Azerbaijan is the easternmost republic in the Caucasus with a large portion of coastline on the Caspian Sea. Since ancient times, Azerbaijan has been famous for its oil and natural gas. Zoroastrians, for whom fire held sacred value, would build temples around natural gas vents in the highlands. In the early 20th century, Azerbaijan provided nearly half of the world’s oil supply and continues to this day to be a major exporter of oil. The capital city of Baku is located on a narrow peninsula that extends into the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijan has been a subject of a large number of imperial powers over the years, Persian, Ottoman, Russian and Soviet, most recently. Azerbaijan possesses an exclave between Armenia and Iran, called Nakhchivan.

RELIGION
Azerbaijan is controlled by a secular state, however the population is reportedly 83% adherents of Shia Islam. This makes Azerbaijan the country with the second highest proportion of Shiite followers, after Iran. Gallup polls from 2010 collected data that indicates that religion does not play a significant role in the lives of at least 49% of Azerbaijanis. Azerbaijan is a country where Shia and Sunni differences have not historically caused much tension. Current conflicts in the Middle East have raised concerns about the radicalization of these religious differences in Azerbaijan as well.

ETHNICITY
Azerbaijanis have maintained a distinct ethnic identity for centuries, derived in part from their Turkic language and territorial past mixed with Shiite Islam and proximity to Persian heritage in Iran. Add to that the two centuries spent under Russian and Soviet bureaucracy and communist social experimentation and one gets a good picture of the major contributors to Azerbaijani identity. The Caucasus Mountains are known for incredible linguistic variation and Azerbaijan is host to a number of small linguistic minorities like the Lezgians, Tats, and Tsakhurs. The Nagorno-Karabakh region, which claims autonomy from Azerbaijan is almost exclusively Armenian. Nearly 16% of Iran is made up of ethnic Azerbaijani.

FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS
Family relations and culture in Azerbaijan should be understood in light of the Soviet rule of the 20th century, which provided for equal voting rights for women, the abolition of the veil and polygamy, and equal access to education between the genders. Urban areas see more Western style social organization, while rural regions remain more adherent to traditional views on family structure. Azerbaijani holidays include a mixture of Soviet era holidays, such as May Day (May 1) and Victory Day (May 9), Persian new year (Novruz Bayrami), and Islamic holidays such as the month of Ramadan.
CONTEMPORARY AZERBAIJAN

The era of independence in Azerbaijan was overshadowed by ethnic conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Between 1988 and 1994 Azerbaijan was in effect at war with an enclave of mountain dwelling Armenians. A cease fire, brokered in 1994 also led to the signing of a $7.4 billion contract for oil extraction with a Western Consortium.

Azerbaijan is an oil-rich country and fits the typology as such, suffering in many ways from the “curse of oil,” which results in a corrupt political leadership, extreme wealth disparity, and a neglect of elements of the economy and social institutional development that are not conducive to shipping lots of oil out of the country. Some view Azerbaijan as one of the nations whose leaders are trending towards authoritarianism and an increase in presidential power. A 2009 referendum eliminated presidential term limits, and in 2016, the presidential term was extended and the required age reduced.

A major reason for Western investment in the 1990s was to help bypass pipelines that lead through Russia, giving Azerbaijan greater control over their own exports and helping Western oil companies take over the market—most of the oil from Azerbaijan goes to Italy and Germany in crude form.

Azerbaijan’s human rights record is weak and the environmental effects of oil extraction are considered devastating. Alarm has been raised over the fragile ecosystem of the Caspian Sea, as many fear that the crucial body of water is going the way of the Aral Sea, which has basically disappeared since harmful exploitation policies were introduced in the Soviet period.

AZERBAIJANIS IN THE USA

The first confirmed immigrant from Azerbaijan to the United States came on the RMS Mauretania in 1912 and was named Merza Ali Akbar. According to estimates, the Azerbaijan-born population of the U.S. is nearly 25,000, half of which reside in New York. Other states with significant populations include, New Jersey, Texas, California, and Minnesota. Census data does not include Azerbaijanis who immigrated from other countries, such as Turkey or Iran, so the numbers are probably higher.

NAMES

Azerbaijani names bear many similarities to Turkic and Iranian names, often times fusing elements of both traditions in a single name, like Eldar. Eli is Turkic for "country/land" and dar is Persian for "possessor".

FAMOUS AZERBAIJANIS

Lotfi A. Zadeh is a pioneering computer engineer and theorist who proposed the concept of “fuzzy logic” and is professor emeritus at Berkeley. He was born in Baku and is of Iranian background. One of Iran’s most famous celebrities is Goo- goosh, a popstar diva, who resides in Los Angeles. Ali Javan, physicist and co-inventor of the gas laser in 1960 was born to Azerbaijani parents in Iran.

AZERBAIJANI WORDS

Hi ............................................ salam
Bye .............................................. sağol
Good morning ................................ sabahınız xeyir
Yes .................................................. bəli
No ..................................................... heç bir
Please/You’re welcome ..................... lütfən
Thank you ............................ taşəkkür edirim
How are you? .............................. necəsiz?
I do not understand ……..man başa düşmürəm
Do you understand?…siz anlamaq edirsiniz?
What is your name .......... sanın adın nədir?
My name is .............................. mənim adım ..
Where are you from? ............. haralısan?

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