

The Puzzle of a Loyal Minority: Why Do Azeris Support the Iranian State?

Abstract

Ever since its inception, the state of Iran has been pressed with the challenge of integrating the multiple ethnic identities that make up its plural society. Of a population exceeding 70 million, only 51% belongs to the Persian majority, while the single largest minority group are the Azeris numbering nearly 25 million (24%). In contrast to a number of other minorities like the Kurds and the Baluchis, the Azeris have shown loyalty to the Iranian state to the surprise of foreign scholars (Shaffer 2002, 2006). They have done so even in spite of a number of potentially favourable political and economic conditions that could support the realization of national aspirations. The paper addresses this puzzle: why, against seemingly favourable odds, Iranian Azeris have refrained from asserting their national ambitions and joining their newly independent kin north of the border? In an attempt to solve this puzzle, the paper will examine the triadic relationship among the Azeri minority in Iran, their home state (Iran), and their kin state (Azerbaijan). Although the Azeris constitute the titular majority in the Republic of Azerbaijan (91%), their articulation of national identity has diverged sharply from that of their kin brethren in Iran. Drawing on the works of Brubaker (2000, 2009), James (2001, 2006), Horowitz (1985), Saideman (2007, 2008) and Laitin (1998, 2007), the paper explores the hypothesis that the main reason for Azeri loyalty is the consistent and successful cooptation of the Azeri leadership into political and economic elite by the Iranian state.

The Ethno - Religious Composition of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is ethnically diverse. Persians comprise slightly over half the country's population. Azeris, Gilaki and Mazandarani, Kurds, Arabs, Baluch, and Turkmen form significant minorities. Successive Iranian governments have always coped with the multi-ethnic society. Even though the Persian Empire included various different ethnic groups, the Persians acted as the ruling class, granting concessions to the outlying regions when it deemed necessary to do so. Intertwined with this concept is the primordial idea that the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau have a common unique Persian heritage. However, the idea of a common Persian ancestry is disapproved by demographical composition. In contrast to the diversity of its ethnic landscape, Iran is relatively homogenous in terms of religion: 90 percent of the population is Shi'ite. Overlapping identities within Iran have posed political challenges to the regimes in the past. The country's Azeri and Kurdish populations have frequently agitated for more cultural freedom and a greater degree of local autonomy from Tehran. These two ethnic groups also have a geographically consolidated critical mass in neighbouring states. Yet, one ethnic group has dominated the various minorities of Iran for centuries – ethnic Azeris.

The Azeris differ from the majority Persians in that they do not speak Farsi. Rather they have adopted a dialect of slightly Persianified Turkish. Yet, perhaps the most important aspects that create binding commonalities are the Shia Islamic traditions that most Iranians share, and which conspicuously do not extend far into Anatolia and the Caucasus. The demographic power of the Iranian Azeris regularly grabs the attention of policymakers in Tehran, Washington, and Tel-Aviv. The provinces that make up Iranian Azerbaijan have the largest concentration of industry and trade outside

of Tehran province. Even though the area represents the Iranian land bridge to Europe through which major transportation routes transverse and large-scale energy projects are executed, no pecuniary value can be put on Iranian Azerbaijan, yet the importance of the Azeris to the rest of Iran is even more visible when looking back at the region's controversial past.

The language of the majority of Azerbaijanis is 'Azeri' (known as Azeri-Turkic) and the religion of the majority of them is Shia Islam. There are over 50 million Azeris living in today's world, of which 25 million are believed to be living in Iran, around 8 million in the Republic of Azerbaijan, close to 2 million in Turkey, about 2 million in Russia. In *The Ancient History of Iranian Turks*, Professor M.T. Zehtabi has traced the origination of current Azeris to ancient Sumerian and Ilamite civilizations, dating back to 6000 BC. Through the examination of archeological and linguistic evidences, Zehtabi has shown that Azeris are descendants of the ancient Ilametes, the Medes, and other agglutinative language peoples like Kassies, Gutties, Lullubies and Hurraies.¹ Historically, three different ethnic components have participated in the formation and the evolution of Azeri people: the Medes who were mainly concentrated in southern Azerbaijan; the Aran-Albanese who were living in the north; the Turks who have been living in various parts of Azerbaijan. From 600 to 330 BC, Cyrus the Great and Alexander the Great struggled to conquer Azerbaijan. Three centuries later Azerbaijan was occupied and continued to be ruled by the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire, and the Confederation of Caucasian Turks.² Soon after the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD, around thirty-thousand Muslim Arabs attacked and conquered Iran through the three famous battles of Qadisiyya and Jalula in 637 AD, followed by Nahavand in 641 AD, overthrowing the Sasanid Empire. Although segments of Azerbaijan became a part of the newly founded Muslim empire, resistance against Arab invasion in northern and central Azerbaijan continued well through the 9th century. Finally, starting from 837, the presence of Arabs culminated in the Islamization of the entire region. After the Arab invasion, a local dynasty known as Shirvanshahs ruled the northern Azerbaijan from 668 through 1539, when they were incorporated into the Safavid Empire (1501-1722). In Iranian historiography, the Safavid Dynasty is problematic precisely because Turkish was spoken at court and because the thirteenth-century Safavid mystical order was only able to become a "royal house" with the aid of Turkish tribes known collectively as the Qizilbas. The Safavids were also crucial in making Twelver Shiism a part of modern Iranian national identity and they did the same for the construction of modern Azerbaijani identity.

