



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Azerbaijan, with an area of 33,436 square miles (86,600 square kilometers), is a country slightly larger than the state of Maine. This figure includes the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan is situated south of Russia in a region known as the Caucasus, which includes Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. The province of Nakhchivan, which borders Iran, is separated from the main part of Azerbaijan by Armenia. Mountains, including the Caucasus and Talysh ranges and the Karabakh Plateau, dominate three sides of the country. Between the mountains are valleys and lowlands with rich flora and fauna. Azerbaijan has a subtropical zone known for its exotic plants, including pomegranate, pistachio, persimmon, fig, olive, and saffron. The amount of saffron grown is enough for commercial processing.

The Caspian Sea forms Azerbaijan's eastern border. Enormous oil and natural gas reserves beneath the sea hold great wealth potential. The Caspian is also rich in biological life; it holds 90 percent of the world's sturgeon. Their habitat is threatened by oil extraction, which began in 1870 and was poorly managed for decades, but efforts are being made to clean up the environment. Two major rivers, the Kür and the Araz, cross the republic. There are also a number of smaller rivers, lakes, and springs.

Azerbaijan has a mild climate with more than three hundred days of sunshine each year. Winters are short and cool, and summers are hot and sunny. Fall is pleasant, with warm days and cool nights. The average July temperature is

80°F (27°C) in the lowlands. The average January temperature is 34°F (1°C) in the lowlands and 24°F (-4°C) in the highlands.

### History

*Azerbaijan* originates from the ancient word *Atrapatakan*, which was mentioned by the Greek historian and geographer Strabo (ca. 64 BC–AD 23) as the name of a prosperous country on Azerbaijan's present territory. Caucasian Albania (unrelated to present-day Albania) was another ancient country to flourish in the region.

Beginning in the seventh century AD, Arabs dominated the area. They introduced Islam, which replaced Zoroastrianism and Christianity as the major religion. They also introduced Arabic. While Arabic did not replace existing languages, its script was used for the Azeri language until 1924.

Because of its geographical location at the juncture of Europe and Asia, the area was dominated by either Turkey or Iran (Persia) for much of its history. It was also ruled by the Mongols and the Russians. According to an 1828 treaty between Russia and Iran, northern Azerbaijan became part of Russia, while the south became part of Iran. The divided Azeris have since experienced different destinies. Present-day Iran has an Azeri population larger than that of Azerbaijan. During the Soviet era, it was difficult for relatives to visit one another across the border, but people are now able to maintain much closer ties.

Northern Azerbaijan declared itself independent in 1918 but was suppressed by Russia's Red Army in 1920 and made part of the Soviet Union. In 1922, it was joined with Georgia

and Armenia as the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic. In 1936, it became a Soviet Socialist Republic, remaining so through the 1980s.

A conflict with Armenia erupted in the late 1980s regarding Nagorno-Karabakh (“mountainous black garden”), an area that is part of Azerbaijan but is inhabited mostly by Armenians. It became the subject of fierce fighting as the Armenians sought rights of self-determination. A large refugee problem, battles over supply lines, and the Soviet Union's inability to stop the fighting caused great hardship in the country.

In 1994, a UN-brokered cease-fire went into effect. The war had displaced one million people and left Armenian troops with control of 20 percent of Azeri land. Frequent peace talks have been held since the cease-fire but have resulted in little progress. Political uncertainty and other factors will make any deal a fragile one.

As Soviet central authority weakened by 1990, Azerbaijan's Popular Front emerged in opposition to the local Communist Party. But it was Azeri Communist leaders who declared independence in 1991, a few months before the Soviet Union dissolved. Abulfaz Elchibey of the Popular Front won the country's first presidential elections, in 1992, but a year later he fled the capital after a rebel assault.

Heydar Aliyev, who had led Azerbaijan during the Soviet era, assumed control in June 1993. He was elected president in October. Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party secured a majority of seats in 1995 parliamentary elections, and Aliyev won reelection in 1998. He governed with nearly complete control and did not tolerate dissent. Although Aliyev was criticized for his government's record on human rights and media freedom, he was popular for saving Azerbaijan from economic and political collapse and for his efforts to develop Azerbaijan's potential as an oil exporter.

