REPUBLIC OF AVARISTAN'S INDEPENDENCE IS ETERNAL

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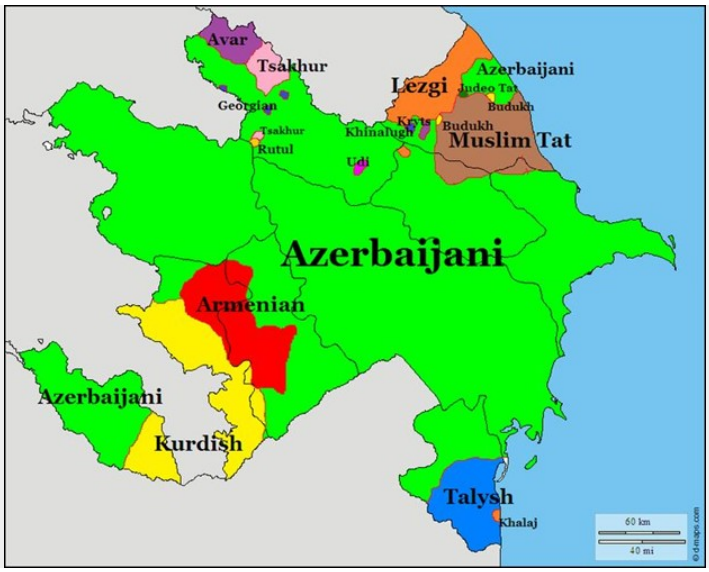

Category: Opinions

By Prof. Z. S. Andrew Demirdjian, Los Angeles, 7 June 2021

Once vibrant and populous, the vast array of the indigenous people of Azerbaijan has become insignificant. To the Azerbaijani government, its swarm of minorities is like a flock of caged "birds" swirling around its forced assimilation processes. In reality, certain minorities such as the Lezgins and the Talysh are demanding their national rights. One of Azerbaijan's hard-working minority "ants" has already become an independent "mammoth," namely the Armenians of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh).

Presently, the Avars are on a collision course with the "Azerbaijanization" of their people. They vehemently oppose the government's attempts at obliterating the Avar culture, language, and heritage. The Avars are deprived of Azeri media coverage of the issues that threaten their culture and existence. They are at risk of being forcibly assimilated into Azerbaijani society as a result of discriminatory government policies. So what are Avars doing to secure their freedom from Azerbaijan.

The Avars (it means mountain dwellers or highlanders) were once Christian and the most dominant of several ethnic groups living in the Russian Republic of Dagestan. The Avars call themselves "Awaral" or "Ma"arulal" ("free mountaineers who inhabit the highest lands"). The vast majority of Avars reside between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Their language spoken belongs to the family of Northeast Caucasian languages. The writing is based on the Cyrillic script. Sunni Islam has been the prevailing religion of the Avars since the 13th century.

According to historical accounts, the Avars originated in Khurasan, south-east of the Caspian Sea, and migrated to the Caucasus for better pastures. These geographical origins apparently link them to the Hurrians of Subartu which are also related to proto-Armenians according to some scholars. The Avar invasion resulted in the establishment of an Avar ruling dynasty in Sarir, a Medieval Christian state in the Dagestan highlands.

Today, Avars inhabit most of the mountainous partsof Dagestan as well as portions of the plains with an estimated population of 850, 000 (2010 census); they also live in Azerbaijan mainly in the northern districts of Balakan, Zakatala, and Qax with an estimated population of 49,800 (census 2009). However, the Avar leaders in Azerbaijan put theeir population figure at over 200,000.

Although the population was drastically reduced through war and emigration, the Avars tenaciously retained their position as the dominant ethnic group in the Dagestan highlands during Soviet times. After WWII, a large number of them left the barren highlands for the fertile plains closer to the shores of the Caspian Sea. Villages are the centers of the community, which is administered by the village assembly and a council of the elders in an old tribal fashion.

The Azerbaijani Avars (about 200,000 people) are concentrated in their historical homeland districts of Zagatala, Balakan and Qax in the north of Azerbaijan. They have two active political organizations

to protect the rights and interests of the Avars. One is called The Avar National Council and the other is the Avar National Movement. Both operate in Azerbaijan. A third organization--Avar National Union -Imam Shamil –is active on both sides of the boarder. One of the activists of the Avar National Council, Magomed Guseynov, has bluntly summarized what the Avars are facing in Azerbaijan: "...physical and moral genocide against Avars"

As a result of the decision of the Trans-Caucasia Bureau of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party of the Bolsheviks, part of the Avar homeland was annexed to Azerbaijan in 1922. Thus, the Avari nation was

The Avar people live in the north of Azerbaijan as the area is indicated in purple.

divided, half in Dagestan and the other half in Azerbaijan. As soon as Azerbaijan took over the Avari lands, "Azerbaijanization of the Avars" began. As a result, in Soviet Azerbaijan the teaching of the Avar language was banned in institutions of general education, television and radio programs were only broadcast in Azerbaijani, and the three Avar districts in the north were actively settled by Azerbaijanis. Furthermore, during the population censuses and while applying for documents, Avars had to identify themselves as Azerbaijanis.

During the Artsakh Liberation War of 1988-1994, mainly poorly-trained Avar conscripts were sent to the front. In the aftermath of the war, the Avari region's "de-Avarizaton" continued as thousands of refugees from the Artsakh War were settled in the region to dilute the Avar population. In no time, the political, economic and other powers in Zagatala, Balakan, and Qax districts became concentrated in the hands of Azerbaijani Turks who had moved in mainly from Nakhitchvan. As a result, 95 percent of the officials in the three districts became Azerbaijani Turks despite the fact that they only made 27 percent of the population.