In nineteenth century, Russia launched several successful military campaigns on its southern flank. As a result, what is today the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia were finally severed away from Tehran's control in 1828. For all Iranians, the treaties of Gulestan (1813) and Turcomanchai (1828) severed northern Azerbaijan from an Iranian homeland. After the annexation of northern Azerbaijan by Russia, the southern region of Azerbaijan continued to enjoy a relatively autonomous status, particularly in the areas concerning trade and commerce as well as culture and language. However, with the subsequent establishment of the absolute monarchism of Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, South Azerbaijan's regional, economic, linguistic, and cultural autonomy came to an end, and through Reza Khan's harsh centralization policy, the hitherto independent region of Azerbaijan now became divided

¹ M.T. Zehtabi, *Iran Turklerinin Eski Tarihi*. İkinci chap, Tebriz: Artun, 1999, translated.

² Audrey L. Altestadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1992; R.G. Suny, ed., *Transcaucasia: Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1983.

into a number of dependent “Ostans” or provinces.³ Thus began a traumatic division of the region known as Azerbaijan, splitting families and kin along a border of Araxes River. The vast majority of Azeris found themselves on the Iranian side of the border, and the status quo remained for over a century until the World War II.

Apprehensive of pro-German sympathies in Tehran, the Soviet and the British armies invaded Iran and divided it into spheres of influence: a British south and a Soviet north. Although Russia occupied several northern Iranian provinces, participants to the Yalta and Tehran conferences agreed that all foreign forces would leave Iran at the end of the war. In fact, only under unprecedented pressure from the Truman Administration did Soviet forces evacuate Tabriz and contiguous provinces. The retreating Soviet authorities, with the help of Tudeh collaborators, used their military power to ignite Azeri nationalism and Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan was established in 1946. Contrary to the Soviet expectations, Iranian Azeris were reminded of large parts of Azeri territory coming under Moscow's control. Indeed, the idea of joining the feared atheist, Communist regime was inconceivable to most Shia Azeris and hostility to the Soviets outweighed any sense of irredentism present in society. Iranian Azeris remained largely hostile to the idea of an independent Azerbaijani nation.

By 1948, the Pahlavi dynasty regained control over Iranian Azeris. Throughout this period, a policy of forced assimilation aiming at the artificial creation of a homogeneous Persian-speaking nation was rigorously implemented. As a result, the publication of newspapers, magazines, and books in Azeri language became prohibited and the people of Azerbaijan were denied the right to education in their own language.⁴ In 1979, the Pahlavi regime was overthrown and, subsequently, the Islamic Republic was formed. With the fall of the Shah, his sponsored Persian nationalistic ideology was briefly overshadowed by an emerging anti-nationalist Islamic ideology. In the revolutionary atmosphere of the time, various ethnic demands and movements began to emerge particularly in Kurdistan, Azerbaijan and Baluchistan. Having consolidated its power bases, the new regime brutally suppressed the legitimate demands of various nationalities for cultural and linguistic rights. The Shah regime vigorously continued to enforce the ban imposed on non-Persian languages during the Pahlavi era, notwithstanding that its own constitution had allowed for the teaching and learning of non-Persian languages in the country. In 1991, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the formation of an independent Azerbaijani nation-state was declared north of the Iranian borders. The northern Azerbaijan once again continued to embrace the spirit of independence and autonomous nationhood as it had during the short-lived 1918-1920 period. Realizing the far-reaching consequences of such an event to the Iranian Azeris, the Iranian regime pursued a dual relationship with the Republic of Azerbaijan, seeking to question its credibility and legitimacy through the state-run media outlets both inside Iran and abroad.

Challenges of Ethnicity and Iranian Nationalism

Iran's modern political history is rife with attempts to consolidate a single Iranian national identity that eclipses ethnic and tribal loyalties. During the Pahlavi era, this took place under the shah's modernization program, which extended the central government's administrative control to the periphery and promoted the Persian language and Persian culture to the exclusion of those of Iran's

³ Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979.

