

Azerbaijan – Iran Cultural Relations: Dynamics and Potentials

Masiagha Mohammadi*

The article surveys the historical and current state of cultural relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the neighboring Islamic Republic of Iran, and discusses the main directions and potential opportunities of further cultural cooperation. The centuries-old cultural affinity and coexistence have been key to the expansion of bilateral relations; the common cultural heritage led to a long-standing relationship between the two countries - even during the Soviet era. After Azerbaijan regained its independence, Azerbaijan-Iran cultural relations have begun to further expand and deepen. During the early years of Azerbaijan's independence, Iran favored the religious dimension of cultural relations, which later caused some problems in the relationship. But over time, the signing of numerous documents on cultural cooperation between the two countries, and the establishment of an appropriate legal base enabled the relationship to cover various spheres in this direction. From 2003, cinema, music, theater and literature have played an important role in cultural relations between the two countries; in addition, significant steps have been taken to boost ties in science and education. In this regard, Iranian culture days in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani cultural days in Iran are being used as a successful format for mutually expanding cultural ties. The declaration of 2017 as the Year of Islamic Solidarity in Azerbaijan has had a positive impact on Azerbaijani-Iranian cultural relations, and revealed the potential for greater cooperation. At this juncture, the paper outlines specific proposals for the realization of this potential and further expansion of cultural relations.

Keywords: Iran, Azerbaijan, cultural relations, religion, Islam



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Introduction

Cultural ties between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Islamic Republic of Iran are deeply significant, rooted in long-standing historical ties and humanitarian linkages. Centuries of political, public, religious, scientific and literary connections between the two countries have led to the formation of a common cultural heritage. This common heritage serves as a reliable foundation for cooperation not only in the cultural sphere, but also across various sectors.

When talking about the inevitability of the expansion of interstate relations, leaders of both countries refer primarily to cultural linkages.

For instance, during his official visit to Azerbaijan in November 2015, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said the following during his speech: “Peoples of Iran and Azerbaijan are one spirit in two bodies, who have common culture, beliefs, religion, faith

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and history. Hence, there is a foundation necessary to develop relations between two nations, and we should leverage this **strong foundation** for the benefit of two nations”¹

In his official visit to Tehran in March of this year, Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, highlighted achievements made within the framework of the bilateral relationship: “Friendship and fraternity between Iran and Azerbaijan grow successfully and quickly. Our ties are based on ancient history, culture and common religion. Based on this **strong foundation**, we managed to build great cooperation”²

It is worth noting that the “strong foundation” (common cultural heritage) cited by both presidents shaped the relationship even during the Soviet period, when Azerbaijan had no opportunity to pursue an independent foreign policy.

1 President.ir, (2014) روابط دو ملت ایران و آذربایجان شایسته تحرک بیشتری است (President.ir, (2014) *The relations between the two nations of Iran and Azerbaijan deserve more mobility*). Available at <http://www.president.ir/fa/8241> (Accessed: 15 November 2017).

2 President.az, (2017). *Azərbaycan və İran prezidentlərinin mətbuat üçün bəyanatları*, (*Press statements of Azerbaijani and Iranian presidents*), Available at <http://www.president.az/articles/23031> (Accessed: 15 November 2017).

Some facts about cultural relations during the Soviet period

Scientific and cultural representatives of Azerbaijan played pivotal role in Soviet-Iranian cultural relations. Throughout between 1940s and 1960s particularly remarkable developments were noticed from this perspective. Azerbaijani intellectuals and representatives of science, literature and the arts were actively involved in the “Iran Society for Cultural relations with USSR”, established in 1943.

In May 1945, a delegation headed by Said Nafisi and Malek o-Sho’ara Bahar, both well-known representatives of Iranian culture, visited Baku to learn more about Azerbaijan’s scientific and cultural achievements.³

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Azerbaijani-Iranian cultural and scientific-literary ties gained renewed impetus in the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. During that period, tours by Rashid Behbudov, a well-known Azerbaijani singer were particularly successful; Iranian audience welcomed Azerbaijani music, and Behbudov included several Iranian songs into his repertoire.

