

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE AZERBAIJANI DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Constitution of the Azerbaijani Diaspora in the USA dates back to 20th century. Immigration of Azerbaijanis to the USA has occurred in four phases. First phase took place in 1920 after disintegration of People's Republic of Azerbaijan, through the immigration of wealthy segment, dissident politicians and scientists. Second phase dates back to years of 1940-1950 and it is associated with Azerbaijani soldiers who were taken captured after the Second World War, choosing the USA as permanent place of settlement. Third phase consists of immigration of Azerbaijanis in Iran to the USA in years of 1950-1960. Last phase has arisen from Azerbaijanis who were opposed to the regime in Iran and population flow from Azerbaijan to the USA in the period of conflict starting between Armenia and Azerbaijan in between 1970-1990 years.

At the present time, there are more than 700.000 Azerbaijanis living in the USA. Generally, Azerbaijani community has been living in states of California, New Jersey, New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania and District of Columbia. Most Azerbaijanis reside in Southern California, especially in Los Angeles. In addition to this, it is possible to encounter Azerbaijanis in New Arc, Washington and Chicago dispersedly.

Majority of Azerbaijanis in the USA is working at banking sector, factories and trade areas. Minority of them is working at politics and local government areas, especially universities. Majority of Azerbaijanis in the USA consists of Southern Azerbaijanis (Iran Azerbaijan Part). Despite there are many institutions related to Azerbaijan in the USA, they do not have a significant influence. These associations which do not collaborate with each other, mainly carry a symbolic value. However, "Azerbaijan Society of America" (Amerika Azerbaycan Derneği) operated in New Arc city of New Jersey state in the USA, is aiming to support Azerbaijan in certain politic issues. "Azerbaijan Society of America" (ASA) which concerns about presentation of Azerbaijan rather than financial purposes, has been working to narrate the USA government corporations and publicity accurately about historical, politic, economic and cultural issues related to Azerbaijan.

In addition to this, 1st World Azerbaijanis Congress was held in June 1996 in Los Angeles. Azerbaijani representatives living in the USA, Canada and Europe have participated in this forum. It was declared that the aim of this congress was to serve for standing up for rights of Azerbaijanis all over the world. With this study, it is intended to examine and evaluate the activities of the Azerbaijani Diaspora in the United States of America.

Key Words: Diaspora, International Migration, Azerbaijani Society, USA.

Introduction

"Diaspora" is an ancient Greek word, literally means "getting scattered". The history of formation of this word coincides with the period of occupation and shifting that was started by Greeks very early of BC. During the military marches Greek army soldiers settled in different occupied countries and made it a part of the permanent residents. The word "Diaspora" derived namely from their language (İbrahimli, 2001: 475). Regardless of activity scope, engagement and religious faith settlement of people of any ethos outside the native land and public activity leads to formation of Diaspora. Compatriots living compactly as community in abroad voluntarily or forcibly due to certain socio-political, socio-economic and other reasons by migrating, preserving the national- cultural origin and developing it, establishing regular links with historical motherland, as well considering self as Azerbaijani from language, religion, moral-cultural values form Azerbaijani Diaspora. Approximately 50 million Azerbaijanis live in 70 countries in the world, including the Republic of Azerbaijan. Our compatriots living in historical areas and turned to be citizens of foreign country as a result of any border changes in course of certain public-politic events, without any fact of migration – ethnic Azerbaijanis living in trans-border areas of Iran, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Russian

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Federation are not considered as diaspora. In 1991, restoration of the tradition of independent statehood of the Republic of Azerbaijan and subsequently socio-political events in the country have left their impact in the history of emigration of people (Azimli, 2003: 9).

In December 16, 1991, the Chairman of the Supreme Assembly of the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan, Heydar Aliyev, taking into account the importance of creating the unity of world Azerbaijanis announced December 31 as the Solidarity Day of World Azerbaijanis (Let's note that the basis of the Solidarity Day of World Azerbaijanis was laid at the end of December 1989 when borders (Soviet-Iranian border) were destroyed). Later by the decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 31st December was confirmed as the Day of Solidarity of World Azerbaijanis. Thus, dear to all of Azerbaijanis the 31st December is marked as holiday of the Solidarity Day of the World Azerbaijanis (Mehdiyev, 2000: 57).

