a roller coaster ride and it ain't over yet, but before leaking any more details I will close this introduction and get to the promised stop-gap offering about Iran.

Best Regards and see you soon,

Thomas Goltz

Baku, May 22nd 1992





Armenians Celebrate April 24th In Tehran

### Southern Azeris Seething

On April 24th, the national day of mourning for Armenians throughout the world, some 20,000 Armenian residents of Tehran marched through the streets of the Iranian capital, demanding justice for what they call the first genocide of the 20th century.

As the Armenians marched, column leaders unfurled banners condemning 'Fascist Turkey,' as well as placards praising the leadership of the Islamic Republic. Others announced that 'When Palestine Is Created, Israel Will Be Destroyed'. There were also several almost pro-forma banners calling for 'Death to America.'

The rhetoric left many on the onlookers silently seething.

"I wonder what sort of banners the Armenians are marching under in Los Angeles and Jerusalem," said one outraged spectator.

Like many of the on-lookers, he was an Azeri Turk--a member of Iran's single largest ethnic group who do not enjoy anything remotely approaching the special status of the country's 400,000 Armenians.

"Let the Armenians march and shout their stupid slogans," said Bakhtiyar, an Azeri student at Tehran University who spent the night of April 23rd ripping down posters advertising the parade, "But we demand the same right. We applied for a permit to mourn our massacred brethren in Karabakh, but the authorities refused us. It is time to take this matter into our own hands."

In Tehran, the Armenia dirge-parade proceeded without incident.

But in Iranian Azerbaijan, there were no parades at all.

In Ardabil, Maragahah and, especially Tabriz, the simple reference to the Armenians left the population quivering with rage and almost ready to revolt.

"While the Armenians slaughter our Muslim kinsmen in Azerbaijan, the mullahs openly encourage the local Armenians to celebrate their dead," sputtered a bazaar merchant in Ardabil, one of the most deeply religious cities in Iranian Azerbaijan, and a region that had one of the highest volunteer in the eight-year Gulf War with Iraq, "We fought Saddam under the banner of Khomeini and Islam, and now the same government is siding with the Christians against the Muslims. This cannot go on."

The deep alienation with the government of the Islamic Republic may be felt everywhere in Iran today, but it is nowhere more electric than in Azerbaijan--and specifically because of the undeclared war between Armenia and the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh.

Through the offices of Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Veliyati, Iran attempted to mediate in the growing conflict.

But with each Tehran-negotiated cease-fire, a new cycle of violence erupted as Armenian militants took advantage of the Azeri gullibility and belief that Tehran could actually stop the Armenians from launching new attacks and seizing more territory.

"The announcement of cease-fire talks in Tehran has come to mean that one can anticipate a new Armenian attack," said Wafa Goulizade, an Azerbaijan diplomat associated with the various talks aimed at containing the conflict.

The last such meeting was on May 7th between acting Azerbaijan President Yagub Mamedov and Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan. Within hours of the cease-fire summit, the Armenians had seized the last Azeri stronghold in Karabakh, thus precipitating a vortex of political chaos in Azerbaijan that included the temporary restoration of deposed President Ayaz

Mutalibov and then a counter-coup by the nationalist Popular Front.

Significantly, the pro-Mutalibov forces had chosen the Muslim call to prayer ('Allahu Akbar!') as their rallying cry, and praised the memory of the late Ayatullah Khomeini when the former Communist Party boss was restored to power.

Ironically, Mutalibov had previously claimed to be a 'moderate' influence against fundamentalists.

But the sole foreign message of congratulations upon his brief reassumption of office came from Iran: the embarrassed emissary arrived at the presidential palace after Mutalibov had fled, a scant 24 hours after resuming office.

The result is that whatever influence Tehran might have had over the northern Azeris has now totally evaporated.

More to the point, rather than consider how to subtly export the Islamic Revolution to nominally Muslim, former Soviet republics like Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic is now facing the prospect having its own, normally docile Azeri population being infected by the secular nationalism emanating from the North.

Indeed, a key if contentious point of policy of the Popular Front that seized power in the counter-coup is the call for reunification of southern and northern Azerbaijan under a secular, nationalist government.

Most observers in Iran regarded the Front's call for Azeri unification as ridiculous rhetorical excess until recently, pointing out that southern Azeris were no more subject to sessionary ideas than the Arabs of Kuzistan, who remained loyal to Iran throughout the long years of the Gulf War with Iraq.

But that has now dramatically changed, and the single, simple cause is the on-going conflict in Karabakh.

"The mullahs have brought it upon themselves," said an Azeri academic from Tehran, "The population as a whole is sick of talking about Islam, but it is the Karabakh issue that has galvanized the Azeri national consciousness in Iran. I wouldn't have believed it possible a year ago. It is going to rip Iran apart."