Furthermore, renowned Azerbaijani Orientalist scholar Rustam Aliyev made several scientific trips to Iran. In Tehran, he published scholarly texts on major works of Iranian literature – “Shahnameh” (“Book of King”) of Ferdowsi and “Bustan” of Saadi; these publications were critically acclaimed by the scientific-literary community of Iran. The friendship between Rustam Aliyev and the famous poet Mahammad Huseyn Shahriyar helped to establish literary ties between Shahriyar and Azerbaijani poets (Mammad Rahim, Suleyman Rustam, Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh, etc.), as well as the wider popularization of Shahriyar in Azerbaijan.

It is also worth noting the opening of the Iranian Consulate General in Baku in 1968, further evidence of Azerbaijan’s status in Soviet-Iranian relationships.

Thus, despite the “Iron Curtain”, Azerbaijan’s cultural and scientific ties with Iran remained strong, continuing to grow despite the various obstacles in their path. Following its declaration of independence, Azerbaijan started to expand and deepen these

³ Vəkilov, C.M. (1991) *Azərbaycan Respublikası və İran: 40-cı illər (mədəni əlaqələr)*. Bakı, 1991, s.62-63 (Vəkilov, J. M. (1991) *The Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran: the 1940s (cultural relations)*. Bakı, 1991, pp.62-63)

“Many Azerbaijanis live in Iran. They are citizens of Iran, however, Azerbaijanis are citizens of independent Azerbaijan. The more our ties are developed, the more they are like to benefit our countries. These ties are established by people without us. Neither government, nor a state is involved in this process. People establish these ties themselves as there are centuries of ties between two nations”

ties. This, first of all, was a process close to the hearts and souls of people living on both sides of the river of Araz. Heydar Aliyev, national leader of the Azerbaijani people, referred to that process: “Many Azerbaijanis live in Iran. They are citizens of Iran, however, Azerbaijanis are citizens of independent Azerbaijan. The more our ties are developed, the more they are like to benefit our countries. These ties are established by people without us. Neither government, nor a state is involved in this process. People establish these ties themselves as there are centuries of ties between two nations”.⁴

Given the strong wishes to expand humanitarian and cultural ties on the part both populations, Armenian aggression and the social-economic troubles faced by Azerbaijan during the early years of independence did not impede this process, as illustrated by a series of developments during 1991-1993.

Cultural relations in the early years of Azerbaijani independence

In March 1991, a group of Iranian politicians and businessmen, representatives of Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, as well as representatives of scientific and religious organizations visited Baku. They also attended Nowruz ceremonies.

In March and December 1991, an Azerbaijani book fair was held in Tehran, and an Iranian Book Fair in Baku. Some three thousand books were shown at the exhibitions. In May of the same year, book publishers of Azerbaijan attended the third and fourth book fairs in Tehran, resulting in an agreement on exchanges of book fairs, publication and trade of books. The agreement envisaged opening book stores in Baku, Nakhchivan, Tehran and Tabriz cities.

At the international festival of puppetry in September 1993, Azerbaijan was represented by the Abdulla Shaiq puppet theatre.⁵

4 Pakayin, M. (2014) *Heydər Əliyev və İranla daimi dostluğa əsaslanan baxış*. Bakı, 2014, s.86 (Pakaein, M. (2014) *Heydar Aliyev and his vision based on persistent friendship with Iran*. Baku, 2014, p.86).

5 Qasimov, M. və Abdullayev, M. (1999) *Beynəlxalq münasibətlər tarixi (XX əsr. II hissə)*. Bakı, 1999, s.103-104 (Gasimov, M. and Abdullayev, M. *The history of international relations (XX century, II volume)*. Baku, 1999, pp.103-104).

This period also witnessed the rapid growth of scientific relations. In 1991, Azerbaijani scholars attended congresses to mark the anniversaries of Nizami Ganjavi and Khaju Kermani in Iran. In April 1993, an international symposium dedicated to Shahriyar was held in Baku with the participation of Iranian scholars.

