

An Iranian Collapse Poses Security Risks for the Azerbaijan Republic

By
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Protests in Iran are continuing to escalate. What started as a protest by local traders against the fall in the value of the local currency, rising prices, economic mismanagement, and worsening economic conditions in the country has quickly [transformed](#) into a growing movement for political change.

[Reports](#) of a crackdown, clashes with the security forces, and rising casualties among protestors indicate that Iran's rulers are facing a serious threat to regime survival—the second such event since the 12 days of war with Israel in June 2025. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei branded the protesters “rioters” and “mercenaries,” who were instigated by the United States. Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump is openly backing the protests and has made it clear that if the Iranian authorities kill protestors, the United States will intervene militarily to protect them from Tehran's reprisals, with the latest reports saying that the U.S. President has even been [presented](#) with possible strike options.

At the same time, Reza Pahlavi, the eldest son of Iran's last shah, and his backers are trying to [hijack](#) the protests and brand them as a popular demand for his return to the country and restoration of an absolute monarchy. However, Reza Pahlavi has a very poor reputation among Iran's non-Persian ethnic minorities, who make up at least [50 percent](#) of the population of the country. Having faced discrimination for over a century from the former Pahlavi and the current Islamic Republic regimes, Iran's Azerbaijanis are mainly [sticking](#) to their national slogans such as “Freedom, Justice and National Government.”

Iran's Azerbaijanis Reject Both Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic

There are [estimated](#) to be 25-30 million Azerbaijani Turks in Iran, making them the second largest ethnic and linguistic group after the Persians. Historically, Azerbaijani Turks have played a [significant](#) role in Iran's politics, not only providing the successive Turkic dynasties that ruled what is today Iran for centuries, but also shaping political thought and spearheading political changes, such as the 1906-1911 Constitutionalist Revolution. Azerbaijanis are primarily concentrated in the northwestern regions of Iran, where they constitute the world's largest Azerbaijani community—bigger than the one in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

As part of the Pahlavi regime's forced homogenization policies to create a Persian-centric Iranian supra-national identity, Azerbaijanis suffered systematic erasure of their identity, such as a [ban](#) on the Azerbaijani Turkic language in print media, education and theatres. Reza Shah's policies of forced assimilation and the promotion of the Persian language, accompanied by the suppression of non-Persian languages, became a [defining](#) state initiative. This was part of the Pahlavi monarchy's promotion of centralism, modernism, and secularism to create an Aryan European nation-state.

Reza Shah's centralization policies resulted in the decline of Azerbaijan's significance within Iran, the reallocation of state resources, and changes in economic development trends. In his book [Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini](#), Rasmus

Christian Elling asserts that the diminishing status of Azerbaijan was accompanied by restrictions on Turkic elements of Azerbaijani culture and initiatives aimed at promoting Persian as the only language of Iran. New provinces were established to fragment Azerbaijani strongholds, important locations were renamed in Persian, and Persian names were promoted for Azerbaijani children.

The short-lived 1945-1946 Autonomous Azerbaijan People's Government, which demanded self-determination within Iran and recognition of Azerbaijani rights, was violently [suppressed](#) in December 1946 by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's army. More than 20,000 Azerbaijanis were killed. Even the Iranian army's records, which downplayed the numbers, reported that 2,500 individuals were executed, 8,000 were imprisoned, and 36,000 were expelled from the Azerbaijan province.

State-level discrimination against Azerbaijanis continues to this day, as the [provision](#) for education in their mother tongue for Iran's minorities, set out in Article 15 of the Constitution, remains on paper only. Azerbaijani rights activists are [subjected](#) to arbitrary arrests and punishments for trying to raise awareness of their identity and language and for [protesting](#) against the environmental disaster of Lake Urmia, which has completely dried up because of the Islamic Republic's mismanagement. The Islamic Republic's ethnic discrimination is still visible in cases of parents being denied the right to give their children Azerbaijani Turkic names. The Islamic Republic's use of Shia Islam to override ethnic differences and forge a homogenous Persian-centric Iranian identity is a continuation of the Pahlavi-era policies.

Security Threats for the Azerbaijan Republic

As the protests grow and U.S. military intervention looms, the Azerbaijan Republic needs to be prepared for possible security risks from the chaotic political environment in Iran. The Iranian regime has been an existential threat to Azerbaijan's security over the years with its [support](#) for the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijan, [export](#) of Khomeinist political Islam and instigation of radical Shia elements against the secular Azerbaijani state, [killing](#) of Azerbaijani citizens, creation of a terrorist proxy called [the Huseyniyyun brigade](#) under Soleimani's supervision, and [pouring](#) of narcotics into Azerbaijan on an almost daily basis.

In a scenario of regime collapse, Azerbaijan needs to formulate a proactive policy by engaging with Israel, the U.S., and Turkey to be ready to prevent any bloodshed against Iran's Azerbaijanis, considering that the PKK-linked [Kurdish PJAK militants](#), who are armed and have territorial claims on Iran's Azerbaijani cities such as Urmia. A second threat might emerge if the regime or an alternative central authority engages in a bloody crackdown against the Azerbaijani minority, which also needs to be prevented. Overall, in a chaotic environment, the primary target should be the prevention of armed attacks by the PJAK militants or a violent crackdown on Azerbaijanis.

A change in Iran from theocracy to secularism is also in Azerbaijan's national interests and might help to mend the ties between the countries. A strong Azerbaijani role in Iran's future as equals is essential to curb pan-Iranist inclinations towards imperialism and denying Azerbaijani identity. Further exasperating this is Russian imperialism, which has re-emerged following the Soviet Union's collapse and has

become deadly under Putin. A democratic and decentralized Iran is in the interests of the world.

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