The estimated 15 million Azeris of Iran are concentrated in the large, denuded plateau area near Lake Orumiyeh in the northwest of the country, the main regional center of which is the ancient market city of Tabriz.

But there are Azeris everywhere in Iran, although the total number is unknown because it is not an statistical identity.

"We are not even registered on any census," said a petroleum engineer who lives in Tehran, "And no-one really cared because we have been so assimilated. We often don't know who is an Azeri and who is a Persian because we all speak Farsi (Persian) with each other, but this is all changing because of Karabakh."

This recent visitor--probably the first non-Persian speaking but Azeri speaking American to visit Iran as a 'tourist' in a decade--was astounded by how many 'Turki' speakers he found on the streets and markets and offices of the Iran capital, Tehran: taxi drivers, shop attendants, bazaar merchants, waiters, professors, engineers, students and high level bureaucrats.

"Fars kalmadi," said an Azeri companion, equally surprised to discover his kinsmen on every street corner, "There are no Persians left."

Traditionally, the Azeris have been one of the most loyal ethnic groups inhabiting 'Iranshahr,' or the geopolitical/cultural sphere of historic Persia.

The first Turkic tribes began trickling into what is today's Iran from Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 10th century AD.

They came as nomads, free-booters in Islamic armies and then as conquerors and rulers. Those that settled in Iranshahr were largely absorbed into the syncretic culture that has marked Iran for thousands of years, losing the dynamic sense of 'Turkishness' that was carried westward into what is today's Turkey.

The main center of the Turks in Iran was the Tabriz, the capital of the 11th century Great Seljuk empire whose wars with Byzantium opened up much of Anatolia for Turkish settlement.

The second great center was the smaller city of Ardabil, where the century founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismael (1473-1524), is buried.

It was Ismael who effectively defined the Turks of Iranshahr as 'Azeris' when he import Shi'ite clerics from the distant Yemen and declared the Shi'ite school of Islamic jurisprudence to be the law of his realm. The decision gave Safavid Iran--and thus the dominant Azeris--a religious identity distinct from the Sunni school subscribed to by most of the Muslim world.

It also put Safavid Iran on a collision course with Ottoman Turkey, resulting in the great Sunni/Shi'ite wars of the medieval Muslim world.

In essence, the difference between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam might be compared with the split between Catholics and Protestants, although in the Islamic context the distinction focuses on the right of succession to religious leadership following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 641 AD. The Shi'ite are best regarded as 'royalists' who felt that the leadership of the Muslim community should descend through the family of the Prophet, while the Sunni might be best regarded as the 'democrats' who felt that new leaders should be elected through consensus.

But beyond the religious rivalry pitting Sunni Muslims versus Shi'ite Muslim, the conflict might be seen as a great Turkic civil war, with the western Turks espousing Sunni Islam while *leaving* their eastern brethren embracing Shi'ism to define themselves as 'other.'

The result is that a great, north-south cleft running from the eastern Black Sea to the flat lands of Iraq split the medieval Turkish world in two.

On the western side of the divide, the Sunni population evolved into the Turks of modern Turkey, while in the East, the Shi'ite Turks became the Persianized Azeris, taking their name not from any ethnic identity, but from the geographical area where they lived.

Nor did the divisions stop there.

In the late 18th century, Imperial Russia began conquering the Muslim principalities in the Caucasus from both Ottoman Turkey and Iran, a process that culminated in 1828 when Russian annexed Nakhichivan and defined the new frontier between the two powers as running along the Aras (Araxes) river--thus creating a northern Azerbaijan in the Russian cultural sphere, while leaving a southern Azerbaijan as part of Persia.

The smaller, less populous northern territory thus became a colony of a distinct foreign power--and subject to the various negative and positive influences that usually accompany that status. One specific development was the early rise of secular nationalism, culminating in the establishment of the Azerbaijan Republic of 1918-20; following the Bolshevik take-over, the ideology of secular nationalism was suppressed in favor of soviet internationalism, while the Russification of the country continued.

The larger, southern Azerbaijan, in contrast, remained floating in the familiar, religiously-defined, syncretic culture of Iran--not so much subject to Persianization as a passive participant in a natural process.

The two Azerbaijanis were briefly reunited in 1946, following a communist take-over of the southern territory. But the union only lasted a few months before Britain and the United States forced the Soviets to pull out, and left bitter memories in the minds of many southern Azeris about the nature of power in Baku.

Following the pull out, the frontier between the two territories became a Cold War front for the next 40 years as the United States used Iran as a bulwark against Soviet penetration of the Gulf, while Moscow used the northern Azeris as a vehicle for destabilizing the Shah's Iran by promoting the Iranian Communist Party, Tudeh.

The distrust of northern Azeris by their southern cousins only increased during the Islamic Revolution of 1978/9, when Tudeh members were hunted down by the thousands by Islamic guards without Moscow or Baku whispering a word of protest.

