

# Southern Azerbaijan



## STATISTICS

<b>Status:</b>	Southern Azerbaijan is a region in northwest Iran, an unrecognized and occupied territory
<b>Pop:</b>	21-23 million within Southern Azerbaijan and 8-12 million outside of the region
<b>Capital City:</b>	Tabriz
<b>Area:</b>	280,000 square km
<b>Language:</b>	Azerbaijani Turkish
<b>Religion:</b>	Shi'a Muslims

## UNPO REPRESENTATION

Southern Azerbaijan is represented at the UNPO by SANAM (Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement). They were admitted to the UNPO as a member on February 2, 2007.



# OVERVIEW

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Southern Azerbaijan is a region in northwest Iran which lies south of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan. The region's most important city is Ardabil, which is located in the north-east of Southern Azerbaijan. This region has great geographical and environmental diversity made up of mountains, valleys, forests, lakes and marshlands.

Southern Azerbaijan is populated by Shi'a Muslim Azerbaijani Turks. They speak a Turkic language that is similar to Turkish and Iraqi Turkmen. It is extremely difficult to give an accurate estimate of the population, since it has been reported that the Iranian authorities tamper with the official statistics. The members of the population in Iran of Azerbaijani descent is estimated to be around 30 million. There are additionally large communities of Azerbaijani Turks living abroad, not only in Azerbaijan, but in countries such as Turkey, Russia, Georgia, U.S.A, Kazakhstan, Germany, Ukraine and Canada.



Many immigrants from the Southern Azerbaijani territory have moved to other parts of Iran such as Teheran. At present, nearly 8 million Southern Azerbaijanis live outside Southern Azerbaijan, where more than a million of them are political immigrants, living in Europe and America. A million of them live in southern Iran while 6 million live in the city of Tehran. The civil struggle for the restoration of the national rights of the

Southern Azerbaijani Turks, including those living in Tehran, continues in the face of systematic suppression by the Iranian government of the Azeri heritage and language.

## POLITICAL SITUATION

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In May 2006 a cartoon implying Azeris were cockroaches was published in an Iranian magazine. Whilst it deeply offended many Azerbaijani Turks, it initiated a feeling of stronger unity in the ethnic group. The rise in Azerbaijani nationalism has made the central government in Tehran feel increasingly threatened. Iranian authorities accuse the Azerbaijani nationalists of promoting "pan-Turkism" and committing disobedience of God and the imams.

The Azerbaijanis have increasingly demanded more cultural and linguistic rights, especially the right to education in the Azerbaijani Turkish language, a right that is enshrined in the Iranian constitution. However, in reality schooling in Azerbaijani Turkish is prohibited and at the Iranian universities there is not a single linguistic department for Turkish. Alongside this, all state television and radio channels are broadcast in Farsi, crushing the constitutionally granted rights for minority languages outside of the private sphere.

There are several reports of occasions when the Iranian authorities have arrested people in Azerbaijani gatherings. Azerbaijani Turks have been detained and sent to prison on charges such as "establishing organizations against the system" and "spreading propaganda against the system". Some of these sentences were up to eight years long, and individuals were held without legal representation.





## UNPO PERSPECTIVE

UNPO supports the Southern Azerbaijanis in their struggle for cultural and linguistic recognition, and in their campaign for civil and human rights. UNPO strongly believe that the Southern Azerbaijani Turks need a much more prominent role in deciding their own future.

Iran needs to embrace democracy and to vastly increase the minority representation by decentralizing central government power. UNPO has over the years increased its calls for a federal Iran and believes that federalism would give the peoples of Iran the best possibility to decide their own destiny.

## UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

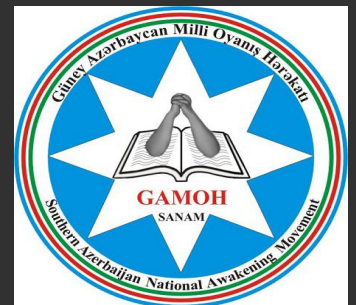
The Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (SANAM) was founded in 1995. The main goal of the movement is precipitate national consciousness in the Southern Azerbaijani Turks. SANAM promotes the struggle for Azerbaijani Turks' political rights in Iran. In accordance with SANAM's constitution and in line with its humanitarian values, it insists on non-violent methods for reaching its goals.

