

MERIA

THE RISE OF NATIONALISM AMONG IRANIAN AZERBAIJANIS: A STEP TOWARD IRAN'S DISINTEGRATION?

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This article deals with the Azerbaijani minority in Iran and its potential and real security threat for the country's internal affairs and for the entire Caspian region. The article opens with an introduction on the ethnic and religious identities of Iranian Azerbaijanis and the community's historical development in Iran--with a particular emphasis on the 1990s and onward. Next, it reviews the current situation in the region and the group's primary motives and goals. The study also focuses on the international perspective, including the positions of key local and extra-regional powers that play an important role in the security of the Islamic Republic.

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country of multiple nationalities. Ethnic Persians account for approximately half of the total population. The remainder of the population consists of members of various ethnic groups of Turkic, Iranian, and Semitic origin, generally concentrated in a particular area.¹ The exact number of these individual minorities and even of the Persian majority is unknown, since population censuses in Iran do not determine nationalities, but rather religious affiliation alone.

Nonetheless, Azerbaijanis are by far the most populous ethnic minority in Iran. Various estimates place them between 12 and 22 million within the territory of the Islamic Republic, accounting for as much as one quarter of Iran's population. The large majority of the Azerbaijani population inhabits Iran's northwestern provinces, which border with Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iraq. These include Western Azerbaijan (where a considerable part of the population consists of Kurds); Eastern Azerbaijan; Ardabil and Zanjan (together with Persians); to some extent also Gilan (together with Gilaki and Persians); and Hamadan and Qazvin (in both cases together with Persians). According to some estimates, a quarter to a third of the population of Tehran consists of immigrants of

Azerbaijani origin and their first- or second-generation descendants.²

In view of their large numbers and corresponding representation among the members of the Iranian elite as well as their territorial concentration, the loyalty of Iran's Azerbaijanis is of key importance for sustaining the regime and for maintaining the Islamic Republic's territorial integrity. The growing nationalistic and, in extreme cases, even separatist tendencies within the Azerbaijani minority are therefore being evaluated by Iran's government with growing frequency as a security threat to which attention must be devoted. This article then deals primarily with the growing national self-consciousness among the members of the Azerbaijani minority within Iran's territory. The purpose of this study is to outline and evaluate the security risks for Iran's internal affairs and for the stability of the entire Caspian region. As little has been written on the topic as of yet, this article focuses on the broader context, presenting readers with an introduction on the ethnic, religious, and politico-historical factors influencing the current situation in the region. It then moves to the status of the ethnocultural emancipation movement of Iranian Azerbaijanis and its influence on Iran's state security. Last, it deals with the international context of Azerbaijani nationalism in Iran, focusing primarily on the

security dimension. Also presented are the positions of the United States, Azerbaijan, Israel, Turkey, and Russia and their relations with the Azerbaijani minority and with Iran itself.

Ethnic and Religious Identity Among Iran's Azerbaijanis

The Azerbaijani minority's perceptions of the central government in Teheran and of Persians as the dominant ethnic group in Iran are directly related to their own historical experience of coexistence with the Persians. Linguistic and religious affiliations and their evolution within the Iranian context play a particularly important role here. The Azerbaijanis of Iran speak a Turkic dialect that is part of the Oghuz language group. Apart from a rather large number of lexical borrowings from Persian and Arabic, it is identical to the language of the so-called Northern (Soviet or Caucasian) Azerbaijanis.³ It is also very close to the language spoken in Turkey. The two languages (Azerbaijani and Anatolian Turkish) are mutually comprehensible. The language is commonly spoken among Azerbaijanis inhabiting northwestern Iran, though instruction in Azerbaijani Turkish is de facto banned at all levels in the country--in contradiction to Iran's constitution. The ban is in effect in all levels of school and applies not only to instruction in the Turkish language, but also to teaching that language as a subject. Thus, for example, at the University of Tabriz, where seven other languages are taught, the native language of the majority of students may not be taught.⁴