Following June 1993, when Heydar Aliyev came to power in Azerbaijan for the second time, relationships in several spheres were consolidated with the establishment of a legal framework. Documents signed during the official visit of Akbar Hashimi Rafsanjani, then president of Iran, were of particular importance. Among the 14 documents signed during the visit, the following agreements were related to cultural and scientific spheres:

Agreement on scientific cooperation between the Ministry of Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Azerbaijan; Agreement on cooperation in science, culture, economy between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan (on Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic); Joint Protocol of Understanding on cultural, scientific and education spheres between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Islamic Republic of Iran; Memorandum on Cooperation in the fields of science, education and research between the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of High Education and Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁶

The development of this normative-legal framework made cultural relations, as well as cooperation in areas such as science and education more systematic.

In 1993, Iranian Cultural Center was opened in Baku. Soon after, with the support of this Center, two new publications - "Nizami Ganjavi" magazine and "Shahriyar" newspaper - were launched in Baku, aimed at contributing to the development of bilateral cultural and scientific-literary ties. In addition, the Cultural Center organizes various events together with Azerbaijan's scientific and cultural organizations, education facilities, and other institutions involved in research and education of Persian language and literature. The Center also enabled professionals from the science, literature and arts sectors of Azerbaijan to participate in relevant events organized in Iran.

⁶ Ibid, p.106

At the same time, the bookstore of the Iranian “Al-Huda” international publishing house was opened in the center of Baku. This publishing house was also involved in the translation, publication and sale of religious literature, which saw high demand among Azerbaijani readers.

Religious dimension in cultural relations

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tool in regard to the Azerbaijani public, then recently liberated from the atheist Soviet regime. The Culture and Islamic Relations Organization (*Sazman-e Farhang va Ertebatat-e Eslami*) played a significant role in cultural relations with Azerbaijan during that period. In 1995, this organization sent 30 clerics to Azerbaijan to promote religious beliefs.⁷ Iran has built institutions dealing with religious education in Azerbaijan, while also offering opportunities for Azerbaijani youth to study religious schools and universities of Iran.

Azerbaijani government demonstrated an empathic and tolerant approach to its Muslim population, who were discovering religious knowledge and Islamic values following the collapse of the communist regime. This tolerance was also extended to the Iranian clerics who were involved in this process. This position was clearly reflected in the statement of Heydar Aliyev in the meeting with delegation headed by Yahya Mohammadzadeh, governor of Eastern Azerbaijani Ostan of the Islamic Republic of Iran: “When I was in Nakhichevan, I invited clerics from Iran to visit Nakhichevan. At that time, we did not have enough religious professionals. Azerbaijan is a secular country and the religion is separated from state here. However, we did a lot in recent years to support the religion to reach the necessary status in the country”.⁸

7 إليه کولای، جمهوری اسلامی ایران و ژئوپلیتیک قفقاز جنوبی. – فصلنامه ژئوپلیتیک. سال ششم، شماره اول، بهار 96 ص. 96-98 (Koolae, E. (2010) ‘Islamic Republic of Iran and South Caucasus geopolitics’, *Geopolitics Quarterly*, Year 6, Number 1, Spring 2010, p.96)

8 Lib.aliyev-heritage.org, (1999) *Azərbaycan Respublikasının Prezidenti Heydər Əliyevin İran İslam Respublikasının Şərqi Azərbaycan əyalətinin ostandarı Yəhya Məhəmmədzadənin başçılıq etdiyi nümayəndə heyətini qəbul edərkən söhbətindən - Prezident sarayı*, 2 avqust 1999-cu il (From the conversation of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev while receiving a delegation led by the governor of the East Azerbaijan province of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Yahya Mohammedzadeh - Presidential palace, August 2, 1999), Available at <http://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/az/6209921.html> (Accessed on 11 November 2017).

This position clearly reflected the desire of Azerbaijani state to raise awareness and religious beliefs of population while also openly demonstrating the “red line” of secularism enshrined in the Constitution. The fact that this subtle and sensitive point has not been considered by certain groups during in certain periods did not just affect cultural relations; it also had a negative impact on the bilateral relationship as a whole. Along with the speeches on cultural expansion of the West in Azerbaijan, the aforementioned groups also voiced their views on imposition of the so-called restrictions on religious people in the country.