Aliyev appointed his son Ilham as prime minister in August 2003. Two weeks prior to October 2003 presidential elections, Heydar Aliyev resigned from the presidency due to ill health. With the backing of his father's New Azerbaijan Party, Ilham Aliyev went on to win the elections by a wide margin, though they were marred by massive protests and allegations of vote-rigging. Heydar Aliyev died in December 2003. Ilham Aliyev was elected to a second presidential term in 2008, and in 2009, a referendum allowed the removal of the two-term limit for president, opening up the possibility of a third term for Aliyev.

Despite the turmoil of its first years, Azerbaijan has enjoyed relative stability over the past decade. The nation's ability to maintain this course under President Ilham Aliyev depends largely on the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and the success of economic (particularly oil) development. Azerbaijan has benefited from a major pipeline, opened in 2006, that carries Caspian Sea oil from Baku to the port of Ceyhan, on Turkey's Mediterranean coast.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Azerbaijan's population of 8.3 million is growing by about 0.8

percent annually. Roughly half of the population lives in urban areas. More than two million people live in the capital of Baku, a cosmopolitan city with many grand buildings and mosques. Agencies are trying to address severe pollution problems to help restore some of Baku's beauty.

Azeris comprise 91 percent of the population. They descend from the early Caucasian Albanians and migrating Turks. The Seljuks, who came in the 11th century, constituted the largest wave of Turks. Their numbers account for the region's adoption of the Turkish language and culture. The remainder of Azerbaijan's population includes Russian, Tatar, Talysh, Georgian, Ukrainian, Armenian, Lezghin, Kurd, and other minorities. Most Armenians within Azerbaijan live in Nagorno-Karabakh. Some minority groups, such as the Talysh, settled in the region long ago. Others were attracted to the rich oil fields of Baku in the late 1800s.

### Language

Azeri belongs to the Oghuz group of Turkish languages and is similar to modern Turkish. In the 1920s, the Arabic script was changed to a Latin script, which was changed to a Cyrillic script in 1939. The Azeri alphabet has now returned to the Latin script. During the Soviet era, Russian and Azeri were official languages. Azeri is now the dominant language. Still, many Azeris can speak Russian, and many publications are in Russian.

### Religion

Traditionally, Azerbaijan has been an Islamic nation, but religious devotion weakened during the Soviet era. Two generations grew up with little knowledge of Islam, so Azerbaijan is more secular than other nations in the region. Today, Muslims (93 percent of the population) may practice their religion freely, praying at home and attending mosque. Jews, as well as Orthodox Russian and Armenian Christians, may also practice their religion.

Most Azeris are Shi'i Muslims. Like all Muslims, they accept the *Qur'an* as the word of *Allah* (God) revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Observant Muslims go to mosque for prayers on Friday, the Muslim day of worship. However, this is not a typical practice for most Azeris.

### General Attitudes

The attitude of Azeris as a nation has changed over the years. While conditioned after World War II to view themselves as Soviets, Azeris still felt separate from Russians. The nation experienced a revival of native literature and history beginning in the 1950s and 1960s that has provided the basis for Azeri feelings in today's political climate. Desire for national prosperity, love for the motherland, and pride in the native language and culture are strong and being further fostered.

Unfortunately, an initial optimism about Azerbaijan's future was dampened by the long war with Armenia. Though fighting has largely ended, the dispute continues to cast a shadow on the nation's mood, economic welfare, and ability to develop and progress. Still, stability and successful oil exploitation give many people hope for a brighter future.

