

# Iran's Azerbaijan Question in Evolution Identity, Society, and Regional Security

Emil Aslan Souleimanov  
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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
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## Executive Summary

Iranian Azerbaijanis have historically been considered the country's most loyal ethno-linguistic minority. Predominantly Shiite, with religion being the most important source of collective identity, Turkophone Azerbaijanis had until the 1920s provided numerous dynasties to the Persian thrones. From Seljuks to Qajars, they stayed at the avant-garde of the Persian empires and shielded them from the major Sunni rival, the Ottoman Empire.

The rise of nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century gradually breached the image of Iranian Azerbaijanis as a perfectly loyal community. For a tiny group of Iran-born Azerbaijani intellectuals in the first decades of the last century, the (re)discovery of ethno-linguistic identity, distinct from Persian, upgraded the populations of the Caucasus and Anatolia to the status of brethren. This raised concerns in Tehran over the fate of the strategic northwest should Iran's largest ethno-linguistic community seek separation from the rest of the country. These fears were heightened when in 1945, Iran's Azerbaijani provinces were established by the Moscow-led People's Republic of Azerbaijan. Lacking popular support, the Communist-inspired puppet republic failed to survive the Soviet withdrawal and disintegrated well before the influx of the Iranian military.

A mere year of *intermezzo* of Iranian Azerbaijan's *de facto* statehood still led the Iranian monarchy to adapt increased efforts to ensure the country's northwest remained part of Iran. Assimilatory policies intensified in the post-World War II decades. These were aimed both at the potentially disloyal members of ethnic communities but particularly at Azerbaijanis. Masses of Iranian Azerbaijanis assimilated into the Persian mainstream. This was due to internal immigration of millions of Azerbaijanis to Tehran and the country's other industrial areas, the lack of education in their native tongue, and certain stigmatization stemming from being a Turkophone Azerbaijani in Iran.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 initially brought about attenuation of state-imposed Persian nationalism. This was eventually replaced by the shared religion, Shiite Islam, as the ideological foundation of the emerging Republic. Yet, the situation gradually shifted during the 1980s and 1990s and Persian nationalism and assimilation policies returned to the forefront of state policies.

Nevertheless, the situation in Iran's Azerbaijani provinces had already begun to change dramatically since the early 1990s. This was largely driven by developments outside Iran. The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the establishment of an independent Azerbaijan to the north of the Araxes River- a source of immense concern for Iranian authorities, particularly in the light of the mounting Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh. This war threatened to jeopardize the Islamic Republic's security by spilling over to Iran's Azerbaijani-majority provinces. The war also served as a source of inspiration for masses of Iranian Azerbaijanis eager to rediscover their "northern brethren" following decades of mutual isolation. In a similar vein, the economic and political rise of Turkey led many Iranian Azerbaijanis to rediscover their ethno-linguistic and cultural roots and reconsider their Turkic heritage as a source of pride. As a result, roughly over the last 25 years, many Iranian Azerbaijanis have become more proud of their unique cultural heritage.

There is also an important international dimension of Iranian Azerbaijan's ongoing transformation. There are two states – Azerbaijan and Turkey – with their dominant population ethnolinguistically and to an extent also culturally very close to Azerbaijanis. Since the establishment of independent Azerbaijan in 1991, many Iranian Azerbaijanis, particularly those of secular and nationalist mindsets, have both enthusiastic and romanticized attitudes toward very statehood of the Republic of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, the division in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century of Azerbaijani-majority territories into the Russian-dominated north and the Persian-dominated South brought about the formation of cultures that are, in many respects, antagonistic. While secularization, Russification, and strong ethnic nationalism have shaped Caucasian Azerbaijan, strong religious identity, social conservatism, and cultural Persification have been dominant in the midst of Iranian Azerbaijanis. Emphatic cultural dissimilarities between the Northern and Southern

Azerbaijanis are something Azerbaijanis on both sides of the Araxes River, even those in favor of unification have become gradually cognizant of.

Since the 1990s, the following processes have been crystallized among Iran's Azerbaijanis:

- A small, yet vocal minority of Iranian Azerbaijanis has emerged advocating for ethno-linguistic and cultural rights, such as education in their native Turkic tongue, formally allowed by the Iranian Constitution, but *de facto* banned. Most of these Iran-based political activists fall short of challenging the territorial integrity of Iran. They have struggled for the acknowledgement of Iranian Azerbaijanis' distinct ethno-linguistic identity within the borders of Iran. The extent of popular support for these groups is hardly calculable. Public manifestations, particularly those regarding politically sensitive topics, are not allowed in Iran and dissidents face harsh persecution. Those in support for Iranian Azerbaijanis' cultural emancipation – or even for autonomy – appear to prevail in the region's main cities, predominately within university-educated secular youth.
- A number of recent events, for instance, the 2006 Cartoon Crisis and the 2011 Urmiye Protests, have motivated even politically apathetic Iranian Azerbaijanis to protest. The protests have concerned what they consider state-tolerated discrimination of Azerbaijanis, a disrespectful attitude toward their heritage, as well as environmental issues.
- Since the early 2000s, a tiny, but visible group of secular (ultra-nationalists) has emerged in Iranian Azerbaijan. This group has been concentrated in major cities, particularly in Tabriz, Urmiye and Ardabil. Often associated with the Tabriz soccer club Tractor Sazi fan club, members of this group have on various occasions questioned Southern Azerbaijan's status within Iran, displaying determination to secede from the Islamic Republic and join the Azerbaijani Republic and/or Turkey.
- Similar explicitly Pan-Turkic and anti-Persian views have been propagated by various Iranian Azerbaijani diaspora groups. These

organizations reside outside Iran in Western Europe and North America, and, to a lesser extent in the Azerbaijani Republic. The latter generally seeks to distance itself from expressing formal support to Iranian Azerbaijanis' struggle and also from the anti-Iranian rhetoric from some of their representatives based abroad. The influence of these groups in the midst of diaspora-based Iranian Azerbaijanis remains unclear as does their impact on the developments within Iran.

- The official position of Iranian authorities contends that Iranian Azerbaijani activists, both seeking secession and struggling to acquire ethno-linguistic rights within Iran's borders, are orchestrated by Iran's outside enemies for the sake of sowing the seed of public unrest to disintegrate the multi-ethnic republic. Yet, no available evidence points to the U.S.A, Turkey, Israel, and Azerbaijan being the masterminds of public protests in Iran's Azerbaijani provinces, or having cultivated in Iran's northwest spy networks, although there is some fractured evidence to imply that individual policy-makers in the U.S.A in the early 2000s may have had initial interest in assessing the potential of Azerbaijani separatism in Iran.
- Notwithstanding, due to these recent developments, many Iranian Azerbaijanis, particularly socially conservative populations residing in rural areas, appear to self-identify as Shiite Muslims first, Iranians second, and Azerbaijanis third. For them, loyalty to the Iranian Shiite state trumps their ethno-linguistic roots and regional identity. Any form of public activism for the sake of obtaining cultural rights, not least secession from the Islamic Republic, is condemned as being inspired by outside powers (Turkey, Israel, U.S.A) in order to imperil the sacred unity of their Iranian fatherland.
- The ongoing civil war in Syria has deepened existing divisions within the Iranian Azerbaijani population. While urban youths have expressed sympathies towards Turkey and the West and blamed the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies for deliberately targeting innocent civilians, rural Iranian Azerbaijanis have shown full support for Iran's (and Russia's) actions in Syria. Indeed, rural Iranian Azerbaijanis have



praised efforts to rescue fellow Shiites – and expand Iran’s influence in a strategically important country.

- The emergence of an independent Azerbaijan in 1991 shaped Iran’s South Caucasian policy for the years to come. Concerned with the negative impact of the Azerbaijani Republic on its own Azerbaijani minority, Tehran in the early 1990s was quick to align itself with Russia to prevent ambitious regional energy projects from realization as they could link up Azerbaijan to international oil and natural gas markets.
- The long-term trend of Iranian youth disassociating themselves from the theocratic regime and its ideology while enduring it outwardly has led to the return of nationalism within the identity of ethnic Persian. Along with this nationalism is anti-Arabic and anti-Turkic overtones. This trend has been running against a similar trend in the midst of young Iranian Azerbaijanis’ rediscovered interest in their Turkic heritage. In the years to come, the weakened appeal of shared Shiite religion and increasing disassociation from the theocratic regime may deepen conflict between both Persian nationalists and Azerbaijani Turkic nationalists. This development could pave the way for ethnically-motivated upheavals in a country that has so far affected the fate of neighboring multi-ethnic States.

Iran’s relationship with Turkey, U.S.A, Israel, and Russia have to an extent impacted Iran’s Azerbaijani community – or discussion of its role in Iran’s relationship with its allies, partners, and foes:

- In the last two decades, many Iranian Azerbaijanis have deemed Turkish identity to be increasingly prestigious. This is due to Turkey’s connotation of a more liberal, modern, militarily powerful, and advanced country. The reception of Turkish (and Azerbaijani) satellite television, formally banned in Iran, has played a significant role in advancing Iranian Azerbaijanis’ ethno-linguistic and cultural emancipation. While increasingly rigorous Turkic identity – and pro-Turkish sentiments – in the midst of Iran’s (urban-

based) Azerbaijani community have since the 1990s been a matter of jealousy for Persian-speakers, Iranian authorities appear to have cultivated a sense of Turkey's covert involvement in Iranian Azerbaijanis' affairs. Therefore, explicitly demonstrated pro-Turkish slogans, such as waving Turkish flags and shouting pro-Turkish mottos by Tractor Sazi fans, have been interpreted by Iranian authorities as being orchestrated by Turkey through the network of its agents in Iran's northwest. The Syrian Civil War has brought additional tension to Turkish-Iranian relations. While there is a lack of evidence regarding the involvement of Turkish intelligence in stirring up protests among Iran's Azerbaijanis, its presence in Iran's northwest cannot be ruled out. Conflicting Turkish and Iranian interests and their increasing regional rivalry may motivate Turkey to take a greater interest in weakening the Islamic Republic from within.

- Washington's troublesome relationship with Tehran has been associated with its efforts to weaken the Islamic Republic both externally and internally. The existence in Iran of a discontented Azerbaijani minority may play well to Washington's hand. This could explain efforts by some American politicians in the early 2000s to investigate the potential for Iranian Azerbaijanis' separatism and irredentism. Yet so far, there is no evidence of direct American interference. The U.S. lacks the capacity to instigate an anti-Tehran rebellion in Iranian Azerbaijan. Yet, due to the current trend of strengthening Azerbaijani Turkic nationalism in Iran, the situation may change in the medium-term.
- From the early 1990s and onwards, Russia and Iran have shared many common interests both in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea area. Both Tehran and Moscow have desired a weak Azerbaijan, preferably without Western orientation and isolated from important East-West energy projects. Upheavals in the midst of Iran's Azerbaijani community, as well as any internal troubles that would weaken the Islamic Republic, are thus not in Moscow's interest. Moscow seeks to have Iran as a strong regional and global partner.
- The worsening of Turkish-Israeli relations in the early 2010s has prompted Israel to place greater emphasis on a secular and friendly Azerbaijan. While

Azerbaijan has acquired sophisticated weaponry from Israel, taking advantage of an important partner on the international scene, Israel has purchased vast amounts of Azerbaijani oil. The growth of Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation has been a matter of much concern in Tehran. On various occasions, Tehran has made explicit warnings to Baku to discontinue cooperation. Speculations abound of increased activities – and mutual rivalry – between the Iranian and Israeli secret services on Azerbaijani territory.

In the final analysis, the Azerbaijani question in Iran epitomizes the growing intersection between the affairs of the South Caucasus and those of the Middle East. Those seeking to weaken the Islamic Republic are likely to continue to monitor the matter with interest; and domestic factors will ensure that it does not go away.

## Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country of multiple ethnic groups, where the share of ethnic Persians makes up approximately half of the population. The remaining population consists primarily of members of about ten ethnic groups of Turkic, Iranian, and Semitic origin generally inhabiting compact territories of the country's northern, eastern, and western periphery.<sup>1</sup> The exact numbers of ethnic minorities or even of the majority Persian population are not known, however, because the Iranian census does not determine the nationalities of the country's inhabitants, but rather only notes their religious affiliation.

The Azerbaijanis are by far the most populous ethnic minority in Iran.<sup>2</sup> According to various estimates, there are between 12 and 22 million of them living within the territory of the Islamic Republic, accounting for up to a quarter of Iran's total population.<sup>3</sup> In a survey conducted by the Statistical Centre of Iran in 2002,<sup>4</sup> 23,3 percent of Iranians responded that "Azerbaijani Turkish" was their regional language.<sup>5</sup> The majority of the Azerbaijani population inhabits the northwest provinces of Iran that border Turkey, Armenia, and Iraq. This includes West

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<sup>1</sup> Among the Turkic ethnic groups are, in particular, Azerbaijanis, Turkmens, Qashqais, Afshars, and Qajars. Apart from the dominant Persians, the other Iranian ethnic groups living within the territory of the Islamic Republic are the Kurds, Lurs, Talyshs, Gilaks, Mazanderanis, Balochs, Pashtuns, and Hazaras. Constituting a minority nationality of Semite origin are the many Arabs living mainly in the southwest of the country near the shores of the Persian Gulf. The country also has a relatively populous Armenian minority inhabiting Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz, and a number of smaller ethnic communities such as the Persianized Georgians known as Fereydanians inhabiting the Fereydan district of the Isfahan province in the central part of Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Many terms are used to describe the Shi'ite, Turkic-speaking population of northwestern Iran. Frequently the terms "Azerbaijani", "Azerbaijani Turks", "Azarbaijani Turks," or in Iran simply "Turks" (tork) are used to describe this group; and even within the group, terminology used for self-identification will differ. The term "Azerbaijani" will be used throughout this study.

<sup>3</sup> A. William Samii estimates the share of Iran's Azerbaijanis at 24 per cent of the entire population. A. William Samii, "The Nation and Its Minorities: Ethnicity, Unity and State Policy in Iran, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 20, no. 1-2 (2000):128-137.

<sup>4</sup> Back then, Iran's population numbered some 65 million people, which would put the number of those Azerbaijanis knowledgeable of their native tongue to around 16 million.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Gilles Riaux, "The Formative Years of Azerbaijani Nationalism in Post-Revolutionary Iran, Central Asian Survey 27, no. 1 (2008): 45-58.

Azerbaijan,<sup>6</sup> East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan,<sup>7</sup> and also parts of Gilan,<sup>8</sup> Hamadan, and Qazvin,<sup>9</sup> and others.<sup>10</sup> According to various estimates, a quarter to a third of the population of Tehran consists of immigrants of Azerbaijani origin and their first- or second-generation offspring.<sup>11</sup> Thus Tehran, a city of around 13 million inhabitants within its metropolitan area, is often referred to as having the Azerbaijani population on earth outside Azerbaijan.<sup>12</sup> There is also a quite sizeable population of Azerbaijanis in other large Iranian cities in the central part of the country, but their numbers are difficult to determine, in part because of the considerable number of mixed marriages between ethnic Azerbaijanis and members of other Iranian ethnic groups, especially Persians.

In view of their large numbers and their corresponding representation among members of the Iranian elite, as well as their territorial concentration, the loyalty of Iran's Azerbaijanis to the Tehran government is of key importance for preserving the regime and maintaining the territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic. The growing nationalist, federalist, and in extreme cases, even separatist – seeking the creation of an independent Azerbaijan from Iran's mostly Azerbaijani provinces – or irredentist – joining with the post-Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan and/or with Turkey – tendencies among the Azerbaijani minority are therefore increasingly viewed by the Iranian government as a security threat requiring heightened attention.

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<sup>6</sup> A major portion of the population there consists of Kurds – especially in the areas bordering with Turkey.

<sup>7</sup> Together with the Persians or the Iranian-speaking Talyshs, some of whom inhabit the border areas of the southeast of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the shores of the Caspian Sea, especially in the Lankaran region.

<sup>8</sup> Together with the majority Iranian-speaking Gilaks and Persians, whose share is especially high in the cities.

<sup>9</sup> In both cases together with the Persians who are predominant in the cities.

<sup>10</sup> It is appropriate to make mention here in a footnote of an important aspect of this study, namely nomenclature and the transliteration of names, geographical features, names of cities etc. For the most part, the established or most commonly used English transliterations have been chosen, but the matter is more complicated in those cases where there is no available established practice. Because one of the authors has knowledge of Turkish (Azerbaijani) and the other of Persian, they are able to make their own transliterations of proper nouns based on phonetic equivalents in English pronunciation and orthography, and these have in turn been adapted by the translator into English equivalents. In some cases, when such a transliteration could be less clear or misleading, more usual transliterations have been employed, including some from English-language sources.

<sup>11</sup> James Minahan, *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 1765–66.

<sup>12</sup> Riaux, "The Formative Years of Azerbaijani Nationalism in Post-Revolutionary Iran", 46.

This study focuses on the phenomenon of growing national self-awareness among members of the Azerbaijani minority in Iranian territory who are striving for ethnolinguistic and cultural emancipation – in confrontation with efforts by the regime and part of the country's Azerbaijani population to continue with a policy of assimilation. In the context of this conflict of identities, an additional goal of the authors is to identify and evaluate potential and existing security risks that this process represents for Iran's internal affairs and for the stability of the whole Caspian region. Because this topic has been subject to only limited study, the presentation of the issue has been conceived in a relatively broad context. Readers are therefore introduced to the ethnic, religious, and politico-historical factors influencing the current situation in the area, followed by an analysis of the current status of the movement for the emancipation of Iran's Azerbaijanis and its influence on Iranian state security. The final part of the study deals with the international context of Azerbaijani nationalism in Iran, emphasizing primarily its security dimensions. Individual chapters analyze the positions of the U.S.A, Azerbaijan, Israel, Turkey, and Russia and the relations of those countries with the Azerbaijani minority and with Iran itself.

Over the period of 2010-2014, we carried out a total of six months of fieldwork in the major Iranian Azerbaijani cities (Tabriz, Jolfa, Orumiye, Jolfa, Ardabil), as well as in the midst of the republic's Azerbaijani communities in the Persian-majority cities of Tehran, Isfahan, and Qom. Security concerns both for researchers and the Iranian Azerbaijanis we contacted required serious precautions not to draw attention from the authorities. We carried out a combination of unstructured interviews and loose discussions, as well semi-structured interviews, their depth contingent on the trust that we were able to establish with individual interlocutors. We sought to contact Azerbaijanis from all walks of life: intellectuals, students, white and blue-collar workers, soccer fans, tradesmen, people from service businesses. In total, we communicated with over 60 individuals. Our knowledge of Turkish and Azerbaijani and Persian enabled us to establish contact with both Turkophone and Persianophone Azerbaijanis, while our fieldwork, carried out separately from each other, enabled us to randomize the pool of our respondents. While our sample is by no means representative, it is one of the largest – if not *the* largest – of all available studies dealing with the discussed issues using first-hand data obtained directly from Iran-based Iranian Azerbaijanis.

## Official Iranian Minority Policy

Although ethnic Azerbaijanis constitute about a quarter of Iran's population, they are still regarded as a minority. The Iranian regime officially rejects any form of discrimination, but certain passages of Iran's constitution<sup>13</sup> do not offer ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities rights equal to those of Shiite Persians. For example, Article 15 identifies Persian as the official language of Iran, so official documents, correspondence, and other texts must be in that language. Minorities are *de jure* permitted the use of their languages in print and in the teaching of their own literature in schools, but only as a supplement to mandatory Persian. The constitution does not, however, make any mention of the possibility of teaching the languages themselves, and in reality, there is targeted repression of such efforts at schools for ethnic minorities.<sup>14</sup> Special attention is paid to Arabic. The position of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, is much better than that of the other native languages of the ethnic minorities. Raeesi summarizes the consequences that at first glance seemingly insignificant discrimination on the basis of language can have for discriminated minorities. The following five points fittingly characterize the effects of discrimination:

First, children from non-Persian families face a difficult situation. At home they communicate in their native tongues: Azerbaijani, Kurdish, Balochi, etc. At school, they are forced to study in Persian, although their teachers are rarely, if at all, native Persian-speakers themselves. When comparing school results between the two groups it is clear that non-Persian children are at a disadvantage. Students of non-Persian origin thus have a considerable handicap *vis-à-vis* ethnic Persians or native Persophones in general. Second, favoring Persian in the educational system leads

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<sup>13</sup> An English translation of the Iranian constitution is available online. "Iran – Constitution", October 10, 2013, [http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html).

