



# Study the Opportunities of Iranian Pharmaceutical Industry in Azerbaijan



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The economic, political, and geographical landscapes of certain neighboring countries of Iran have created potential opportunities and capacities that, if effectively harnessed, can propel Iran towards rapid economic growth and development. Azerbaijan, owing to its geographic proximity with a 765-kilometre border with Iran and numerous cultural ties, stands out as one of the most promising commercial opportunities for Iran.

**Methods:** This study unfolds in five overarching stages. Initially, an examination of published texts and articles is conducted to identify challenges and opportunities. Subsequently, interviews with experts are conducted to refine and supplement the questionnaire to identify challenges and opportunities and encapsulate factors influencing drug exports from Iran to Azerbaijan. Following this, a structured questionnaire is developed based on the extracted factors from the preceding stages, and interviews with experts are conducted using the structured questionnaire. Finally, the results obtained are analyzed using the Simple Additive Weighting (SAW) method to facilitate the enhancement of drug exports from Iran to Azerbaijan.

**Results:** After scrutinizing the infrastructure and opportunities for drug exports to Azerbaijan, we have reached fourteen influential factors, and after ranking the factors influencing pharmaceutical exports to Azerbaijan, it becomes evident that market and sales-related factors, laws, and regulations, as well as quality and supply chain considerations, respectively, are among the most significant factors affecting drug exports from Iran to Azerbaijan.

**Conclusion:** The study has suggested that most important factors that affect the Iran-Azerbaijan pharmaceutical business market research, price differentials, and networking with influential individuals in Azerbaijan, it provided effective strategies for enhancing pharmaceutical exports to Azerbaijan. Furthermore, internal challenges within Iranian pharmaceutical companies, including regulatory compliance, quality assurance, and limited international certifications, underscored the necessity for cohesive collaboration between governmental entities and private enterprises to streamline export processes and enhance competitiveness in the global market.

**Keywords:** Drug Exports, Pharmaceutical Industry, Pharmaceutical Market, Economy



## Introduction

Azerbaijan, geographically situated between 44° 59' 44" to 36° 50' 54" east longitude and 38° 26' 38" to 54° 41' 36" north latitude, holds a strategic location. These coordinates correspond to the main territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, excluding Nakhchivan. [1] The Republic of Azerbaijan is located south of the Caucasus Mountain range, north of the Aras River, and along the Caspian Sea. It is surrounded by three mountain ranges: The Greater Caucasus in the north, the Lesser Caucasus in the west, and the Talysh Mountains in the south, collectively covering 40% of the country's area. [2]

The total land area of Azerbaijan is approximately 86,600 square kilometres, making it the widest country among the South Caucasus nations. Azerbaijan shares borders with Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Armenia, Iran, and the Caspian Sea to the north, and it shares common borders with Armenia, Iran, Georgia, and Russia, measuring 1007, 765, 480, and 390 kilometres, respectively. Additionally, through its autonomous region of Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan shares a 15-kilometre border with Turkey. Due to its location between Asia and Europe and its proximity to Iran and Russia, Azerbaijan holds international significance in various aspects such as transportation, trade, and politics. Azerbaijan became a member of the Council of Europe in 2001. [3, 4]

Azerbaijan follows a semi-presidential system, with the President serving as the head of state and the Prime Minister as the head of government. [5] The country's government system is outlined in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, establishing it as a democratic, secular, and unitary state. [6] The official language is Azerbaijani Turkish, but Russian is also widely used. Baku serves as the political, economic, and cultural capital of Azerbaijan. The currency is the Azerbaijani manat, with 100 qepiks in one manat. [7] Azerbaijan is in the GMT+4 time zone, having a 3-hour and 30-minute time difference from Iran. Challenges such as weak telecommunications infrastructure, low information literacy, and high satellite communication tariffs continue to be key obstacles to internet access in Azerbaijan. The information and communication technology sector are the second-highest foreign investment target in Azerbaijan after the oil and gas industry. [8]

Given the geographical proximity of Iran and Azerbaijan, the road connection between the two countries plays a crucial role in transit. Azerbaijan is among the countries that receive the highest volume of transit goods from Iran. The transportation of goods between Iran and Azerbaijan is conducted through the border

crossings of Jolfa, Bilasuvar, and Astara. Due to Azerbaijan's economic growth and strategic geographical position, it presents one of the best trade opportunities for Iran. Iran, leveraging its neighbourly advantage, can capture a significant share of Azerbaijan's imports. An assessment of Iran's current performance in utilizing these capacities can effectively inform the development of foreign trade policies and investment programs. Despite the challenges posed by sanctions, Iran has focused extensively on increasing exports to demonstrate a positive trade balance. [9]