Under the Persian nationalist regime of the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), the use of a Turkic language in public was completely banned. During the period that followed, the policy was slightly more lenient, allowing for the establishment of an Azerbaijani radio and television station. These official media, however, only broadcasted in Azerbaijani Turkish for a few hours a day, and the language for broadcast was "Persianized" to the maximum possible extent.⁵ Until recently, the majority of Iran's Azerbaijanis used Farsi

(or Parsi, Persian) for written communication, as the Iranian variant of Azerbaijani Turkish had not been codified. Knowledge of the language among Azerbaijani immigrants in Tehran, Qom, and other cities outside of northwestern Iran is gradually declining, which is also related to a reduction of Azerbaijani self-identification.⁶

The vast majority of Azerbaijanis, like the majority of the rest of Iran's inhabitants, belong to the Shi'i branch of Islam.⁷ Shi'i Islam is predominant in only a few countries other than Iran, including the Republic of Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Iraq. As a minority in the Islamic world, Shi'i solidarity is stronger than that found among the majority Sunnis. This bond was further reinforced in Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, in which Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was overthrown and a Shi'i cleric led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took over with the *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) system of government. The multiethnic state that had relied on Persian nationalism and perceived power through the concept of the shared state of Iran during the era of the Pahlavi Dynasty was replaced by the concept of a religious Iran that unified its inhabitants through the Shi'ism.

The fact that Persians and Azerbaijanis both follow the Shi'i religion has historically brought them together, while on the contrary, this has created animosity towards Anatolian Turks and Kurds, who mostly profess Sunni Islam. For many religiously oriented Azerbaijanis, to this day, a marriage between persons speaking the same (Turkic) language but belonging to different branches of Islam (i.e., Shi'i or Sunni) is totally unthinkable. frequent as a result of the mass migration of Azerbaijanis from the northwest to other places in Iran. On the other hand, nothing would prevent a marriage between two Shi'a of different ethnic origins (such as a Persian and an Azerbaijani). Such "mixed" marriages have become frequent as a result of the mass migration of Azerbaijanis from the northwest to other places in Iran. Also affecting migrants to the Persian-speaking parts of the country is their separation from the Turkish-speaking

environment and ethno-linguistic discrimination on the part of the Persians. These factors have led to intensive Persianization of Azerbaijanis (as with migrants from other minorities) migrating to Persian cities.⁸

As Shi'a, Azerbaijanis are traditionally integrated into Iranian society. By no means negligible are the numbers of Azerbaijanis serving as high state officials, clerics, army commanders, important figures in the economy, and representatives of the intellectual elite. Among the most prominent examples are the country's supreme religious leader, Ali Khamene'i; the opposition leader and reformist candidate in last year's presidential election, Mir-Hossein Mousavi (who is incidentally a distant relative of Khamene'i, and who also comes from the same village as the ayatollah); and the former Minister of Interior and Minister of Social Security Sadeq Mahsouli.

Such cultural and religious figures include popular poet Mohammad-Hosein Shahrar, who was born in Tabriz and wrote in Persian and Azerbaijani, and Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, one of the most influential clerics in Iraq and Iran in the twentieth century. As far as Azerbaijanis in the Iranian armed forces are concerned, they face no discrimination there and are full-fledged members. Iran's Revolutionary Guards,⁹ however, are more ethnically pure, and Persians account for the vast majority of the general staff.

The majority of the Azerbaijani elite in high military, economic, and political positions at the central level are regarded by ordinary Iranian Azerbaijanis as Persianized, and therefore as not being of their own kind. For this reason, they do not even accept the fact that the top man in the country is an ethnic Azerbaijani. Rather, they regard him as having long ago become a Persian.¹⁰ A condition for attaining high standing in society, after all, is the renunciation of Turkic identity and declaration of one's Iranian identity or devotion to the idea of Iranian statehood. Many Azerbaijanis, therefore, distance themselves from their Turkism, and to a

certain extent even from their origins in the Azerbaijani provinces. This is particularly true of the members of the older generations. For example, Ayatollah Khamene'i very seldom speaks Azerbaijani Turkish in public, and he refers to himself as an "Iranian from Mashhad."¹¹

The Historical Experience of Iran's Azerbaijanis

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Turkish dominance over Persia came to an end with the establishment of the first purely Persian dynasty, the Pahlavis. Persian nationalism, already strongly developed at the time, became the state ideology.¹² The importance of religion as a collective identity that was not all-encompassing (in view of the populous Sunni minority) was suppressed as much as possible by the shah's regime. Instead, pan-Iranian nationalism dominated, with the political assimilation of ethnic minorities.