SANAM wishes to form a democratic, pluralist and secular region, in which all nations and minorities are respected and all individuals are free to express their opinions. SANAM believes that a fully autonomous state in Southern Azerbaijan could guarantee the national and individual rights of the nations and the peoples living in Iran, whose rights that have been suppressed and denied by Iranian regimes historically.

SANAM aim is to acquire self-determination for Southern Azerbaijan, as the organization is convinced that all people have the right to determine its own destiny. In this regard, SANAM wishes to see its represented people live in a modern Middle East where human rights are respected in an atmosphere of peace and friendship their neighbours. In this way, SANAM seeks help from all humanitarian organizations and free people of the world.

## UNPO PERSPECTIVE

## UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE



# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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### Early History

Southern Azerbaijan has fertile soil and a pleasant climate and has for a long time been the destination of nomadic tribes. One such tribe was the Medes who are generally thought to be the ancestors of today's Azerbaijanis. It is likely that Azerbaijani people settled on the Iranian mainland before any Persian tribes entered the area. A tribe of the Medes took control of the north-western part of Iran in what today comprises Azerbaijan in around the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The Medes Empire ruled for 75 years before it became a part of the Persian Empire.

The Asiatic Turks, the Seljuks, dominated the region in the 11th and early 12th centuries, and contributed much to the culture of the region. The Turkish influence and strong immigration into Persia placed Southern Azerbaijan at the centre of power in the country. The Gajar (Qajar) dynasty was the last of the Turkish dynasties to rule Persia. Turkic states, such as the Gajar state, strongly affected the history of modern Azerbaijan. The Gajar dynasty ruled most parts of present day Iran, including Southern Azerbaijan, 1794-1925. During this time only men from the Azerbaijani people could claim right to the throne of the state of Gajar. The undercurrent dynasty seems to have been to unite all land previously ruled by their ancestors, these moves led to long lasting wars between the Gajars and Russia, as Russia quested to seize Southern Caucasus.

Ultimately these hostilities led to the division of Azerbaijan into a northern part ruled by Russia and a southern part ruled by the Gajar confederation, as agreed in the treaties of Gulustan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828). Before the split the Azerbaijani borders reached from what is today Dagestan, the most southern city of Russia, to the province of Hamadan, south west of Tehran. During Russian rule of Northern Azerbaijan its territory decreased significantly, this later became the Republic of Azerbaijan.

### Recent History

During the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) Southern Azerbaijan played a key political role, as the starting point of the revolution occurred in Tabriz, capital of Southern Azerbaijan. During the First World War the Gajar dynasty remained in power in Tabriz, and the city became one of the most powerful in Iran, holding the seat of the crown prince. In 1920 the Pro-democracy revolution under Sheykh Muhammed Khyabbani also begun in Tabriz and Southern Azerbaijan gained independence for six months. However, this short lived independence was put to an end by battles between the Soviet Union and Iran and resulted in the killing of tens of thousands of Azerbaijani Turks.

In 1925 when the Gajar state collapsed Southern Azerbaijan was annexed to Iran and there was a massive move of non-Azerbaijanis to the cities of Gazvin and Hamadan where 37% of the population are now of Azerbaijani descent.

After the Second World War, Southern Azerbaijan became an independent state, the Azerbaijan People's Republic, was estab-



lished. During this year of independence, the Turkish language in schools and on radio stations became ingrained and Tabriz was established as an urban and cultural center. Independence, however, again only lasted for a short time, after a year the Soviet Union and Iran again fought bloody battles for the state in a process which killed approximately 35,000 people. After the crushing of the independent state, the Iranian government gathered all Turkish publications published during the republic and burned them in public. All people that had worked or supported the formation of the independent state were persecuted, and led to the movement for Southern Azerbaijani rights underground.