With a population of approximately 10 million, Azerbaijan could serve as a relatively good target market for Iran. However, Iran's share of exports to Azerbaijan is minimal, accounting for less than 5% of the total imported goods in 2018. [10, 11]

The pharmaceutical market in Azerbaijan, with a weak local pharmaceutical industry, is the largest in the South Caucasus region. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, state-owned distribution companies operated in Azerbaijan, distributing pharmaceuticals. After Azerbaijan declared independence, these distribution companies were privatized, with some, like Avromed, AzriMed, and Kartos Pharma, becoming major marketers and distributors of pharmaceuticals in Azerbaijan. Consequently, local pharmaceutical production almost ceased, and Azerbaijan transformed into a pharmaceutical importer. Only a few local pharmaceutical manufacturers remain, and approximately 97% of the market is filled with foreign pharmaceuticals.

In 2015, the government approved a pharmaceutical industry development plan to establish modern production cycles adhering to international standards. The Pirallahi Industrial Park was established in Baku in 2016, offering tax incentives to pharmaceutical producers. Foreign investors have engaged in joint ventures with local partners to establish pharmaceutical companies in Azerbaijan. [12]

The importation of drugs to Azerbaijan is carried out by about 50 active importers. Analyzing the structure of pharmaceutical companies in the major wholesale and retail sectors of the Republic of Azerbaijan, based on the number and size (scale) of companies, two very important variables in market structure, the pharmaceutical market of this country can be classified as a type of oligopoly. Markets with a small number of companies or with a few large companies and a few small companies are more likely to have monopolistic characteristics compared to a market with several small and

large companies of equal size. The pharmaceutical market in Azerbaijan follows the first model. [13]

In the 1990s, the domestic consumption of medical products was limited to about \$60–70 million annually, prompting the Azerbaijani government to implement a project in the field of drug production. In 1999, PharmSynthesis Holding was formed in Baku, consisting of two companies. One of them, Azersintez, produced intravenous fluids, while the other, Azpharm, produced a range of pharmaceutical products. However, after 2010, drug imports to Azerbaijan increased significantly, reaching \$296 million in 2019. [14]

Azerbaijan almost obtains all its drugs through imports, with 57% of registered drugs in the country being produced in Europe, 26% in CIS countries, and 12% in Russia. A relatively small proportion of Azerbaijani drug imports are produced in Asian countries. The cost of Azerbaijani drugs accounts for about 3% of the total volume, representing only 134 drug names in physical terms. [15] The Azerbaijani pharmaceutical market, until the end of 2017, included about 10,713 registered trade names, with most of the registered drugs being produced by international pharmaceutical companies. Consequently, some foreign investors reached agreements with Azerbaijani companies to establish joint ventures for drug production in Azerbaijan. [16]

Exports to the Republic of Azerbaijan are important for Iranian producers and traders. Due to the neighboring relationship with Iran, exports to this country are very significant. In fact, Azerbaijan is considered one of the countries that consume or import goods, and its main exports are oil and gas, which generate the country's main income. According to the foreign trade statistics of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2018, the share of Iranian goods in the Azerbaijani market was less than 4% (exactly 3.62%). [9]

The Republic of Azerbaijan is one of the largest importers in the region. Most of Azerbaijan's imports are from Russia, Turkey, China, Germany, the United States, Ukraine, and Iran. The chart below shows the country's imports in dollar value over recent years. [14]

The largest importer to Azerbaijan in 2018 was the Russian Federation. This trade is mainly based on past relationships, proximity, and the import of services, intellectual property, and products from Russia to Azerbaijan. In recent years, the highest increase in imports to

Azerbaijan has been from China and Switzerland. [17]

The reality is that the field for Iran's presence in the Azerbaijani market, although not entirely without competitors, is not too difficult. With Iran's competitive advantage and careful long-term planning, it is possible to move towards capturing the Azerbaijani market. [18]

The orientation of the export market has a significant impact on marketing capabilities and the effectiveness of export marketing. Export marketing effectiveness has a significant impact on export performance and contributes to export performance. [16] The size of the company and the age of the company positively moderate the relationship between marketing and export performance. [19]

Cultural differences and similarities have a significant impact on exports. Studies have shown that the greater the cultural differences, the more likely exporters will have more differences in communication and negotiation styles with local styles. Therefore, exporters will have fewer local business contacts and less knowledge of local consumer preferences. [20, 21]