<sup>14</sup> A comprehensive analysis of the Iranian authorities' policies toward non-Persian ethnic groups is offered in Samii, "The Nation and Its Minorities: Ethnicity, Unity and State Policy in Iran", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20, no. 1-2 (2000): 128-42.

to the steady decline of regional languages. The chances for non-Persians to contribute literature, music, or other high culture products become considerably lower in comparison to Persian. Third, Persian is the language of government officials and the court system. Due to the lack of interpreters in Iranian courts, non-Persians suffer discrimination *vis-à-vis* the majority population. This problem is even more pronounced for poor and uneducated Iranian citizens from minority nationalities. For them it is very difficult to attain the same level of justice as is experienced by the Persian majority. Fourth, according to Raeesi's argument, since language and literature are among the most important means of human development, the marginalization of local languages negatively affects development in Iran's peripheral regions. Fifth, due to the aforementioned factors, ethnic Persians enjoy superior positions in terms of their cultural development and ethnolinguistic dominance. This means they are at a distinct advantage when compared with members of the republic's ethnic minorities.<sup>15</sup>

The Iranian constitution is in fact quite detailed and exact in its definition of the rights and protection of minority nationalities and other minorities, but its application, together with other legislative measures, and especially its enforceability are wanting. Therefore, demands are periodically made, for the revision of some parts of the Iranian legal code and for the implementation of rights provided by the constitution, usually at times when elections are approaching.

### **Historical Background to Iranian Azerbaijan**

Persia has represented a conglomerate of nationalities, languages, and culture for centuries. The ancestors of present-day Azerbaijanis began to populate the area together with the dominant Persians around the year 1000 CE, when the eastern provinces of present-day Iran were conquered by the Ghaznavids, the first Turkish dynasty originating in Central Asia, who became the first of a series of dynasties of Turkic origin that would rule the territory of the ancient Persian kingdoms. They would become Persianized over time and accepting of the more developed culture

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<sup>15</sup> Foreign Policy Centre, "Discrimination against Religious and Ethnic Minorities in the Islamic Republic Constitution", Iran Human Rights Review, January 2014, [https://tavaana.org/sites/default/files/657\\_violence-en\\_discrimination-against-religious-and-ethnic-minorities-in-the-islamic-republic-constitution1\\_0.pdf](https://tavaana.org/sites/default/files/657_violence-en_discrimination-against-religious-and-ethnic-minorities-in-the-islamic-republic-constitution1_0.pdf)



and often even the language of the native Persians. The Ghaznavid rulers were followed by the Seljuk Oghuz, ancestors of today's Turks, Azerbaijanis, and Turkmen, when nomadic tribes began a large-scale westward migration from the plains and steppes of Central Asia through Persia as far as Asia Minor. With the exception of Mongolian hegemony from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the territory of historical Persia was ruled by powerful Turkic dynasties that managed to centralize the Persian lands, and ruled Persia until 1925, when the last shah of the Qajar Dynasty was deposed by Reza Shah Pahlavi in a *coup d'état*.

During those centuries, Persia's military-political elite generally consisted of members of various Turkic tribes, the ancestors of the present-day Azerbaijanis.<sup>16</sup> Various Turkic dialects close to modern Azerbaijani served as the informal language of the court and also as the language of the army, which consisted mainly of members of the originally semi-nomadic Turkic tribes. Meanwhile, Persian kept its position as the literary and formal language of the court, and Arabic was regarded as the language of theology and science. Turkic dynasties and urbanized members of Oghuz tribes usually underwent Persification within just a few generations, while the Turkic-speaking countryside kept its ethno-linguistic identity.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was Shah Ismail I – a Turcophone ruler of the Safavid dynasty, which originated in the Azerbaijani region of Ardabil – who gave Shiite Islam the status of state religion.<sup>17</sup> The majority of Azerbaijanis and Persians adopted Shiite Islam, which became, along with high Persian culture, the foundation of Iranian statehood during the centuries that followed. This religious identity put the ancestors of the present-day Azerbaijanis in conflict with the Sunni Anatolian Turks of the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>16</sup> Their dominance can, perhaps, be explained by the fact that unlike the settled Persians with their environment of highly developed feudal relations, the Turkic tribes, which lacked social stratification (i.e. a nobility controlling the land and dependent peasants), possessed an established warrior ethos. From childhood, every young male was regarded as a freeman and a future soldier, and he was raised in that spirit.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the Turkic – or Azerbaijani Turkish – role in the Safavid period (1501-1736/1773) see Willem Floor and Hasan Javadi, "The Role of Azerbaijani Turkish in Safavid Iran," *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 4 (2013): 569-581.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Azerbaijan, which found itself at a strategic crossroads near the Ottoman and Russian borders became the place from which the winds of progressive change were blowing in from Europe, often through the empire of the Romanovs. It was through this northwestern region of Iran that the ideologies of socialism and nationalism found their way to Iran. Thus, the vanguard of many modern movements was made up of intellectuals from Azerbaijan, often directly from Tabriz, whose language skills enabled them to complete their studies in Istanbul and later in Europe, or laborers from Iranian Azerbaijan, who brought socialist ideas back to their native Iran from seasonal work in the oil industry of Baku.

Of course, this phenomenon was by no means limited to the borders of Iranian Azerbaijan. The shaping of Azerbaijani identity both in northern and southern Azerbaijan<sup>18</sup> at first played out as a struggle between two ideological currents, the first of which upheld the primacy of culture and religion (*société persane*), while the second emphasized that identity was originally derived from language. The forming of a unified Azerbaijani identity was in effect hindered not only by traditional clan-territorial differentiation, but also by sectarian differences. While a preponderance of Azerbaijanis professed Shiite Islam, a strong Sunni minority inhabiting mainly the west and north of Azerbaijani territory tended to identify itself more with fellow believers from Turkey and Dagestan.<sup>19</sup>

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the winners of this ideological dispute became divided on the opposite banks of the Araxes River. The primacy of language finally won out in northern Azerbaijan, and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Azerbaijan's pro-Turkic identity had already clearly taken shape, and the role of religion in nascent Azerbaijani secular, pro-Western, and modernist nationalism was kept to a minimum. At approximately the same time, the Iranian orientation of the elites of

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<sup>18</sup> At that time, after all, there was no impenetrable border between the two Azerbaijanis. The newspapers published in Tabriz or Baku were available on both sides of the Arax River, and there were also lively contacts among business people, intellectuals etc.

<sup>19</sup> Referring to contemporary Russian sources, Tadeusz Swietochowski states that at the moment of the Russian occupation of the Azerbaijani khanates, the number of adherents to Sunni Islam was roughly equal to the number of Shiites. The number of more militant and more politically active Sunnis gradually declined, because they emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920. The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 88.

southern Azerbaijan established itself, as the leading representatives there were among the most vocal proponents of Iranian nationalism – and of the Iranian origins of the Azerbaijani nation.

The first exception may have been an autonomist movement that was established in Iranian Azerbaijan soon after the Second World War, when those areas of Iran were occupied by Soviet troops.<sup>20</sup> In 1945-46, the so-called Azerbaijan People's Government based in Tabriz was established by Moscow, after the Red Army had taken control over the northern part of Iran during the war. The Iranian Azerbaijani Communist puppet regime led by Ja'far Pishevari was, of course, dependent on Soviet armaments. Although he never declared the intention of splitting off from Iran, and would speak of the need for the federalization of that multiethnic country instead of discussing independence, his actions indicated that he was actually moving towards independence, and given a different constellation of international politics, this might have come about. Newly established Azerbaijani home defense forces disarmed units of the Iranian army; a new judicial system based on Soviet law was created; land reform unfavorable to wealthy landowners was enacted; and for the first time in the history of the region, Azerbaijani Turkish was elevated to the status of official language. But increasing pressure from the United States forced the Russians to withdraw from northern Iran, and that led to reoccupation by the Iranian army and the beginning of repression aimed at actual or supposed collaborators from among the local Azerbaijanis. Iranian Azerbaijanis, many of whom were distrustful of Pishevari's regime because of its ties to Russians and Communists, often welcomed the Iranians back with open arms.<sup>21</sup>

Still, the event seems not to have been forgotten in Tehran. Separatism on the northwestern periphery represented a nightmare for Iranian monarchs of the Pahlavi Dynasty.<sup>22</sup> The strategic location of Azerbaijan, the ethnolinguistic ties of

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<sup>20</sup> For excellent analyses of the internal dynamics and external context of the discussed movement, see Jamil Hasanov, *At the Dawn of the Cold War: The Soviet-American Crisis over Iranian Azerbaijan, 1941-1946* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Louise Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 35-55; and Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 129-92.

<sup>21</sup> Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, 129-92.

<sup>22</sup> It is true that nearly every time the power of the country's central government was weakened, separatist uprisings occurred in the peripheral areas. The goal of the tribal rulers who generally led

its population to Turkey and to Caucasian Azerbaijan, and the sheer size of the ethnic Azerbaijani population represented a potential challenge to the country's integrity. From the beginning, the Pahlavi Dynasty exerted great efforts to build a centralized state, and having experienced the *de facto* secession of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, it focused considerable attention on this key region.

At the same time, Iran's modern-thinking elites worked incessantly to push Shiite Islam into the background, instead emphasizing Persian nationalism. Islam was treated as an alien element 'imported' by the Arabs and imposed on the country in spite of considerable opposition, and the regime instead identified with the pre-Islamic traditions of the ancient Persian empires of the Achaemenids, Sasanians, and Parthians.<sup>23</sup> The Persians were regarded as a state-forming nationality, and the regime adopted a policy to assimilate its ethnic minorities. Instruction, publishing, and media in non-Persian languages were banned.<sup>24</sup> The Azerbaijanis played a special role as the largest ethnic minority, and Iran's Azerbaijani provinces were among the first in the country where mandatory school attendance (in Persian, of course) was implemented. Taqi Arani, a native of Tabriz and an important leftist intellectual, explained in 1924 that mandatory school attendance, "must be secured in Azerbaijan whatever the cost," emphasizing its political importance.<sup>25</sup> He also called for the elimination of the Azerbaijani Turkic language, asserting that it had been foisted on the people by, "Mongol invaders," whereas the region had been the birthplace of Zoroaster and the cradle of the Iranian Aryans.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Iranian Azerbaijani elites themselves often supported assimilation.<sup>27</sup> In this way, they

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the uprisings was, of course, to strengthen their own economic and political autonomy, but their motivation was not nationalistic.

<sup>23</sup> The series of reforms already being carried out during the interwar period was notably reminiscent of the Kemalist reforms in neighboring Turkey, whether involving relations with the clerics, the emancipation of women, or efforts to consolidate power in Tehran by the maximum centralization of the country.

<sup>24</sup> This applied especially to the ethnic groups of the Muslim faith in compact settlements on the country's periphery, an environment from which one could expect separatism – if only in an embryonic form. These restrictions did not apply to the ethnic minorities of the Christian faith that were concentrated mainly in urban locations, such as the Armenians in Tehran, Esfahan, and Tabriz.

<sup>25</sup> Taqi Arani, "Azarbaijan ya yek mas'ale-ye hayati va mamati-ye Iran," [Azerbaijan as a Vital Problem in Iran] *Farangestan*, no. 1, September (1924): 254.

<sup>26</sup> Arani, "Azarbaijan ya yek mas'ale-ye hayati va mamati-ye Iran," 247-48.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmad Kasravi, *Azari, ya zaban-e bastan-e Azarbaijan*, [Azeri, or the ancient language of Azerbaijan] (Bethesda, Maryland: Ibex Publishers, 1993).

helped ingrain the image of the Azerbaijanis as pureblooded but linguistically Turkified Aryans.<sup>28</sup>

The economic policies of the shahs focused on building industry and infrastructure in the Persian-dominated central areas of the country, while the ethnic periphery was deliberately neglected. As a consequence, the standard of living in central Iran became incomparably higher than in the periphery. These economic policies influenced migration and subsequent assimilation of minorities, especially the Azerbaijanis, in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>29</sup>

Yet simultaneously, Azerbaijani self-confidence was on the rise in this period, as was tolerance on the part of the ruling dynasty towards Azerbaijani demands. This was a result of the marriage of Mohammad Reza to Farah Diba in late 1959. Although born in Tehran, Farah Diba repeatedly emphasized her Azerbaijani ancestry and identity, and appeared to view her marriage to the Shah of Iran as perfect proof of the Persian-Azerbaijani union that joined the two largest nationalities of modern Iran.<sup>30</sup>

More significant changes began to take place following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The emphasis of state ideology now shifted from Persian ethno-nationalism to religious solidarity. For a certain segment of Azerbaijani intellectuals, the revolution – and the brief openness it generated before the Islamic character of the emerging regime was sealed – also resurrected hopes for the federalization of Iran. Manifestations in favor of federalization took place in several Azerbaijani cities, and especially in Tabriz. But they could not compete with the demonstrations held in support of the ethnically Azerbaijani cleric and local native, Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari. That liberal ayatollah rejected Khomeini's conception of the "rule of clerics" as being incompatible with Islam, and condemned the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran. Shariatmadari was placed under house arrest, and Iranian military units reappeared on the streets and squares of the Azerbaijani metropolis. Bloodshed was prevented only by

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<sup>28</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 388-418.

<sup>29</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Tehran: The Making of a Metropolis* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Farah Pahlavi, *Memoirs* (Prague: Argo, 2004).

Shariatmadari's resignation and his appeal to the demonstrators to go home.<sup>31</sup> Demonstrators supporting Shariatmadari – and opposing Khomeini – also frequently called for autonomy in Iranian Azerbaijan.<sup>32</sup> As Brenda Shaffer has observed, “each time the central control over freedom of expression in Iran has diminished, for example, during the period of Islamic Revolution, Azerbaijanis amplified their expressions of Azerbaijani identity and their demands for expanded cultural and language rights.”<sup>33</sup> But whereas outright separatism was voiced among the Arab, Turkmen, Baloch, and Kurdish minorities, the notion of separation from Iran remained anathema among Azerbaijanis. The Azerbaijani population remained loyal to Iran during the great Kurdish rebellion from 1980 to 1983, and during the bloody Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988. To this day, the suffering and hardships of that war binds many Persians and Azerbaijanis together.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> It is not without interest that in 1963 it was Shariatmadari who actually saved Khomeini's life by raising him to the status of a marja (a cleric of high authority who could not be executed according to the Iranian constitution). In part for this reason, Khomeini was sent into exile by the shah's regime for his “subversive activities” rather than executed.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, a period news report broadcast on American television by NBC News from Tabriz in January 1980. “NBC: Turkish People Protest Against Khomeini – 1980 – Tabriz, Iranian Azerbaijan,” Youtube, October 8, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gx1ldPE-W9A>.

<sup>33</sup> Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews of Josef Kraus and Emil Souleimanov with locals on both sides of Azerbaijan-Iran border.

## The Current Situation in Iranian Azerbaijan

Since the beginning of the 2000s, in spite of all of the restrictions imposed by the Iranian authorities, the Azerbaijanis have been holding almost regular mass processions at their national symbols – Mount Sabalan and the fortress Bazz. At these processions, separatist slogans appear, as do Pan-Turkic symbols and the illegal flag of South Azerbaijan, which is visually similar to the flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>35</sup>

Besides increasingly frequent clashes between soccer fans of Azerbaijani and Persian origin, anonymous posters have begun appearing that call for instruction in the Turkish language, as well as the flags of Azerbaijan and Turkey hung overnight in conspicuous places. In response, police and militia units remove these flags immediately. The Iranian regime has imposed a total embargo on information about activities of this kind, and as a consequence, the majority Persian population often live under illusions foisted on them by official government propaganda.

Between 2009 and 2014, field research conducted by the authors in Iranian Azerbaijan found that in Tabriz, there is nearly open talk of the need for the federalization of Iran and for the creation of Azerbaijani autonomy, and from time to time one even hears slogans about the need for Azerbaijan to split away from Iran. Taking into consideration the established narrative of the full integration of the Azerbaijanis into Iranian society and the permanent threat of reprisals, one may assume that the mood is one of heightened tension. Unlike the situation twenty years ago, when one would scarcely have heard a Turkic language spoken openly in Tabriz – or ten years ago, when hardly half of the population spoke Turkic in public – now everyone speaks Azerbaijani in public and listens exclusively to Azerbaijani or Turkish music. This does not only apply to Tabriz, but also to Tehran. Azerbaijanis jokingly call Tehran the world's second largest Turkish city after Istanbul, because the Iranian capital is a magnet for immigrants, many of whom are of Azerbaijani origin. The Azerbaijani language can easily be used

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<sup>35</sup> For a depiction of the flag of South Azerbaijan, see "Tarihte ve Günümüzde Türk Bayrakları. Güney Azerbaycan," November 11, 2006, <http://turkbayraklari.blogcu.com/guney-azerbaycan/705509>.

instead of Persian around the city, because Azerbaijani is the native tongue of many people, while many Persians have at least a passive knowledge of Azerbaijani. Most inhabitants of Tehran would like to visit Turkey, and are familiar with it thanks to satellite broadcasts and very popular Turkish series and telenovelas.

Questions of nationality are gradually becoming important policy matters in Iran. During the campaign for the Iranian presidential election in May and June of 2013, the conservative candidate Mohsen Rezaee publicly declared his idea for the economic federalization of the country based on the individual provinces.<sup>36</sup> The goal of this idea, which he had already introduced a year earlier in his book *Economic Federalism*, is to improve the country's economy, with less redistribution at the central level, and with greater authority and freedom for the provincial governments of the federation to decide on the economic direction and development within their own territories. In spite of the predominant emphasis on economic matters, the idea of federalization has caught on mainly among nationalistic activists, who see in it an opportunity for the creation of nationality-based autonomous territories. In the context of the election campaign, Rezaee's remarks can be viewed as a targeted attempt to woo voters from the periphery and the Azerbaijanis, Kurds, and Balochs in particular. He succeeded in this to a certain extent, because he began to be discussed as a possible candidate who would help the minorities achieve greater emancipation. Yet everything changed with the dramatic ascent of Hassan Rouhani, who won easily in the first round. Rezaee also received most of his votes in regions inhabited by minorities, especially in the Arab, Kurdish, and Lur areas in the west of the country, but also in Iranian Azerbaijan.<sup>37</sup> It remains unclear to what extent this was a result of his ideas on federalism.

In sum, an emancipatory phase of Azerbaijani nationalism appears to be underway at present, with the parallel emergence and development of armed resistance forces, although by all indications at a very early stage, and their future and ability (and willingness) to act is uncertain. Judging only from the difficulties involved with a nationalistic campaign, it is apparent that the nationalist groups of Iranian Azerbaijan must have broad support. In view of the repressive nature of the Iranian

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<sup>36</sup> "Mohsen Rezaee's Emphasis on Economic Federalism", *Asr Iran*, May 7, 2013, <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/269458>.

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Interior of Iran, "The Results of Presidential Election," 2013, <http://result-p.moi.ir/Portal/Home/default.aspx>.



regime, it is inconceivable that such movements could operate without support from abroad, either provided by foreign governments or the diaspora.