## Personal Appearance

Azeri men and women generally wear Western-style clothing. However, rural women sometimes wear traditional clothing, which includes a long pleated skirt, a long-sleeved blouse, and a *charshab*—a long piece of cloth wrapped loosely around the skirt. Young women cover their heads with light kerchiefs or an *orpack*, a small piece of cloth that wraps around the head and shoulders. Older men usually wear the traditional *papah*, a high, round lambskin hat.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

When greeting each other, men shake hands and say *Salam* (Peace). Women also say *Salam*, but they do not shake hands. Female friends or relatives might hug and kiss. If people are acquainted, they follow a greeting with *Nejasiniz?* (How are you?). One often asks about the health of the other's family. *Sagh ol* (Be well) is used at parting.

Azeris of the same age call each other by given (first) names. It is common to use *hanum* (“Miss” or “Mrs.”) or *hala* (aunt) after a woman's given name, and *ami* or *dayi* (uncle) after a man's given name. *Bey* (Mr.) is also used after a man's given name at social gatherings or work. The use of *Bey* was banned in 1920 when Russia invaded, but it is again a preferred way to address men.

### Gestures

Azeris remove shoes before entering mosques. When an older person or woman enters a room, those present stand to greet him or her. It is impolite to cross one's legs, smoke, or chew gum in the presence of elders. Speaking loudly to one's colleagues is impolite.

One uses the right hand in handshakes and other interactions; using the left hand is rude, unless the right hand is busy. One may point at objects but not people with the index finger; shaking it while it is vertical is used to reprimand or warn someone. Azeris also use the index finger to attract a listener's attention. The “thumbs up” gesture means “fine” or “okay.” Forming a circle by rounding the finger to touch the thumb tip is obscene.

### Visiting

Azeris consider hospitality to be a vital part of society. Friends and family visit without prior notice. Guests are often invited to share a meal or to drink tea. In midafternoon, Azeris enjoy tea with other refreshments, including pastries, fruit preserves (not jam), fruit, and candy. Guests will also be offered tea and some sweets at other times of the day. Tea is served in *armudi stakan* (small, pear-shaped glasses). Rural inhabitants customarily invite guests to have tea in the backyard during the spring and summer. People also visit in open-air teahouses. Men often like to drink tea in a *chaihana* (a building or tent used as a gathering place). Visitors, particularly those who have adopted Russian customs, often take gifts to their hosts, such as flowers, candy, or pastries. However, a wrapped present is not opened in the presence of the giver.

## Eating

People usually eat three meals a day. For breakfast, tea and bread with butter, cheese, or honey is common. Dinner, eaten in the afternoon, includes soup, followed by meat, *plov* (a rice and meat dish), potatoes, or macaroni. People commonly eat these same foods for supper, though soup is typically reserved only for dinner. They eat vegetables and fresh herbs at both the afternoon and evening meals.

Azeris hold the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. In most traditional homes, the cook prepares the plates in the kitchen for each person. In other homes, serving dishes are placed on the table. Still, guests do not serve themselves; they are served by others. Tea is served at the end of the meal.

In cities, women and men eat together at large social gatherings, but they eat separately in rural areas. In the past, eating at restaurants was generally reserved for special occasions, but eating out has become increasingly popular. The host pays the entire bill and tip.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Azeris value family over the individual. Family needs come first. Men are protective of women in the family. An Azeri would commonly swear by his mother (as opposed to deity) because she is the most valuable person on earth. Parents feel a lifelong commitment to provide their children with financial support, even after marriage.

Rural Azeris tend to live in extended families. The father is the undisputed head of the family. Married sons and their families live with their parents until financially independent. All members of the family are loyal to and dependent on the group. This tradition is less evident in cities, where nuclear families are somewhat more common. Rural parents usually build a house for their married sons, and urban parents might buy them apartments. Unmarried adults generally live with their parents, regardless of age. Adult children are expected to care for their elderly parents. Relatives remain close, visiting each other often and gathering for special occasions. Grandparents help care for grandchildren when necessary.

### Housing

Most of Azerbaijan's urban population lives in blocks of apartments built during the Soviet period. A typical apartment has a living area, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a balcony. Many Soviet-era buildings were built cheaply and quickly and are poorly maintained today. For example, elevators are often broken. A construction boom has taken place in Baku and other cities, as wealthy Azeris prefer to buy apartments in areas with newly constructed high-rise buildings. Wealthy and middle-class urbanites often own summer houses in the mountains or on the Caspian Sea.