The impact of cultural factors on exports is not very noticeable in the short term, but in the longer term, the effect of cultural factors on exports increases. [22]

One of the most important administrative factors is systemic corruption in the administrative and economic systems of countries. [23] Reducing corruption in the exporting country improves trade, and, from the perspective of the importer, reducing corruption increases trade volume. [24]

Studies also show that international trade taxes are more affected by corruption than other types of taxes. Middle Eastern countries need to make reforms that either reduce corruption or increase income from tax categories that are less susceptible to corruption. [25] The global banking system and exchange rate fluctuations are positive factors, and economic fluctuations affect exports and imports. [26] Also, the economic development and economic policies of countries are influential factors in exports and imports. Economic policymakers in the country can minimize barriers to imports and, at the same time, enhance the level of non-oil exports, especially exports of industrial and high-value-added goods, by choosing an approach to liberalize foreign trade and complete accession to the World Trade Organization, which is accompanied by deregulation and tariff reduction. [27]



Sanctions are among the most important tools of foreign policy used by major powers. In addition to reducing imports and adverse health effects, they can also hinder economic activities. [28]

Sanctions create problems in the economic and political systems of countries, and their long-term effects are highly detrimental. Naturally, sanctions are always the most impactful tool on a country's economy; thus, they are used as a means to create problems in target countries. [29]

Sanctions affect all factors and indicators influencing exports; therefore, to prevent this issue, sanctions are separately examined, and other factors are considered without taking into account the sanction conditions. Although many studies emphasize the necessity of adopting economic policies based on the expansion of non-oil exports and dealing with sanction conditions, it is essential to note that sanctions are among the most impactful tools affecting a country's economy. Therefore, they are used to create problems in target countries [30].

### Materials and Methods

Considering the objectives of our study, which focused on the pharmaceutical system infrastructure in Azerbaijan and the opportunities for Iranian pharmaceutical exports to Azerbaijan, we conducted interviews with experts using an open-ended questionnaire after conducting relevant reviews and a comprehensive study of related articles in this field. The factors influencing pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan were questioned in questionnaire number 1, which was designed to include five main groups, and each group contained several factors. The five main groups of Questionnaire 1 are as follows: 1. Market and marketing factors 2. Political and Economic Factors 3. Legal and Regulatory Factors 4. Cultural Factors 5. Quality and Supply Chain. After the reviews were conducted, Questionnaire 1 was designed, including five main groups, and it was adjusted using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) and paired comparison method.

The most influential main groups in pharmaceutical imports to Azerbaijan were identified, and each main group was weighted. Simultaneously, through pairwise comparison of the five main groups, using the Likert spectrum (selecting numbers between 1 and 7), we evaluated the subgroups of the main factors. Questionnaire 2 was designed to evaluate each factor, and experts assigned scores based on their experience and knowledge. These questionnaires were provided in three languages: Persian, English, and Azerbaijani,

accessible online at <http://abediasl.noobers.ir/>. Eighteen experts from the pharmaceutical industry in Iran and Azerbaijan, nine of whom were in Iran and nine were pharmaceutical experts in Azerbaijan, completed the questionnaires. After the completion of Questionnaires 1 and 2 by the experts, the results of 18 questionnaires were analyzed. Considering the reliability of both questionnaires in 18 interviews, ultimately, using fuzzy logic, the weight of the main factors, which was somewhat equal to one, was obtained. Also, for Questionnaire 2, considering that we used the Likert spectrum, the results of all questionnaires were integrated, and the average score based on the Likert spectrum for each factor was obtained. Finally, with the simple weighted sum method, they were combined, and the weight of each main group was multiplied by the average score of the evaluation for its subgroup, resulting in the final score of the factors influencing pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan. Questionnaire 1 was analyzed using Expert Choice software version 11, and Questionnaire 2 was analyzed using SPSS software version 16 [31].

### Data Analysis

The data analysis phase of this study involved a multifaceted approach aimed at elucidating the factors influencing pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan. Through the implementation of two distinct questionnaires and subsequent statistical analyses, key insights were gleaned to inform strategic decision-making.

Firstly, Questionnaire 1 was designed to capture expert opinions on various factors grouped into five main categories: Market and Sales Factors, Political and Economic Factors, Legal and Regulatory Factors, Cultural Factors, and Quality and Supply Chain Factors. These factors were assessed using the Likert scale, allowing experts to assign scores based on perceived importance. The results were then subjected to an Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) analysis to determine the weighted significance of each main category.