An analysis of the nationalist movements among Iran's Azerbaijanis cannot avoid at least a brief characterization of the foreign influences on those groups. It should, however, be noted that foreign influences on the issues being studied are among the areas for which research is obviously the most difficult. In Iran itself, there are no sources whatsoever on this topic. The members of Azerbaijani nationalist groups in Iran are likewise very unwilling to discuss support from abroad. The outline below is therefore based on fragmentary information available in the countries where support has existed for nationalist groups of south Azerbaijan.

### Jokes and Insults

The jokes the Azerbaijanis and Persians tell about each other and their mutual humorous insults represent an interesting and, in part, entertaining aspect of their relations. Tellingly, a caricature depicting an Azerbaijani as a cockroach provoked a wave of protests and riots. Nonetheless, jokes, insults, and taunts that do not go beyond certain limits are a normal part of Iranian society, and the Persian population enjoys making fun of the second largest ethnic group – the Azerbaijanis. The main target of this ridicule is the Azerbaijani language, which apparently sounds comical and stupid to Persians.<sup>38</sup> In any case, it is the alleged 'stupidity' of Azerbaijanis that forms the punchline for most jokes. Azerbaijanis come off as less intelligent, naive people who are incapable of dealing with the problems of everyday life, or who solve problems of whatever kind in their own stupid manner.<sup>39</sup> The most popular insult, *tork-e khar*, translating to 'Turkish Donkey,' is such a reference to Azerbaijani stupidity. Persian ridicule of the Azerbaijanis generally takes the classic form of jokes or brief anecdotes. It should be added that many such jokes target Iran's other inhabitants. A good example are the inhabitants of the town of Rasht, who also tend to be depicted as stupid.<sup>40</sup> There are also jokes

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<sup>38</sup> Azerbaijanis are often ridiculed by Persian-speakers for not being able to pronounce the Farsi letters "ghayn" and "jim" and for pronouncing "ts" instead of "ch" and "dz" instead of "j."

<sup>39</sup> Other parts of the Iranian stereotype of Azerbaijanis, although less articulate in the jokes circulating in Iran, include the portrayal of Azerbaijanis as stubborn, jealous, and hot-tempered, with Azerbaijani women seen as hard-working and "high-maintenance."

<sup>40</sup> Iranian humor is also aimed at other locations. Typical targets of jokes include the inhabitants of Esfahan for being greedy, while Qazvin has a reputation for ubiquitous homosexuality, the people of Abadan are said to be boastful, Arabs are described as sex-starved etc.

about other characteristics of the Azerbaijanis, such as paranoia or the feeling of having been wronged.

Although members of other Iranian nationalities are becoming targets of local jokes, especially the Kurds, Arabs, Balochs, and Afghan immigrants, jokes about the Azerbaijanis seem to be the most widespread and the most popular. Humor at the expense of the Azerbaijanis is common most likely because they are the largest minority in the country, and are present in considerable numbers in central Iran's major cities. While Kurds are not common in Tehran, Esfahan, or Shiraz, Azerbaijanis are present even in the upper echelons of society, politics, the military, the economy, and the religious hierarchy.

Although Iranian humor is based on ridiculing ethnic minorities and people from various regions and cities, and such humor is firmly rooted in Iranian society, it is generally spread only by word of mouth among family members, friends etc. The jokes are passed on by practically all groups of the population, and members of the 'targeted' group themselves often literally collect jokes about their own ethnicity. On the other hand, any public ridicule by the media (as in the case of the caricature of the cockroach) or political representatives is taken very seriously. Thus, for example, former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami provoked sharp protests from the Azerbaijani minority in 2009 in Tehran, Tabriz, and Urmia after a video began to circulate around the internet showing Khatami telling an 'Azerbaijani joke.' In the video, Khatami retells the story of an Ardabil cleric telling the story about the wedding of Fatimah, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad. According to the cleric, "On the night when Fatima became a bride, she was taken to the groom's home. The Prophet was then taking the path before her, while Imam Hasan and Imam Hussein (Fatima's two sons) walked at her side." The point is that the Azerbaijani cleric neither understands the story nor is able to tell it properly. Khatami's joke ridicules the religious knowledge of Azerbaijani clerics and their ability to teach religion to the people. The mass reaction to Khatami's joke took the form of demands for a public apology, and some groups even called for the former president to be deprived of his status as a cleric. There was nevertheless suspicion that the video had been released deliberately to hurt reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, an ethnic Azerbaijani, whom Khatami supported.<sup>41</sup> Thus, what

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<sup>41</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, "Khatami's Azeri Joke Backfires," *Radio Free Europe*, May 27, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Khatamis\\_Joke\\_Backfires/1741034.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Khatamis_Joke_Backfires/1741034.html).

at first glance seems harmless can often stir up very strong passions that can reach even the upper echelons of Iran's internal politics.

### **Soccer Nationalism**

In view of the *de facto* ban on any ethno-emancipation activities by the Azerbaijanis as well as by other ethno-linguistic communities, sports or soccer nationalism have taken on the role of a flagship for the Azerbaijanis' emancipation movement. This phenomenon is embodied by Tractor (also called Traxtor, Teraktur, Tiraxtur) Sazi, the premier Tabriz soccer team. In recent years, this soccer team, founded in 1970 at a Tabriz tractor factory, has made its way into Iran's top soccer league, and is one of the most important Iranian soccer teams with an international following because of its participation in the Asian League.

Formerly, only the two biggest Iranian soccer teams, both from Tehran (Esteghlal and Persepolis), were able to attract a large number of fans to away games, but Tractor fans now nearly outnumber home-team fans at matches against those two soccer teams when playing in Tehran, in large part because of the fans of Azerbaijani origin living in Tehran and the surrounding communities. At any Tractor Sazi match, there is stable attendance of over 60,000 fans, record numbers in Iran,<sup>42</sup> and the team usually fills even non-Azerbaijani stadiums, for example Azadi Stadium in Tehran, which has a full capacity of 90,000. Tractor's great popularity is also aided by satellite television broadcasts of most of their games, which are watched in many Iranian-Azerbaijani households on the television stations Sahand TV (state pro-regime television) and especially the Azerbaijani exile station GünAz TV.

The reason for Tractor's high level of support is the politicizing of the Iranian soccer league by non-Persian teams and their fans, and it is the fans of Tabriz Tractor who tend to be both the most active and the most aggressive. Before, during, and after practically every game, they articulate demands for the establishment of instruction and television broadcasting in their native Azerbaijani language. Fans also openly shout Pan-Turkic slogans by the thousands and use Pan-Turkic symbols. Among the slogans are, for example, "Tabriz, Baku, Ankara, our path leads elsewhere than the path of the Persians," "Azerbaijan is ours, Afghanistan is yours," "All people have the right to study in their own language," "Down with

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<sup>42</sup> See tractor-club.com.

Persian fascism," "Long live a free Azerbaijan," "To hell with those who do not like us," and "We are proud to be Turks". Considering the conditions in Iran this is an unprecedented phenomenon.<sup>43</sup> Pan-Turkic symbolism also includes the well-known hand gesture of the wolf's head (*kurtbaşı*), used by radical Turkish nationalist groups for decades. This gesture is ubiquitous at soccer stadiums in Tabriz and outside of Iranian Azerbaijan.<sup>44</sup>

These Azerbaijani nationalist slogans are also heard outside of Iran, especially when Tabriz Tractor travels to matches abroad. For example, in April 2013, in an Asian League match (AFC Champions League), when Tractor was playing against a team from the United Arab Emirates (Al-Jazira Sports & Culture Club), several incidents occurred before and after the match. Fans from Tabriz unfurled a banner in front of Abu Dhabi Stadium with the words in English: "South Azerbaijan is not Iran", and started to chant nationalistic and anti-Iranian slogans. After a while, they were attacked by Iranian security delegates who were present at the scene. The incident was broadcast on GünAz TV, then posted on the internet.<sup>45</sup>

Banners with this slogan can often be seen at Iranian stadiums as well, especially in the Azerbaijani provinces. The banners appear to be inspired by a similar campaign by fans of the Spanish soccer team FC Barcelona, who regularly unfurl a banner with the slogan, "Catalonia is not Spain." Tractor fans consider FC Barcelona a friendly (or even affiliated) team, and the nationalistic aspirations of the Catalonians are similar to those of the Azerbaijanis. On discussion forums, fan websites, and Facebook pages, countless photographs and videos can be found showing the unfurling and displaying of Azerbaijani nationalist banners.<sup>46</sup>

At Tractor soccer matches against Persian teams, it is common to hear hateful, offensive slogans with an ethno-nationalistic subtext from both sides. The Persians

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<sup>43</sup> Hamed Bey, semistructural interview of Josef Kraus with a fan of Tabriz Tractor soccer club. March 2013, Tabriz.

<sup>44</sup> Emil Souleimanov, Kamil Pikal, Josef Kraus, "The Rise of Nationalism Among Iranian Azerbaijanis: A Step Toward Iran's Disintegration?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2013); Facebook Tractor Club 1970, February 28, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=424770430940765&set=a.373195376098271.90366.373094976108311&type=1&theatre>.

<sup>45</sup> "Tractor-Əlcəzirə oyununda 'South Azerbaijan is not iran' yazısı və qarşıdurmalar," ["Sign 'South Azerbaijan is not Iran' and Conflict at the Tractor-Aljazeera Game] Gunaz TV, *YouTube*, April 28, 2013, <http://youtube/g6xTuWKro4Y>.

<sup>46</sup> Facebook Tractor Club 1970, February 28, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=424770430940765&set=a.373195376098271.90366.373094976108311&type=1&theatre>; "South Azerbaijan Is Not Iran," *YouTube*, February 26, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRfQ52cz7TE>.

usually chant *tork-e khar*, meaning ‘Turkish donkey,’ usually accompanied by an imitation of a braying donkey, which in this context takes on a more offensive note than more harmless jokes. In response the Azerbaijanis have increasingly been observed to shout *maymun-e farsi*, meaning ‘Persian monkey’, or *sag-e farsi*, meaning ‘Persian dog.’<sup>47</sup> This can then lead to bloody clashes, with the police usually siding with the Persians. The ethnic hostility between Persians and Azerbaijanis at soccer stadiums can even assume international dimensions. Especially at Azadi Stadium, where both of the main Tehran soccer teams (Esteghlal and Persepolis) play their home matches, there have recently been instances of ethnic Persians provoking their Azerbaijani rivals by bringing Armenian flags with them to matches.<sup>48</sup> They then wave those flags with the intent of stirring up nationalistic passions by making reference to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and Iran’s support for Armenia in that conflict. Banners with inscriptions like, “Azerbaijan is an integral part of Iran” have also been unfurled.<sup>49</sup> Photographs of Persian fans with Armenian flags have been published both on Azerbaijani and Persian fan forums and Facebook pages. Azerbaijani reactions have begun to appear in the same manner in the form of photographs desecrating the Armenian flag by burning or stepping on it.<sup>50</sup>

It is not surprising that such explosive passions lead to outbursts of violence at soccer games. The violence tends to have two forms: either it is aimed at government targets, or it takes place between fans of rival clubs. In the former case, celebrations of victories or frustration over losses can be transformed into rage against the regime, as was witnessed most strikingly in 2001 during a qualifying match for the World Cup. After a defeat of the Iranian national team by the Bahrainians, there were massive protests by thousands of young fans who attacked government buildings and the police. Of course, a victory can also lead to riots, like in 1997 and 2005, when Iran qualified for the World Cup, and the subsequent street celebrations led to the public drinking of alcohol, women taking off their *hijabs*, and

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<sup>47</sup> Neyereh Tohidi, “Iran: Regionalism, Ethnicity And Democracy,” *OpenDemocracy.net*, June 28, 2006, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/regionalism\\_3695.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/regionalism_3695.jsp).

<sup>48</sup> Josef Kraus was present at a game between Esteghlal Tehran and Tabriz Tractor, and he observed the entire situation. March 2013, Tehran.

<sup>49</sup> “Fans of Tehran Football Club Attend Match with Tebriz with Armenian Flags,” *News.az*, March 12, 2013, <http://www.news.az/articles/armenia/77791>.

<sup>50</sup> Facebook Tractor Club 1970, May 29, 2013, [https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=616456738366242&set=a.115435995134988.18124.115428545135733&type=1&relevant\\_count=1](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=616456738366242&set=a.115435995134988.18124.115428545135733&type=1&relevant_count=1).

men and women dancing together, all of which is prohibited in Iran.<sup>51</sup> Clashes between fans of different teams are also nothing unusual, although local members of the soccer subculture claim that those clashes are less vigorous than they were some years ago. The fans of Tractor Tabriz are generally regarded (by the Iranian media, among others) as the most aggressive, and there is a widespread opinion among Persian observers that they often travel to see matches in order to get into fights.<sup>52</sup> It should be added that soccer violence is far less refined and organized in Iran than in some European countries – there are fewer prearranged riots and attacks, and violence is more *ad hoc* and disorderly. The fans remain fearful of police repression, arrest, and legal consequences. State security forces systematically repress soccer hooliganism, especially if it is connected with anti-regime or nationalistic manifestations. This applies in particular to soccer matches with teams of non-Persian provenience, and especially Tabriz. In other words, the issue is not one of general soccer violence, but the manifestation of Azerbaijani nationalism and expressions of anti-Persian sentiment. The secret police are regularly deployed at games that present a security risk, and they monitor the situation and identify potential rowdies. The stadium police presence tends to be significant, and *Basij* units monitor streets after games.<sup>53</sup>

Although the Iranian police and secret services pay a great deal of attention to soccer hooligans, the fans of Tractor Tabriz represent neither a particular subculture nor an underground movement. Cooperation among fans tends to be *ad hoc* rather than organized. The polarization of society according to ethnic and linguistic criteria thus continues to escalate, as do tensions between Persian and Azerbaijani youth. This polarization has had somewhat of an impact on the members of Iran's other, less populous Turkic communities, which now identify more strongly with their Turkic roots than before.

### Looking Towards Turkey

The Turkic identity of the Iranian Azerbaijanis has been gradually gaining strength since the mid-1990s and reaches far beyond the realm of sports. Unlike in the past, emphasizing Turkic identity is no longer a punishable offense, nor is it socially

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<sup>51</sup> Sohail Jannesari, "Iran, Football and Violence – Whose Side Is The Regime On?" *The Independent Blogs*, 2011, <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2011/01/21/iran-football-and-violence-%E2%80%93-whose-side-is-the-regime-on/>.

<sup>52</sup> Interview by Josef Kraus with Masoud Sikkah, a fan of Esteghlal Tehran, March 2013, Tehran.

<sup>53</sup> Interview of Josef Kraus with a fan of Tabriz Tractor soccer club, March 2013, Tabriz.

unacceptable to speak Azerbaijani Turkish in public. This development is conditioned by several factors both in Iran as a whole and in the country's Azerbaijani provinces.

One of the most important causes for the new flourishing of Azerbaijani nationalism in Iran is declining self-identification with the theocratic state and religion and the strengthening of ethnic nationalism throughout the country. Many young Iranians are dissatisfied with the restrictive rule of the clerics, and this was reinforced in particular during the bloody unrest surrounding the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009. Many young Iranians identify with the theocracy to a far lesser extent than the generation of their parents.<sup>54</sup> Throughout society and especially in urban environments, there is widespread disillusion about the theocratic form of government and resistance to its fundamentalist manifestations. Many educated Iranians distance themselves from religious identification, and instead admire the West. The same applies to the Azerbaijanis. Weakening self-identification with the regime and religion leads to a search for an alternative ideology, for many meaning the revival of (ethnic) nationalism. Among Persians, this involves an ever expanding role of Persian nationalism, which turns to the pre-Islamic traditions of the empires of Persia's glorious past.<sup>55</sup> This development is also reflected by the production of an ever increasing number of films and literature glorifying the pre-Islamic past of the Persians. This results in fertile soil for conflicts between Turkic (Azerbaijani) and Iranian (Persian) nationalisms.<sup>56</sup> Informal interviews by the authors with the inhabitants of Tehran, Ardabil, and other Iranian-Azerbaijani cities from 2010 to 2014 indicate that an ever increasing number of Azerbaijanis claim an ethnolinguistic Turkic (*Türk* or *torki*) identity rather than a local (*Tabrizi*, *Ardabili*) or a more neutral regional (*Azerbaijani*) or national (*Iranian*) identity as was more common in past years.

While recent events might challenge this, for the kind of young Iranians described above, Turkey represents a free, pro-Western, and relatively advanced country that is, moreover, politically and militarily powerful. Last but not least, Turkey is perceived as a country that is more 'European' than Iran. Iranians have lately

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<sup>54</sup> Nastaran Moosavi, "Secularism in Iran," in *Secularism and Secularity. Contemporary International Perspectives*, eds. Barry A. Kosmin And Ariela Keysar, (Hartford: ISSSC, 2007), 143–145.

<sup>55</sup> Kamyar Abdi, "Nationalism, Politics, and the Development of Archeology in Iran," *American Journal of Archeology* 105, no. 1, January (2001): 51-76.

<sup>56</sup> Association for Defense of Azerbaijani Political Prisoners in Iran, "Racism in Contemporary Iran: an Interview with Alireza Asgharzadeh," October 9, 2009.

become fond of Turkish seaside resorts, and most Iranian families of the urban middle class visit Antalya, Antakya, or Bodrum.<sup>57</sup> For many Iranians, Turkish identities is associated with more liberal, modern, militarily powerful, and advanced Turkey and not without prestige. This naturally has some impact on the perception of Azerbaijani 'Turks' as well. In Tabriz, the authors have routinely encountered Azerbaijanis both in public cafés and in their homes who cheer mainly for a Turkish soccer team or Turkish athletes participating in world championships. Turks were often referred to as 'ours' (*bizimki*).

Many Iranians, and especially those of Azerbaijani origin, travel to Turkey for work. Many Azerbaijanis with whom the authors were able to speak between 2010 and 2014, especially those from Tabriz, view Turkey not only as a sort of dreamland where, "we Turks live well," but also as a trampoline into Western Europe for a better life. There they encounter very strong Turkish nationalism and consciousness of Turkic solidarity, which strengthens their ethno-linguistic consciousness and reduces a certain psychological handicap ingrained in them since the days of the shahs. The reception of Turkish and Azerbaijani satellite broadcasts also plays a significant role in the context of the ongoing emancipation of Iran's Azerbaijanis. Although the use of satellite dishes is formally banned in Iran, it became common in northwestern Iran in the 1990s to watch Turkish television stations, which offer a wider selection of programs that are incomparably more interesting than strictly censored Iranian television. During repeated stays in Tabriz, the authors have had the opportunity to observe the growing popularity of Turkish culture and, in particular, pop culture.

Regularly watching Turkish television broadcasts helps reinforce consciousness of Turkish solidarity, and helps improve the language skills of the viewers. Over the past decade, the number of expressions from Anatolian Turkish in the language of Iran's Azerbaijanis has increased markedly.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hürriyet, "İranlı turistler Türkiye'ye geliyor," [Iranian Tourists Come to Turkey] February 22, 2011, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/17087969.asp>.

<sup>58</sup> Fardin Alikhan, "The Politics of Satellite Television in Iran," in *Media, Culture and Society in Iran*, ed. Mehdi Semati (New York: Routledge, 2008), 98.



## The Impact of Independent Azerbaijan on the Azerbaijani minority of Iran

Aside from looking up to Turkey, an ever increasing identification with the Caucasian Azerbaijanis, who gained independence in 1991, has developed in Iran's northwestern provinces. But the attitude of Iran's Azerbaijanis towards post-Soviet Azerbaijan cannot be regarded *a priori* as boundlessly positive or admiring. Many secular and nationalistic minded Iranian Azerbaijanis are enthusiastic about the attributes of the Republic of Azerbaijan as a state, of which they have a romanticized perception, and the nationalistic literature and films from the north contribute to this.<sup>59</sup> However, the attitude of a large portion of the Iranian Azerbaijanis towards the so-called *shuravi* "Soviets", as the northern Azerbaijanis are often called to this day, also has a number of negative attributes.