⁴ Javad Heyat, “Regression of Azeri Language and Literature under the Oppressive Period of Pahlavi,” *The First International Conference on Turkic Studies*, Indiana University: May 19-22, 1983.

minority groups. The Islamic Revolution took a similar approach, emphasizing a religious identity that was by definition supranational and refused to recognize the heterogeneity within Iran. During the Iran-Iraq war and the recent quarrels with the international community over Iran's nuclear program, the government has attempted to foster a common Iranian identity based on nationalism. The extent to which these ideologies have succeeded in consolidating an Iranian identity that supersedes ethnic loyalties remains a debatable question. Despite this long history, Iran has been a state for much longer than it has been a nation. This legacy has forced successive regimes to grapple with competing identities that do not necessarily correspond with Iran's geographic borders. The relatively well-integrated position of the largest non-Persian ethnic Azeri group and the solidarity of nearly all segments of society in the defence of Iranian territory during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) suggest that Iran has largely succeeded in forging an identity that surpasses long-standing ethnic and tribal cleavages. However, modern Iranian history suggests that some external interventions might have sharpened ethnic cleavages within Iran.⁵

As the Pahlavi regime, with American support, quickly recovered and moved north to crush Azeri nationalism, the border between the two Azerbaijanians was re-established and the perturbed Mohammad Reza Shah took on an increasingly determined campaign to re-imagine the Iranian nation along his Persian-centric view of the state and, by extension, Persian ethnic nationalism. At the same time, however, Azeris began a massive integration into Iranian society, and becoming a major force in business and trade. Yet the Shah, still fearing the massive Communist threat from the north, repeatedly denied the one concession Azeris constantly urged for: linguistic freedom. The Pahlavi regime banned Azeri from schools, the workplace, and the media. The Shah's vision of Iran centered around the glorification of the Persian Empire and was heavily influenced by racial and ethnocentric outlooks that were meant to put Persians forward as the rightful heirs to the glory of Cyrus the Great. The Shah's insistence on promoting the primacy of Persian symbols as well as the suppression of the linguistic rights of minorities, and the centralized nature of his regime alienated many ethnic groups who could not fully accept the methods of nation building practiced by the Persian. Despite the fact that the Azeris were at the forefront of the broad anti-shah coalition that led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, they did not use, unlike the Kurds, the revolutionary chaos that erupted after the fall of the Pahlavi regime to rekindle any sort of ethnic nationalism. Contrary to provocative calls for independence, Azeris sided with the rest of Iranian society in demanding democracy, pluralism, and the expulsion of foreign interference, personified in the Shah's elites. In democratic society, which was the original goal of the anti-Shah movement, the Azeris believed that a new government would allow for linguistic freedom and the recognition of the role Azeris play in Iranian society.

The revolution resembled, in some ways, a rebellion of the ethnically diverse provinces against the perceived Persian bigotry of Tehran. Thus, the revolutionary sentiments of Azeris in 1979 portrayed much more of a nationalist Iranian tone rather than ethnic nationalism, albeit tinged with a rejection of the exclusively Persian version of Iranian nationalism. Although article 15 of the new Iranian constitution, granting linguistic rights to ethnic minorities was adopted, Azeris soon found out that a sense of Persian-centered Iranian nationalism, instilled by thousands of years of tradition, still prevailed around the centers of power in Tehran. Two major developments prevented Azeri nationalist tendencies from gaining ground in Iranian Azerbaijan after the victory of the revolution: the invasion of Iran by Iraq and the promotion of Shiism as the primary force in rallying the Iranian nation against

⁵ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *The World Fact Book*, 2009.

Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi invasion threatening the very existence of the Iranian state, coupled with the strong and pervasive influence of Shia Islam throughout Iran, brought together Azeris and Persians in defence of a common homeland. Azeris and Persians fought and died together confronting an aggressive Arab nationalism personified by Saddam Hussein. In fact, the Iranian Azeris came to achieve higher level of standing among both the ruling elite and the Iranian society in general.

Lessons from the Past

Shi'ite Islam is an important component that holds together an Iranian national identity. The Islamic Republic of Iran founded its legitimacy on Iranian nationalism, using the homogenizing influence of religion to override ethnic and tribal loyalties. Since the Islamic Revolution, the definition of being Iranian has been also based on Shi'ism in addition to a broader shared culture and shared history. This religious formulation of the Iranian identity has had great utility for the regime when multi-ethnic loyalties challenge its authority. In such cases, the universality of Islam can be used to undercut demands stemming from local concerns, as when the state responded to the Kurdish uprisings of the early 1980s. Ayatollah Khomeini's violent reaction to the unrest was revealing, exposing the inherent tension in his assertion of the universality of Islam and his espousal of minority rights. The emphasis on Shi'ism also serves to divide. Iran's Baha'is and Sunni Muslims have faced varying degrees of repression since the early years of the Islamic Revolution.⁶ The official propaganda considers the Baha'is to be heretics and have singled them out for particularly harsh treatment. Even though the Baha'i community in Iran is tiny and poses no threat to the regime, the government executed some 200 Baha'is and jailed a further 600 in the 1980s simply for adhering to their faith.⁷ Even though Sunni Muslims have not been subjected to the same degree of persecution as the Baha'is, they frequently suffer discrimination as both religious and ethnic minorities because much of Sunni population is of Kurdish, Baluchi, or Turkmen ethnicity. The cleavages of identity politics in Iran have deep historical antecedents and are likely to remain a challenge to any type of government.