The analysis revealed that Market and Sales Factors, Legal and Regulatory Factors, and Quality and Supply Chain Factors were deemed the most influential, with respective weights of 28.0, 27.0, and 24.0. Conversely, Political and Economic Factors and Cultural Factors exhibited comparatively lower weights of 16.0 and 5.0, respectively.

Subsequently, Questionnaire 2 delved deeper into specific factors within each main category, garnering expert opinions and employing pairwise comparisons to ascertain relative importance. The Simple Additive Weighting



(SAW) method was then applied to compute the final weights for each factor, facilitating prioritization based on cumulative scores.

The analysis identified 14 main factors deemed significant in influencing pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan. Among these factors, market studies, monopoly of drug imports in Azerbaijan, price differentials, and networking with influential individuals in Azerbaijan emerged as pivotal determinants with the highest assigned weights.

Moreover, the analysis shed light on challenges inherent within Iranian pharmaceutical companies, such as regulatory compliance, quality assurance, and limited international certifications. These internal challenges underscore the imperative for cohesive collaboration between governmental entities and private enterprises to streamline export processes and enhance competitiveness in the global market.

In conclusion, the data analysis phase provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan. By leveraging these insights, stakeholders can devise targeted strategies to overcome barriers, capitalize on opportunities, and foster sustainable growth in pharmaceutical trade between the two nations.

## Results

After gathering information about the level and method of pharmaceutical exports from Iran and the challenges faced in this matter, the first phase of the study focused on collecting the necessary information through two questionnaires provided to eighteen pharmaceutical industry experts. The analysis was conducted using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) and Likert spectrum evaluation. Questionnaire 1, after assessing its validity, included 54 factors. Azerbaijani pharmaceutical experts rated each factor on the Likert scale (scores 1–7). The average score for each question's results was considered. Consequently, a general conclusion regarding the importance of influencing factors was presented.

The combined results analysis (Table 1) indicates the weighted importance of the main factors as follows:

According to the integrated results, it can be concluded that, according to the experts, the most influential factors in pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan are as follows, in descending order: Market and Sales Factors (28.0) Legal and Regulatory Factors (27.0) Quality and Supply Chain Factors (24.0) Political-Economic Factors (16.0) Cultural Factors (5.0)

It is evident that market and sales, legal and regulatory, and quality and supply chain factors are considered the most important.

In Questionnaire 2, each expert provided their opinions, and pairwise comparisons were made between the five main groups. After obtaining the Simple Additive Weighting (SAW) results, the weight of each main group was multiplied by the average score. The final result was prioritised (Table 1). Based on this research, 14 main factors influencing the export process were identified, with the most important factors assigned higher weights (Table 2).

Considering the final weights obtained from the questionnaire analysis, the most important factors identified by the majority of experts as negative influences on pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan, based on the highest weights assigned, include the monopoly of drug imports in Azerbaijan; the multitude of decision-making centers and administrative bureaucracy in Iran; continuous changes in domestic laws concerning exports in Iran; the presence of major and reputable companies in the Azerbaijani pharmaceutical market; ease of access to Iranian drugs for Azerbaijani citizens through common borders; and the limited knowledge of Iranian exporters regarding international trade. To improve the situation of drug exports to Azerbaijan, it is advisable to focus on areas with the greatest impact.

Additionally, the positive factors influencing pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan, as perceived by the experts based on the highest assigned weight, include in-depth market studies and precise examination of the Azerbaijani market needs; price differences of drugs between Iran and Azerbaijan; establishing a network of connections with influential individuals in Azerbaijan; having informed individuals about Azerbaijani laws and conditions as consultants in Iranian companies; precise recognition of upcoming opportunities for market entry into Azerbaijan; and appropriate planning for continuous and sustainable presence in the Azerbaijani market.

## Discussion

The study revealed that the main factors affecting pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan can be categorized into three primary areas: market and sales, legal and regulatory, and quality and supply chain. It is noteworthy that many issues in pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan originate from internal factors within Iranian companies and Iran's regulations. Addressing these internal challenges could facilitate smoother export processes.

The current mentality of Iranian pharmaceutical companies does not show a strong inclination



towards exports. The primary reason is the dependency of pharmaceutical industries on governmental and semi-governmental entities. Profit considerations do not play a significant role, and long-term and stable strategies are not consistently implemented.