The state's assimilation policy was especially harsh on the Azerbaijanis--who were viewed as a potential threat to the country's territorial integrity, above all because of their numbers and their degree of integration into Persian society. The regime denied Azerbaijanis' Turkic identities and instead attempted to foist on them a theory according to which they were linguistically Turkicized members of the Iranian Azari ethnic group.¹³ It should be mentioned that the regime's concern about the insufficient loyalty of its Turkic population was not entirely unfounded. With the support of Russia and later the Soviet Union, Azerbaijanis attempted on several occasions to gain autonomy or complete separation from the country. This mainly occurred from 1917-1920, when separatist movements in the region were gaining strength. In July 1920, separatists declared part of southern Azerbaijan an independent territory called Azadistan ("Land of Freedom"). Within less than three months, however, the Persian army regained control of the unrecognized territory. Another separation attempt took place in November 1945, when

the Azerbaijan People's Government was created with the support of the Soviets. It was likewise crushed by Iranian forces after about a year, and its leadership headed by President Sayyed Ja'far Pischevari fled into Soviet exile.¹⁴

Given the mistrust of the majority population toward the Azerbaijani minority, especially in the periods immediately following the liquidation of the two separatist regions, many Azerbaijanis began hiding or even denying their Turkic origins, generally by claiming Iranian identity. This negation was expressed as either of concealment of their regional origins and the acceptance of pan-Iranianism or acceptance of the theory that Azerbaijanis were of Iranian origin. This was common both among representatives of the Azerbaijani social elite as well as of among the masses of rural Azerbaijanis, who left to Tehran and other Iranian cities outside of historical Azerbaijan during the industrialization of the 1960s /1970s and later.¹⁵

To a certain extent, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 reduced the force of Iranian nationalism, in that it solidified the role of the Shi'i religion as the leading component of Iranian collective identity. Yet from the 1990s, shortly after the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Iranian (Persian) nationalism again grew stronger. With this came an increase in anti-Turkic sentiments directed in particular against the country's Azerbaijani minority. Especially in the cities where Persians are the majority, many Azerbaijanis have attempted to hide their true identities in order to avoid becoming objects of ridicule and discrimination.

In ethnically mixed Azerbaijani-Persian families, common in Iran's large cities, the children generally claim Persian nationality. Many parents in fully Azerbaijani families living outside the Azerbaijani provinces teach their children only Persian from birth and avoid communicating in their Turkic language to spare their offspring ridicule because of their Azerbaijani accents and origins.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the Turkic identity of Iran's Azerbaijanis has not been eliminated completely. Rather, it has been pushed out of

the public discourse and into the private sphere. Together with the change of the social climate in recent years, Turkic identity has been resurfacing with rather surprising intensity by Iranian standards.

GROWING AZERBAIJANI NATIONALISM

Although Azerbaijani nationalism has always existed in northwestern Iran, since the 1990s, it has greatly increased. This is due to a combination of several different factors affecting the Azerbaijani minority. As follows, the most important factors influencing Iran's Azerbaijanis within the Islamic Republic and with respect to external forces are discussed.