Since 1995, migration outside the country changed its character, and got purely economic nature, and like in other developing countries it got civil forms, which fell within the norms of international law. National cultural and political solidarity of Azerbaijanis scattered in various countries by protecting their identity is compatible with the interests of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan and one of its strategic goals. Strengthening the traditions of independence and statehood, strengthening our position at the international level, delivery of the actual voice of the people affected by the Armenian aggression to world community, getting a fair solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem within the framework of international legal norms and principles makes it necessary to achieve uniting of organizations engaged in Diaspora activities in foreign countries around a single center. Acting of world Azerbaijan as monolithic force in the county of their residence has a considerable influence on protection of their national and civil rights. In this respect, purposeful work, especially carried out since 1993, gave its concrete results in a number of leading world states (İbrahimli, 2001: 476).

On May 23, 2001 by decree of President of the Azerbaijan Republic Heydar Aliyev I Congress of World Azerbaijanis held in Nov 9-10 of 2001 in Baku city. The Congress taking into view the opinion of representatives of representatives from various countries of the world, many offers, as well as social- political, economic, cultural and etc positions of Azerbaijanis in the world, interest based on Azerbaijanihood platform, the historically formed need in moral unity had adopted the decision. It was decided to hold the congress of world Azerbaijanis once in three years (İbrahimli, 2001: 477).

In 5 July 2002, President of the Azerbaijan Republic Heydar Aliyev had signed a decree "On establishment of the State Committee for Work with Azerbaijanis living abroad". And with Decree No. 54 of President İlham Aliyev of Azerbaijan Republic dated November 19, 2008 the State Committee for Work with Diaspora was established on the basis of the State Committee for Work with Azerbaijanis Living Abroad. As early as in 1997, the organization coordinating Azerbaijani Diaspora of the world - World Azerbaijanis Congress was created.

In recent years, active participation of Azerbaijani communities in the socio-political and cultural life of their countries is the most important directions at the establishment of Diaspora communities. Being represented in legislative, executive power, local self-government bodies of some countries, the opening of Sunday schools in compact areas of their living and functioning of 27 newspapers, 10 magazines, 3 radio and 1 TV at various associations and communities, organized various events for the purpose of informing the world community about the truth on Azerbaijan is the indicator of increasing of the socio-political activity of representatives of the Azerbaijani Diaspora.

One of the most important Azerbaijani diasporic groups is found in the United States. Today, around 700 thousand Azerbaijanis live in the US. In general, the Azerbaijani community resides in the states of California, New Jersey, New York, Michigan and Pennsylvania, and the federal region of Columbia (AHAF, 2013: 3). South California, especially Los Angeles, is the largest home to Azerbaijanis. In addition, it is possible to find Azerbaijanis in a scattered form in New Arc, Washington and Chicago. Most of the Azerbaijanis in the US work in banking, factories and commerce. They constitute a very minor group in politics and local administration, especially in universities (İbrahimli, 2001: 478).

Azerbaijan Associations

The USA was among the first states that recognized the independent Republic of Azerbaijan. The then President George Bush announced on TV in December 25, 1991 that the US Government officially recognized the independence of Azerbaijan (Rasizade, 1992). The White House decided to establish diplomatic relations with Baku in February 23, 1992, and to open an embassy in Baku in March 15, 1992, which would be opened two days later. Following the opening of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Washington in April 1993, regular diplomatic relations between the two countries took a new shape. The organization of Azerbaijani associations in the US gained pace as Azerbaijan declared its independence. The following Azerbaijani associations are currently operating in the United States:

1. National Association of Azerbaijani Americans;
2. Azerbaijan Cultural Society of Northern California;
3. American-Azerbaijani Friendship Society;
4. Azerbaijan Cultural Association in South California;
5. Azerbaijan Cultural Association in Washington;
6. Azerbaijan Society of America in New Arc;
7. Azerbaijan Society of America (ASA);
8. Azerbaijani-American Council;
9. Azerbaijani Center of Culture and Commerce

Despite the fact that there are many organizations related to Azerbaijan in the US, these organizations are not of any quality but a symbolic value. However, the Azerbaijan Society of America operating in New Arc, New Jersey makes efforts to support Azerbaijan in various political issues. The Azerbaijan Society of America (ASA), which is concerned more with the promotion of Azerbaijan than economic activities, tries to accurately convey the historical, political, economic and cultural matters concerning Azerbaijan to American governmental institutions as well as to the public (ASA, 2013: 3).

The efforts of bringing together Azerbaijanis living in the US were initiated during the term of Heydar Aliyev. With his support, the first Congress of World Azerbaijanis was organized in June 1996 in Los Angeles. Representatives of Azerbaijanis living in the US, Canada and Europe participated in the forum. The purpose of the congress was declared to be serving to defend the rights of Azerbaijanis all over the world. (UAC, 2013: 2). Encouraged by this meeting, Azerbaijani associations began to carry out more important works. Representatives of Azerbaijan held simultaneous meetings in April 18, 1998 in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and other states to protest the sanctions of the Congress on Azerbaijan and the efforts of pro-Armenian Congressman F. Pallone against Azerbaijan. This meeting was organized with the support of ASA, Azerbaijani-Turkish Mosque and representatives of Azerbaijan at UN. In February 8, 2000, the ASA President Tomiris Azeri appealed via mail to Governor G. Bush, Senator J. McCayne, Vice-President A. Gore and Senator W. Bredly, requesting their efforts to abolish the "Supplementary Item numbered 907" in order to support the Azerbaijani-American relations (Pravda, 2001: 11).

The Azerbaijani-American Council in Washington operates in the form of a center that deals with academic works in the US related to the Caucasus and the Central Asia. This association, moreover, aims to enlarge and strengthen the mutual economic, cultural and educational ties. To this end, the Council publishes a journal called "Caspian Crossroads", which includes articles written by renowned politicians and strategists (UAC, 2013: 3).

With the purpose of uniting the Azerbaijanis in the US, the "Azerbaijani Center of Commerce and Culture" was inaugurated in September 2000 with the participation of Heydar Aliyev. In the Center, Azerbaijanis organize exhibitions and other events related to Azerbaijan and celebrate holidays together. Under the coordination of the Center, the role played by Azerbaijani students in the US is also strengthened. By sending letters to senators and congressmen and via the internet, they advocate the interests of Azerbaijan.

The US-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce

The Us-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (USACC) has played a significant role in the diaspora activities of Azerbaijanis in the US. It was established in Washington in 1995 with the aim of improving the mutual commercial, cultural and educational relations. R. Veziri and R. Matske are the heads of the Chamber, which started to fully operate in April 1996 (Orucov, 1996: 7-8).

The main objective of the Chamber, which is an independent NGO, is to attract foreign capital to Azerbaijan, which has rich oil and natural gas resources, to contribute to Azerbaijan's transition to the free market economy and its integration to global markets, and to support Azerbaijan by helping it in terms of commerce and capital. In Baku, with the same objectives, American Business Council (ABC) is operating. The Council, which supports the economic and commercial cooperation between the US and Azerbaijan, also sponsors publications on cultural and commercial fields (USACC, 2013: 5). It cooperates with various organizations in the US to increase humanitarian aid provided to refugees in Azerbaijan. The Council has advisors such as James Baker, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, Richard Cheney. The management of the Council is composed of 12 people including the former Deputy Secretary of Defence, Richard Armitage; Deputy Secretary of Energy, William Wait and chancellors of big oil companies. The Council, which was established by the enterprise of oil companies, is currently cooperating with more than 55 oil companies. The symposium entitled "Azerbaijan: Transition from Communism to Democracy" was held in Washington in February 18, 1997 with the support of the Council in order to improve mutual relations. In the symposium in which 450 people participated, it was concluded that the relations between the US and Azerbaijan should be improved in various industries and that this would serve the interests of both countries. Ilham Aliyev, who delivered a speech in the symposium as the Vice-President of Socar, mentioned the "Contract of the Century" and