Historically, when Reza Khan took power in 1925, a good part of Iran was effectively outside the reach of the central government, and the outcomes of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1909) projected even greater devolution of authority to localities.⁸ Thus, attempts to consolidate the Iranian state faced a series of obstacles, not to mention including linguistic differences, illiteracy, and poor administrative control over unsettled rural population. Many scholars point out that employing a combination of patronage and coercion, Reza Khan temporarily succeeded in displacing the authority of competing power centers (mainly clergy and tribal leaders). The shah's policies were authoritarian and often brutal, including the forced settlement of thousands of nomads, the compulsory unveiling of women, neglect of non-Persian minorities, and the concentration of power in Tehran.⁹ Although primary school enrolment increased more than five times, all textbooks were printed in Persian by the

⁶ Under Article 13 of Iran's Constitution, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian believers are protected under law and are accorded a small quota of seats in parliament.

⁷ Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002, p. 205.

⁸ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 11–41; Akhavi, Shahrough, "State Formation and Consolidation in Twentieth Century Iran," in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, eds., *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics*, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986, p. 204. The Constitutional Movement was motivated in large part by a desire to institute municipal councils that were capable of representing localities. See also Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000, pp. 27–39.

⁹ Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002., pp. 189–211.

authorities in Tehran, and the teaching of any other languages spoken in Iran was strictly prohibited.¹⁰ Education became the key tool in the shah's efforts to merge Iran's national identity with that of its largest ethnic group, Persians.¹¹ The socializing influence of education was used to cultivate patriotism among Iran's youth, complementing the shah's introduction of mandatory military service as a second initiative designed to elevate allegiance to the nation over ethnic loyalties.¹² Another important direction of Reza Khan's consolidation of authority was the pursuit of investment and economic development in Iran's central Persian region; the periphery where the country's Azeri, Kurd, Arab, Baluch, and Turkmen populations resided was relatively neglected. As an indicator of the shah's preferential treatment of the country's Persian center, the government invested in industries in the country's Persian central and Northern provinces during the last ten years of Reza Khan's rule but only two in the Azerbaijani region.¹³ This marginalization of the periphery continued under the rule of Mohammed Reza Shah. On the eve of the Islamic Revolution, the Azeri, Kurd, and Baluch provinces trailed the Persian regions significantly in indicators of health, education, and income. In the Persian central provinces, 20 percent suffered from poverty, but more than 30 percent lived below the poverty level in Kurdish and Azeri areas and more than 70 percent in Baluchistan.¹⁴ Similarly, while literacy rates in Persian areas stood at nearly 15 percent above the national average, the corresponding figures ranged from 5 percent to 18 percent below the mean in heavily minority provinces.¹⁵

At the end of World War II, numerous ethnic movements emerged among both the Azeri and Kurdish populations, culminating in the creation of the National Government of Azerbaijan on December 12, 1945 and the Republic of Kurdistan on January 22, 1946. The new government of Azerbaijan advocated autonomy rather than secession from Iran. While asserting that the Azerbaijani people constituted a distinct nation, the movement did not challenge the territorial integrity of Iran. In return, the Azeris demanded the use of Azeri in local schools and government administration, more control over local taxation and the establishment of provincial councils, a right granted in the Iranian constitution but never recognized under the shah¹⁶. The language issue proved the most popular platform.¹⁷ Despite enjoying broad support within their ethnic enclaves, the governments of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan were only able to survive under the Soviet military presence - seven months after the Soviet retreat; Tehran reasserted its control over the territories.

Challenges of Irredentism and Ethno-Nationalism

During the 1979 Revolution, the Azeris were a crucial mass in challenging the legitimacy of the shah's rule and eventually forcing his abdication. As in the case of the Azeris' activism under the Mohammad Mossadegh government in 1953, the community's goals were principally "all-Iranian" combined with some limited ethnic demands.¹⁸ On December 12, 1977¹⁹ protestors at Tabriz University gathered to chant anti-regime slogans. The protests led to a confrontation with military

¹⁰ Atabaki, Touraj, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000, p. 58.

¹¹ Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, MIT Press, 2002, p. 48.

¹² Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*, New York: Paragon House, 1993, pp. 192, 194–196.

¹³ Atabaki, 2000, p. 60.

¹⁴ Akbar Aghajanian, "Ethnic Inequality in Iran: An Overview," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, May 1983, p. 218.