In February 2016, on the eve of his official visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev, referred to these allegations in an interview to Radio-Television Broadcasting Company of Iran: “Historically, Azerbaijan has never been home to any religious and national discrimination, and representatives of different ethnicities, confessions, religious movements coexisted under peaceful conditions with mutual understanding. The Constitution and legislation provide full guarantee for freedom of worship and religious belief, and no obstacles are created for free activity of religious people in their daily life. In the Soviet period, the 17 mosques operated in Azerbaijan. During early years of independence, number of mosques saw significant increase. At present, there are more than two thousand mosques in Baku and other residential areas. The biggest mosque of the country – Heydar Mosque was built at the expense of public budget to serve the religious people”.⁹

Following this statement, President of Azerbaijan announced 2017 as the Year of Islamic Solidarity. The Islamic Solidarity Games hosted by Baku during this year clearly demonstrated Azerbaijan’s clear position on this matter. It is noteworthy that Iranian athletes actively participated in the Islamic Solidarity Games, and various cultural programs were organized by Iranian Cultural Center alongside the Games in Baku.¹⁰

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9 President.az, (2016) İlham Əliyev İran İslam Respublikasının Radio-Televiziya Şirkətinə müsahibə verib (Interview of İlham Aliyev to the Radio-TV Broadcasting Company of the Islamic Republic of Iran). Available at <http://www.president.az/articles/17843> (Accessed on 10 November 2017).

10 Baku.icro.ir, (2017) Mədəniyyət Mərkəzinin sədri İRNA ilə müsahibəsində demişdir: İslam həmrəylik oyunları qədim İran mədəniyyətini tanımaq üçün gözəl fürsətdir (In an interview with İRNA, the chairman of the Cultural Center said: Islamic solidarity games are a great opportunity to introduce ancient Iranian culture) Available at <http://baku.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=225&pageid=30159&newsview=677536> (Accessed on 8 November 2017).

New stage in cultural relations

The Agreement on “Principles of friendship and cooperation relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Islamic Republic of Iran” signed during the visit of Heydar Aliyev to Iran in May 2002 had significant implications for the Azerbaijani-Iranian cultural relations.

The Agreement on “Principles of friendship and cooperation relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Islamic Republic of Iran” signed during the visit of Heydar Aliyev to Iran in May 2002 had significant implications for the Azerbaijani-Iranian cultural relations. The following documents were signed during this visit: “Memorandum on cooperation in the field of education and research between the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Ministry of Science, Researches and Technologies of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, “Memorandum on cultural cooperation between the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance of the Islamic Republic of Iran”. The legal framework of cultural cooperation between Azerbaijan and Iran created plenty of opportunities to find and introduce new forms and methods of cultural rapprochement between two countries.¹¹

This visit heralded a new stage in cultural relations across different sectors, as shown in research on this topic.¹²

The Isfahan cultural days in Azerbaijan in 2007 were key in presenting the nature of the new cultural relationship. As part of the cultural days, fine art exhibition, music programs and cinema week related to Isfahan were organized in Baku.

During this period, cinema, music, theatre and literature played an important role in shaping cultural relations. In addition, significant steps were also taken towards the expansion of cooperation in the fields of science and education.

There is a great interest in well-known Iranian movies. Iranian film weeks held regularly in Baku were popular with Azerbaijani audience. Many movies produced by Iran have been dubbed and shown in Azerbaijani cinemas and on television channels.