## CURRENT ISSUES

### 1. Linguistic and cultural rights

Currently the Azerbaijani Turkish language is suppressed in Iran, even though the Iranian constitution enshrines the right to minority groups to use their own language. The central government, however, prohibits use of Azerbaijani Turkish in schools, and no education is available at any level, and even at the University of Tabriz, where seven other languages are taught. Azerbaijanis want to be able to use their language when in contact with regional authorities and the judicial system, in particular to exercise the basic cultural rights as set out in article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Additionally, a number of street and place names have systematically been changed into Farsi. One central problem in the media is that in reality the language used is a version of pseudo-Farsi with Azerbaijani Turkish influences. Therefore, Southern Azerbaijani people have campaigned for media productions to be broadcast in the correct form of the Azerbaijani Turkish language – both on radio and television. There is a strong feeling that the Azerbaijani cultural and historical heritage is being ignored, and even in some cases physically destroyed by bombing to make way for new buildings, in the case with the Ark Castle in Tabriz.

## CURRENT ISSUES

## 2. Harassment and imprisonment of Azeri cultural activists

According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, several high profile Azeri cultural activists, such as Mahmudali Chehregani, the founder of SANAM, Mohammed Hossein Tahmasbpour, an Azerbaijani Turkish language poet and Dr. Mehdi Parham, a translator and writer, have been arrested arbitrarily and in some cases jailed on trumped up charges. Mass arrests by the Iranian government have also been a common feature of Azerbaijani cultural gatherings and demonstrations. According to Amnesty International hundreds of Azeri activists have been jailed, accused of “acting against national security”.



Southern Azerbaijani Political Activists

## 3. Economic Discrimination

Along with other non-Persian nationalities in Iran, Southern Azerbaijanis suffer from economic discrimination. Discrimination against non-Persian peoples since the 1979 Revolution has been led by the tight centralism of the state built on an ethnic hierarchical system; the economic consequences of this severely influencing the daily lives of non-Persians in Iran.

For instance, strict rules in the financial system and a relentless lack of government investment in the region has contributed to mass emigration from rural areas and finds a flux of more than eight million emigrants living in overcrowded poverty in the capital and other central cities.

Along with routine harassment, economically discriminative policies have been practiced. As a local newspaper disclosed, government investments in industries and mines in Kerman, a central city in Iran, have been 300 times bigger than in the four Azerbaijani provinces.

## 4. Territory and Identity

Turks have dominated and ruled Iran and the lands beyond it for thousands of years, and the northwest of Iran has long been the Azerbaijani Turks' homeland. However, after the Gajar, the last Azerbaijani kingdom in Iran collapsed, the Pahlavi dynasty dominated Iran and this saw the beginnings of the anti-Turk movement.

As a result, the Iranian government has consistently and repeatedly split Southern Azerbaijan into several different regions and perused a policy of separating the peoples of the region from their native languages and culture. Iran's regimes have also altered the ethnic demography of the separated provinces of Azerbaijan by relocating groups of Fars into some of the Southern Azerbaijani provinces like Qazvin and Hamadan.



The continuance of the assimilation policy in Southern Azerbaijan by the regime in Tehran has led to a significant social and national identity crisis. The Iranian government has been running wide spread propaganda against any non-Fars national identity in Iran, so that the ethnic peoples will stop embracing their own traditional cultures and assimilate into the Persian centralised model. Southern Azerbaijani women face double discrimination, since they experience inequality in terms of their gender and also for belonging to a minority group.



## KEY QUESTIONS

### 1. What is the Southern Azerbaijanis relationship to the pro-democracy movement in Iran?

The Southern Azerbaijanis feels disappointed and sidelined by the pro-democracy movement, a movement widely praised for opposing the Iranian government's attempt to engineer the June 2009 elections. This sense of disillusionment emerged due to hostile treatment of minorities in post-election Iran, where the government blamed the groups for supporting the opposition and demanding their cultural and political rights. After the election campaign three Azerbaijanis were beaten to death in Tabriz.