¹⁵ Aghajanian, 1983, p. 216.

¹⁶ Shaffer, 2002, p. 55.

¹⁷ Atabaki, 2000, p. 105.

¹⁸ Both the Tabriz University and the University of Urmiya became a focal point of student anti-regime protests in 1977.

¹⁹ The date commemorating both the establishment and fall of the National Government of Azerbaijan.

units that resulted in property damage and clashes that continued into the next day.²⁰ The pressure continued thereafter, with the Azeri population continuing to play an important role in the general unrest that forced the shah to abdicate. However, despite strong support and participation from ethnic minorities during the Islamic Revolution, it became apparent that neither democracy nor minority rights were primary concerns of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran's Turkmen, Baluch, Arabs, and Kurds all staged revolts. With the exception of the Kurdish challenge, the regime put each down relatively quickly (1979–1980).²¹ The Azeri opposition was more circumspect, using boycotts of early votes (including the referendums on the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in April and on the institution of *velayat-e-faqih* in December of 1979, as well as the first presidential and Majlis elections) to challenge the legitimacy of the new leadership and protest the Islamic Republic's unwillingness to accommodate the demands of its non-Persian minorities.²²

The proponents of merging political and religious authority, embodied in the doctrine of *velayat-e-faqih*, rejected the Azeris' ethnicity-based demands, and launched a counteroffensive that targeted Ayatollah Kazim Shariatmadari, an influential Azeri cleric who rejected theocratic rule and sought greater cultural freedoms. Ayatollah Shariatmadari's confrontation with Khomeini was interpreted as symbolic of the broader struggle between ethnic minorities seeking some measure of autonomy in the new Iran and those who advocated a strong center and continued Persian dominance. In the end, Shariatmadari's support for local activists, opposition to *velayat-e-faqih*, and criticism of Khomeini's prosecution of the war with Iraq after the Islamic Republic continued to press the offensive into Iraqi territory, led to Shariatmadari's defrocking.²³ Then, the government gradually extended its control over the Azerbaijani provinces, using the war with Iraq as a pretext to appeal to the Azeris' sense of patriotism and the province's historic role as a bulwark against Arab expansionism.²⁴ This type of policy — placating the Azeris by stressing their important contributions to Iranian history and defence of the state continues today.

Unlike the Azeris, the Kurds are the most difficult problem for the Iranian government. While the Azeris continue to raise the issue of state discrimination against non-Persians, they have proven more amenable to assimilation than Iran's Kurdish enclave.²⁵ As Shi'ites, the Azeri are also better integrated into the religious fabric on which the Islamic Republic of Iran's identity is predicated. Moreover, the sheer size of the Azeri community has forced the national government to be more accommodating. Azeris are broadly represented in the state bureaucracy, the military, and the religious establishment. Significant Azeri representation among Iran's entrepreneurs has provided the community with socioeconomic mobility and greater ties to Iran's Persian center.²⁶ Azeris' loyalty to the state in times of duress leaves them less vulnerable to the accusation of serving as a "fifth column"—a charge that has plagued Iran's Kurds since the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)

²⁰ Shaffer, 2002, p. 81.

²¹ Dilip Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, New York: Routledge, 1987, pp. 111–113; Patricia Higgins, "Minority-State Relations in Contemporary Iran," in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, eds., *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics*, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986, pp. 185–187.

²² Shaffer, 2002, p. 79; Patricia Higgins cites 80 percent of the Azerbaijani electorate as boycotting the constitutional referendum; see Higgins, 1986, p. 189.

²³ Shaffer, 2002, pp. 90–103.

²⁴ Halliday, Fred, "Iranian Foreign Policy Since 1979: Internationalism and Nationalism in the Islamic Revolution," in Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie, eds., *Sh'ism and Social Protest*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986, p. 106.

²⁵ Higgins, Patricia, "Minority-State Relations in Contemporary Iran," in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, eds., *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics*, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986, p. 188.

²⁶ Leonard Helfgott, "The Structural Foundations of Iran's National Minority Problem in Revolutionary Iran," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. XIII, Nos. 1–4, 1980, p. 206. Estimates of the Azeri population in Tehran range from one-third to one-half of the capital's total population; see Shaffer, 2002, p. 224.

threw in its lot with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.²⁷ Azeris, concentrated mainly in the oil-poor northwest of Iran (along the border with Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), often claim a population share close to 40 percent, a number that includes ethnic brethren such as the Turkmen, Qashgais, and other Turkic-speaking groups. Admittedly, the Azeris' role in the Persian government was significantly weakened when the Pahlavi dynasty came into power in 1925. Moreover, Azeris have had mixed relationships with other Iranian minorities. Kurds, who make up around 15 percent of Iran's population, do not have particularly good relations with ethnic Azeris; several cities in western Iran, such as Urumieh and Mako, are inhabited by both Kurds and by Azeri Turks. In the last decade, the ethnic majority of the Azeri Turks in some areas close to the border with Turkey has been diluted by resettlement of Kurds.