Azerbaijani arts professionals attended the traditional Fajr

11 Manafova, M. (2008) *Azərbaycanın Şərqi Asiya ölkələri ilə mədəni əlaqələri*. (Kitab) Bakı, s.10 (Manafova, M (2008) *The cultural relations of Azerbaijan with Eastern Asia countries*. (Book) Bakı, p.10)

12 Məmmədzadə, G (2004) *İran-Azərbaycan mədəni əlaqələrinin inkişafı*. (Kitab) Bakı; Bakıxanov, T. (2006) *Azərbaycan və İran musiqiçilərinin qarşılıqlı əlaqələri*. (Kitab) Bakı, 2006 (Mammadzadeh, G. (2004) *Development of Iran-Azerbaijan cultural relations*. (Book) Bakı; Bakikhanov, T. (2006) *Relations of Azerbaijani and Iranian musicians*. (Book) Bakı)

festival organized in Iran. For instance, Tofig Bakikhanov, Azerbaijani composer attended this festival several times. Parts of the “Voices from the Orient”, which the composer wrote on the basis of Iranian folk music, were played during the XX Fajr International Film Festival in 2005. Tofig Bakikhanov’s Sonata № 6, on a subject related to Iran, has been included in the curricula of both Azerbaijani and Iran music schools.¹³

In addition, “Toplan”, a children’s play by Azerbaijani writer Saida Hagverdiyeva, was staged in the puppet theatre “Mika” in Tabriz. In recent years, significant work has been done to promote Azerbaijani writers in Iran, and classic and modern Iranian literature in Azerbaijan. For example, poems by the famous modern Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri were translated by author of this piece and published with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Azerbaijan.¹⁴

Iranian universities and scientific centers expanded cooperation with their Azerbaijani counterparts, such as the National Academy of Sciences, Baku State University, Khazar University, etc. During the visit by the rector of Tehran University, a Memorandum of Understanding on inter-university cooperation, exchange of professors and students, joint conferences and seminars was signed between Baku State University and Tehran University.¹⁵

In general, cultural relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have developed significantly in recent years. Visits to Baku by Abuzar Ibrahimy Turkman, chairman of Iranian Organization for Culture and Islamic Relations to Baku in 2014 and 2016, and his meetings with Azerbaijani officials, played a key role in this. Iran’s Organization for Culture and Islamic Relations and State Committee for Work with Religious Institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan signed a protocol on religious cooperation. According to the

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13 Ələsgərova, K. (2016) *Tofig Bakixanovun İran mövzusunda 6 sayılı sonatası* (Alasgerova, K. (2016) *Tofig Bakikhanov’s Iranian sonata #6*), Available at <http://konservatoriya.az/?p=1581> (Accessed 1 November 2017)

14 Sepehri, S. (2010) *Suyun ayaq səsi (şeyrlər və poema)*. Fars dilindən tərcümə edilən və ön sözlün müəllifi Məsiəğa Məhəmmədi. Bakı (Sepehri, S. (2010) *The footsteps of water (poems)*. Translator from Persian and author of foreword is Masiagha Mahammadi. Baku)

15 bsu.edu.az, (2014) *BDU Tehran Universiteti ilə Analışma Memorandumu imzalayıb* (BSU has signed Memorandum of Understanding with Tehran University) Available at http://bsu.edu.az/az/news/bdu_tehran_universiteti_il_analima_memorandumu_imzalayib (Accessed 1 January 2017)

Iranian official Abuzar Ibrahimi Turkman, this protocol would enable “further development of religious cooperation based on principles of mutual respect”.¹⁶

At present, one of the successful formats for expanding cultural ties is the organization of Azerbaijani culture days in Iran and vice versa. The last such event took place in July 2017, when Azerbaijani culture days were held in Iran. During his visit to Iran, Abulfas Garayev, Minister of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Azerbaijan said that: “Culture days help people to know each other while also allowing for building contacts between them ... Today we need to increase cultural ties between Iran and Azerbaijan to the level that will be helpful for future generations”.¹⁷ The minister added that in 2018, events similar to Iranian culture days could be held not only in Baku, but also in Ganja, Gabala and other cities.