Mir Hossein Mousavi, the leader of the opposition movement in Iran, is an Azerbaijani Turk. Thus, the authorities associate Azerbaijanis with the pro-democracy movement, and blame them for its activities. However, Mr Mousavi remained silent in 2006, when thousands of Azerbaijanis took to the streets to protest the political cartoon that pictured Azerbaijanis as cockroaches. Additionally, the followers of Mr Mousavi are mostly Persians and share the government's concern that minority rights would threaten Persian hegemony in Iran.



## KEY QUESTIONS



Protests in Tabriz in May 2006



## 2. How Many Southern Azerbaijani are being held as Political Prisoners?

Exact numbers are unknown. However, in June 2010 five further Southern Azerbaijanis' activists were arrested by the Iranian security forces. The crimes committed by these individuals, mainly students, were to work for a peaceful solution to the on-going violence and discrimination perpetrated towards their ethnic group.

A sports journalist Abdollah Sadoughi was also arrested in the city of Tabriz in January, after publishing a poster supporting the city's Traktor Sazi football team. He is held without charge at Tabriz prison, and is on hunger strike in protest at what he considers to be his baseless detention. He is a prisoner of conscience, held for peacefully expressing his views.





## CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

### Art & Dance

The Azerbaijanis have a rich and distinctive culture, a major part of which is decorative and applied art. This form of art is represented by a wide range of handicrafts, such as chasing, jewellery making, engraving metal, carving in wood, carpet-making, lace-making, pattern weaving and printing, knitting and embroidery.

Southern Azerbaijan's national and traditional dress consists of the Chokha and Papakhi. There are a number of Azerbaijani dances; these folk dances are ancient and very melodious. There are often performed at formal celebrations and the dancers wear festive clothes or Chokha cloaks. These dances have very fast rhythms, and demand skill from the dancer. The national clothes of Azerbaijan are well preserved within the national dances.

### Music

The music of Azerbaijan builds on folk traditions that reach back nearly 1,000 years. For centuries Azerbaijani music has evolved under the badge of monody, producing rhythmically diverse melodies.

Mugham and Ashik are some of the many musical traditions of Azerbaijan. Mugham usually consists of poetry with instrumental interludes. When performing Mugham, the singers attempt to transform their emotions into singing and music. In contrast to the Mugham traditions of Central Asian countries, Azerbaijani Mugham is more free-form and less rigid; it is often compared to improvised jazz. UNESCO proclaimed the Azerbaijani Mugham tradition a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on 7 November 2003.

Ashik is based on the mystical troubadour tradition, where a travelling bard sings and plays the saz, a traditional Turkic instrument. This tradition has its origin in the Shamanistic beliefs of the ancient Turkic peoples. Ashik songs are semi-improvised around common themes. Azerbaijan's Ashik art was included in the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the UNESCO on September 30, 2009.

### Industries and handicrafts

Industries include machine tools, vehicle factories, oil refinery, petrochemical complex, food processing, cement, textiles, electric equipment, and sugar milling. Oil and gas pipelines run through the region. Wool, carpets, and metal ware are also produced.

## LANGUAGE & RELIGION

In Iran Azerbaijani Turkish is spoken by 25-30% of the population (15-20 million people). It is a Turkic language that is similar to the language spoken by the Turkish and Iraqi Turkmen, and distinct from the Iranian state language, Farsi.



## CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

### Famous Southern Azerbaijanis:

**Babak Khorram:** Azerbaijani revolutionary leader

**Sattar Khan:** key figure in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and one of the great heroes of Azerbaijan

**Sayyed Ja'far Pishevari:** founder and chairman of democratic and socialist Azerbaijan People's Government (1945 - 46)

**Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari:** Azerbaijani Grand Ayatollah.



Graffiti supporting the Southern Azerbaijani language being taught in schools

## DATES OF INTEREST

Azerbaijani Turkish is widely spoken in everyday life, and in Southern Azerbaijan also used in mosques. However, very few Southern Azerbaijanis are able to read or write in their language, since the education is centralized and regulated from Teheran and there is no state education is performed in the language.

The Azerbaijanis are followers of Islam. The Muslim population is approximately 95% Shi'a and 5% Sunni; differences traditionally have not been sharply defined. Most Shias are adherents of the orthodox Ithna Ashari school of Shi'a Islam.