thanked American companies that had taken part with highest shares. He underlined that Azerbaijan was ready for cooperation with the US in all sectors and elaborated on the importance of achieving this target. Through this symposium, the Council publicized itself in the US. By inviting the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia to Washington in March 26, 1997, the Council organized an important seminar on problems in the Caucasus. The main thesis defended in the seminar, to which Brzezinski and various senators attended, was that the failure to resolve problems in the Caucasus would hinder the economic development of the region and therefore the parties should come to terms. The Council effectively continues its operations in the US as one of the most important defenders of Azerbaijani interests. We could say that the Council is “oil lobbying” in the US for the benefit of Azerbaijan. The predomination of the “oil lobby”, which developed as a result of the sensitivity of the US in the Caspian oil resources, over the Armenian lobby that had been very powerful in the US provoked anxiety in Armenia that the initiative that Armenia had been holding on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh is slipping by.

Activities of the Armenian Lobby against Azerbaijan

We can say that the Armenian lobby in the United States works with two main objectives: The first is occupying a significant political and economic position in the US and disseminating the Armenian culture; whereas the second is disrupting the relations of the US with countries with which Armenia has problems (Turkey and Azerbaijan). The Armenian lobby tries to create a negative image in the global public, particularly in the US, about the history and economy of Azerbaijan as well as the hydrocarbon riches of the Caspian region (Baghirov, H. 2000: 57).

The most important advantage of the Armenian lobby, which seems to be highly organized and effective, is that it is openly supported by very influential people in the Congress. One of them is Robert Dole, who has served as the eye and the ear for Armenians in the Congress (Gayer G.A. 1995). The activities of the Armenian lobby sometimes clashes with the political interests of Washington. Despite the national interests of the US requires a balance policy in the Caucasus, negative decisions such as the “Supplementary Item numbered 907” can sometimes pass in the Congress due to the influence of this lobby. In addition, it is seen that the Armenian lobby is also influential over the Congress on issues like providing humanitarian, technical and development supports to Armenia. Other than these, among the prioritized issues are imposing sanctions on Turkey and Azerbaijan. The Armenian lobby also tries to gain the support of members of the Congress on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and have them visit Armenia. It is seen that these lobbying efforts are successful.

The improved relations between the US and Azerbaijan after 1996 provoked the reaction of the Armenian lobby. In 1996, the “Wilson Amendment” related to the decision numbered 907 that put an obstacle in front of the US-Azerbaijan relations was accepted. Although the decision moderated with this amendment, all efforts to abolish it remained inconclusive. Then, initially an unstable and ambiguous relationship emerged between the two countries. In contrast with the demand of Azerbaijan to have closer cooperation, the US failed to remain objective in its decisions due to the influences of domestic ethnic groups. As Smith suggested, “due the American Armenian lobby, the US policies on the Caucasus remained very harsh and short-sighted for a long time” (İbrahimli, 2001: 485).

Conclusion

The Azerbaijani diaspora is not as organized as its Armenian counterpart for several reasons: First, it has a shorter history. Second, Azerbaijanis who departed from the North and the South work separately from each other. There have been serious problems with Southern Azerbaijanis in terms of national consciousness. Besides, since the Azerbaijani society does not make efforts for common national interests, the Azerbaijani diaspora in the US remained ineffective and weak. The rich Caspian hydrocarbon resources provide significant opportunities for (oil) lobbying in the US for the interests of Azerbaijan. If this potential is exploited, the Azerbaijani lobby in the US can become stronger than the Armenian one. This requires serious efforts.

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