An impact of the partition of Azerbaijan between Russia and Persia in 1828 was the noticeable cultural Russification of the population of northern Azerbaijan, and under the Soviet regime, that population also underwent vigorous secularization. By contrast, Iran's Azerbaijanis have preserved many elements of traditional patriarchal life, and Islam in particular. The division of the nation into northern and southern parts thus resulted in the formation of cultures and identities in the two related populations that differ and are, in many respects, antagonistic: secularism, Russification, and nationalism *vis-à-vis* Russia and Armenia on the northern side, and religious conservatism, Persification, and nationalism *vis-à-vis* a centralized, Persian-dominated Iran on the southern side. Because of the differences in the ways the two groups define themselves, there are also a number of prejudices and stereotypes held by each part of the Azerbaijani population concerning the other. People from the north view or disparagingly describe the Iranian Azerbaijanis as religious fanatics and reactionaries. Indictments made from the other direction concern a loss of identity, irreligiousness, and alcoholism. Obviously, their separation for several generations and the effects of completely different cultural-political currents have created considerable contradictions that cannot be overcome or overlooked as easily as many nationalists on both sides of the divided territory often seem to think. Some disillusion has taken hold following the euphoria of the early 1990s, when the border on the Araxes River was relaxed

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<sup>59</sup> Cameron Brown, "Observations from Azerbaijan," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6, no. 4, December (2002): 68.

for the first time in fifty years, and the Azerbaijanis from the north and south were able to visit each other. The Iranian and the post-Soviet Azerbaijanis have, after all, realized how many striking cultural differences separate them.

Iranian Azerbaijanis are themselves divided along a line of demarcation between religion and nationalism. Religiously minded, conservative people, especially of the older generations, identify themselves primarily with their fellow believers. They equate Shiite Islam with the idea of Iranian statehood, and they take a skeptical, even antagonistic stance towards manifestations of Azerbaijani nationalism. They generally regard the Anatolian Turks negatively as Sunnis, and the Caucasian Azerbaijanis as "Russified." It is no coincidence that Iranian Azerbaijan's rural provinces are quite conservative, "the Azeri provinces traditionally have a strong conservative vote, and have not always favored reformists even when they were native sons."<sup>60</sup>

In an environment of individuals with such attitudes, the argument is often made that the Republic of Azerbaijan should join with Iran or with Iranian Azerbaijan. This is built on the notion that, "we're all Shiites" and Caucasian Azerbaijan has historically always belonged to Persia.<sup>61</sup> Among this group, Pan-Shiite opinions are widespread, with visions of the creation of a consolidated Shiite territory (similar to what is called the "Shia Crescent") encompassing the Shiite portion of Afghanistan and Iraq along with Lebanon, Syria, and above all, greater Azerbaijan and Iran. It should, however, be noted that the interviewees within this text spoke of these contingencies as mere fantasy, and appeared aware that such visions are unfeasible.

On the other hand, especially among young, secular-minded Azerbaijanis, the Shiite religion is of decreasing importance, and they tend to assert their Turkic origins and to profess Turkic Azerbaijani nationalism. That ideology leads them to support a union with the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey. Moreover, during the last twenty years there has been an intensification of mutual contacts between the Azerbaijanis of the two countries. Thanks to the breakup of the Soviet Union, the de-radicalization of the Islamic Republic, and a generally more relaxed

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<sup>60</sup> Rasmus Christian Elling, "Tribal Hands and Minority Votes: Ethnicity, Regionalism and Elections in Iran," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 14: 2541.

<sup>61</sup> Svante Cornell, "Iranian Azerbaijan: A Brewing Hotspot," Presentation to Symposium on "Human Rights and Ethnicity in Iran", November 22, 2004, organized by the Moderate (conservative) party, Swedish Parliament, Stockholm, <http://southaz.blogspot.com/2008/03/iranian-azerbaijan-brewing-hotspot.html>.

atmosphere, growing numbers of tourists, merchants etc. are crossing the border in both directions. Many Iranian Azerbaijanis travel (some even fly) to Baku for entertainment – to drink alcohol and go to nightclubs and places of merriment. A place commonly frequented by less wealthy Iranians is the border town of Astara, to which trips are made primarily to consume alcohol. Understandably, the affordability of such ‘excursions’ means that these two groups of inhabitants of different countries are encountering each other with growing frequency, coming into contact not only in northern Azerbaijan, but also in Turkey. There is also temporary migration from northern Azerbaijan to Iran. Because of the high cost of healthcare in Baku and other cities of Azerbaijan, many travel to hospitals in Tabriz or Ardabil in what amounts to medical tourism.<sup>62</sup>

In recent years, the nationalistic Azerbaijani community has witnessed a noticeable shift in preference for an orientation towards Turkey rather than Azerbaijan. As paradoxical as that might seem at first glance, it is a result, among other things, of the perception that the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan is a small country that is relatively weak economically, militarily, and politically, plagued by corruption, under authoritarian rule, and has suffered the humiliation of military defeat.<sup>63</sup> For example, one young Iranian diplomat of Azerbaijani origin confided to the author that he could see no rational reason for Iranian Azerbaijan to join with the Republic of Azerbaijan, because while the (Shiite) citizens of Iran have the possibility of enrolling at a university, completing their education, and securing career advancement on the basis of their own efforts and abilities without having to rely on connections, in Azerbaijan, that is very difficult.<sup>64</sup> This is another reason why, somewhat paradoxically, Iranian Azerbaijanis identify more with Turkey – a country that has until recently been freer, far less corrupt, and militarily and economically more powerful than the Republic of Azerbaijan. Instead of Azerbaijani nationalism, one increasingly sees Pan-Turkic tendencies that are further reinforced by the strengthening of Turkey’s role in the fields of economics and regional politics.

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<sup>62</sup> Iranian Azerbaijanis can also be found in large numbers on excursions for alcohol etc. in neighboring Armenia; despite the animosity between the two nationalities since the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, many Azerbaijanis with Iranian passports travel to Armenia without problems.

<sup>63</sup> Brenda Shaffer, “The Formation of Azerbaijani Collective Identity in Iran,” *Nationalities Papers* 28, no. 3 (2000): 470.

<sup>64</sup> Interview in September 2010.

Another segment of the educated and fully integrated Iranian Azerbaijani community regards itself as an integral part of not only the Iranian, but also the Persian nation. According to the proponents of this line of thought, which is especially prevalent in the environment of Azerbaijani intellectuals, industrialists, and educators in Tehran, the Azerbaijanis are linguistically Turkified Persians, who have maintained their original Persianness in their 'genes,' which is apparent in their lighter, more 'European' appearance by Iranian standards.<sup>65</sup>

### **Nationalist Organizations of Iranian Azerbaijan**

Among the Iranian Azerbaijani groups with emancipatory or separatist agendas, the South Azerbaijani National Awakening Movement (SANAM, *Güney Azərbaycan Milli Oyanış Hərəkəti*) is the most well-known. Established in Baku in 1995, SANAM has been a mystery to many. Some of its members and supporters – usually based outside Iran either in the Azerbaijani Republic or within Iranian Azerbaijani diaspora communities in Turkey and Europe – have called for the unification of Azerbaijanis living on both sides of the Araxes River.<sup>66</sup> SANAM itself has a lucidly irredentist motto.<sup>67</sup> The flag of Iranian Azerbaijan adopted by the organization bears a clear resemblance to that of the independent Azerbaijani Republic. The very self-designation as South Azerbaijan in the title of the organization is seen by many Iranians of various ethnic backgrounds – including Iranian Azerbaijanis – as a politicized move with noticeably irredentist overtones.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The importance of race in the background is also acknowledged by some young, more nationalistically (whether Turkic or Persian) oriented Azerbaijanis in Tabriz and other cities of Iranian Azerbaijan, according to whom the discrimination in Iran is not (merely) an ethno-linguistic matter, but instead racial. According to them, Iran historically has been and still is ruled by Northerners with relatively light complexions, in whose numbers the Azerbaijanis are also counted, while the natives of the southern areas – Khuzestani Arabs, Balochs from the southeast of the country, Khorasani Turkmens with Mongoloid features, and darker Persians from areas around the Persian Gulf are not infrequently subjected to discrimination. According to them, this manifests itself not only in the areas of education and career opportunities, but also, for example, in interethnic marriages: while, for example, nothing would hinder the marriage of a Persian, Mazandarani, or Gilani woman to an Azerbaijani man, racial and cultural stereotypes often complicate the choice of natives of northern areas who decide to join their fates to Southerners in particular. Numerous interviews by the authors with natives of Iran of various ethnic origins in Iran, the U.S.A, Sweden, and Turkey between 2005 and 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Iran: Cartoon Protests Point To Growing Frustration Among Azeris," *Radio Free Europe*, May 31, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1068797.html>.

<sup>67</sup> The motto of SANAM reads "Long Live Independent Azerbaijan with Tebriz at its capital city!"

<sup>68</sup> Authors' numerous discussion with Iranians and Iranian Azerbaijanis in Iran, U.S. and Europe, 2010-2014.

But others, particularly the leader of the organization, former linguistics professor Mahmudali Chehregani (*Mahmudali Çöhrəqanlı* in Azerbaijani),<sup>69</sup> have seen their task in promoting Azerbaijani identity and prompting the Iranian authorities to allow teaching in Azerbaijani as stipulated by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic.<sup>70</sup> In 2002, while based in the West, Chehregani asserted that SANAM “support[ed] the territorial integrity of Iran and [did] not seek unification with Republic of Azerbaijan or Turkey.”<sup>71</sup> In recent years, Chehregani has spoken out in favor of the federalization of Iran: “a federal structure [in Iran] resembling the United States, where Azeris can have their own flag and parliament.”<sup>72</sup> According to this perspective, in a federalized and united country, Azerbaijani provinces — like the rest of multiethnic Iran — could be granted a cultural, administrative, and possibly even fiscal autonomy. Since around the mid-2000s, Chehregani has in his public statements largely sought to profile himself as a devout anti-regime fighter concerned with the cultural rights of Iran’s ethnic minorities rather than a leader of an ethno-separatist movement.

Still, Chehregani’s political views — and the political orientation of SANAM — seem to be unclear. For instance, in a public speech at Johns Hopkins University’s Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in April of 2003, Chehregani explicitly spoke of, “Persian enemies” who separated the Azerbaijani people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He also asserted that there was, “widespread support for independence” among Iranian Azerbaijanis who had been seeing the, “revival of nationalism” — and that the “illegitimate theocracy” was to collapse, “within three to five years.”<sup>73</sup> In some of his numerous appearances on Günaz TV, an Iranian Azerbaijani-run and Chicago-based television station with a strong nationalist and separatist agenda, he spoke of the neighboring provinces of Iranian Azerbaijan without Azerbaijani majority —

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<sup>69</sup> Chehregani was elected to the Iranian Majlis in 1996. Soon thereafter, the authorities annulled his election and arrested him, apparently following Chehregani’s public protests after his course on Turkish linguistics at Tabriz University was closed by the authorities. Chehregani was re-arrested in 1999 and subjected to torture while imprisoned. This prohibited him from running in 2000. Chehregani was freed from prison and allowed to leave Iran owing to the personal interference of Senator Sam Brownback (R). For more on Chehregani, see, for instance, Riaux, “The Formative Years of Azerbaijani Nationalism in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” 53-56.

<sup>70</sup> Afshin Molavi, “Iran’s Azeri Question: What Does Iran’s Largest Ethnic Minority Want?” *Eurasianet.org*, April 14, 2003, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/culture/articles/eav041503.shtml>.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Roger Howard, *Iran in Crisis? The Future of The Revolutionary Regime and the US Response* (New York: Zed Books, 2004), 182.

<sup>72</sup> Molavi, “Iran’s Azeri Question”.

<sup>73</sup> “Azeri Separatist Meets Policy Makers in Washington,” *National Iranian American Council*, April 10, 2003, <http://www.niacouncil.org/azeri-separatist-meets-policy-makers-in-washington/>.

Qazvin, Hamadan, Tehran, Arak, and portions of Kordestan and Gilan – as parts of historical Azerbaijan. He also made implicit references to the ultimate goal of unifying Azerbaijan, along with his positive portrayal of the brief period of post-Second World War independence of Iranian Azerbaijan. Besides, the website of SANAM includes images of its leader showing a Pan-Turkist salutation, with Persians constantly referenced as “chauvinists.”<sup>74</sup> To sum up, while Chehregani has generally sought to avoid being explicit about the secession of Iranian Azerbaijan as a goal of his SANAM, his rhetoric has been interpreted by many as implying just that.

The reasons for this ambiguity can be formed from the following arguments. First, in 2002, after Tehran's pressure on Baku where Chehregani had been briefly based after leaving Iran, Chehregani was exiled to the United States where he has lived since. However, the party itself is still formally based in Baku. Due to Tehran keeping an eye on Baku's attitude toward the Iranian Azerbaijan question and Azerbaijani authorities' resultant reluctance to irritate Iran, SANAM has not received support from Azerbaijani authorities, apart from tolerance of their symbolic presence in a Baku apartment. Consequently, SANAM has become a paralyzed group of local enthusiasts rather than a political movement. Second, with the organization reduced to several activists and a formal – and distant – head, Chehregani's influence on the ground has become minimal. Besides, there is no reliable data as to the actual support for SANAM among Iranian Azerbaijanis within Iran.<sup>75</sup> Many Iranian Azerbaijanis in the diaspora have expressed positive attitudes toward the organization and its goals of emancipation, while some have expressed support for its presumably separatist agenda. Yet most have coalesced around Chehregani being a rather symbolic figure without actual clout.<sup>76</sup> Third, and closely related, Chehregani himself appears to have maneuvered between his hardcore support base among Northern Azerbaijanis, which is rather strong, but an undefined – and possibly weak – support base within Iranian Azerbaijan itself.

In addition to SANAM, some other emancipationist groups have existed since the 1990s. These include the South Azerbaijan National Liberation Movement, established in 1991 (SANLM or NLMSA, *Cənubi Azərbaycan Milli Azadlıq Hərəkatı*);

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<sup>74</sup> See the website of SANAM devoted to its head, <http://gamoh.org/basqan/>.

<sup>75</sup> During our fieldwork in Iranian Azerbaijan, we sought to avoid posing direct questions about the locals' support for SANAM due to security considerations.

<sup>76</sup> Authors' numerous discussion with many Iranian Azerbaijanis in Iran, U.S.A, and Europe, 2010-2014.

the South Azerbaijan National Revival Organization, established in 1995 (SANRO, *Güney Azərbaycan Milli Dirçəliş Təşkilatı*); the South Azerbaijan National Liberation Front, established in 2012 (SANLF, *Güney Azərbaycan Milli Azadlıq Cəbhəsi*), the South Azerbaijan Independence Party, established in 2006 (*Güney Azərbaycan İstiqlal Partiyası*), and others. Similar to SANAM, which remains the predominant and most renowned group representing Iranian Azerbaijanis led by an authoritative leader, these loose organizations, usually consisting of several activists and always based outside the Islamic Republic, have advocated for the ethnolinguistic emancipation of their ethnic kin in Iran. These organizations, too, have been led by exiled or diaspora-based Iranian Azerbaijanis without backing from the Azerbaijani or Turkish authorities. Moreover, their agenda has been more explicit about unequivocal independence or unification with the Azerbaijani Republic than in the case of SANAM.

While these groups have often cooperated – for instance, to draw attention to the ethnolinguistic discrimination of Iranian Azerbaijanis or to the fate of political prisoners from among Iranian Azerbaijanis in Iran – they have also competed with one another to be considered the major representatives of Iranian Azerbaijanis and their interests abroad.<sup>77</sup> These revivalist groups have sought to command maximum impact on the political preferences of Iranian Azerbaijanis, using Günaz TV as the main media outlet to reach out particularly to Turkey and Western-based Iranian Azerbaijanis as a first step to penetrating Iran's Azerbaijani community. In one way or another, these organizations have attempted to pave the way for a potent separatist movement in Iran's Azerbaijani provinces that would either lead to the creation of an independent Southern Azerbaijan or its unification with Azerbaijan and Turkey. To facilitate this ambitious process, the leaders of the South Azerbaijani independence organizations have appealed to Western-exiled representatives of Iran's other "oppressed" ethnic communities – Arabs, Kurds, Balochs – to coordinate their efforts and, should circumstances allow, also gain support from key Western nations.<sup>78</sup>

Little is known about the actual effect of these groups' activities on Iranian Azerbaijanis. However imperfect, our fieldwork in Iran's Azerbaijani cities implies

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<sup>77</sup> Zuber Hewrami, "Azeri Movement Argues for Independence from Iran," *Rudaw*, October 1, 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/10012014>.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. It is also likely, given the statements of the representatives of these groups, that they, too, have sought to establish contacts with – and receive financial support from Western, Turkish, or Azerbaijani authorities to promote their goals.

that this effect has been minimal so far. With the exception of Chehregani and SANAM, few had ever heard of any of these groups. Günaz TV appears to be the single source of information about these groups in Iranian Azerbaijan. This TV station – blocked by Iranian authorities, but still accessible in Iran through the internet when Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) are used – seems to be popular with part of the Iranian Azerbaijani urban youth in Tebriz, Ardabil, and elsewhere. But most Iranian Azerbaijanis appear to lack regular access to it, which has left them unexposed to the rhetoric of these groups.

In any case, SANAM and competing revivalist groups have not been able to create any underground Azerbaijani movement within Iran that would be capable of organizing effectively, recruiting a large number of members, and carrying out any kind of activity. Although there is a general familiarity with SANAM in the bigger cities of Iranian Azerbaijan, and locals believe that its cells – or rather sympathizers – do exist there, people in rural areas do not generally know much about this movement. SANAM has also based a big deal of its popularity on its hardline stance with respect to the Kurdish minority that is primarily found in the Western Azerbaijan province.<sup>79</sup> Most of Iran's Azerbaijanis, however, are not affected by any of the movement's activities and do not perceive it as a platform for a real solution to their problems or desires for autonomy, actual independence, or unification with the Azerbaijani Republic or Turkey. SANAM, let alone other revivalist groups, are therefore virtually incapable of reaching out to Iran-based Azerbaijanis. Members of the younger generation are much more inclined to seek articulation of their political opinions through student organizations, demonstrations, or the soccer subculture.

Having said this, we believe that the ethnic emancipation of Iranian Azerbaijanis has evolved unaffected by concerted efforts from abroad. As is illustrated in this monograph, it has been a matter of the region's internal dynamics shaped by the rise of ethnic nationalism in Iran, and influenced by external developments, such as the emergence of independent Azerbaijan to the north of the Araxes, exposure to Turkish TV, and so on.

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<sup>79</sup> In fact, Azerbaijani nationalism is often directed against not only Persians, but also – and sometimes primarily – against Kurds. In the past, SANAM have stated several times that if problems arise, it would be necessary to limit the birthrate of the Kurds, restrict their immigration, or even expel them from Azerbaijani territory, thereby creating an ethnically homogenous Azerbaijani-dominated territory. These nationalist appeals supported by SANAM have often focused on the Kurds, the poorest segments of the regional population, as being primitive, aggressive, and barbarian.