Obviously, relative successes of Iranian national project can be explained by Saideman and Ayres recent studies²⁸ of numerous ethno-religious conflicts in post-communist Eastern Europe, demonstrating that the content of nationalism matters for conflict: ethnic nationalists are less likely to seek new territory than political ones.²⁹ In Saideman and Ayres's view, xenophobic nationalist messages concentrating on the threat from kin-immigrants and minorities plays better with the electorate than appeals to annex diverse new territories. Popular irredentism is doused by distaste for the ethnic minorities who would be acquired alongside ethnic kin. Even co-ethnics may be perceived as foreign, and the feelings may be mutual. Certainly, there is concern for ethnic kin, but not in sufficient quantity to spend blood or treasure to incorporate them. This is especially true when the newcomers' inclinations would disproportionately benefit the political opposition or consolidate different ethno-linguistic and religious groups.

Growing Azeri Nationalism and Identity Pathways

The Azeri Diaspora is a comparatively new phenomenon, rooted in a roughly three decades of history of migration. It owes its existence to three major events that took place in the recent history of the region: the Islamic Revolution in Iran; the demise of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991. The Islamic revolution was a major socio-political upheaval that affected all aspects of life in the country. In the periods during and after the Islamic Revolution, waves of mass migrations took place partly because of violations of human rights in Iran, partly because of the 8-year war with Iraq, and partly due to the worldwide impact of globalization along with a whole set of other economic and developmental factors. This migratory trend continues, albeit on a much smaller scale.

According to the latest statistics, there are over five million Iranian immigrants in Europe and North America. Thus, the main segment of an Azeri Diaspora, at least in terms of numbers and figures, come not from the north, but from Iran and the south Azerbaijan. In the case of the Azerbaijan Republic, the demise of the Soviet Union and the independence of northern Azerbaijan significantly contributed to the formation of an Azeri Diaspora. Along with the independence, the iron curtain was

²⁷ Nader Entasser, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992, p. 130.

²⁸ Saideman, Stephen M. and R. William Ayres, *For Kin and Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism and War*, New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2008.

²⁹ Saideman and Ayres (2008) point out that Armenian and Croatian irredentism occurred despite, not because of, local xenophobia. Representatives of stranded ethnic kin and the wider overseas diaspora were unusually well represented in the power structures of both countries, influencing respective state policies in unpopular ways.

lifted and the hitherto closed Azerbaijani society was exposed to the outside world in an unprecedented way. As a result, many Azeris were accorded the opportunity to travel, to migrate and settle down in a foreign country, for a variety of economic, educational, and socio-political reasons.

Added to this new wave of migration was the status of hundreds of thousands of those Azeris who, as citizens of the former Soviet Union, were living in such places as Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine. After the fall of the Soviet Union, these Azeris came to find themselves as immigrants living in a newly independent country. Therefore, they too became Azeri immigrants living in abroad. In essence, they are, and will continue to be, important components of the Azerbaijani Diaspora. The experience shows that in diasporas, the Iranian Azeris have come into close contact with the Azeris from the Republic of Azerbaijan. For instance, one could make mention of various Azerbaijani community centers, organizations, groups, media outlets, particularly journals, magazines, and internet discussion groups in which there are indications of close collaborations between the northern and southern Azeris. The increasing rate of intermarriages, the noticeably high rate of travels and visits from Diaspora to Baku, from Baku to Tabriz and vice versa could be cited as other indicators of tightening relationships between the two sides. All these developments have implications in terms of collective, national, and personal identification processes.

The existence of a variety of identity categories poses a major challenge to individuals of Azerbaijani heritage in articulating a common identity that could be applicable to the Azeri people on both sides of the Araz River as well as in Azeri diaspora worldwide. Evidently, the exercise of “free choice” in using identity categories in the context of Azerbaijan has encountered various practical, cultural, and linguistic difficulties, which necessitate the significance of using a common identity category by all Azerbaijanis. ‘Turks’ on a local Iranian level has inevitably linked this identity to the larger ideology of Turkism rooted in an existing notion of pan-ethnic/pan-Turkish identity. This linkage is demonstrated through reactions shown on the part of Iranian Turks to issues emerging from Armenian-Turkish and Kurdish-Turkish relations. Belonging to a pan-ethnic identity compels some Azerbaijanis to act as advocates of the former Ottoman Empire or the current Turkish Republic by showing reactions against the demands that certain ethnic groups such as the Armenians and the Kurds have from these political entities. As a result, some ethnic conflicts existing in the Turkish Republic are brought over to Azerbaijan and are automatically made to be an Azerbaijani issue. Thus, this essentialist and undemocratic understanding of pan-ethnic identity serves to create hostilities among various ethnic groups particularly at a time when these groups need to be cooperating with one another towards the achievement of common social, cultural, political, and collective rights.