In rural areas, most people live in freestanding brick houses, often with two storeys. Tiles cover the roof. In many cases, the home was built by the owner's parents or grandparents. Most rural Azeris have a separate garage on the property and maintain a small garden next to the house.

### Dating and Marriage

Dating in the Western sense is not common in rural parts of Azerbaijan, but it is normal for many urban couples. If urban men and women go out, their relationship is expected to lead to marriage. Premarital sex is strongly discouraged. Urban Azeris choose their spouses, but rural Azeris are often expected to follow their parents' wishes regarding a mate.

To become engaged, a man sends a formal proposal to the woman's parents through an older relative. Weddings are celebrated elaborately. A folk music group usually accompanies a groom and his relatives to the bride's house in a procession of several cars decorated with flowers and ribbons. The party moves inside the bride's home, where the couple's parents and relatives dance. A special wedding melody is played as a signal for the bride to say good-bye to her parents and join the groom. The bride's parents then give the couple their blessings. The actual wedding ceremony usually takes place at night. The bride is accompanied by friends and relatives who are carrying candles and a decorated mirror.

### Life Cycle

The birth of a child is cause for a major celebration with food and music. Relatives and friends buy presents and gather in the family's home. An urban family may throw a party at a restaurant. Male infants are circumcised, an event marked by another celebration. The father is given first priority to name the baby. A child is often named after a grandparent or another respected person, though urban parents may choose a name popular at the time.

When a family member dies, Azeris often observe a 40-day mourning period. Every Thursday during this time, families gather to share food, pray for the soul of the deceased, and reminisce on his or her life. The body of the deceased is typically buried in a nearby cemetery.

### Diet

Azeris are proud of their cuisine, which they refer to as the "French cuisine of the East." The area's abundance of vegetables, fruits, and fragrant herbs and spices has inspired Azeri cooks to create distinctive national dishes. Cooks often use cilantro, dill, mint, saffron, ginger, garlic, cinnamon, pepper, and other flavors in their dishes. The most popular dish, *plov*, is made of rice that is steamed for a long time and topped by a variety of foods. These toppings might include chicken, lamb, dried fruit, or milk. During the Soviet era, potatoes and cabbage joined, and in some cases replaced, rice as staples.

Men usually prepare kebabs—grilled pieces of meat (lamb, chicken, or sturgeon) on a stick—by cooking them over fire or charcoals. *Piti* is a lamb broth with potatoes and peas, cooked in clay pots in the oven. *Dovga* (yogurt, rice, and herbs) is often served as an addition to the main meal at celebrations. It is believed to improve digestion. Dinner ends with sherbet or tea, *mürebbe* (preserves), and pastries. The preserves are made from quince, figs, apricots, peaches, cherries, grapes, plums, strawberries, raspberries, walnuts, or mulberries.

### Recreation

The most popular sports are wrestling and soccer. Azeri wrestlers and other athletes have enjoyed success in international competition. For middle- and upper-class families, vacations of three to four weeks are spent in summer houses that dot the Caspian seashore. Going to theaters or movies is common in the cities, and visiting is a favorite pastime for everyone.

### The Arts

Azerbaijan has an ancient and strong literary tradition, and today it is common during social gatherings to recite poems of native poets. *Ashugs* (poet-singers) pass on ancient literature through oral recitations and song, often accompanied by string instruments such as the *tar* and *kobuz*. *Mugam*, another folk music derived from classical poetry, is based on improvisation. Modern musicians have developed a popular musical style by combining jazz and blues with traditional Azeri music. Dance, folk and modern, is an important part of social life. In rural areas, members of larger families often perform as folk groups. Contemporary Azeri operas and classical compositions have received international recognition.

Azerbaijan is also known for its textiles. Carpet weaving is one of the most respected and popular means of artistic expression. Poetic, traditional, historic, and scenic themes are depicted in brightly colored rugs.