Positive impact of the “Year of Islamic Solidarity”

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The declaration of 2017 as a Year of Islamic Solidarity in Azerbaijan by President Aliyev was welcomed in Iran¹⁸ as well as in other Muslim countries, and many Iranian officials appreciated this initiative. Indeed, at the beginning of the same year, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran Ibrahim Rahimpour referred to it as a “wise decision” in a meeting with Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov on official visit to Baku.¹⁹ On 7 August, Speaker

16 Scwra.gov.az, (2014) *Azərbaycan ilə İran arasında dini sahədə əməkdaşlıq haqqında protokol hazırlanır*, Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dini Qurumlarla İş üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi (Azerbaijan and Iran are preparing a protocol on cooperation in the religious sphere, State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan). Available at <http://scwra.gov.az/vnews/439> (Accessed on 12 November 2017).

17 Mct.gov.az, (2017) *İranda Azərbaycan mədəniyyəti günləri başlayıb* (Days of Azerbaijani culture started in Iran). Available at <http://mct.gov.az/az/region-xeberleri/randa-azərbaycan-medeniyyeti-gunleri-baslayib> (Accessed on 12 November 2017).

18 Irna.ir, (2017) *سال ۷۱۰۲ میلادی سال همبستگی اسلامی در جمهوری آذربایجان اعلام شد* (Irna.ir, (2017) *The 2017 declared as Year of Islamic Solidarity in Azerbaijan Republic*). Available at <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82382048> (Accessed 10 October 2017)

19 Rəhimpur, İ. (2017) *2017-ci ilin Azərbaycanda “İslam Həmrəyliyi İli” elan edilməsi müdrik qərardır* (Rahimpour, I. (2017) *Declaring 2017 as the Year of Islamic Solidarity in Azerbaijan is a wise decision*). Available at https://azertag.com/xeber/Ibrahim_Rehimpur_2017_ci_ilin_Azərbaycanda_Islam_Hemreylilyi_Ili_elan_edilmesi_mudrik_qerardir-1030042 (Accessed 10 October 2017).

of the Parliament of Iran Ali Larijani described this declaration it as an “important venture”.²⁰ During a meeting in Tehran with Chairman of the Caucasus Muslim Department SheikhuIslam Haji Allahshukur Pashazade, and his accompanying delegation, the Speaker also declared that the shared cultural experiences of the two countries create opportunities for joint activities and initiatives in ensuring the unity of Muslims.²¹

A variety of different events were organized by state bodies and public organizations as part of “Islamic Solidarity Year”, both nationally and internationally. By mid-September, more than 150 domestic and international events had been organized just by the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan.²² Representatives of Iran also participated in many of these events. For instance, an international conference was held in Baku on “Islamic Solidarity: Harmony of Religious and Cultural Diversity”, organized by the Caucasus Muslim Department, State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Baku International Multiculturalism Center, International Turkish Culture and Heritage Foundation. The chairman of the Iranian Cultural Center and the representative of the Supreme Leader of Iran attended this high-level event.²³

In this regard, the most interesting example of bilateral cooperation between was a conference entitled “Islamic Solidarity in the context of Iran-Azerbaijan friendship” held in Tehran on 6 August. The conference was co-organized by the Caucasus Muslim Department, State

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20 Laricani, Ə. (2017) *Prezident İlham Əliyevin 2017-ci ili Azərbaycanda “İslam Həmrəyliyi İli” elan etməsi mühüm addımdır* (Larijani, A. (2017) President Ilham Aliyev’s declaration of 2017 as the Year of Islamic Solidarity in Azerbaijan is an important step). Available at https://azertag.az/xeber/Ali_Laricani_Prezident_Ilham_Aliyevin_2017_ci_ili_Azərbaycanda_Islam_Hemreyliyi_Ili_elan_etmesi_muhum_addimidir-1083814 (Accessed 10 October 2017).

