

Opinion – Environmental Loss and Repression in Iran

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez

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WILDER ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ, AUG 15 2023

Iran's environmental problems have been well-documented: pollution, unhealthy air quality across major urban areas, the drying up of lakes, and deforestation. An important aspect to remember is that several of these environmental problems affect the country's Azerbaijani population, which has been historically harassed and oppressed by Tehran. Environmental challenges in Northern Iran add extra woes and suffering to an ill-treated community.

Azerbaijanis in Iran primarily live in the East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Ardabil provinces. One of the most important cities in the country is Tabriz, East Azerbaijan, which suffers from poor air quality. Tabriz is one of the country's most polluted cities, and schools and kindergartens have to shut down when the air quality becomes too unbearable.

Another issue is the dying Lake Urmia in Northwest Iran, which "began shrinking in 1995 due to a combination of prolonged drought, and the extraction of water for farming and dams." Interestingly the Lake is located between Tabriz and Urmia, West Azerbaijan, which means that primarily millions of Azerbaijanis living in the area depend on it. Local inhabitants occasionally protest to demand attention from authorities about the shrinking body of water. "Lake Urmia is dying, [the] parliament orders its killing," reportedly yelled one protester during a July 2022 protest. Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, police officers have arrested environmental protesters instead of making substantial changes to heal the Lake.

As for the Aras River, this body of water crosses the Caucasus, beginning in Eastern Turkey and flowing into the Kura River. The river passes briefly through northern Iranian territory, specifically through the Azerbaijani-populated provinces, along the border with the Republic of Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, the health of this river is also not respected, as pollution levels are regularly reported. Heavy metals are a significant source of pollution. At the same time, there are accusations that radioactive material from Armenia's Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant (Yerevan and Tehran are close allies) has leaked into the Aras' waters and then flows into Iran. There are reportedly many recorded cases of individuals developing stomach cancer, which can be traced back to the Aras water. "Dams, over-exploitation of water, and discharging pollutants also hurt the river," explains IranWire.

International organizations and research centres are aware of the environmental crisis in Iran. Moreover, just this past May, the United Nations Human Rights Council republished a statement submitted to the UN Secretary General by the "Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaïdjanais-Iran" (ARC) about the status of Lake Urmia. The ARC statement bluntly argues, "as the Iranian authorities continue their charade of misinformation on Lake Urmia, Azerbaijanis are convinced that the authorities are deliberately engaged in forcing the Lake to dry up." The report highlights the problems caused by the construction of dams and how salt dust from the dried-up Lake could "scatter around up to 400 km if the lake dried up gradually, forcing the people to evacuate Tabriz."

Two years into the presidency of President Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's environmental crisis remains the same, if not worse.

Northern Iran's environmental challenges must be placed in the proper context, meaning the repressive operations against the large Azerbaijani population in Iran. The Raisi regime has already gained international condemnation for the crackdown on nationwide protests that commenced with the September 2022 death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini.

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However, violent state repression is sadly part of daily life for Azerbaijanis. Tehran has passed laws restricting language and cultural rights for Azerbaijanis living in the country, which prevent the new generations from learning the Azerbaijani language at school. Moreover, authorities and law enforcement respond violently when people carry out anti-government protests. Azerbaijanis have a minimal voice in Iranian politics, which means there are no representatives in the higher echelons of the Iranian government that can push for reforms to address the situation of the sizeable Azerbaijani population in Iran.

Given this problematic situation, which will not improve anytime soon, the numerous environmental threats that the Azerbaijani people in Iran's Northern provinces face becomes even more concerning. Sadly, the relationship between Tehran and the millions of Azerbaijanis living in the country will not change in the foreseeable. One well-known fear of Tehran is that the Azerbaijanis, who number around 30 million in a population of about 70 million, may wish to separate and unite with Azerbaijan. Thus, Iranian authorities and state-run media outlets justify arrests of protesting Azerbaijanis by labelling them "as separatists and backers of 'pan-Turkism' – labels usually applied to Turkish-language rights activists in Iran."

A 20 July conference at the Atlantic Council titled "Minority rights in Iran: Discrimination and patterns of repression" included remarks by Shahin Milani, *Executive Director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center*. Milani argues that the provinces where minorities live "bear the brunt of the regime's suppression."

Sabah Bandoei, *Representative for Baluchistan* at the Human Rights Group (Geneva), also spoke at the conference and added that geography influences Tehran's policies as Kurdistan and Balochistan are in Iran's borders (with Iraq and Pakistan & Afghanistan, respectively). The Tehran regime "wants to control [the border regions], they do not want the Baluch people, for example, or the Kurdish people" to profit and benefit from trade and other industries in border areas. While Bandoei did not mention the Azerbaijani provinces by name, we can assume that a desire for more control of Iran's northern border is another reason why repressive policies, including an apparent lack of interest in resolving environmental problems, are carried out against Azerbaijanis.

To be clear, northern Iran is not the only area of the country that is suffering due to environmental challenges. "Water shortages and rising temperatures, as well as mismanagement and a lack of enforcement of existing environmental regulations," the drying up of rivers and wetlands, severe groundwater depletion, desertification, biodiversity reduction, air and soil pollution, poor waste management, soil erosion, destruction of pastures and forests, and dust storms, the Atlantic Council explained in a September 2021 analysis. Sadly, the situation has not improved since almost two years after that analysis was published.

As a corollary to this commentary, it is crucial to note Iran's climate-migration crisis: an insightful January analysis by Dr. Banafsheh Keynoush for The Middle East Institute explains "a decline in average annual precipitation, rise in temperatures, and dire water shortages are leading drivers of climate-induced internal migration in Iran."

That is the daily situation for the Azerbaijani provinces of Iran, where many local inhabitants must leave their homes for a better life (including better air quality). Some experts argue that Iran would welcome the migration of Azerbaijanis to other provinces to diffuse or diminish their presence in the historical areas where they currently live; this scenario would improve Tehran's control of border areas, as the panellists at the Atlantic Council argued.

More data is necessary to understand the situation, environmental pollution and destruction will drastically reshape demographics across East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Ardabil in the coming years and decades. Environmental challenges, like dangerous levels of air pollution in Tabriz, the pollution of the Aras River, and the dying Lake Urmia, make the life of Azerbaijanis even worse. Moreover, given Tehran's well-known attitude towards its minorities, including the Azerbaijanis, we can safely and sadly assume that even if a pro-environment president is ever elected in Iran, addressing the environmental problems in the three provinces where these people predominantly live in Iran will probably be the last to receive aid and attention. The future looks equally grim for Iranian Azerbaijanis and the Iranian environment in general.

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Wilder Alejandro Sánchez is President of Second Floor Strategies, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. He covers geopolitical, defense, and trade issues in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. He has monitored Moldovan affairs for over a decade: he co-authored a chapter on the Transnistria separatist problem for the book *Separatism and Regionalism in Modern Europe*, while a journal essay on Moldova's Gagauzia region is scheduled to be published this year.