Secularization and Admiration of Turkey

Since around the mid-1990s, there a gradual strengthening of Turkic identity has emerged among Iran's Azerbaijanis. More and more Azerbaijanis are claiming their Turkic origins. Unlike in the past, this is no longer a crime, nor is it socially unacceptable to speak Azerbaijani Turkish in public, although doing so can elicit an occasional negative reaction from the Persian-speaking majority. One of the most important reasons for this new rise of Azerbaijani nationalism is the reduced self-identification with the Iranian theocratic state and with religion, and the strengthening of ethnic nationalism. About two-thirds of Iran's population is under the age of 30. Many young Iranians are dissatisfied with the restrictive regime of the clerics, and this dissatisfaction was multiplied in particular during the bloody unrest surrounding the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009. They no longer identify with the theocracy, or they identify with it to a much lesser extent than the previous generation.¹⁷

Throughout society, and especially in the urban environment, there is widespread disillusion with the theocratic form of government and resistance to its fundamentalist aspects. There are increasing expressions of the desire for societal reforms. Out of protest against the regime, many

educated Iranians are also less fervent about their religious identities. On the contrary, they admire the West. This also applies to Azerbaijanis. Naturally, the weakening of self-identification with the regime and with religion is leading to a search for an alternative ideology--the revival of (ethnic) nationalism, which means Turkic nationalism to many Azerbaijanis. In the case of the Persians, what is involved is a constantly expanding role for Persian nationalism, which turns to the pre-Islamic tradition of the Persian empires of the past.¹⁸ This development is also reflected in growing number of films and literature glorifying the pre-Islamic past of the Persians. It seems that this phenomenon is being tolerated by the clerics, and that they are even supportive of it to some degree. Fertile ground is thus emerging for conflict between Turkic (Azerbaijani) and Iranian (Persian) nationalisms.¹⁹

To these young Iranians described above, Turkey represents a free, pro-Western, and relatively developed country, which is also politically and militarily powerful. Last but not least, Turkey is perceived as a country that is more "European" than Iran both culturally as well as in the physical appearance of its inhabitants. In recent years, Iranians have also taken a liking to Turkish seaside resorts. Few middle-class, urban Iranian families have never visited Antalya, Antakya, or Bodrum.²⁰ Turkic identity in connection with a liberal, modern Turkey is no longer without prestige for many Iranians. This is also having something of an impact on the perception of Iran's Azerbaijani "Turks."

Many Iranians, especially of Azerbaijani origin, travel to Turkey for work. There, they encounter very strong Turkish nationalism and consciousness of Turkic solidarity. This strengthens their ethno-lingual consciousness and reduces something of their psychological handicap dating back to the era of the Shah. Also playing a significant role in the context of the ongoing ethnocultural revival of Iran's Azerbaijanis is the reception of Turkish (and Azerbaijani) satellite broadcasts. Watching Turkish television stations in northwestern Iran became commonplace in the 1990s,

although the use of satellite receivers is formally forbidden in the country. Many Azerbaijani households also watch Turkish television stations that provide a wide selection of programs of incomparably greater interest than the strictly censored Iranian television.

Regularly watching Turkish broadcasts not only strengthens their awareness of Turkic solidarity, but also helps viewers improve their language skills. Interestingly, since the early 2000s, there has been a considerable increase in the number of Anatolian Turkish-isms in the language of Iran's Azerbaijanis.²¹

Independent Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani Minority in Iran

In addition to admiration of Turkey, there has been a growing identification with Caucasian Azerbaijanis, who gained independence in 1991, in the northwestern provinces of Iran. While many secularly and nationalistically minded Azerbaijanis view the attributes of statehood of the Republic of Azerbaijan with romantic enthusiasm--encouraged by nationalistic literature and films from the north, among other things²²--the relationship of a large portion of Iran's Azerbaijanis with the so-called *shuravis* ("Soviets"), as the northern Azerbaijanis are often called to this day, also has a number of negative aspects.

Azerbaijan's partition between Russia and Persia in 1828 led to a noticeable cultural Russification of the population of northern Azerbaijan, which also underwent strong secularization under the Soviet regime. At the same time, however, Iran's Azerbaijanis preserved many elements of traditional patriarchal life, and especially Islam.²³ Among the two related populations, the division of that nation into northern and southern parts thus led to the formation of differing cultures and identities, which were antagonistic in many respects.