Exporting should be a comprehensive and integrated approach. The government and private sector, through joint operational committees, can actively monitor the export situation. By issuing guidelines and directives aimed at overcoming export barriers, they can support exporters. On the other hand, exporters, through proper currency exchange and the execution of precise and regular programs based on the country's needs, can contribute to the health and well-being sector.

Many Iranian pharmaceutical factories lack international quality certificates, and most companies lack international certifications. This creates doubt and skepticism about the quality of Iranian drugs for foreign buyers. Many countries, including Azerbaijan, have strict legal requirements for importing human drugs, requiring internationally recognized certificates of drug quality and optimal production documents.

Challenges arising from economic sanctions, sometimes imposed by the United States and international organizations, disrupt domestic drug production. The plan to address internal shortages is a top priority. Additionally, due to economic and banking sanctions, financial transactions face difficulties, increasing the trade risk for foreign companies dealing with Iranian companies.

In conclusion, for a comprehensive and coordinated long-term plan for increasing pharmaceutical exports, collaboration between the legislative (governmental) and private sectors is essential.

### Conclusion

The strategic location of Azerbaijan, nestled between Europe and Asia and bordered by key nations like Russia, Turkey, and Iran, underscores its significance in global trade and politics. With a diverse landscape and a burgeoning economy, Azerbaijan presents lucrative opportunities for trade and investment. This study has shed light on the pharmaceutical sector, a crucial domain with immense potential for growth and collaboration between Iran and Azerbaijan.

Through a meticulous examination of market dynamics, regulatory frameworks, and supply chain intricacies, this research has pinpointed key factors influencing pharmaceutical exports from Iran to Azerbaijan. Market analysis, regulatory compliance, and product quality emerged as pivotal determinants shaping export success. Moreover, the study underscored the need for a strategic approach, bridging the gap between market needs and industry capabilities. Internal challenges within Iranian pharmaceutical companies, including regulatory complexities and quality assurance deficiencies, pose significant hurdles to export endeavors. Addressing these challenges demands concerted efforts from both public and private sectors. Governmental support, coupled with proactive measures by industry stakeholders, can foster a conducive environment for export growth.

Despite the formidable challenges posed by economic sanctions and global uncertainties, a coordinated, long-term strategy is imperative for enhancing pharmaceutical exports. Collaboration between governmental bodies and private enterprises, bolstered by streamlined regulations and quality assurance protocols, holds the key to unlocking the full potential of pharmaceutical trade between Iran and Azerbaijan.

In essence, this study not only delineates the prevailing challenges but also illuminates pathways for fostering robust trade relations in the pharmaceutical domain. By leveraging market insights, regulatory reforms, and strategic partnerships, Iran and Azerbaijan can chart a course towards mutual prosperity and sustainable development in the pharmaceutical sector.

### Ethical Considerations

The study was confirmed by the Ethics Committee of Ardabil University of Medical Sciences: IR.IRUMS.REC.1398.522

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This study was part of Pooria Abediasl PharmD thesis registered in Zanjan University of Medical Sciences.

### Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to obtaining final approval.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of Interest.

## Tables

Table 1. Comparison between five main groups

Main Groups	Market and Sales Factors	political Economic Factors	Legal and Regulatory Factors	Cultural Factors	Quality and Supply Chain Factors
Combined	28.0	16.0	27.0	5.0	24.0

Inconsistency=0.02; With 0 missing judgment.

Table 2. Main factors influencing export

NO.	Factor	Weight
1	Market studies and detailed analysis of Azerbaijan's market needs	1.93
2	Monopoly of drug import in Azerbaijan	1.80
3	The difference in drug prices in Iran and Azerbaijan	1.80
4	Creating a communication network with influential people in Azerbaijan	1.77
5	The number of decision-making centers and administrative bureaucracy in Iran	1.77
6	The presence of people familiar with the laws and conditions of Azerbaijan as consultants in companies Iranian	1.76
7	Accurate understanding of upcoming opportunities to enter the Azerbaijan market	1.74
8	Continuous changes in Iran's domestic laws regarding exports	1.73
9	Proper planning for continuous and stable presence in Azerbaijan market	1.66
10	The presence of the original and reliable companies in the pharmaceutical market of Azerbaijan	1.60
11	Ease of access to Iranian medicine for Azerbaijani citizens through borders Common	1.60
12	Little knowledge of Iranian exporters regarding international trade	1.58
13	Obtaining international certificates of approval GMP	1.57
14	Attending international exhibitions in Azerbaijan	1.50



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