
Iranian Azerbaijanis Move North

By Kemal Ali in Baku (CRS No. 335, 13-Apr-06)
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Growing numbers are moving from Iran to Azerbaijan, especially since the upsurge in tension between Washington and Tehran.

I would never have thought they were from Iran. Said Suleimani, 42, and his family members looked like regular residents of Baku. Women in the Azerbaijani capital do occasionally wear black headscarves, and there was nothing unusual about the denim gear worn by Said and his two sons. Only their accent betrayed that they were southerners, possibly from Iran.

I met them in Baku's Zavokzalny district beyond the railway station, which used to be an Armenian neighbourhood before the war over Nagorny Karabakh, and which then became a haven for Azerbaijani refugees.

Now there are reports that the area has become a haven for a new kind of migrant. Semyon Kastrulin, a journalist who lives in this neighbourhood, says Zavokzalny is now home to large numbers of ethnic Azerbaijanis from Iran.

Said and his bashful and silent wife agreed to talk to me. They come from around Tabriz, the capital of Iran's East Azerbaijan Province.

They said they had come to Baku for about three weeks, to do some sightseeing and shop for cheap goods.

According to Said, their visit had nothing to do with fears of an American attack on Iran, in the dispute over its development of nuclear technology. He said they had long been planning to come. But he conceded that they might stay a bit longer, waiting for things to quieten down back home.

I met another Iranian, Nazim Muhammadi, 60, in Cafe Tebriz close to the Iranian embassy. Apparently, this is now the local Iranian community's favourite place to hang out and discuss the latest political and sports news.

Muhammadi and his two sons came to Baku at the end of March. They are staying with his wife's relatives, who emigrated from Iran during the Soviet era, fleeing political persecution in the wake of the Red Army's withdrawal from northern Iran at the end of the Second World War.

"We are from Tehran, where we own a beautiful two-story house with a courtyard," said Muhammadi. "We have a family car repair business. My brother and his family are staying there now, looking after the house and the business."

Nazim is playing with the idea of starting a car repair centre in Baku, but he is not sure he can compete with the locals. "We are not going to stay here forever; we'll see how it goes. If we're lucky, we'll probably go to Europe. If not, we'll go back home," he said.

The Iranian Azerbaijani migrants are hard to spot in Baku - still less count - partly because they blend in with the locals, but also

because they keep a low profile and come and go from Iran.

IWPR contacted Majid Faizullai, press spokesman for the Iranian embassy in Baku, for a comment on newspaper reports that Azerbaijan was being "overrun" by refugees from Iran. The Express newspaper, for example, had reported that the flow of migrants to Baku had intensified to such an extent that housing and land prices had gone up.

Faizullai appeared annoyed and said he could only repeat what his ambassador, Afshar Sulaimani, had already said - that the embassy had no information about this matter.

Word-of-mouth reports however suggest a sharp rise in migration from Iran. Political analyst Rovshan Novruzoglu told IWPR he knows of more than 150 Iranian families who have fled to Azerbaijan in fear of an American attack on Iran.

But Iranian immigrants are nothing new for Baku. Ethnic Azerbaijanis came across from Iran in the Soviet period, fleeing persecution by the Shah's regime before it was overthrown in 1979.

Novruzoglu also claimed that Iranian security agents were in the country disguised as migrants, creating a threat to Azerbaijan's national security.

Why have Iranian nationals chosen Azerbaijan as a safe haven? Iran's ethnic Azerbaijanis speak the same language spoken north of the border and often have relatives in Azerbaijan. However, Persian-speaking Iranians also come to Azerbaijan.

It is easy and inexpensive for Iranian nationals to obtain an Azerbaijani visa. A three-month renewable visa costs them 40 US dollars. Under a 2005 bilateral agreement - yet to be ratified by the Azerbaijani parliament - both Iranian and Azerbaijani nationals living within 40 kilometres of the frontier will be entitled to cross without a visa.

Another Iranian, Ahmed, who had arrived in Baku a few weeks before, said he believed the Azerbaijani authorities were stalling on the visa-free border agreement for fear of being overrun by Islamic fundamentalists from Iran.

Azerbaijan's National Committee on Refugees and Forced Migrants reported that in 2005 the number of Iranians applying for refugee status was ten times the 2004 figure, rising from 14 to 147. In 2005, the applications of 40 Iranian families were approved, according to the committee's press spokesman Sanan Huseinov.

Vugar Abdusalimov, press spokesman for the Azerbaijani office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, told IWPR the numbers had not really changed despite the talk of an increased refugee flow prompted by the threat of conflict.

Baku residents are wary of their more affluent cousins from Iran, believing that they bump up property prices in a city already bursting with other migrants and refugees from the Karabakh conflict.

According to Baku's Birzha newspaper, the average price of a three-room apartment in a good Baku neighbourhood has gone up from 22,000 or 23,000 US dollars to 35,000-40,000 dollars in just 12 months. Property prices are also reported to be on the rise in Nakhichevan, the Azerbaijani exclave that borders Iran.

Westernised Baku is a strong contrast to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Kastrulin said he noticed that Iranian men enjoy the freedom to drink alcohol in restaurants - something they are denied at home, while the women are frequently seen on the street without the obligatory headscarf.

If the tension between Iran and the United States continues to rise, it seems inevitable that many more Iranian nationals will want to make Baku their new home.

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