### Nature & Environment

Southern Azerbaijan is famous for its great natural beauty. There are 17 rivers and two lakes in the region. The northern, alpine region, which includes Lake Urmia, is mountainous, with deep valleys and fertile lowlands. Grains, fruits, cotton, rice, nuts, and tobacco are the staple crops grown the region. The temperatures in Southern Azerbaijan are also very variable. For example, in the north, winters are generally cold and snowy and summers are moderate. While in the plains the regions experience winters that are relatively cold and warm summers. The Orumieh province located in the north-west of Southern Azerbaijan, it is a mountainous area with a diverse and vast topography. A long mountain range is situated on the western part of the province which forms the international border with Iraq and Turkey. Melted snow that originates from the mountains creates many streams that flow through the various valleys making fertile lands.

### Dates of Interest

#### Genocide Day—17 December

The anniversary of the Southern Azerbaijanis genocide carried out by the Teheran regime during its occupation and the overthrowing of Azerbaijan peoples government in 1946. During this invasion, 350000 Southern Azerbaijani civilian were killed and thousands imprisoned. The event was discussed at the Nuremberg court in 1948, and finally 1950 it was legally recognized as genocide. The United States Supreme Court Associate Justice William O. Douglas in his famous book "Strange Lands and Friendly People" notes the event, he describes as vandalism done by Fars's Army in Azerbaijan reminds him of the Nazis soldiers' behaviour towards France. This violence is known as the Genocide in Southern Azerbaijan.

#### Book Day—17 December

During the aforementioned violence and the Pahlavi regime defeated Southern Azerbaijan all the books found to be published in the Azerbaijani language were burnt on 17 December 1946. The public use of Azerbaijani people's mother tongue has been prohibited since then. The UN has accorded the actions against the Southern Azerbaijanis between 15 December 1948 and 19 December 1966, as breaching the international covenant on civil and political rights and it has also been declared as cultural genocide. Southern Azerbaijani civil activists hold special ceremonies on "book day". They give Azerbaijani Turkish books to each other as gifts and some even donate Turkish books to retailers.

#### International Mother Language Day—21 February

Since Azerbaijani language has played an important role in awakening of Southern Azerbaijan people and also in profile raising of Azerbaijani identity, every year in February 21, Azerbaijani activists prepare gatherings and demonstrations against the governing regime in the face of large personal risks.



### **National Uprising Day—22 May**

In May 2006, a discriminatory cartoon was published in “Iran”, Iran`s best selling magazine analogizing Turks to beetles feeding from the Fars`s toilet. It followed to ask how to prevent the increase in the beetles population. And answered that they were mostly not able to talk in their own language, it suggest that, the Fars, should not even spare the time to defecate on the beetles. This clear political and media bullying to promote cultural assimilation is strong in Iran, however, causes great offence to the nationalities.

Thus, on the 22 May, hundreds of thousands of Southern Azerbaijanis demonstrate in Tabriz and other major cities, and even some of the smaller towns of Southern Azerbaijan. During the uprising hundreds of protesters were killed and injured, and thousand more imprisoned. However, it became a turning point in the Southern Azerbaijan national awakening movement's resistance against the religious theocracy which dominates in Iran. Since then, every year on “the national uprising day” Southern Azerbaijan people do demonstrations and have ceremonies in memory of those killed in 2006.



Southern Azerbaijani protestors in Brussels

#### **RELEVANT LINKS:**

##### **The Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement**

[www.GAMOH.info](http://www.GAMOH.info)

##### **South Azerbaijan News Agency**

[www.sananews.info](http://www.sananews.info)

##### **Tebriz TV**

[www.tebriztube.com](http://www.tebriztube.com)

##### **Araz Dergisi Magazine**

<http://arazdergisi.org/>





The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is a democratic, international membership organization. Its Members are indigenous peoples, occupied nations, minorities and independent states or territories who have joined together to protect their human and cultural rights, preserve their environments, and to find non-violent solutions to conflicts, which affect them.

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