## Demonstrations and Manifestations

As a result of the aforementioned factors, the emancipation of the Azerbaijani population in northwestern Iran has been on the rise since the mid-1990s. Since 1996, there have been large demonstrations in Tabriz, Urmia, and other mostly Azerbaijani cities in northwestern Iran approximately once every two to three years. The chief demand of the demonstrators is for the establishment of instruction in the Azerbaijani language and the recognition of the linguistic autonomy of the 'Azerbaijani Turks,' as they present themselves. From time to time, demands are also made for the establishment of cultural-administrative autonomy in the Azerbaijani provinces.<sup>80</sup> Escalating Azerbaijani nationalism in the mid-1990s was perceived by the Iranian government as a serious security risk, and the state's organs of repression immediately began to combat the threat, for example by holding show trials. In April 1996, the Information Minister, Ali Fallahian, announced the arrest of twenty-nine, "Turkish spies" in the province of West Azerbaijan. In March 1997, there was another announcement, this time of the arrest and confession of fifty alleged Turkish spies in the Urmia region. The activist and lawyer Sepehr-ruz Moludi has been in prison since October of 1996, and many claim that this is because of his defense of Azerbaijani rights. Moludi was charged with espionage, and he could even have faced a death sentence. That same year, the Azerbaijani writer Mohammad Hossein Tahmasebpour was arrested when he tried to leave the country. No reason for his arrest was ever publicly stated. There were also mass protests surrounding the arrest of the aforementioned Mahmudali Chehregani, a leading figure of Iranian-Azerbaijani nationalism.<sup>81</sup>

The unrest in May and June of 2006 was the culmination of Azerbaijani demonstrations for emancipation and, at the same time, a turning point in this respect. The unrest began with the publication in the May 12, 2006 issue of the national daily newspaper "Iran" of a grossly offensive caricature of an Azerbaijani depicted as a cockroach along with an article demeaning the Azerbaijani minority. Shortly after the repugnant material was published, demonstrations were initiated by students, with protesters numbering in the thousands in the predominantly Azerbaijani cities of northwestern Iran, but also in Tehran itself. Life in those cities

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<sup>80</sup> Rasmus C. Elling, "State of Mind, State of Order. Reaction to the Ethnic Unrest in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 8, no. 3 (2008): 486.

<sup>81</sup> "Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities: Discrimination in Law and Practice," *Human Rights Watch*, September 1, 1997, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a8240.html>.

was paralyzed for days, and even for several weeks in some places.<sup>82</sup> As Tureček points out, the cartoonist himself was of Azerbaijani descent, but his cartoon, in the perception of many Azerbaijanis, created the impression that the Persian-language establishment was ridiculing the Azerbaijani minority.<sup>83</sup> Large-scale riots occurred mainly in the cities of Tabriz, Urmia, and Ardabil; demonstrators destroyed public property, and security forces intervened aggressively. In addition, Iranian politicians immediately accused several foreign governments, including that of the Republic of Azerbaijan, of having deliberately incited the riots. However, eyewitnesses and participants in the demonstrations categorically deny any interference from abroad and attribute everything to a spontaneous reaction of an outraged mob and the long-term frustrations of the Azerbaijani minority.

For a time, demonstrators even seized control of television broadcasting in Urmia (West Azerbaijan) and the municipal council building in Sulduz (East Azerbaijan). Meanwhile, the large majority of local police and militia units (*Basij* and *Pasdaran*) consisting of ethnic Azerbaijanis refused to take action against their co-ethnics, an unprecedented phenomenon in Iran.

The demonstrators demanded the punishment of the authors of the cartoon and the article. This did, in fact happen: the article's authors and the editor-in-chief of the newspaper were dismissed, and the publication of the newspaper was temporarily suspended, but the demonstrators went further. At the demonstrations, political slogans being shouted were quite daring by Iranian standards, including, "I'm proud to be a Turk," "Down with Persian chauvinism," "Hands off of Azerbaijan," and "We want instructions in Turkish at schools". To suppress the demonstrations, militia and army units from other regions of Iran were called in. This resulted in a bloody repression of the protests. According to reports provided mainly by Azerbaijani nationalists, over 100 people were killed, but the exact number of victims remains unknown as a result of the strict embargo on information about the events in northwestern Iran imposed by Tehran.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Bijan Baharan, "The Hidden Side of Iran. Discrimination against Ethnic and Religious Minorities," *International Federation for Human Rights*, October (2010): 15, <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/IrandiscrimLDDHI545a.pdf>.

<sup>83</sup> Břetislav Tureček. "Near East and the Azerbaijani Gambit", *Bulletin of the Center for Azerbaijani and Caspian Studies*, Prague 2014.

<sup>84</sup> "Havadaran Tirakhtur," Azerbaijan. Tractor Sazi Football Club and Racism in Iran," December 13, 2010, <http://tractorfans.blogspot.com/1389/09/22/post-4/>.

The events of 2006 and the harsh reprisals that followed served to solidify Azerbaijani nationalism and to exacerbate animosity towards the theocratic regime. That animosity has been strongly evident on repeated occasions, such as during the presidential election in 2009, when northwestern Iran sided with the local native and reformist Mousavi, an event that cost the lives of a number of Azerbaijani demonstrators. Those demonstrations were riding the wave of anti-regime protests subsequently called the Green Revolution or the Green Movement. Millions of people in all of Iran's major cities took to the streets in demonstrations expressing their dissatisfaction with the official results of the election, and this led to harsh repression by state security forces and pro-regime activists. There were also frequent clashes between supporters of the two main presidential candidates. The most serious situation was at universities, and the regime responded by closing them temporarily, monitoring access to campuses, and turning off mobile telephone networks in their vicinity.<sup>85</sup> During the unrest, there were also intentional outages of internet connectivity, and selected internet servers were blocked, particularly Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, where the protesters were using for coordination and for public reports on the situation at given locations.<sup>86</sup> In addition, this was the first larger-scale demonstration where the phenomenon of social networks and the role they can played a role in the creating and organizing of protests. Although the Iranian regime already perceived the importance of controlling the means of communication and especially mobile telephone networks and the internet, it did not immediately realize the power of information being spread rapidly through social networks. However intensively the internet is monitored and censored in Iran, ordinary users routinely find ways to get around this censorship. Whether with personal computers, smartphones, or even publicly accessible computers in internet cafés, people use remote access (VPN) through servers abroad to circumvent data filtering, thus being able to connect to internet services banned in Iran without difficulty. The dissemination of information through Twitter, which was lightning fast, not only had an influence on the environment within Iran, but also, provided coverage of the events in Iran to the worldwide public. Within a few hours, Twitter was able to spread literally all over the world a video taken at anti-regime demonstrations following the election depicted a young girl named Neda hit by gunfire; this video shows her

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<sup>85</sup> "Iran Cops Clash with Opposition Protesters," *CBC News*, December 7, 2009, <http://www.cbcnews.com/stories/2009/12/07/world/main5921492.shtml>.

<sup>86</sup> Slater Bakhtavar, *Iran: The Green Movement* (Irving: Parsa Enterprises, 2009), 220-230.

dying almost instantaneously. Even the repression of the post-election protests failed to quell the situation in Iranian Azerbaijan. In 2010, an estimated two to three thousand people protested in Tabriz to demand the right to receive education in Azerbaijani and condemned what they called, "discrimination against the Azerbaijani Turks in Iran." Demonstrators in the streets shouted slogans such as, "All people have the right to be educated in their mother tongue," or "Long live Azerbaijan, and to hell with anyone who does not like us!" One of the protesters gave an interview to the opposition radio station Radio Free Europe.<sup>87</sup> He explained that shortly after the demonstration had begun, the protesters were attacked by members of the Basij auxiliary militia, who were often dressed in civilian clothing. Basij forces beat the demonstrators and arrested at least a dozen of them. The demonstration appeared to have been organized by fans of the Tabriz soccer team Tractor. During the soccer match, fans of Persepolis (a well-known team from Tehran) shouted aggressive slogans at their rivals and were trying to offend the Iranian Azerbaijanis, leading to violent clashes between the two camps. During the presidential election of 2013, another wave of protests and subsequent repression occurred. The Iranian regime intensified its repression of Azerbaijani human rights activists, many of whom were arrested and imprisoned for lengthy periods. In April 2013, the activists Abbas Valizadeh and Mehdi Kukhiyan were sentenced to eight years and one year in prison, respectively, for propaganda against the regime, collaboration with a separatist Pan-Turkic movement, insulting the supreme spiritual leader of Iran, and contempt for of religious values. In May, the revolutionary court in Iran's East Azerbaijan Province convicted five members of an organization called the Movement for the National Revival of South Azerbaijan of creating an illegal organization for the purpose of undermining national security and of participating in anti-regime propaganda; each of the defendants was sentenced to nine years in prison.<sup>88</sup>

On the other hand, the scenario from 2009 did not repeat itself, and the demonstrations were not nearly of such great intensity. Understandably, the primary reason for this was that the candidate favored by a great number of the Azerbaijanis – Hassan Rouhani – actually won the election and became the new

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<sup>87</sup> "Tabriz Demonstrators Demand Right To Education In Azeri," *Radio Free Europe*, August 2, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Tabriz\\_Demonstrators\\_Demand\\_Right\\_To\\_Education\\_In\\_Azeri\\_Turkish/2116559.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tabriz_Demonstrators_Demand_Right_To_Education_In_Azeri_Turkish/2116559.html).

<sup>88</sup> "Racism in Contemporary Iran: an Interview with Alireza Asgharzadeh."

Iranian president. The Azerbaijani provinces turned out to be among his main electoral bastions, and to a considerable extent, he can attribute his success to those provinces. Our interviews with Iranian Azerbaijanis during the campaign and the election itself indicate that Rouhani won the favor of Iran's ethnic minorities (not only the Azerbaijanis, but also the Kurds, Arabs, Balochs etc.) because Rouhani, during the campaign, did not present himself in the role of a pro-Persian centralist, and in fact mentioned the honoring of the rights of minorities within Iran's territory. He expressed an inclination towards greater decentralization of the country and the shifting of some power to the individual regions. Quite logically, he was then viewed as the opposite of conservative, power-oriented candidates like Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf or Mohsen Rezaee. Iranians generally perceive that Rouhani's win was a concession to the regime, which, given the extent of Rouhani's support, feared mass unrest if a different candidate had won. On the other hand, Rouhani is not considered a problematic or uncomfortable president for the regime.

Moreover, in 2013 the Iranian regime was much better prepared for any security complications and demonstrations than it had been in 2009. The state apparatus, which had not been fully prepared at the time, had been working strenuously to liquidate or infiltrate opposition movements and especially to increase its control over universities, which had been the main flashpoints of protests in 2009.

Opposition to the ruling regime can partially unite Iran's Azerbaijanis with other opposition currents. This was the case during the presidential election in 2013, when Rouhani won valuable points in Iran's periphery. The interests of many non-Persian nationalities have thus merged with those of the Persian modernists who united in opposition to the conservative power-oriented candidates, but certain barriers still exist, because a considerable portion of the Persian opposition to the regime's theocratic government is based on Persian nationalism, which is equally antagonistic towards Turkic nationalism as the present regime is.

### **Lake Urmia and the Nationalization of the Environmental Movement**

The demonstrations against the poor condition of Lake Urmia are another important set of antigovernment protests that have gradually been assuming strongly ethnic overtones. The lake itself, lying on the border between the Iranian

provinces of West and East Azerbaijan, is a natural wonder, and has been classified by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve.<sup>89</sup>

Lake Urmia is a salt lake without an outlet, and is threatened by the intensification of agriculture in its vicinity. Because of the growing consumption of water from the rivers that feed the lake and the construction of more than thirty dams on those streams, the size of the lake has gradually shrunk, and fears exist that it could dry up completely. Iranian officials have not taken any serious measures to keep the lake from drying up, although the matter is receiving growing levels of attention. The lake is not only a valuable biotope, but also one of the symbols of South Azerbaijan.<sup>90</sup> The level of the lake drops by around 24-39 inches per year. Moreover, the drying up of this extremely salty lake is causing not only an environmental catastrophe for local plant and animal species, but also a threat to the surrounding area. The strong winds in this region carry salt to places many miles from the dried up surface, destroying the local flora and fauna, and also causing health problems for humans.<sup>91</sup> It is estimated that more than 60 percent of the lake has dried up, and many people from the surrounding area have abandoned the region as a result of health complications and problems with raising crops, and have moved to cities. Because of frequent salt storms and other problems, nearly fifty villages in the area are said to have been completely abandoned.<sup>92</sup> That, however, may only be the beginning, because problems with the lake and with water affect the whole region, which has a population of 6.5 million people, leading to potential large-scale devastation and out-migration.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), "Biosphere Reserve Information: Lake Orumieeh," January 18, 2001,

<http://www.unesco.org/mabdb/br/brdir/directory/biores.asp?code=IRA+07&mode=all>.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Hogan, "Lake Urmia," in *Encyclopedia of Earth*, ed. Cutler J. Cleveland (Washington D. C.: Environmental Information Coalition, National Council for Science and the Environment, 2011), [http://www.eoearth.org/article/Lake\\_Urmia?topic=49560](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Lake_Urmia?topic=49560).

<sup>91</sup> Saeed K. Dehghan, "Iranian Greens Fear Disaster as Lake Orumieh Shrinks: Football Chants and Street Protests Raise Profile of Fight to Save Unesco-listed Site," *The Guardian*, September 5, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/05/iran-greens-lake-orumieh-shrinks>.

<sup>92</sup> "Preserving the world second largest hypersaline lake under future irrigation and climate change," *Radio Farda*, January 13, 2013, <http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f10-pm-says-50-vilage-deserted-over-lake-urmia-shrinkage/24822635.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Francesco Femia, Caitlin Werrell, "Socio-environmental Impacts of Iran's Disappearing Lake Urmia," *The Center for Climate & Security*, 2012, <http://climateandsecurity.org/2012/05/18/socio-environmental-impacts-of-irans-disappearing-lake-urmia/>.

The authors visited Lake Urmia and the area around it in person.<sup>94</sup> From places where there had been beaches just a few years ago, the lake itself is no longer visible, the dry lake bottom consisting of a ubiquitous layer of salt. The desperation of the local people is evident, and they blame the government for the situation. The opinion among embittered local people is that the government in Tehran is not interested in this region, and is more concerned with industrial and agricultural plans elsewhere that draw on water which would normally flow towards the lake. The high concentration of salt in the atmosphere destroys farmland, and afflicts nearby towns, especially Urmia – Iran’s seventh-largest city with 1.2 million inhabitants. Azerbaijanis inhabiting Urmia increasingly view the situation through the prism of a Persian-Turkish struggle, and feel discriminated against by a Persian majority that takes care of its own territory while exploiting the rest of the country.

From 2010-12, a series of protests sought to draw attention to this serious ecological problem. The demands of the demonstrators were initially apolitical, yet the regime chose to crack down on the demonstrators, and in reaction to this growing pressure, political and nationalistic themes began to emerge ever more frequently.<sup>95</sup> At later demonstrations, banners could be seen with such inscriptions as, “Lake Urmia is drying up. Iran has ordered its execution,” “Urmia is thirsty; Azerbaijan must rise up or lose the lake,” etc.<sup>96</sup> Fans of Tractor Sazi have joined in the wave of nationalistic protests over Lake Urmia, including chanting, “come weep and fill Lake Urmia with your tears,” one of the most widespread and popular slogans for expressing the demonstrators’ stances.<sup>97</sup>

The most visible demonstrations over Lake Urmia took place in mid-2011, when there were sharp clashes between protesters and police in riot gear not only in bigger cities like Tabriz and Urmia, but also right on the shores of the lake itself.<sup>98</sup> Clearly, the originally issue-driven ecological protests have begun to assume ever clearer nationalistic features in reaction to the regime’s unresponsiveness, and the

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<sup>94</sup> Josef Kraus did field research there in August 2012, making numerous observations and interviewing local people.

<sup>95</sup> Dehghan, “Iranian Greens Fear Disaster as Lake Orumieh Shrinks.”

<sup>96</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “Concerns About Urmia Lake Boosts Nationalism among Azerbaijanis in Iran,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 5, 2011, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5637>.

<sup>97</sup> “Ormu,” *YouTube*, October 13, 2010, <http://youtu.be/wbgqwAjPR00>.

<sup>98</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, “Dying Lake Gives New Life to Iran’s Antigovernment Protests,” *Radio Free Europe*, September 1, 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/dying\\_lake\\_revives\\_iran\\_protests/24314925.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/dying_lake_revives_iran_protests/24314925.html).

problem is increasingly being interpreted to mean that an Azerbaijani natural landmark will cease to exist because of the deliberate inaction of the Persians.<sup>99</sup>

From 2012 to the present, Iran's economic problems have come to override the public's worries about the environment.<sup>100</sup> The topic again found itself on the front pages of local and foreign newspapers after Iran declared that it would spend half a billion dollars during the next five years in order to restore Lake Urmia. The money is to be spent mainly on improving water management, a reduction of water usage for farming, and the overall restoration of the environment. The Iranian Ministry of the Environment and the UN Development Program have introduced a plan to save the lake and the surrounding areas, which President Rouhani has publicly confirmed.<sup>101</sup> Even so, Lake Urmia has become one of the most significant manifestations of Azerbaijani nationalism, and is certain to remain an important issue in Azerbaijani-Persian relations for many years to come.

### **Regime Reaction to Azerbaijani Protests**

The Iranian regime tends to react to demonstrations with harsh repression. Measures against rioters have increased in intensity, especially since the 2009 presidential election. Riot police and in some cases the *Basij* militia are frequently deployed to disperse protesters using batons, water cannons, tear gas, and rubber projectiles. Typically, selected protesters are arrested or quasi-legally or even illegally abducted, subjected to harsh interrogation, and jailed. There are also targeted provocations intended to legitimize the intervention of regime security forces and to cause outbreaks of violence in places that benefit deployed forces rather than demonstrators. Thanks to this well-known tactic for suppressing protests, it is possible to take action against riots quickly, keep them under control, and then disperse them with the aid of targeted attacks by the security forces. Demonstrations also tend to be suppressed by the pro-regime vigilante group *Ansar-e Hezbollah* ("Supporters of the Party of God"), which concentrates on enforcing Islamic morality among the citizenry and on suppression of opposition to the regime and expressions of protest.<sup>102</sup> However, the deployment of *Ansar-e*

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<sup>99</sup> Souleimanov, "Concerns About Urmia Lake Boosts Nationalism among Azerbaijanis in Iran."

<sup>100</sup> Hamed Bey, semi structured interview with a fan of Tabriz Tractor soccer club, March 2013, Tabriz.

<sup>101</sup> Jeff Hecht, "Iran to Spend \$500 Million to Save Shrunken Lake Urmia," *New Scientist*, 2014, [http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25850-iran-to-spend-500-million-to-save-shrunken-lake-urmia.html#.U8PRRFOAI\\_2](http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25850-iran-to-spend-500-million-to-save-shrunken-lake-urmia.html#.U8PRRFOAI_2).

<sup>102</sup> Frederic Wehrey, *The Rise of Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), 10-11.



*Hezbollah* is not frequent or massive in the Azerbaijani territories, where the group does not have a large membership base. Its presence is felt strongly only in Tabriz, where it has assisted the *Basij*. Ruhollah Bejani, the leader of *Ansar-e Hezbollah* in Tabriz, attracted widespread attention in late 2011, when he began to rhetorically attack the Azerbaijani consulate in that city in reaction to secularist policies enacted by the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>103</sup> In April 2012, he repeated his demand for the closing of the consulate, even appealing to President Ahmadinejad with a reference to the consulate's alleged plans to hold a "gay parade" in Tabriz.<sup>104</sup> His demands were not heeded, and *Ansar-e Hezbollah* was further marginalized in the eyes of local residents.

The *Basij* have proved useful for greater control over the university environment. During the latter half of the 2000s, the regime began packing faculties with loyal instructors, leading to the creation of a Teacher's *Basij* Organization, which was supposed to strengthen the influence of its members over other academics and the manner of instruction. The organization claims to have over 15,000 members, collecting a quarter of all university teachers. There is also a Students' *Basij* Organization for monitoring compliance with morality and for the possible controlled mobilization of students. For many people, membership in *Basij* represents the only possibility for getting a university education, and thus the Students' *Basij* Organization has over 650,000 members at 700 Iranian higher education institutions. The organization's main tasks include coordinated confrontations with reform activists and pressure on university administrations concerning schools' social, moral, and political shortcomings.