21 Farsnews.com, (2017) همگرایی جهان اسلام در اوضاع کنونی امری ضروری است (Farsnews.com, (2017) *The convergence of the Islamic world in the current situation is essential*). Available at <http://www.farsnews.com/13960516001504> (Accessed 10 October 2017)

22 Apa.az, (2017) *Bakıda İslam həmrəyliyi mövzusunda konfrans keçirilib (Baku hosts conference on Islamic solidarity)*. Available at <https://apa.az/xeber-az/dini-xeberler/bakida-islam-hemreyliyi-ile-bagli-konfrans-kecirilib-796.html> (Accessed 10 October 2017)

23 Az.baku.icro.ir, (2017) *Mədəniyyət Mərkəzinin sədri Beynəlxalq İslam Həmrəyliyi konfransında iştirak etmişdir (The chairman of the Cultural Center attended the International Islamic Solidarity conference)*. Available at <http://az.baku.icro.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=225&pageid=11715&newsview=675830> (Accessed 10 October 2017)

Committee on Religious Associations, Iran's Culture and Islamic Relations Organization and The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought.²⁴ During the speeches, it was stated that Islamic solidarity could help to establish peace and security not only in the Muslim world, but across the globe, via joint efforts by Azerbaijan and Iran. It is no coincidence that in a meeting between the Azerbaijani delegation and the chairman of the Iranian Cultural and Islamic Guidance Organization during the conference, the unity of Muslims was highlighted as a necessary issue. The meeting underscored the importance of the Azerbaijani-Iranian cooperation in strengthening the Islamic solidarity.²⁵

Another successful example was a photo exhibition entitled "Azerbaijan - Pearl of Islamic Culture", organized by the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Iran at the ECO Cultural Institute in Tehran in October/November. The exhibition was opened by Azerbaijani Ambassador to Iran Bunyad Huseynov and the President of ECO Cultural Institute Mohammad Mehdi Mazaheri. Mazaheri mentioned the importance of such events in building understanding and rapprochement between nations.²⁶ Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister, also attended the exhibition, where 80 photographs reflecting Islamic culture in Azerbaijan were presented, and emphasized the need for increased solidarity within the Islamic world.²⁷

Conclusion

Cultural ties between Azerbaijan and Iran have a rich history, rooted in centuries-old tradition. Their endurance even during the Soviet period stands testament to the special significance of these ties.

24 Scwra.gov.az, (2017) *Tehranda "Islam h m r yliyi İran-Azərbaycan dostluğu timsalında" adlı konfrans keçirilib (Tehran hosted a conference titled "Islamic Solidarity in the context of Iranian-Azerbaijani Friendship")*. Available at <http://scwra.gov.az/vnews/3683/> (Accessed 10 October 2017)

25 Irna, (2017) *وحدت مسلمانان امری ضروریست/تاکید بر همکاری تهران - باکو برای همبستگی اسلامی* (Irna, (2017) *Unity of Muslims is essential / Emphasizing the cooperation of Tehran - Baku for Islamic solidarity*). Available at <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82623732> (Accessed 10 October 2017)

26 Mehrnews.com, (2017) *«یوم‌السنای گتسبیمه» عرضوم اب ناچ‌ای‌بردا یرومج س‌ک‌ع هاگش‌ی‌امن زاغ* (Mehrnews.com, (2017) *The opening of the photo exhibition of the Republic of Azerbaijan on "Islamic Solidarity"*). Available at <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4125888/> (Accessed 10 October 2017)

27 Azertag.az, (2017) *Mohammad Cavad Zərif Azərbaycan səfirliyinin təşkil etdiyi fotosərgiyə baxıb (Mohammad Javad Zarif viewed the photo exhibition organized by the Embassy of Azerbaijan)*. Available at https://azertag.az/xeber/Mehemmed_Cavad_Zerif_Azərbaycan_səfirliyinin_təşkil_etdiyi_fotosərgiyə_baxıb-1110017 (Accessed 10 October 2017)

The current level of cultural ties between two countries is noteworthy; nonetheless, there remains significant potential for further cooperation.

In order to further expand cultural ties, the following steps could be considered:

- Opening an Azerbaijan Culture Center in Tehran, considering that there is an Iranian Culture Center in Baku;
- Use of modern techniques and methods of cultural diplomacy in relations;
- Deepening relations in the media sector, and preventing the media from spreading materials that do not serve the development of relations;
- Making scientific relations more systematic and targeted;
- Expanding cooperation in international cultural organizations, including joint initiatives to protect common cultural heritage;
- Increasing cooperation in the fields of film, music and literature;
- Promoting direct relations and cooperation among non-governmental organizations and cultural institutions.