With Glasnost in the former USSR and the stabilization of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, contacts between the two Azerbaijanis were resumed, culminating in 1990 when a special regime allowed for cross-border visitations for those living within 45 kilometers of either side of the frontier.

In practice, however, both family visitations and commerce are far more wide ranging.

The Caspian Sea town of Astara on the frontier has become a favorite watering hole for southern Azeris who have a taste for vodka, while the bazaars of northern Iran now have sections devoted to cheap Soviet electronic goods and cameras brought in by northern Azeri entrepreneurs.

300 cross-border marriages have occurred this year alone.

"Our policy is not to aggressively advertise our country, but to allow people to come and see for themselves," said a high level foreign ministry official in Tehran, denying any putative 'rivalry' with secular Turkey over the hearts and minds of the northern Azeris.

But most observers suggest that the open-door policy is exactly that.

They point out that the Islamic Republic has been quietly building mosques and religious schools in the north and beaming radio broadcasts of a distinct religious nature in the northern Azeri Turkish dialect.

The big push for influence in the North, however, came in February when Tehran, which had showed a remarkable reticence to even recognize the independence of (northern) Azerbaijan, suddenly assumed the role of 'mediator' in the Karabakh conflict with the tacit implication that the Islamic Republic, being a Shi'ite Muslim state, was a reasonable broker for Azerbaijan because it, too was also a Shi'ite, Muslim state.

"It is outrageous that much of the world has accepted the mullahs as our advocates," said Niyazi Ibrahim, a leader of the fiercely secular Popular Front in Baku, "It is like an invitation for Iran to make a second, Islamic state here."

But if that was Iran's intention, it has now thoroughly back-fired in the face of Baku's continued series of losses to Armenia and Iran's bungled efforts to mediate in the conflict.

"At first the Iranians were sending Persian mullahs to Azerbaijan, but then they realized that language was a barrier," said a Turkish official in Tabriz, "So then they started sending Azeri mullahs. They might go to Azerbaijan to promote the Iranian

vision of Islam, but they all come back infected with the idea that their blood-brothers have been sold out to the Armenians by the Persians and start talking about that in the mosques."

The sermons are reaching the very last Azeri disciples of the Islamic Revolution, because the vast majority of southern Azeris do not even attend prayers anymore out of protest against the mullah-inspired policies toward northern Azerbaijan.

On a recent Friday in Tabriz, the city's main place of worship--a huge, covered parking lot next to the remaining wall of a long-crumbled mosque complex, was virtually empty. The worshippers in attendance, obliged to undergo a security check by guards before entering, were mainly old men, young children and women. A column of street cleaners dressed in orange overalls added some color to the occasion by marching down the main street under the familiar anti-western banners while chanting the familiar anti-America slogans, but the spectacle was so feeble that it only underlined the fact that for all intents and purposes, the Islamic revolution in Iranian Azerbaijan is dead.

It has been replaced, quite simply, with Azeri nationalism.

In the restaurants and coffee shops around the mosque, young men who fought in the Gulf War under the banner of Islam had now grown their moustaches into burly schnaubarts in public defiance of the Islamically-approved, neatly trimmed beard of the mullahs, and laughed when asked why they were not attending the Friday prayers, mocking those who said they so intended.

"Go to the mosque? You are out of your mind," snarled one young man when asked by two religious visitors from Turkey about whether they wanted to go pray.

The group of Azeris, in addition to making idle chatter about the sex dens of Turkish Black Sea port of Trabzon, were mainly interested in talking about the situation in northern Azerbaijan, and spoke of reports of weapons being sent to Armenia via the Zengazur corridor that drives a wedge between Azerbaijan proper and the Azeri territory of Nakhchivan, itself now under attack by Armenian gunmen.

"We have started turning in the local Armenian moon-shine makers to the Islamic police," smiled a veteran of the Gulf War, "They were sending the profits to Armenia to buy guns for Karabakh. Now we are making the liquor ourselves and using the profits to help our Azeri brothers."

There was also talk of volunteering for the good fight--the Azeri fight.

Such developments have left Tehran in a quandary, and after the most recent outbreak of fighting on Iran's very doorstep, the Islamic Republic categorically condemned 'Armenian aggression'--a lame effort to appease its own Azeri citizens before inchoate Azeri nationalism gets out of hand.

It may be too late.

At a tea shop in the town of Turkmanchay, where the Russians and Persians signed a treaty in 1828 that divided Azerbaijan between them, this correspondent asked those gathered how they defined themselves in order of importance--Muslim, Azeri, Turk or Iranian.

Azeri, Turk or Azeri-Turk were the standard replies.

A few said Muslim.

No-one called himself an Iranian.

"Iran," spat one man, "We have been fooled by the mullahs into believing we were equal partners because of Islam. No longer. We are Azeris, Turks--and our people are dying across the frontier."