The rivalry of Iran and Turkey to influence Azerbaijan has also encompassed the religious sphere. Both countries have been active in propagating Islam in Azerbaijan. Different mosques are identified with the Iranians or the Turks. In Baku, Gouy Majid (Blue Mosque) is unofficially the Sunni mosque, and this is where Turkey's clerical representatives give sermons. The government appears to facilitate Turkey's religious activities in Azerbaijan, but is more careful about Iran's religious activities. Iranian clerics make regular visits to Baku and several of them teach religion in various places. However, Iran faces a number of problems in its attempt to gain a foothold in Azerbaijan's urban religious life. First, Iran has played a precarious role in the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict. Although it set up refugee camps for nearly hundred thousand displaced Azerbaijanis just south of the Araz River, Iran's overall role in the conflict is seen as a betrayal of its Islamic goals. Second, two components of Iran's politico-religious rhetoric and stance which often come up in the sermons -its anti-West and anti-American position and its stance against Israel- appear to be ignored in Azerbaijan. Likewise, anti-

Russian sentiment in Azerbaijan has created very pro-western and pro-American sentiments. It is difficult to see how Iran's religious and cultural propaganda will withstand the secular and Western challenge. The main political discourse in Azerbaijan is about disengagement with Russia and engagement with the West, which is seen at times as the only viable alternative that might help them to emerge from the crisis created by the collapse of the Soviet regime. This is coupled with Azerbaijan's good relations with Israel. Unlike in Iran, the Arab-Israeli conflict does not dominate public agenda at all, not to mention any anti-Semitic rhetoric. Third, Sunni and Shi'a differences are not as demarcated as they are in Iran. Thus, moderate religious Azeris see Iran as pushing increasingly a very sectarian religious line - the Jafari school of Shi'ism. However, most Azerbaijani Muslims do not necessarily identify with present-day Iran or the religious establishment there. Nor does Iran see the Azerbaijanis as "true" Muslims. Surprisingly, the impact of the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran has been to stunt the Azerbaijani people's return to Islam in their own more natural way in the post-Soviet period.

Foreign Intervention and Iranian Nationalism

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of an independent Azeri state north of the Araxes River sent a clear signal to Tehran. Yet, by the beginning of the 1990's, Iranian Azeris had woven themselves into every facet of Iranian life, dominating the business elite of the nation and even holding high positions of power. Former Prime Minister Mir-Mousavi and Supreme Leader Khamenei are examples of ethnic Azeris gaining positions of influence after the revolution. As a result, the Azeri language began to witness a sort of official rehabilitation. Local television and mosques began to use Azeri in addition to the standard Persian. The reformist administration of President Khatami went so far as to support Azeri language newspapers and its treatment of the Azeris stood in stark contrast to the police tactics of the Pahlavi regime. The Azeri position and stature in Iranian society was so secure by the 1990's that some Iranian Azeris actually called for the re-integration of the former Soviet Azeri Republic back into Iran, causing much consternation in Moscow and Baku. To what degree would the people of Iran stand united in the face of a foreign intervention? If confronted by a foreign power, could Iran's leaders count on popular support for the regime, or would a significant share of society see such action as a window of opportunity to break with the theocratic government?

Unlike Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in which Shi'ites and Kurds suffered open persecutions, ethnic and religious minorities in Iran are subject to subtler forms of discrimination and have more freedoms. Unlike many pro-Western monarchical regimes, Persia has been a state for thousands of years. Obviously, external power will lack natural allies in Iran. Although a growing number of Iranians are unhappy with clerical rule, the depth of the grievances of Iranian minorities cannot be equated with those of Iraqi minorities. It is unlikely the external forces could count on Iranian ethnic minorities to support a forced regime change. The sheer size of Iran, in terms of both territory and population, would make it much more challenging to convince potentially supportive populations that any external power could protect them from Iranian government reprisals. Since Iranians are overwhelmingly Shi'ite and majority Persian, a regime change would be unlikely to change the political positions of ethnic groups or religious minorities. Although Iran's minority groups would prefer a more-tolerant regime, they do not have a realistic capability of taking power.

The post-revolutionary regime has promptly adopted a constructivist approach, using the ideals of sacrifice during the war and the rallying cry of Shia Islam to create a powerful ethnic attachment

that saw as its primary objective the defence of Iranian homeland. This attachment is to a broader supra-structure above the traditional notion of splintered ethnic groups that coalesces around a Shia-dominated Iranian cultural identity. Not surprisingly, Iran's ethnic groups appear to aspire to a modest range of objectives, with federalism standing at the far end of that continuum. Some marginalised groups might silently welcome foreign intervention but would be unlikely to make dependable allies for policies aimed at changing the regime by force.

