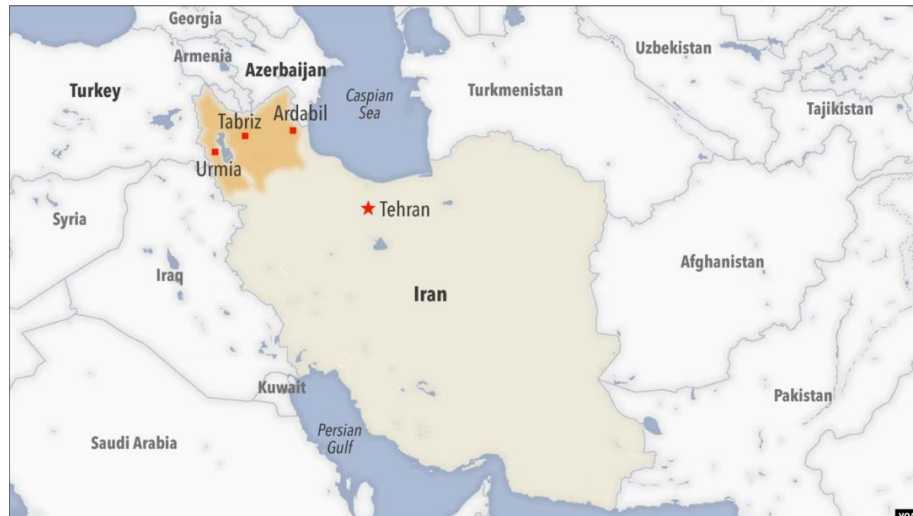




**America-Eurasia Center
International Security Program**

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**Educational Human Rights
Violations Faced by Azerbaijanis in Iran**



Map of the ethnic Azerbaijani areas in Iran

Photo Credit: Voice of America

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Educational Human Rights Violations Faced by Azerbaijanis in Iran



Youth ethnic Azerbaijani school girl in Iran's repressive education. "Where is education in my motherland?"
Photo Credit: Ahwaz Monitor, AZOH, Aghvam bashariyyat.

Introduction

According to estimates, the Southern Azerbaijanis of Iran make up an estimated 16% of Iran's total population of 89 million. Despite being the largest ethnic minority in Iran, ethnic Azerbaijanis have faced routine discrimination facilitated by Iranian authorities. Restrictions to the practice and acceptance of Azerbaijani language and culture have influenced the rights which Azerbaijanis have over their children's education. As a result, the international community has increasingly recognized the struggles of the educational rights of the ethnic Azerbaijani minority in Iran as a significant human rights issue.

There are several ways in which the language, culture, and legacy of the people of Southern Azerbaijan are being suppressed nowadays. Azerbaijani is not allowed in Iranian schools, despite the constitution's protection of minority groups' freedom to speak in their own tongue. Consequently, no educational institution, not even the University of Tabriz, offers instruction in

Azerbaijani language, but instead, seven other languages are taught there. The ban on native language instruction has presented numerous challenges, as Azerbaijanis are forced to study and communicate strictly in Farsi, limiting their ability to express themselves in their mother tongue. Efforts for native language education, including advocacy for language rights and community initiatives, have aimed to address this issue. However, the government's official stance on native language education and the implementation of language policies have hindered progress in this area. These restrictions have also had negative effects on educational outcomes, including academic performance and dropout rates. The role of language in identity formation is crucial, as language serves as a marker of ethnic identity and has psychological and social implications. In fact, the roots of this official policy extend back further into the history of Iran. Reza Shah Pahlavi created a policy called Persianization which was an official policy to assimilate ethnic minorities in Iran to speak Persian or Farsi and ban their native languages. The Azerbaijani language was banned for use on the premises of schools, in theaters, for religious ceremonies and in print. Reza Shah carried out a forceful de-Turkification campaign in Iran.