This pro-regime structure not only limits and controls academic freedom, but also serves the rapid suppression of student uprisings and protests of any kind. According to university students in Tabriz,<sup>105</sup> the system operates through a network of infiltrating informants who report to *Basij* and other components of the Iranian security apparatus virtually in real time about practically all student activities that involve even a hint of political activism. Because these associations, often created *ad hoc*, tend to be dispersed very quickly and their leaders (or all participants) arrested, interrogated, or even jailed and expelled from school, most

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<sup>103</sup> "Hezbollah Threatens to Stop Activity of Azerbaijani Consulate General in Tabriz," *News.Az*, November 1, 2011, <http://www.news.az/articles/48006>.

<sup>104</sup> "Iranian Clergyman Vows to Close Azerbaijan's Consulate in Tabriz," *Panorama.am*, April 16, 2012, <http://www.panorama.am/en/society/2012/04/16/gays-azerbayjan/>.

<sup>105</sup> Interview by Josef Kraus with several students at the University of Tabriz, August 2012, March 2013.

student communication and organization has been moved into the virtual space of social networks and discussion forums during the last three years. This has led to a situation where the individual members of various student groups and movements do not know each other personally, and all of their communication is based on knowledge of the communications channel and of the nicknames of other members. This has an additional security implication, because these people first meet each other when a protest of some kind is held, but without knowing each other's identities, and this makes it literally impossible to trace additional individuals by interrogating arrested protesters.

The efficiency of the regime's security structures at universities in the Azerbaijani provinces was quite apparent during the post-election demonstrations in 2009, when paramilitary units cracked down on student riots. *Basij* units even raided university campuses and student dormitories, where there were clashes and mass arrests.<sup>106</sup> The raids at the University of Tabriz were especially harsh. The beatings, arrests, and aggressive interrogations of students, destruction of property, and liquidation of opposition student groups pushed the locals towards nationalism at a time when the events at the universities in Tabriz were being compared with those in Tehran. While the raids at the University of Tehran were investigated by a specially created committee of the Iranian National Security Council, the incidents in Tabriz were ignored. The local press immediately began to ask why investigations were being conducted differently in Tabriz.<sup>107</sup> Originally directed against the election results, the demonstrations and student riots quickly acquired an ethnic dimension.

Besides the direct suppression of already active riots and demonstrations, the Iranian regime also uses sophisticated methods to infiltrate, monitor, and liquidate separatist groups right at their inception. According to information from the region confirmed by Iranian government officials and academics, separatist cells are forming among the ranks of fans of Tractor Sazi, leading to the politicizing of their demands. These cells generally gather in Nakhchivan, an exclave of the Republic of Azerbaijan where Iranian citizens can travel without a visa. Since it would be dangerous for the regime to ban the soccer team outright, the Tehran government

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<sup>106</sup> Robert Tait, Julian Borger, "Iran Election: Mass Arrests and Campus Raids as Regime Hits Back," *The Guardian*, June 17, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/17/iran-election-protests-arrests1>.

<sup>107</sup> "Students Protest in Tabriz Crushed with Utter Violence," *Iran Press Service*, August 12, 2009, [http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles/students\\_killed\\_12899.html](http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles/students_killed_12899.html).

appears to seek to infiltrate its network with agents and to prosecute the most politically engaged fans.<sup>108</sup>

Another regime tactic is to incite Kurdish-Azerbaijani tensions. This is an integral component of Tehran's policy, especially in West Azerbaijan, where there is a large Kurdish community. Especially in the 1990s, the Islamic regime was settling Kurds in villages to the south of the Araxes River, which flows along the border with Azerbaijan and Armenia, in order to create a sort of buffer zone. At the time, the government managed to create considerable tension between the local Azerbaijani inhabitants and the newly arrived Kurds. Tensions are especially high in the area around Lake Urmia, an area which many Kurds are moving to. The contempt between the two communities is observable when interviewing locals of both ethnic groups. The Kurdistan Workers' Party and other Kurdish militant organizations often proclaim territorial demands for an independent Kurdistan that many Azerbaijanis regard as impinging on their own territory. One such map even included Tabriz, causing a wave of indignation. Iran's Azerbaijanis therefore do not tend to feel sympathy for the Kurdish movement, and they regard Kurdish activists as excessively militant. This manifests itself at soccer games between Kurdish and Azerbaijani teams, when there are occasionally physical altercations between fans in the streets of Tabriz.

Tehran's efforts to set the Kurdish and Azerbaijani communities of this province against each other have been partially successful and have resulted in a decline of their mutual relations, although this has not yet led to a more serious clash. However, there is significant agreement among the leaders of the two communities, who strive for similar reforms – instruction in Kurdish and Azerbaijani Turkish, the establishment of ethno-administrative autonomy, etc.<sup>109</sup> The mutual relations between the two nationalities are, in fact, aided by the one thing they truly have in common – the feeling of being repressed by the Iranian regime.

Lately, Iran's political elite has tried to cool nationalistic passions, and the election of Rouhani has made a positive contribution. It should, however, be added that so far, there have been no legislative or practical improvements to the status quo

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<sup>108</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "Iranian Azerbaijan: The Brewing Hotspot of Future Separatism?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 27, 2010, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5432/print>.

<sup>109</sup> Majid Khorshidi, Yok Fee Lee and Fakhreddin Soltani, "Ethnic Secessionism in Iran. Accusation or Fact?" *Journal of Politics and Law* 3, no. 2, August (2010): 273.

concerning cultural and linguistic freedoms, in spite of Rouhani's campaign promises. The fact that equal rights are just the subject of governmental and political proclamations, while the situation has in fact improved only minimally, means that further outbursts of frustration and dissatisfaction are possible. At the same time, in an effort to avoid stirring up Azerbaijani passions, the regime now appears to tolerate the watching of Turkish and Azerbaijani television using widespread satellite receivers that are technically illegal. Locals believe the government is aware that it cannot enforce the ban, because that would mean enormous upheaval and mass protests.

### **Impact of the Syrian Civil War on the Iranian Azerbaijani Community**

The Syrian Civil War has begun to find its way into the issue of Iranian Azerbaijani nationalist aspirations. An example of this can be seen at soccer matches: at several Tabriz Tractor matches, there have been protests by Azerbaijani fans against Iran's engagement in Syria, which they understand as an indirect war against Turkish interests in that country. These tensions over Syria have also been reflected in Iranian Azerbaijan, through Azerbaijani soccer fans shouting pro-Turkish slogans and burning pictures of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.<sup>110</sup> Thus, Iran is once again in their eyes supporting an enemy of the Turks in an armed conflict. James Dorsey sees this as another impulse for the strengthening of Azerbaijani nationalism, and at the same time, a *proxy war* between Iran and Turkey on Syrian territory could lead to an escalation of secessionist tendencies in Iranian Azerbaijan.<sup>111</sup>

Nevertheless, these extreme manifestations of pro-Turkish sympathies notwithstanding, the ongoing war in Syria appears to have deepened ideological barriers between parts of Iranian Azerbaijani population and the Turks. In fact, with a vocal minority of nationalists supportive of Turkey's efforts in the Middle East, most secular-minded Iranian Azerbaijanis have been rather indifferent to the religious dimensions of the Syrian Civil War. But this segment of the Iranian

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<sup>110</sup> Videos of these protests and of the burning of photographs are available on social media, discussion forums and also on YouTube, e.g. "Iran, Football Fans Carrying Syrian Independence Flag & Burning Bashar Assad's Picture," *Youtube*, December 10, 2011, <http://youtu.be/yIIVKgeRiiI> or "Bashar al-Assad Photos Was Burned in Azerbaijan-Iran 9 Dec 2011 – Tabriz, Sahand Stadium," *Youtube*, December 9, 2011, <http://youtu.be/0Ib8vMsd1tM>.

<sup>111</sup> James Dorsey, "Iranian Azeri Soccer Protests Raise Spectre of Turkish-Iranian-Syrian Proxy War," *Middle East Soccer*, November 30, 2011, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.cz/2011/11/iranian-azeri-soccer-protests-raise.html>.

Azerbaijani population is confined to the urban centers, while most of the Iranian Azerbaijani's rural areas and smaller towns are home to populations with a fairly strong Shiite identity. The latter group is supportive of the Assad regime as fellow Shiites, and Sunni Turkey is increasingly portrayed as a religious enemy. The situation is exacerbated by the hundreds of young Iranian Azerbaijanis who volunteer in Syria as part of Iran's semi-official forces – of whom dozens have been killed or injured in combat. Although our sample size is far from being representative, available evidence suggests that the civil war in Syria has halted the advance of ethnic nationalism – a phenomenon that had been gaining momentum since the Urmia protests of 2011 – in Iran's Azerbaijani-majority areas. Perhaps even more importantly, the Syrian Civil War has deepened divisions between Iran's nationalist secular Azerbaijanis on the one hand, and socially conservative and religiously-minded Azerbaijanis on the other.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Numbers of interviews of Emil Souleimanov with Iranian Azerbaijanis based in Europe and of Josef Kraus with Iranian Azerbaijanis based in Tabriz and Urumieh.

## Iranian Relations with Azerbaijan and Impact on Iranian Azerbaijan

The relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan has been troubled from the very beginning, when the former Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic gained independence in 1991. Iran's worries over the irredentist or separatist tendencies of its Azerbaijani minority have influenced its relations with its northern neighbor to a considerable extent. Somewhat surprisingly for many outsiders, during the Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992-1994, Iran did not side with its fellow Shiites. Instead, Tehran supported Azerbaijan's Christian adversary with deliveries of weapons from Russia and the Armenian diaspora.<sup>113</sup> Iran's ultimate goal was to prevent the strengthening of the newly independent Azerbaijan, which it feared could inspire a desire among its ethnic brethren for a separate state or for union with their northern neighbor and the creation of a Greater Azerbaijan.<sup>114</sup> To achieve this goal, Iran, backed by Russia, initially sought to problematize Azerbaijan's claim to its national sector in the Caspian Sea, trying to block the construction of the crucial Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that would enable Azerbaijani oil to be supplied to world markets while bypassing Russia and Iran. Tehran has challenged a portion of the Azerbaijani national sector – in the Araz-Alov-Sharg oilfield – effectively freezing its exploitation since 2001.<sup>115</sup> Iran also protested against the building of a Trans-Caspian pipeline that would help export Turkmen oil or natural gas via Baku to Turkey.<sup>116</sup> In fact, in the early 2000s, facing the increasingly visible American presence in the South Caucasus aimed

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<sup>113</sup> See, for instance, Emil Souleimanov, "Dealing with Azerbaijan: The Policies of Turkey and Iran toward the Karabakh War (1991-1994)." *Middle Eastern Review of International Affairs* 15, no. 3 (2013), <http://www.rubincenter.org/2011/10/dealing-with-azerbaijan-the-policies-of-turkey-and-iran-toward-the-karabakh-war-1991-1994/>.

<sup>114</sup> See Emil Souleimanov, Maya Ehrmann, and Huseyn Aliyev, "Focused on Iran? Exploring the Rationale behind the Strategic Relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14, no. 4 (2014): 471-488.

<sup>115</sup> In mid-2001, an Iranian warship forced an Azerbaijani survey ship with experts from British Petroleum to leave waters around the contested oilfield.

<sup>116</sup> Sureyya Yigit, "Trans-Caspian Pipeline: When or If?" *Turkish Weekly*, October 22, 2015, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/2015/10/22/op-ed/the-trans-caspian-pipeline-when-or-if/>.

particularly at acquiring access to Azerbaijan's Caspian oil and natural gas, Tehran sought to create an alternative Tehran – Yerevan – Moscow axis.<sup>117</sup>

In addition, Iran has sought, so far unsuccessfully, to help establish and back anti-regime Shiite opposition in Azerbaijan in order to destabilize the country. In fact, since the 1990s, Tehran has cultivated and supported conservative pro-Iranian Shiite clergy in Azerbaijan, along with the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), an organization established in 1991 that seeks to transform Azerbaijan into an Iranian-style Shiite theocracy.<sup>118</sup> The IPA has failed to rally popular support across Azerbaijan's secular society, although its appeal has been relatively strong in some parts of the Absheron peninsula and in Azerbaijan's southeast.<sup>119</sup> In recent years, Baku's increasingly cordial relationship with Israel has also caused considerable concern in the Islamic Republic.<sup>120</sup> In fact, there is an opinion that Israel's sale of sophisticated weapons to Azerbaijan in the recent past has served to put pressure on Tehran.<sup>121</sup> Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Iran has been an important partner of Armenia, and the countries' bilateral political affinity and orientation, mutual trade, and cooperation in the energy sector are constantly growing.

The strained relations between Iran and Azerbaijan culminated in the early 2010s. In January 2012, Azerbaijani authorities announced that a plot by three Azerbaijani citizens to assassinate leading members of Azerbaijan's Jewish community and a prominent Israeli official had been uncovered. Of even greater significance were Baku's allegations of Hezbollah and Iranian involvement in masterminding the attempted assassinations. According to some sources, the conspirators were also

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<sup>117</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, see Svante Cornell, "Iran and the Caucasus," *Middle East Policy* 5, no. 4 (1998): 51-67; Svante Cornell, Geopolitics and Strategic Alignments in the Caucasus and Central Asia, *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* IV, no. 2 (1999): 108-121; Emil Souleimanov and Ondrej Ditrych, "Iran and Azerbaijan: A Contested Neighborhood," *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2 (2007): 101-116.

<sup>118</sup> North Azerbaijani society is notably secular due to the decades of Soviet-imposed atheism which has rendered Azerbaijani society largely immune to the manifestations of political Islam promoted by Iran and its agents. The main tools used by Iran are charities and religious foundations that use funds provided mainly by the Iranian state budget, Iranian religious organizations, or fundraising campaigns (*zakat*) to help families in need (if, of course, they are properly religiously and ideologically oriented), to build and operate community and religious centers, and also, to a considerable extent, to contribute towards the building of mosques. Since 2010, however, the activities of Iranian charities have stagnated, and during the past year, they have even been deliberately suppressed by the Azerbaijani government.

<sup>119</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "Azerbaijan, Islamism, and Unrest in Nardaran," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 27, 2015, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13316-azerbaijan-islamism-and-unrest-in-nardaran.html>.

<sup>120</sup> See Souleimanov, Ehrmann, and Aliyev, "Focused on Iran?"

<sup>121</sup> Robert Swift, Azerbaijan: Israel's secret Muslim friend. *Jerusalem Post*, 11. 2. 2015. Available at: <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Azerbaijan-Israelis-Secret-Muslim-Friend-431810>.

instructed by Iranian operatives to assassinate Gaby Ashkenazi, chief of the Israeli defense forces, who was expected to visit the Azerbaijani capital in a few months.<sup>122</sup> Tehran clearly feared the increasingly cordial relationship between Baku and Tel-Aviv, with Azerbaijan, as one Israeli intelligence agent put it, becoming a, “ground zero for Israeli intelligence work. Our presence here is quiet, but substantial. We have increased our presence in the past year, and it gets us very close to Iran. This is a wonderfully porous country.”<sup>123</sup> In addition, in early 2012, Azerbaijani authorities arrested 22 Azerbaijani citizens and accused them of spying for Iran, a move that soon led to a parallel reaction from Iran. In mid-2012, Iranian media reported they had interrogated and were holding two Azerbaijan nationals on charges of espionage. According to the Iranian media, using the cover of cultural activities, Azerbaijani nationals traveled to Iran's Azerbaijani-majority provinces to recruit Iranians – in fact, ethnic Azerbaijanis – to promote separatism.<sup>124</sup> In the midst of heated debates in the West over the necessity to strike at Iran over its nuclear program, what appeared to be Azerbaijan's flirtation with Israel and the United States over providing its soil to intelligence operations made Iranian officials nervous. At the peak of the crisis, Azerbaijani parliamentarians suggested changing the name of their country to Northern Azerbaijan, reviving Tehran's paranoia of Baku seeking – possibly in tandem with Iran's age-old enemies – to disintegrate the Islamic Republic from within.<sup>125</sup> The crisis took on a financial dimension following the stiffening of Western sanctions against Iran that took place over this period. In fact, for the internationally isolated Iran, Azerbaijan had represented an important trade partner and an intermediary for access to Western and global markets. After Iran was cut off from the worldwide electronic banking system, SWIFT, in early 2012, the importance of the Azerbaijani banking system became fully apparent. Until then, Azerbaijan had been serving as an important site for carrying out international banking operations that could not be conducted in the Islamic Republic, and for conducting international trade in general. Yet in

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<sup>122</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “Is Azerbaijan Becoming an Area of Confrontation between Iran and Israel?” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 8, 2012, <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5711>.

<sup>123</sup> Elad Benari, “Azerbaijan Considering Helping Israel in Iran,” *Israel National News*, September 30, 2012, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/160429#.V0785ksgdbg>.

<sup>124</sup> “Iran Questioning Azerbaijani Nationals on Espionage Charges,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 4, 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/content/iran-report-says-two-azerbaijan-nationals-questioned-espionage-charges/24634989.html>.

<sup>125</sup> Joshua Keating, “Azerbaijan to Change Name to ‘Northern Azerbaijan’ to Annoy Iran?,” *Foreign Policy*, February 2, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/02/azerbaijan-to-change-name-to-northern-azerbaijan-to-annoy-iran/>.



2012, triggered by the mounting crisis between the two neighboring states, the Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA) deprived Royal Bank, owned in large part by Ali Jam, an American citizen of Iranian origin, of its license to conduct banking activities in Azerbaijan.<sup>126</sup> In addition, the CBA effectively halted all of Royal Bank's transactions, as well as activities carried out on behalf of Iranian businessmen, who were accused of money laundering. A number of Iranian businessmen were deported – and the flow of funds from Iran into Azerbaijan restricted. The bank finally had its license revoked by the CBA.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, companies and businesses on Azerbaijani territory owned by Iranians were closed and their assets were transferred from Iranian to Azerbaijani control. This happened, for instance, with one of Baku's largest and most important hotels – Hotel Europa, which had been owned by Iranian businessmen. The hotel was transferred to Azerbaijani owners, and many employees of Iranian origin were dismissed. Back then, despite its formal distancing from the Western-Iranian standoff, Azerbaijan tended to side with the West in financial terms.

By and large, in comparison to the 1990s and early 2000s, the government in Tehran tends to take Azerbaijani statehood more seriously today.<sup>128</sup> This is caused mainly by the growing economic power of post-Soviet Azerbaijan along with its increasing military and diplomatic strength, cemented by its established relations with key Western nations in the field of oil and natural gas exports. Importantly, since 2014 and especially since 2015, there has been a substantial warming of Iranian-Azerbaijani relations as both countries, are hungry for foreign investment and increased regional cooperation, following the striking of the nuclear deal with Iran in early 2015 and the global fall of oil prices. As Fariz Ismailzade has summarized, with oil prices, "hit[ting] low levels, Azerbaijan and Iran are looking for ways to develop their non-oil economy, integrate regional transport networks and boost mutually advantageous business projects. In that respect, thorny political issues

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<sup>126</sup> Common knowledge had it that Royal Bank was involved in money laundering for Iranian citizens and it may ties to Tehran.

<sup>127</sup> "Central Bank of Azerbaijan annulled the license of Royal Bank," Contact.az, June 13, 2012., <http://www.contact.az/docs/2012/Economics&Finance/071300005337en.htm#.V2ftg2iLSHs>

<sup>128</sup> Interviews by Josef Kraus with representatives of Azerbaijani and Iranian political circles, whose names are withheld at their request.

that have dominated the bilateral relations appear to have been put on the backburner."<sup>129</sup>

While Azerbaijani-Iranian relations have seen periods of heated conflict and cooperation in the recent years, their impact on Iran's Azerbaijani community has been modest. Notably, cognizant of its limited room for maneuver, Baku has sought to keep a low profile on the Iranian Azerbaijani issue in order not to antagonize its powerful neighbor over. Even at the peak of Iranian Azerbaijani protests in Urmia and elsewhere, Azerbaijani authorities sought to distance themselves from commenting on what they considered the Islamic Republic's internal affairs. While Azerbaijan is likely to have cooperated closely with Israel on intelligence matters, most probably involving Iran, nothing suggests that Baku sought to infiltrate Iranian Azerbaijan in order to stir separatism and irredentism in their ranks.