To Avars, the Azerbaijani environment became toxic. Anyone who criticizes the current regime may very well risk his life. Ali Antsukhsky was a successful businessman and a member of the Azerbaijani parliament. He was also a native of Zagatala district and one of the leaders of the Avar people. He was assassinated in Baku in 1996 for criticizing the government for the plight of the Avars.

The Avars are brutally silenced and anyone criticizing the regime runs the risk of being murdered. The Avar history is often falsified in Azeri textbooks. Avar names of villages and areas are changed into Azerbaijani.

While Azerbaijan's government can stop the Azars from demonstrating against President Aliyev's regime, but they cannot prevent them from dreaming. One of the dreams of the Avari people is the flag of the Republic of Avaristan which symbolizes to them Independence. One night, several years ago, the Avari flag appeared on the wall of a Russian school in the village of Katekh in Azerbaijan's Zagatal district. Six armed Azerbaijani men removed the Avari flag and in its place put a placard with the Azerbaijani state flag with the slogan "Azergbaijan's Independence is Eternal!" The Avari people, in turn, reinstalled the flag of the "Republic of Avaristan" along with a new slogan: "Averistan's

Independence is Eternal!"

The incident regarding the slogan of "Averistan's Independence is Eternal" epitomizes the resolve of the Avari people for liberty and freedom. Against the increasing loss of population to forced assimilation, the Avars have recently awakened to the fact that unless they stop the Baku policy of Azerbaijanization, the Avars will become a footnote in the history books. However, they are ill-prepared to get rid of Azeri yoke. Unlike the Lezgins and the Talysh, the Avars are not politically well-organized with a specific strategy to gain their freedom. They seem to depend on Dagestan's diplomats such as the current president to solve their problems in Azerbaijan. However, due to Russian foreign relations, Dagestan has to keep a friendly posture toward Azerbaijan.

There are three possibilities for Avar freedom from Azberaijan's assimilation machination. The first one is for Russia to invade and take over the Avari region just as was done for the annexation of south Ossetia. The geopolitics of the Caucasus has always been in a state of flux. Russia has amassed one-eighth of the world's land mass. When the right opportunity presents itself, Mr. Putin will not hesitate to join Zagatala, Balakan, and Qax provinces to Dagestan.

The second possibility is when the four major minorities (Lezgin, Talyish, Kurds, and Avars) form a coalition seeking their extinction by Azerbaijan. They should join forces to fight forced assimilation for there is strength in numbers.

The third hope is when Artsakh decides to makr a preemptive strike on Azerbaijan and reach all the way from Agdam to the border of Dagestan. The intent will be to liberate but not occupy the three Avar districts and the Armenian province of Utik in Azerbaijan and to establish a border with Russia. This would be a win-win proposition for Artsakh Armenians and for the Avars of Azerbaijan for finally joining their brothers and sisters in Dagestan. Naturally, the Avars should reciprocate the assistance of Armenians by allowing them to build a military base in Zagatala or Balakan for joint future defense against the incessant Azerbaijani aggression. However, the Artsakh's defeat at the hands of Turkey and Azerbaijan in 2020 has made a preventive attack on Azerbaijan far-fetched.

In their quest for freedom and independence, the Avars should not have fought against their other beleaguered fellow minorities struggling to gain self-determination. Fighting against a once persecuted minority like the Artsakh Armenians proves that Avars practice double standard in dealing with other minorities. Unlike the Avars, Lesgins refused to bear arms against the Armenians in 1988-1994 war, and some of the Talysh leaders have asked the Talysh people not to get involved with the Artsakh war of 2020.

Armenians are Christians and, therefore, believe in forgetting and forgiving someone else's mistakes such as the Avars fighting against the Armenians of Artsakh in the Azeri army. However, in the character of Avars, there is no such thing as to forget and forgive someone's mistakes. For them anything less than revenge is dishonorable.

Avars should be encouraged to organize their Diaspora who is well-educated and well-off

compared to their folks in their homeland. Avars should build bridges of friendship with the Armenians who were once downtrodden in Azerbaijan. Without any active struggle for independence, Avers will soon face extinction.

History has been consistent on concluding that these two essentials for the survival of an ethnic group are earned and seldom given by the conqueror or colonizer of one's homeland. Take, for example, Artsakh Armenians. They certainly had to pay with their soldiers' blood to gain independence from the oppressive Azerbaijani government. There is no discount in the cost of freedom and independence of an ethnic minority engulfed by the usurper of one's ancestral lands but to pay the price of freedom by continuing the quest until success is achieved.

Avars' quest for freedom would have important implications to the Armenians of Artsakh. Any internal strife, would disorient Azerbaijan for the mutual benefit of the marginalized minorities. Right after the second Artsakh war, Armenians would welcome stabbing Azerbaijan with an Avar "borrowed knife". The Avars should remember George Washington's words: "Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth". If Avars want liberty and freedom, they should show courage like the Armenians, the Lezgins, and the Talyish people.

It goes without saying that the Avars should collaborate with the other minorities to gain their freedom. They should even reach out to the Armenians for help. One of the most precious gifts Armenia could give to the Avars is moral support. To any person, group, or nation struggling to accomplish something of personal value, moral support plays a major role: itcosts nothing to the giver but it means the difference between sticking to and giving up one's goal or dream.

There are no comments yet.