Community initiatives have also played a role in promoting native language education, with local organizations establishing schools and programs to teach Azerbaijani language. Furthermore, international support has been crucial in raising awareness about the restrictions faced by Azerbaijanis and providing resources for native language education. Despite the Iranian government's restriction of native language education ongoing community efforts reflect the determination of the Azerbaijani community to maintain their language and cultural heritage within the Iranian education system. Efforts for native language education among Azerbaijanis in Iran have been driven by advocacy for language rights, community initiatives, and international support. Activists have been advocating for the right to instruction in their native language, highlighting the importance of preserving their cultural identity. Community initiatives have also played a role in promoting native language education, with local organizations establishing schools and programs to teach the Azerbaijani language. Furthermore, international support has been crucial in raising awareness about the restrictions faced by Azerbaijanis and providing resources for native language education.

The disregard for Azerbaijani language and culture in Iran is not limited to education; several place and street names with Azerbaijani legacies have been converted to Farsi. In general, there is a widespread perception that the cultural and historical legacy of Azerbaijan is being disregarded. For instance, the Ark Castle in Tabriz was physically destroyed to make room for

other construction projects. The Iranian constitution guarantees the right to education in Azerbaijani language and culture, which Azerbaijanis have called on authorities to respect. In reality, however, teaching Azerbaijani language in schools is forbidden, and there isn't a single language department dedicated to Azerbaijani at Iranian universities. In addition, Farsi is the only language aired on official radio and television, which further disregards the constitutionally guaranteed rights of minority languages to be spoken outside of the private sector. Southern Azerbaijanis should have the ability to communicate in their own tongue with local government representatives and the legal system.

The role of language in identity formation, particularly as a marker of ethnic identity, has further compounded the psychological and social implications for the Azerbaijani community in Iran. When compared to other ethnic minorities in Iran, it becomes apparent that education rights vary, highlighting the importance of international perspectives on language rights. International standards, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, play a vital role in advocating for minority language rights and can inform efforts to address the restrictions faced by Azerbaijanis in Iran. Unfortunately, there are also flagrant cases of violations of the law in the educational sphere, which require an immediate response from the international community. Since November 2022, a disturbing rise in cases of poisoning among schoolgirls in regions densely populated by Azerbaijanis was observed. According to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman, dated August 24, 2023, “more than 13,000 students, the majority of whom are girls, have reportedly received medical care caused by the suspected poisoning.” These violations can only be described as chemical and biological terrorism, as these innocent schoolgirls were deliberately exposed to harmful substances.

Unfortunately, Iranian law enforcement authorities have failed to take effective measures against these terror acts, which have persisted for seven months. The lack of accountability and failure to bring the responsible individuals to justice raises serious doubts about the Iranian state authorities' commitment to addressing these incidents. Ultimately, linguistic and cultural discrimination in education leads to illiteracy among Azerbaijanis, especially women. This systematic approach undermines the cultural and linguistic identity of the Azerbaijani community, ultimately leading to assimilation into the dominant Iranian culture.

In the recent years, various resistance and advocacy efforts have emerged in response to the violation of educational rights of Azerbaijanis in Iran regarding their right to study in Azerbaijani language. These efforts aim to address the discriminatory practices and promote equal educational

opportunities for the Azerbaijani community. Grassroots movements and activism play a significant role in raising awareness about the issue and mobilizing the community to demand their linguistic rights. Legal challenges and litigation have also been pursued to challenge the discriminatory policies and seek legal redress. International support and solidarity have been crucial in advocating for the educational rights of Azerbaijanis in Iran and successful in putting pressure on the Iranian government to address this issue. Unfortunately, language educational rights violations extend to a number of other ethnic minorities in Iran and although it is difficult to obtain images on the Azerbaijani victims, Zara Mohammadi who was teaching Kurdish to her students below, was arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison.



Azerbaijani school girls hold signs in Iran – “There should be schools in our mother tongue.”
Photo Credit: Ahwaz Monitor, AZOH, Aghvam bashariyyat



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