A certain unofficial influence of the Azerbaijani government on the Iranian Azerbaijani community does, however, exist. Some allegations exist, so far unsubstantiated, that the soccer team Tractor Sazi receives financial support from Baku, albeit not officially and mainly for the team's facilities and supplementary activities rather than directly towards operations.<sup>130</sup> The aforementioned debate in the Azerbaijani parliament, clearly condoned by the leadership, over renaming the country was episodic and their message symbolic; it was rather a forewarning in the chain of mutual confrontation than a tangible act. With the exception of episodic pro-independence statements made by the representatives of Azerbaijani political parties with regard to Iranian Azerbaijan, this has been the only public appeal made by Azerbaijan's state representatives more or less explicitly in the direction of Iranian Azerbaijan since president Abulfaz Elchibey's infamous statements in the early 1990s.<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, from time to time, triggered by vociferous events in Iranian Azerbaijan, mass demonstrations take place in Azerbaijani cities in support of Iranian

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<sup>129</sup> Fariz Ismailzade, "A breakthrough in Iran-Azerbaijan relations?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 19, 2016, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13330-a-breakthrough-in-iran-azerbaijan-relations?.html>.

<sup>130</sup> We found hard to verify this information which may be a rumor, yet is quite widespread within Azerbaijani soccer community. Josef Kraus carried out dozens of interviews about this topic with fans of Tabriz Sazi in the period of 2011-2016.

<sup>131</sup> Back then, at the peak of Azerbaijan's military confrontation with Armenia and facing a pro-Armenian Russia, Azerbaijan's nationalist president Elchibey publicly stated that the "unification of Azerbaijan was a matter of three to five years at most."

Azerbaijani co-ethnics and their struggle for ethnolinguistic rights. For the most part, Azerbaijani authorities rarely crack down on such events. While the leader of the Iranian Azerbaijani emancipation movement, Chehregani, was prompted by Baku to leave the country following Tehran's vehement protests, Azerbaijani authorities have tolerated the formal presence of SANAM and other pro-Iranian Azerbaijani independence groups in the country. To some extent, the Iranian Azerbaijani card is useful to Baku for exerting limited diplomatic pressure on Iran – if nothing else, to counter Tehran's pro-Armenian stance, its export of radicalism, and its position on the Caspian sea.<sup>132</sup> Yet by and large, the watchful Azerbaijani authorities have sought to distance themselves as much as possible from events in Iranian Azerbaijan, while trying not to eradicate the pro-Iranian Azerbaijan movement, a source of increasingly vocal Azerbaijani nationalism, on Azerbaijani soil.

A much stronger force than diplomatic or intelligence activity seems to be presented in the exchange of ideas that has been taking place between Iranian and Caucasian Azerbaijanis since the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Azerbaijanis on both sides of the Araxes River have become increasingly close, which is partially caused by a significant increase in Azerbaijani cultural influence in Iranian Azerbaijan over the last five to ten years. From their encounters with their northern relatives and co-ethnics in Azerbaijani Republic, Iranian Azerbaijanis – usually from urban areas – often bring back nationalist and separatist ideas. The smoldering conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan – particularly occasional hostilities on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh – strengthens the sense of solidarity between Azerbaijanis from Iran and their ethnic kin in the South Caucasus. On the other hand, as the next chapter illustrates, while the ongoing war in Syria has had a rather marginal effect on Azerbaijanis to the north of the Araxes River, the Syrian war has entailed Shia upheaval among Iranian Azerbaijanis who predominantly appear to side with Iranian policies in general and Bashar al-Assad in particular. Yet cultural differences between Russified Azerbaijanis and segments of the socially conservative Persianized Azerbaijanis community, as illustrated in the above chapters, are too large to allow for a perfectly harmonious relationship between co-ethnics from the opposite sides of the Araxes River.

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<sup>132</sup> Irina Morozova, "Contemporary Azerbaijani Historiography on the Problem of 'Southern Azerbaijan' after World War II." *Iran and the Caucasus*, 9, no. 1 (2005), 85-120.

## The International Context of Azerbaijani Nationalism in Iran

Aside from internal security problems related to the Azerbaijani minority, the issue is also important in relation to other countries. Iran's policy in this regard is very pragmatic, and in view of its size, strength, and ambitions, Iran plays the role of an important regional power that has, in addition, no lack of interests (and enemies) beyond the borders of the region. Of course, the Azerbaijani question is normally a secondary factor in Iran's foreign policy, let alone in that of other countries involved. That said, the country's most populous minority can, at certain times, play a significant role in the political, military, economic, and societal security of the entire Middle East. The United States, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, and Israel are the most important foreign players affecting the standing of Azerbaijani nationalists in the Islamic Republic. The following section will deal primarily with Iran's security relations with those countries, with an effort to focus on the factor of Iran's Azerbaijanis.

### Turkey

The contemporary relations between the moderate Islamist government in Ankara and the Iranian theocracy are, in part, a result of Turkey's efforts to maintain normal relations with Iran, an important economic partner and major regional player. In fact, Iran is Turkey's second-largest source of natural gas after Russia, and this supply gained importance during the sharp deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations in 2015-16. Since the 2000s, Ankara has been consistently opposed to the imposition of sanctions against the Islamic Republic, as Ankara feared it would lose an important economic partner. Moreover, when sanctions were stiffened against Turkey's southeastern neighbor in 2011, Ankara assisted Tehran in evading them through a covert gas-for-gold scheme.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Joe Parkinson, Emre Peker, "Turkey Swaps Gold for Iranian Gas," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2012, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324352004578136973602198776>.

In Turkish-Iranian relations, periods of hostility have often replaced episodes of cordial relations.<sup>134</sup> Most recently, the relations between the two historical rivals have been strained because of the civil war in Syria, where Turkey's and Iran's interests have been in direct conflict. With Ankara providing support to various anti-Assad groups, and Iran, backed by Russia, being the major ally of the Assad regime, the two neighbors have been engaged in conflict to an extent that some observers have termed it a proxy war between Iran and Turkey on Syrian territory.<sup>135</sup> These tensions over Syria have been reflected in Iranian Azerbaijan, through Azerbaijani soccer fans shouting pro-Turkish slogans and burning pictures of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.<sup>136</sup>

Conflicting Turkish and Iranian interests increasingly merged regional rivalry together with ideological differences. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and before the AKP rose to power in the early 2000s, Turkish secularism was often pitted against Iranian Islamism by those interested in containing the spread of political Islam in the region. But increasingly, Turkey's foreign political agenda under Erdogan's leadership is shaped by a Sunni sectarian agenda and a vision of Turkey as a leading Sunni superpower. This self-representation is in direct conflict with Tehran's pro-Shiite regional agenda, with Iran portrayed as a leading Shiite superpower. Hypothetically, this could prompt Turkey to take a greater interest in Iran's internal situation in order to utilize the Islamic Republic's perceived weaknesses. In this case, given the sympathies that many Iranian Azerbaijanis have cultivated toward Turkey, the notion of Azerbaijani separatism would present itself as a viable option. The ongoing transformation of the AKP as a party favoring a supra-ethnic Sunni agenda into an increasingly nationalist organization, manifested in Turkey's mounting conflict with Turkey's and Syria's Kurds, may make Turkish elites even more willing to play the ethnic card in Iranian Azerbaijan.

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<sup>134</sup> Gareth Jenkins, *Occasional Allies, Enduring Rivals: Turkey's Relations with Iran*, Washington and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, May 2012, (<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13115>)

<sup>135</sup> Gökhan Bacik, "The Turkey-Iran Proxy War," *Today's Zaman*, August 13, 2012; Nick Gillespie, "If Syria is a Proxy War, What's the U.S. Interests?" *Hit & Run Blog*, 2013, <http://reason.com/blog/2013/06/06/if-syria-is-a-proxy-war-whats-the-us-int>.

<sup>136</sup> Videos of these protests and of the burning of photographs are available on social media, discussion forums and also on YouTube, e.g. "Iran, Football Fans Carrying Syrian Independence Flag & Burning Bashar Assad's Picture," *Youtube*, December 10, 2011, <http://youtu.be/yIIVKgeRiiI> or "Bashar al-Assad Photos Was Burned in Azerbaijan-Iran 9 Dec 2011 – Tabriz, Sahand Stadium," *Youtube*, December 9, 2011, <http://youtu.be/0Ib8vMsd1tM>.

Still, there is yet to be any evidence that Ankara has utilized the Iranian Azerbaijani card in its relationship with Tehran. To the contrary; during the mass protests in Iranian Azerbaijani cities in 2006 and 2011, Turkish media paid relatively little attention to the events in the Islamic Republic, with Turkish authorities ignoring the issue. Moreover, while Turkish (and Azerbaijani) society and some civic organizations and political parties unequivocally expressed support for what they considered to be the plight of their ethnic kin in Iran, the inaction of the authorities led the editors of the Pan-Turkic website run by Chehregani to lament over brotherly Turkey's "indifference toward the heroic uprising of Azeri Turks against the bloody suppression in Iran."<sup>137</sup>

As a matter of fact, Ankara has influence over the Azerbaijani minority in Iran, but this influence is passive, i.e. untargeted and largely inadvertent through television broadcasting, tourism, and immigrant workers.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, Turkish satellite television represents the main channel of communication connecting Turkey, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and Iran's Azerbaijani-majority provinces. Turkish culture, language, and mainstream political attitudes have been pouring into the majority of Azerbaijani households, who perceive these as an alternative to official Tehran broadcasts and as a model for their own cultural and political orientation.

Still, the ongoing war in Syria appears to have deepened ideological barriers between parts of Iranian Azerbaijani population and the Turks. In fact, most secular-minded Iranian Azerbaijanis have been indifferent to the religious dimensions of the Syrian Civil War. But this segment of the Iranian Azerbaijani population is confined to the urban centers, while most rural areas in Iranian Azerbaijan and smaller towns are home to populations with a fairly strong Shiite identity. The latter group is supportive of the Assad regime as fellow Shiites, and Sunni Turkey is increasingly portrayed as a religious enemy. The situation is exacerbated by the hundreds of young Iranian Azerbaijanis who volunteer in Syria as part of Iran's semi-official forces – of whom dozens have been killed or injured in combat. Although our sample size is far from being representative, available evidence suggests that the civil war in Syria has halted the advance of ethnic

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<sup>137</sup> Quoted in Nayereh Tohidi, *Iran: Regionalism, Ethnicity and Democracy*, Open Democracy Working Paper, June 29, 2006,

<http://ejournal.narotama.ac.id/files/Iran%20regionalism,%20ethnicity%20and%20democracy.pdf>.

<sup>138</sup> In 2011, 2.7 million Iranian tourists are said to have visited Turkey. Anthony H. Cordesman, "U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Turkey and the South Caucasus," *Center for Strategic Studies & International Studies*, June (2013): 30, [http://csis.org/files/publication/130612\\_turk\\_casp\\_chap9.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/130612_turk_casp_chap9.pdf).

nationalism – a phenomenon that had been gaining momentum since the Urmia protests of 2011 – in Iran’s Azerbaijani-majority areas. Perhaps even more importantly, the Syrian Civil War has deepened divisions between nationalist secular Azerbaijanis on the one hand, and socially conservative and religiously-minded Azerbaijanis in Iran itself on the other.<sup>139</sup>

This having been said, Ankara may have additional reasons not to play the Iranian Azerbaijani card, at least not in cooperation with Baku. Turkey maintains significant influence on post-Soviet Azerbaijan as it is Azerbaijan's closest and most important strategic partner. But so far, in an attempt to avoid armed confrontation with Russia’s key ally in the South Caucasus, Armenia, Turkey has been unwilling and unable to help Baku find an effective solution to its conflict with Armenia or to provide Azerbaijan with security guarantees.<sup>140</sup> Although Ankara’s assistance in the regional isolation of Armenia has proven crucial to Baku – and Ankara has functioned as Baku’s most important partner on the international scene – Turkey has avoided entering a formal alliance with Azerbaijan. If Ankara and Baku are to make use of the Iranian Azerbaijani card – and Baku is to face the consequences of this play – Turkey is unlikely to provide tangible support to Azerbaijan. This may further reduce Baku’s willingness to engage in covert activities in Iranian Azerbaijan. From Ankara’s perspective there is the potential of Iranian interference into Turkey’s dealings with Kurds. For instance, in 2016 there have been reported meetings of representatives of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, led by Gen. Qasem Soleimani with senior Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) members in Baghdad and in Halabja and Rania in Iraqi Kurdistan. The internal divisions between Kurdish groups continue to make headlines, but it is clear that they are still able to influence the behavior and decisions of both Iran and Turkey. So far, the two countries have managed to keep their proxy war over northern Syria and Iraq contained, avoiding allowing it to lead to direct confrontation between them.

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There is an additional economic reason why Ankara would seek to avoid playing the Iranian Azerbaijani card. Following the warming of Iran’s relations with the

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<sup>139</sup> Numerous interviews by Emil Souleimanov with Iranian Azerbaijanis based in Europe and of Josef Kraus with Iranian Azerbaijanis based in Tabriz and Urumieh.

<sup>140</sup> On the fundamentals of Turkey’s Azerbaijan policy, see, for instance, Svante Cornell, "Turkey and the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Delicate Balance," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (1998): 51-72.

<sup>141</sup> Pinar Tremblay. "Iranian-Turkish tug-of-war over Kurds, Al-Monitor", *Al-Monitor*, December 13, 2016. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/turkey-iran-become-latest-surrogate-of-pkk.html>)

West, natural gas exports from Iran headed for European markets would necessarily have to pass through Iranian Azerbaijan.<sup>142</sup> Transport infrastructure, both extent and under construction, reflects this reality. Any threats to this infrastructure would necessarily mean a threat to the economic interests and even to the energy security of Turkey. Although Ankara views the emancipation efforts of the ethnically closely related Azerbaijani minority in Iran in a positive light, Turkey's economic interests act as a powerful counterweight. Emerging interdependence thus creates stability between the two regional powers.<sup>143</sup> The ambivalence between the country's real economic interests on the one hand and the power rivalry between the two powers are likely to lead Ankara's policy on Iranian Azerbaijan to remain largely passive.

### **The United States**

Relations between the United States and Iran have been complicated ever since the so-called Islamic Revolution in 1979, when Tehran transformed itself from one of Washington's key allies into its archenemy virtually overnight. Over the long term, America's position with respect to the Islamic Republic has been overtly antagonistic, and since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, Iran has become America's chief adversary in the region. However, American interests tend to concentrate more on the Persian Gulf than on the Caspian Sea. This is primarily due to historical circumstances and the closer ties to Saudi Arabia.

America's relations with this region are thus at a crossroads of policy regarding the Caucasus and policy towards Iran. The U.S.A customarily identifies three areas of interest in the Caucasus – security and stability, democratization and human rights, and energy and trade. The U.S.A, meanwhile, has enforced harsh trade sanctions against Iran and its energy industry sector since 1995 with the aim of trying to limit Iran's participation in any energy projects in the Caspian Sea and elsewhere. For example, in November 1994 Baku agreed to provide Iran's National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) a five percent share in the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) developing Azerbaijan's offshore oilfields. But already in April 1995, as a result primarily of American pressure, the NIOC was excluded from the consortium. Richard Kauzlarich, then the American ambassador in Baku, stated

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<sup>142</sup> A different version would use the unstable territory of Iraq and of civil war torn Syria.

<sup>143</sup> For more information about Turkey's position as an energy hub, see Emil Souleimanov, Josef Kraus, "Turkey: An Important East-West Energy Hub," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2, Summer (2012): 157-168.



openly that without exclusion of the Iranian company from the consortium, the American firms with their strong 40 percent share would withdraw entirely. In reaction, Iran immediately charged President Aliyev of Azerbaijan with being a puppet of the “Great Satan.”<sup>144</sup>

More recently, President George W. Bush famously ascribed Iran into the “axis of evil” in 2002, a move that caused outrage in the Islamic Republic. According to some observers, in order to weaken the Islamic Republic from within, during the past two decades some Washington neo-conservatives have advocated for supporting the political demands of Iran’s major ethnic minorities – such as Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Baluchis, and Kurds.<sup>145</sup> In the Kurdish case, according to journalist Seymour M. Hersh, there has been the U.S.A support for the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), a Kurdish organization fighting – both politically and militarily – the Iranian government to obtain cultural and political rights and acquire self-determination for Kurds in Iran.<sup>146</sup> According to Hersh, Americans and Israelis provided PJAK with equipment, training, and targeting intelligence.

Although data is missing on this controversial topic, off-record consultations with American experts and diplomats reveal that back in the early 2000s, part of the U.S. A neo-conservative establishment may have at least flirted with the idea of supporting Azerbaijani separatism in Iran. Yet they apparently gave up on the idea, having evaluated the weak popular base for Azerbaijani separatism in the Islamic Republic.<sup>147</sup> Most recently, Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican member of Congress from California, introduced a resolution in September 2012 calling for the self-determination of the Azerbaijani people who are, “currently divided between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Although the resolution failed, some Azerbaijani nationalists in Baku and a few leaders of the Iranian-Azerbaijani diaspora greeted this initiative as an important milestone for their cause. Personalities like Rohrabacher represented an idea, popular in some circles,

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<sup>144</sup> Emil Souleimanov and Ondrej Ditrych, “Iran and Azerbaijan: A Contested Neighborhood,” *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2, 2007.

<sup>145</sup> Nayereh Tohidi. Iran: regionalism, ethnicity and democracy. *OpenDemocracy*, 2006. Available at: <http://ejournal.narotama.ac.id/files/Iran%20regionalism,%20ethnicity%20and%20democracy.pdf>

<sup>146</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, “The next act. Is a damaged administration less likely to attack Iran, or more?,” *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2006, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/11/27/the-next-act>.

<sup>147</sup> Discussions by Emil Souleimanov with US experts and diplomats in Washington, 2007 and 2014.

that any means short of an outright military attack should be used to weaken Iran from within in order to pave the way for regime change.<sup>148</sup>

## **Israel**

Formerly a strategic partner of the Iranian monarchy, Israel turned into Iran's archenemy in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. Since then, Iranian-Israeli relations have been tense, with Iran's ambitious nuclear program – and Tehran's frequent calls to wipe the Jewish State off the face of the Earth – being at the core of the two countries' troubled relationship.<sup>149</sup> Moreover, Tehran's support for extremist Shiite groups in south Lebanon, particularly Hezbollah, has been a major source of concern in Israel.<sup>150</sup>

Since the Turkish-Israeli relationship deteriorated in the late 2000s, Israel has concentrated on its relations with Azerbaijan to further its interests in the region. Azerbaijani-Israeli relations have long been excellent in the fields of security, economic, and military cooperation.<sup>151</sup> Since the mid-2000s, Azerbaijan's increasingly close cooperation with Israel – including Baku's massive purchases of sophisticated weapons from Israel and intelligence cooperation – have spurred speculation that Azerbaijani territory could be used for an Israeli attack on the Islamic Republic.<sup>152</sup> However, as most observers have agreed, Baku is very unlikely to consent to granting its territory for the purposes of attacking its southern neighbor as doing so would subject the country to considerable risk from an Iranian military strike.