### Holidays

Azerbaijan celebrates a number of national holidays, beginning with International New Year on 1 January. The Day of Commemoration (20 Jan.) honors victims of the 1990 Soviet invasion of Baku. Other important dates include International Women's Day (8 Mar.), Veterans' Day (9 May), Republic Day (28 May, marking the 1918 declaration of independence), National Salvation Day (15 June, celebrating the day President Heydar Aliyev arrived in Baku and began his quest for power), National Independence Day (18 Oct., marking freedom from the Soviet Union in 1991), Constitution Independence Day (12 Nov.), National Revival Day (17 Nov.), and Worldwide Solidarity of Azerbaijanis Day (31 Dec.).

A favorite holiday is *Novruz Bairami*, the traditional New Year celebration that occurs at the beginning of spring. For days before *Novruz Bairami*, women gather in families to bake pastries. Then on the evening before the holiday, families come together to eat *plov* and have tea with pastries. Young people make fires in front of their homes and jump over them; they dance and play games. National melodies are played throughout the country.

Azeris also recognize various Muslim holidays, the most important being *Ramazan Bairami*, the feast to end the month of *Ramadan*. During that month, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, eating only in the evenings. Forty days later, *Kurban Bairami*, the holiday of sacrifice, commemorates the pilgrimage season and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son.

## SOCIETY

### Government

Azerbaijan's president (currently Ilham Aliyev) is chief of state. Presidential elections are held every five years. The president chooses the prime minister (currently Artur Rasizade), who is head of government. Azerbaijan's constitution allows for a 125-seat national assembly, known as the *Milli Majlis*. Members of the *Milli Majlis* serve five-year terms. The most prominent political party is the president's New Azerbaijan Party. Other parties exist but have little power. All citizens may vote at age 18.

### Economy

The economy is based on the production of oil and natural gas. With its huge Caspian oil reserves, Azerbaijan has great potential for economic development. Construction, exploration, and production contracts with foreign oil firms benefit Azerbaijan in the form of jobs, foreign capital, and high revenues. The chemical industry and the production of oil-extraction equipment are important sectors of the economy that are being modernized through international investment. Azerbaijan's planned transition to a market economy has not been smooth, but small businesses are beginning to emerge as international investment increases. In agriculture, the most important cash crops are cotton and tobacco. Azerbaijan also exports fruits (especially grapes), vegetables, nuts, and saffron. Production is not very efficient, but reform programs are underway to improve output and raise revenues. Azerbaijan's currency is the *manat* (AZM).

### Transportation and Communications

Buses, a subway, trolleys, taxis, and suburban trains provide public transportation in Baku. People travel between cities mainly by train and bus. Most roads are paved, but urban roads are in better condition. Azerbaijan has an airline that flies internationally.

A number of daily national newspapers and some regional and local papers are in circulation. Most urban homes have telephones but most rural dwellings do not. The nation's communications system is in need of modernization. Cellular phones are becoming increasingly common.

### Education

The government spends more of its budget on education than on anything else except defense. It provides free education through the university level. Still, challenges exist. New textbooks are needed to replace Soviet era textbooks, which were written in Cyrillic and taught Marxist philosophy. Due to a lack of facilities, schools operate in two shifts: morning and afternoon. Classes are held Monday through Saturday. Schools are not divided into levels. Children graduate from the same school they began attending at age six or seven. Eight years of attendance are mandatory. The final three are optional. Those who do not want to complete the full eleven years may attend trade schools to learn a profession. A number of colleges and universities are available; most are in Baku.

### Health

Medical care is provided free, but facilities are not well equipped. Rural areas especially lack clinics and equipment. Drugs and vaccines are sometimes in short supply. This has led to an increase of measles and diphtheria. Childhood immunization has become a government priority. Severe pollution around Baku causes numerous health hazards. Overall, people's health is declining rather than improving.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

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### POPULATION & AREA

Population	8,303,512 (rank=91)
Area, sq. mi.	33,436 (rank=112)
Area, sq. km.	86,600

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	67 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	62 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$10,400
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 98% (female)
Infant mortality rate	53 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	63 (male); 72 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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