The division is also visible, however, within the community of Iran's Azerbaijanis along the religion-nationalism dividing line. Religiously oriented conservatives belonging

mainly to older generations identify themselves primarily with their fellow believers. They identify Shi'i Islam with the idea of Iranian statehood, and they are skeptical--even antagonistic--toward manifestations of Azerbaijani nationalism. They generally have a negative opinion of Anatolian Turks as being non-believers (Sunnis) and of Caucasian Azerbaijanis as "pro-Russians."

In this environment, it is not uncommon to hear statements that the Republic of Azerbaijan should be annexed to Iran or to Iranian Azerbaijan, since "we are all Shiites," and that historically, Caucasian Azerbaijan has always belonged to Persia.²⁴ On the other hand, among secular-minded Azerbaijanis, and especially among young people, the importance of Shi'ism as the pillar of their identity is on the decline. They rather tend to claim their Turkish origins, or they profess Turkish Azerbaijani nationalism. This nationalism distances them from the idea of Iranian statehood, while bringing them psychologically closer to the members of Turkic society in Iran as well as in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey, with which they desire unification.²⁵

Among the nationalistic Azerbaijani community in Iran, there has thus been a greater orientation toward Turkey than Azerbaijan. While this might at first seem paradoxical, this is the case because, among other aforementioned factors, the present Republic of Azerbaijan is perceived in Iran as a small, economically, militarily, and politically weak state with rampant corruption, under the authoritarian rule of one family, and which also suffered disgrace in the form of military defeat (Nagorno-Karabakh).²⁶ Therefore, somewhat paradoxically, Iranian Azerbaijanis identify more with Turkey than with the Republic of Azerbaijan.

In such a case, when a significant ethnic group in a state with multiple nationalities is becoming more and more inclined toward nationalities and states beyond the borders of its own country, this naturally puts pressure on the identity of the home country. Here, the security threat arising from such tendencies is

further augmented by the fact that Turkey represents an important rival of Iran in international politics, while Azerbaijan represents a potentially dangerous ally of the West and of the state of Israel (see below).

Demonstrations and Displays of Dissatisfaction

As a result of the aforementioned factors, there has been a growing sense of (Turkic) ethnocultural commonality of the Azerbaijani population in northwestern Iran since the mid-1990s. Since 1996, there have been several larger demonstrations in Tabriz, Urmia, and other mainly Azerbaijani cities. The protestors' main demands have been to permit instruction in the Turkish language and the recognition of the ethnic and linguistic peculiarity of the "Azerbaijani Turks," as they refer to themselves. There have also been occasional calls for the establishment of cultural and administrative autonomy in the Azerbaijani provinces.²⁷

The culmination and turning point of the demonstrations for ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic emancipation occurred when riots broke out in May and June of 2006. On May 12, 2006, the state newspaper *Iran* printed a grossly insulting caricature of an Azerbaijani as a stupid, dirty cockroach and ran an article directed against the Azerbaijani minority. Shortly after the publication of the defamatory material, thousands of demonstrators turned up in the mostly Azerbaijani-populated cities of northwestern Iran as well as in Tehran. The demonstrations, initiated by students, paralyzed these cities for several days, in some cases even weeks.²⁸ The protestors even seized a television transmitter for a short period in the western city of Urmia as well as a municipal building in the eastern city of Sulduz. Meanwhile, the vast majority of local police and militia (Basij²⁹ and Pasdaran), composed of ethnic Azerbaijanis, refused to take action against their compatriots, a case which was unprecedented in Iran.