Another important Israeli interest is the import of oil from Azerbaijan. A significant portion of the oil consumed by Israel – an estimated 40 percent – is imported from Azerbaijan. A subsidiary of SOCAR even took part in the oil drillings by Shemen Oil off the Ashdod coast within Israeli territory. The drilling has so far been

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<sup>148</sup> Eldar Mamedov, "Azerbaijan: American Neo-Con Meddling Threatens to Bring Balkan-Style Mess to Iran," *Eurasianet.org*, November 1, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66134>.

<sup>149</sup> For more on the evolution of the Iranian-Israeli relations, see Ray Takeyh, "Iran, Israel and the Politics of Terrorism," *Survival* 48, no. 4 (2006), 83-96.

<sup>150</sup> Patrick Devenny, "Hezbollah's Strategic Threat to Israel," *Middle East Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (2006), 31-38.

<sup>151</sup> Azerbaijani-Israeli cooperation has symbolic limits, as well. Although an Israeli embassy exists in Baku, Azerbaijan has refrained from opening a diplomatic headquarters in Tel Aviv in order not to alienate fellow Muslim states, the support of which it has sought over the Nagorno-Karabagh issue, and, even most importantly, not to alienate Iran.

<sup>152</sup> Mark Perry, "Israel's Secret Staging Ground," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/03/28/israel\\_s\\_secret\\_staging\\_ground](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/03/28/israel_s_secret_staging_ground).

unsuccessful, but is an important sign of Azerbaijan's willingness to cooperate with Israel and invest in its energy sector.<sup>153</sup>

As previously mentioned, Azerbaijani authorities averted a terrorist attack on Jewish targets in 2012. Three men were arrested by the Azerbaijan Ministry of National Security, after planning to attack two Israelis employed by a Jewish school in Baku. They received smuggled arms and equipment from Iranian agents.<sup>154</sup> Azerbaijani officials immediately blamed Iran's secret services, which were accused of having masterminded, funded, and orchestrated the plot. At the same time, speculation surfaced that Israel's intelligence service had assisted in preventing the attack.<sup>155</sup> Azerbaijan's Ministry of National Security subsequently announced the arrest of 22 persons accused of treason and conducting espionage for the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Thus, Tehran appeared to view Azerbaijan as an important battleground in its secret war against the Israeli intelligence services.<sup>156</sup>

As Israeli covert action against Iran has increased, the possible role of nationalist groups in Iranian Azerbaijan has risen on the agenda. Retired Brigadier General Oded Tira, for example, urged Israel to, "coordinate with Azerbaijan the use of airbases in its territory and enlist the support of the Azeri minority in Iran."<sup>157</sup> Israeli agencies have been credibly alleged to cooperate with the opposition Iranian *Mujahedeen-e-Khalq*<sup>158</sup>—on spying operations, diversionary actions, and assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. It would not be inconceivable for this established model of cooperation to be gradually passed on to increasingly

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<sup>153</sup> Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Israel-Azerbaijan: Despite the Constraints, a Special Relationship", *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 17, No. 4, January 2015.

<sup>154</sup> Eli Shvidler, "Azerbaijan Thwarts Terror Attack Against Israeli, Jewish Targets", *Haaretz*, January 23, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/azerbaijan-thwarts-terror-attack-against-israeli-jewish-targets-1.408705>

<sup>155</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "Is Azerbaijan Becoming Area of Confrontation Between Iran and Israel?"

<sup>156</sup> Moniquet and Racimora, "The Armenia-Iran Relationship: Strategic Implication for Security in the South Caucasus Region," 57.

<sup>157</sup> "Israeli General Suggests to Use Azerbaijan's Airbases in Strike against Iran", *today.az*, January 2, 2007. (<http://www.today.az/news/politics/34565.html>)

<sup>158</sup> *Mujahedeen-e Khalq*, also known by the abbreviations MEK, MKO, or PMOI (People's Mujahedin of Iran), is an organization that constitutes an important Iranian opposition group that often resorts even to terrorist methods. The MKO was most active in the early 1980s, when it carried out a series of assassinations against leading representatives of the new Iranian regime. The most significant terrorist act was a bomb attack in 1981 at the headquarters of the Party of the Islamic Republic, which resulted in the deaths of more than seventy highly placed officials of the new regime. Khomeini reacted with a massive wave of purges and repression that forced the MEK to flee into exile. Michael Rubin, "Monsters of the Left: The Mujahedin al-Khalq," *Middle East Forum*, January 13, 2006, <http://www.meforum.org/888/monsters-of-the-left-the-mujahedin-al-khalq>.

radicalized minority groups, including Iranian Azerbaijanis. Yet no key structures for the Iranian nuclear program are located in Iranian Azerbaijani, and thus any targeting of Iranian Azerbaijani groups would be motivated mainly by a calculated attempt to weaken the Islamic Republic's power through internal disruption. However, given Azerbaijan's vulnerability to Iran and Turkey's willingness to keep a low profile in security issues surrounding Azerbaijan, any Azerbaijani or Turkish assistance would be difficult for Jerusalem to acquire. Due to the recent *détente* in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, that assistance is even less likely today than it was a decade ago.

## **Russia**

Post-Soviet Russia has held a special relationship with Iran. Since the mid-1990s, Russia has been an important supplier of advanced weapons to the Islamic Republic, at the same time becoming its key economic and strategic partner. In the post-Islamic Revolution period, Russia has also basically created the Iranian nuclear program. Russia shares Iran's interests in the Caspian Sea region and has similar goals in the Persian Gulf. In the latter area, Moscow-backed energy companies have won lucrative contracts for the development of Iranian oil and gas fields.<sup>159</sup>

Russia's approach to Azerbaijan has been conditioned by long-term stakes in the region and, in particular, its own energy, strategic, and commercial interests. From a geopolitical perspective, both Tehran and Moscow desire a weak Azerbaijan that is not closely linked with the West, and the U.S.A in particular. As the two most powerful Caspian littoral states, Russia and Iran, often acting in tandem, have been strongly opposed to the presence of the military forces of third parties in the Caspian Sea, in addition to their efforts to reduce Western presence in the Caspian.<sup>160</sup> Importantly, Russia is the key ally of Armenia, Azerbaijan's adversary. Since the armed conflict ended in 1994, many in Azerbaijan have laid the blame for the country's defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war – and Azerbaijan's reluctance to regain the occupied territory by force – on Russia.

Still, relations between Moscow and Baku have improved greatly in the past half-decade. A number of fundamental issues in the relations between Russia and

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<sup>159</sup> Sanam Vakil, "Iran: Balancing East Against West," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2006), 51-65.

<sup>160</sup> For an overview of Russian-Azerbaijani relations, see, for instance, Murat Gul, "Russia and Azerbaijan: Relations since 1989," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 2-3 (2008): 47-66.

Azerbaijan are no longer on their agenda or have been entirely resolved. In 2002, a Russian-Azerbaijani agreement on the demarcation of the Caspian seabed was concluded, and Moscow began attempting to strengthen its influence by cooperating with Baku rather than by trying to block its projects, which it was unable to do given the international diplomatic constellation. Since the early 2010s, due to the Azerbaijani authorities' deteriorating relations with the West over Baku's crackdown on domestic opposition and media, Moscow and Baku have become closer politically and economically. Baku has also improved its ties with Moscow in the field of military sales, with Russian becoming – strong Armenian protests notwithstanding – the main supplier of advanced weapons to Azerbaijan.<sup>161</sup>

On the other hand, Russia has had no lack of experience with Iranian Azerbaijan, which was occupied by the Red Army from 1941 until 1946 during what has been termed the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran. But as noted above, Moscow sponsored the Pischevari puppet regime in Iranian Azerbaijan as well as an analogous puppet state in Iranian Kurdistan called the Mahabad Republic. Although this was a brief episode, the Russian presence on Iranian territory left traces that remain to this day. In Iran's Azerbaijani provinces, some older people still speak some Russian or have nostalgic memories of Iranian Azerbaijan's short-lived autonomy, even if under Russian patronage. Although Russia's influence in Iranian Azerbaijan is limited, Russia is still very interested in picking up on these historical linkages. Russia as such is therefore generally a very popular country among a certain segment of Iran's Azerbaijanis.<sup>162</sup> Its popularity has grown even more since the Russian armed forces intervened in the Syrian Civil War. As both Iran and Russia support Bashar Assad and the West has been largely ineffective in its handling of the Syrian crisis, many Iranian Azerbaijanis with strong Shiite identity or pro-Iranian sentiments have come to regard Russia as an important ally.<sup>163</sup> On the other hand, Iranian Azerbaijanis sympathetic to Turkey have grown even less favorable of Russia.

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<sup>161</sup> John C. K. Daly, "Russia Proclaims 'Parity' in Arms Sales to Armenia and Azerbaijan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13, no. 71, April 12 (2016), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45307&cHash=50ed0c9fb1fd89bbf9070fb9ba288c23#.V08j-ksgdbg](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45307&cHash=50ed0c9fb1fd89bbf9070fb9ba288c23#.V08j-ksgdbg).

<sup>162</sup> Interviews by Josef Kraus with Iranian Azerbaijanis in Tabriz, Ardabil, and Urmia in August 2012.

<sup>163</sup> Interviews by Josef Kraus with Iranian Azerbaijanis in Tabriz, July 2015 and February 2016.

That being said, Azerbaijani separatism in Iran, possibly backed by external powers, is not in Moscow's interest as it needs the Islamic Republic to be a stable and predictable partner. Should Iran be weakened as a result of internal problems, Russia is likely to lose an important ally and a counterweight to Western influence in the Middle East. This could pave the way for a stronger presence of the United States, Israel, and other states with which Russia has had troubled relations. Therefore, any strengthening of Azerbaijan through a hypothetical union with Iranian Azerbaijan would contradict Russia's interests.

## Conclusion

At present, Iran's Azerbaijanis are visibly disunited. The religious-minded, conservative members of mostly older generations and people living in rural areas identify themselves primarily with their fellow believers. They tend to equate Shiite Islam with the idea of Iranian statehood, and their attitudes towards manifestations of Azerbaijani nationalism – and even of ethnolinguistic and cultural emancipation – range from skeptical to antagonistic. They generally view Sunni Anatolian Turks negatively, and see the Caucasian Azerbaijanis as being “Russified,” in sharp contrast to their fellow Shiites in Iran. Also playing an appreciable role in their self-identification – or in the self-identification some Iranian Azerbaijanis – are decades of Iranian nationalism, which holds that Azerbaijanis are of Iranian origin, while a ‘barbaric’ Turkic origin is regarded as lacking prestige. These people often claim that for the sake of historical justice, the Republic of Azerbaijan should “rejoin Iran” because of shared Shiite heritage and because Caucasian Azerbaijan has from “time immemorial” belonged to Persia. They criticize efforts to achieve ethnolinguistic emancipation by their ethnic kin, or believe the idea of the federalization of Iran to be the result of long-term efforts by the enemies of Iran – Israel, the U.S. and Turkey – to disintegrate the country from within.

On the other hand, among secularly-minded Azerbaijanis, and especially among more educated urban youths, the importance of the Shiite faith as a pillar of identity has been in decline. Although there are groups of young people that are trying to find their way to God by gravitating towards Shiism, it is still very rare among Azerbaijani youth to focus heavily on religion. They are usually more interested in a Western life-style and in participation in the growing Azerbaijani economy, not in cultural or religious heritage, conservatism and spirituality. Despite long-term efforts by Tehran to promote Iranian Shiism, the Azerbaijani population continues to resist this influence and the most important religious leaders in Azerbaijan are highly independent of Iranian clerics.

To a growing extent and impacted by Turkish and Azerbaijani cultural influences, these Iranian Azerbaijanis have tended to claim Turkic origins that differentiate them from Iranian heritage, while self-identifying with increasingly fashionable Turkic nationalism. This alienates them from the idea of Iranian statehood and, in contrast, brings them closer to the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey, with which many Azerbaijanis with such attitudes wish to unite.

The ongoing war in Syria has given new impetus to these internal cleavages between, roughly speaking, the proponents of these polar ideological camps. Socially conservative rural – and older – Azerbaijanis with strong Shiite and Iranian identity have sided with the Assad regime, expressing increasing resentment against the Sunni Turkish policy in and over Syria. At the same time, many urban Azerbaijanis, indifferent to religion but ascribing themselves to ethnic nationalism, have tended to self-identify with Turkey on political grounds. Thus, while some Iranian Azerbaijanis have volunteered to fight in Syria as part of Iran's semiformal armed units, suffering casualties, others have burned portraits of the Syrian dictator whilst chanting pro-Turkish slogans.

In addition to the polarization within the Iranian Azerbaijani community, emancipatory fervor accompanied by ethnic tension that has gained momentum in northwestern Iran in recent years appears to have contributed to a certain polarization within Iranian society along ethnolinguistic lines. In view of the traditionally strong resistance among relatively liberal Azerbaijani urban youth to the repressive theocratic regime, one may expect this tendency to strengthen. Importantly, in contemporary Iran with its increasingly anti-regime and religiously indifferent urban youth, ethnic nationalism – in the case of Persian nationalism tolerated by Tehran – seems to have been reclaiming its positions. This may pave the ground for mutual antagonism between the dominant Persians and members of other ethnic groups, not least Iranian Azerbaijanis, who see their positions challenged. On the other hand, growing Azerbaijani nationalism in Iran has been marked by negative attitudes not only toward ethnic Persians, but also toward some of Iran's ethnic minorities, for instance, toward neighboring Kurds, but also Balochis and Arabs. Resultantly, this has complicated the chances for establishing a common front against what many have considered ethnic-Persian dominance in the Islamic Republic.

Apparently, Azerbaijani nationalism has been experiencing a phase of active ethnolinguistic and cultural emancipation since the 1990s and especially 2000s. Yet



against the background of the repressive policies carried out in Iran, national emancipation – or any sign of organized dissent for that matter – has been a tough challenge for many. Hence, most ordinary Iranian Azerbaijanis, eager to avoid imprisonment and torture, have sought to distance themselves from expressing overtly political views, let alone views that would associate them with calls for separatism and irredentism. Still, many have taken on the risk of fighting for their constitutional rights. At the same time, an increasingly vocal minority of urbanites – in Tabriz, Ardabil, Urmiye, Marand, Marageh, and some other cities – have gone so far as to manifest demands with clearly political connotations. The mass demonstrations in Iranian Azerbaijan in 2006, 2011, 2012, as well as the rise and politicization of the Tractor Tabriz soccer club along with its popular support base, have all illustrated that Iranian Azerbaijanis have become an increasingly self-confident, united, and visible force in Iranian politics. Soccer, in particular, has come to represent a major forum for Azerbaijani-Persian rivalry and serves as a release valve for ethnic, economic, and political frustration. Today, soccer matches are rife with exhibitions of Azerbaijani nationalism, anti-Persian sentiments, and separatism. While ordinary soccer hooliganism, vandalism, and violent attacks are well known in the European soccer scene, in Iranian Azerbaijan, their causes, motives, and goals are far more sophisticated than was previously the case. Soccer has become the only platform available to gather en masse and express political protest without the threat of immediate punishment. This is why the Tabrizi soccer club has become so popular even beyond the historical capital city of Iranian Azerbaijan. The nascent subculture of soccer hooliganism represents an ideal arena for the radicalization of many young Azerbaijanis and the possible formation of organized groups willing to resort to violence.

In addition, the new motivating force in the looming ecological catastrophe of Lake Urmia is of considerable significance. As the lake shrinks, growing numbers of local people appear receptive to conspiracy theories blaming the government in Tehran for purposefully seeking to harm Iranian Azerbaijanis. Thus, protests that were once purely ecological in nature are now becoming increasingly politicized. The ongoing Syrian civil war has slowed the politicization of Iranian Azerbaijanis particularly from rural areas, many of whom have sympathized with those protesting against the drying out of the “Pearl of Azerbaijan.” The same holds for the “politicization of Azerbaijani jokes” that the Islamic Republic has witnessed since the mid-2000s. The often insensitive attitude of authorities in Tehran toward

what many in the Iranian Azerbaijani provinces consider a matter of ethnic – or regional – honor has apparently galvanized hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis, regardless of prior political stances. Against this background, the effect of the Syrian civil war may well hold in the short term, while the overall evolution of the Iranian Azerbaijani minority – with its calls for more ethnolinguistic and cultural emancipation – would hardly change in the years to come. In fact, although Azerbaijani efforts towards emancipation and protests against the regime have been overshadowed by the overall mass unrest following the problematic presidential election in 2009 during the years of the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidency, they continue to represent an increasingly potent challenge to Iran's internal security and integrity. The regime's reaction to protests shows its awareness that universities have become one of the emerging centers of resistance – leading to the strengthening of the regime's own presence on campus.

In the years to come, the prospective strengthening of Azerbaijani separatism – still a work in progress – will be an incomparably greater threat to territorial integrity than the already active Kurds, Balochs, or even the Khuzestan Arabs, due to the fact that the Azerbaijanis represent the country's largest ethnic minority. Unlike the marginalized and Sunni minorities, many members of the Azerbaijani minority play leading roles in Iranian society and hold great influence in the state and security apparatus. In addition, Iranian Azerbaijan is of great strategic importance to the country because of both the region's significant agricultural production and its position; major export routes pass through the Azerbaijani provinces en route to Turkey and Western Europe. Last but not least, growing separatist aspirations among Azerbaijanis could also impact Iran's smaller Turkic minorities, e.g. the nearly 1.5 million East-Mazandarani and Khorasani Turkmens settled near the border with Turkmenistan.

Iran's Azerbaijanis are no less important from the perspective of international relations. It should be noted that foreign powers have not sought to exploit this potential "fifth column" in the Islamic Republic at all; neither the United States nor Israel provided significant support to the Azerbaijani emancipation movement during their most acute confrontation with Tehran. But as Azerbaijani nationalism becomes politicized, it in turn increases the potential for the Iranian Azerbaijani card to be played by external players aiming to weaken the Islamic Republic. It cannot be ruled out in the future, especially if Iran resumes its efforts to seek

nuclear capabilities, or the current *détente* between Iran and the West concludes for other reasons.

As for the Republic of Azerbaijan, it plays more of a role because of what it is than because of what it does. Baku's official policy distances itself from the Iranian Azerbaijani question as an internal Iranian affair, but the influence of secular nationalists from the north can still be felt in the south, and the statehood of the Republic of Azerbaijan has a strong motivating effect on Iran's Azerbaijanis, many of whom aspire to such statehood. Even so, a considerable number of Iran's Azerbaijanis tend mainly to look toward Turkey for inspiration. Besides Turkey's ethno-linguistic and cultural closeness, it is also attractive because of its development and its advanced economy and sophisticated cultural exports, as well as relationships established through trade, tourism and employment. But Turkey's role is not clear; the discrepancy between Turkey's economic and energy needs on the one hand, and its ethnic and political interests on the other, inhibit Turkic activism in its approach to the Azerbaijani minority in Iran. While Israel may be most inclined to play the Azerbaijani card in the future, some sort of cooperation with Ankara or Baku would be necessary, a prospect that is highly unlikely given the current situation.

By comparison, Russia is a strong Iranian ally, and has showed its willingness to intervene in Middle Eastern affairs to shore up a vulnerable allied regime. In case of troubles in Iranian Azerbaijan, Moscow could be expected to support severe repressive measures by the Iranian regime against Azerbaijani protests, and to use its international leverage to undermine any efforts to internationalize the issue.

At some point in its history, every multiethnic state may face an internal threat to its territorial integrity that could be possibly backed by external forces. If the loyalty of the Azerbaijanis to the idea of Iranian statehood were ever to be challenged, this would dramatically weaken Iran's internal security and have enormous implications for the region. And while the threat of Iranian Azerbaijanis revolting against Tehran is still intangible, as our monograph has implied, it is likely to occur not because of external interventions, but rather because of clumsy policies of the Iranian authorities unwilling to meet the basic demands of one of its ethnic minorities.

## Authors' Bio

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