Conclusion

The Azeri historical grievances reflect the tribulations of the entire Iranian population: frustration with the constraints of religious government, corruption, and social restrictions. The frustrations of Iranian Azeris, as in 1979, are concurrent with the mood of the Iranian people as a whole. In 1999, pro-democracy protests in Tabriz ranked second only to the ones in Tehran in size and focused on the granting of greater press freedoms throughout the country. The thousands that demonstrated at Tabriz University conspicuously did not include any references to Azeri nationalism in their agenda. Obviously, Azeri community is more likely to play a role in determining the future direction of Iran's political evolution than in igniting an ethnically based separatist movement. Having proven its centuries-long loyalty to the Iranian state and territorial integrity, the Azeris are also likely to work within the current political system to address their grievances. Although the emergence of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan has been a source of Azeri ethnic pride, it has not generated popular support from the Iranian Azeri community to seek to join Azerbaijan.

The demands of Iran's Azeri community remain relatively modest, focusing on the expansion of cultural freedoms, such as local control over Azeri-language broadcasting, greater say in local government, and the promotion of the Azeri language at all levels of education, including university instruction. In light of the regime's need to avoid exacerbating dual loyalties inside its borders and the prominent role Azeris play in the government and the business community, the Iranian government is likely to meet their demands. Although some scholars contend that Azeri nationalism could be exploited as a lever to influence the national government, there appears to be little popular support within Iran's Azeri community to assert a national identity other than Iranian.³⁰ Indeed, a few organizations advocate solutions ranging from the creation of a federal Iran to the secession of "South Azerbaijan" and reunification with its northern brethren. These groups are generally seen as offsprings of international entities rather than products of local activism, including the Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement, a Washington – based organization led by the former Majlis candidate Chehregani.³¹ To say the least, these groups lack the domestic support to mount an effective challenge to the Iranian government. Moreover, being connected to outside actors, such groups undermine constantly the credibility of local activists.

Historically, the Azeris have advocated a more democratic Iran: during the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1909), in the Azeris' brief challenge to the shah in 1945–1946, and leading up to and immediately following the Islamic Revolution (1977–1980). Iran's non-Persians may have a role to play in transforming Iran, but it will likely take place under the umbrella of a pro-democracy movement rather than through an ethnic-based opposition movement. The dual legacies of

³⁰ International Crisis Group, "Iran: Discontent and Disarray," Middle East Briefing No. 11, Brussels, October 15, 2003, p. 10; A. Molavi, "Iran's Azeri Question: What Does Iran's Largest Ethnic Minority Want?" EurasiaNet Commentary, April 15, 2003.

³¹ William Beeman, "Rumblings in Azerbaijan—Bush's Hawks Eye Northern Iran," Pacific News Service, June 6, 2003.

discrimination against ethnic minorities and the country's uneven economic development have created strong support in non-Persian areas for political reform. During recent presidential elections, the non-Persian electorate tilted heavily toward the reformist wing. Support for democratic political change among Iran's ethnic minorities is likely to persist so long as the country's periphery remains an economic backwater. Although the Iranian economy has been growing, the symptoms of underdevelopment remain acute in Iran's ethnic enclaves. Discrimination, compounded by poorer economic conditions, could motivate ethnic groups to challenge the Iranian government in the future.

A combination of state-sponsored suppression of Azeri sentiment (during the Pahlavi rule) and a massive integration movement toward the Iranian mainstream (under the Islamic regime) has prevented the rise of ethnic nationalism in the northwest. The result has been the establishment of an over-arching sense of Iranian nationalism skilfully manipulated and interlaced with loyalty to the precepts of Shiism, which makes an almost universal devotion to Iranian national identity possible. The war against the Iran's historic enemy, the Arabs from the western lowlands, cemented the feeling of Iranian nationalism that was able to eclipse ethnic nationalism across the new Islamic Republic. Non-Arab Iran united in the face of an Arab invasion, vowing not to repeat the catastrophic defeat of the Persian Empire by the Arabs centuries earlier. The Azeri support of the war effort increased the group's level of acceptance among both the Iranian populace and the nation's elites. With the foundation of a shared identity created by years of war, recent Iranian governments have allowed more flexibility in granting linguistic rights to the Azeri people. At present, there is little tangible evidence to support the notion that Iranian Azeris are prepared to confront the government in Tehran. Today, the Azeris seem to have attained a satisfactory level of ethnic self-esteem, with the ability to open up more space for themselves by influencing the growing national reform movement within the Iranian polity. The overwhelming majority of Iranian Azeris has repeatedly shown very little interest in ethnic-inspired instability and virtually no interest in separatism or reunification with the Republic of Azerbaijan, which is broadly viewed as economically stagnant, culturally disoriented and politically corrupt.

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