The demonstrators called for the creators of the caricature and the article to be punished,

about a demand that was finally met. The authors of the article and the editor-in-chief of the newspaper were dismissed, and publication of the newspaper was temporarily suspended. Yet the demonstrations still continued. Protestors shouted political slogans such as, "I am proud to be a Turk!" "Down with Persian chauvinism!" "Keep your hands off of Azerbaijan!" and "We want instruction in Turkish in our schools!" Militia and army units were called in from other areas of Iran to end the demonstrations, resulting in dozens of deaths. According to some reports, provided mainly by Azerbaijani nationalists, there were more than a hundred victims. The exact number of victims cannot, however, be calculated, due to Teheran's strict information embargo concerning the events in northwestern Iran.³⁰

The events of 2006 and the harsh repressions that followed further strengthened the Azerbaijanis' Turkic nationalism and intensified their resentment toward the radically theocratic regime. These sentiments reemerged, for example, during the 2009 presidential elections. Northwestern Iran supported the local native and reformist Mousavi. A number of Azerbaijanis lost their lives during demonstrations. While resistance to the ruling regime may serve to unite Iran's Azerbaijanis with other opposition currents, there are nonetheless certain barriers--a significant portion of the Persian opposition to the regime is critical of the theocratic government but is just as antagonistic toward Turkic nationalism as the current regime.

Soccer Nationalism

In view of the de facto ban on all Azerbaijani ethno-emancipatory activity, applying to other ethno-lingual communities as well, sports have come to play an important part of the flagship of the Azerbaijani emancipation movement in Iran. The success of the Tractor (also Teraktur, Tiraxtur) Sazi soccer team of Tabriz, the historical center of so-called southern Azerbaijan, has led to a sort of "soccer nationalism." Founded in 1970 at a tractor factory in Tabriz, the team has since

won a place in Iran's top soccer league and has broken several Iranian records at the national level.

Formerly, only Iran's two biggest soccer teams, both from Tehran (Esteghlal and Persepolis), were capable of turning out more fans at away games than the home team. Recently, however, Tractor fans have almost outnumbered the home team fans at their games against the two Teheran soccer teams, thanks to the attendance of fans of Azerbaijani origin living in Tehran and the surrounding communities. Tractor Sazi games generally draw over 60,000 fans, an Iranian record.

This high level of support for Tractor is conditioned by the politicization of the team's fans, who articulate their demands for the institution of instruction and television broadcasting in their native Azerbaijani language at almost every game. Unprecedented in Iran, the crowds of tens of thousands of fans also shout pan-Turkic slogans and use pan-Turkic symbolism, such as, "Tabriz, Baku, Ankara, our path leads in a different direction from the path of the Persians," "Azerbaijan is ours, Afghanistan is yours," "All people have the right to study in their own language," "Down with Persian fascism," "Long live free Azerbaijan," "To hell with those who don't like us," "We're proud to be Turks," etc.

At Tractor games against soccer teams from Persia, hateful, defamatory slogans, with an ethno-nationalistic subtext, can be heard from both sides. The Persians generally chant "*tork-e khar*" or "Turkish donkey," to which the Azerbaijanis have respond "*fars-e maimoon*" or "Persian monkey." This has led to bloody clashes, in which the police have generally sided with the Persians.³¹ This polarization of society along ethnic and linguistic lines and nationalistic tensions between Persians and Azerbaijanis is thus on the rise. This has also led to an awakening among other, less populous Turkic communities in Iran, which are claiming their Turkic identities more strongly than in the past.

Lake Urmia and Nationalization of the Environmental Movement

Another important group of anti-government protests that have assumed strongly nationalistic overtones have been demonstrations calling attention to the poor condition of Lake Urmia. The lake itself, located on the border between the Iranian provinces of Western and Eastern Azerbaijan, is a unique natural feature and is listed as a UNESCO biosphere reservation.³²

This salt lake has no outflow, and it is under threat from the intensification of agriculture in surrounding areas. Due to increasing use of water from rivers that feed into the lake and the construction of over 30 dams in those streams, the surface area of the lake is progressively shrinking. According to some experts, the lake could dry up completely in a matter of a few years. Yet officials of the Islamic Republic have not taken serious measures to prevent the lake—not only a valuable biotope, but also one of the symbols of Southern Azerbaijan—from disappearing.³³

From March 2010, a series of protests took place in hopes of drawing attention to this serious ecological problem. Although Tractor Sazi fans, known for their inclination towards Azerbaijani nationalism, have been involved in the protests from the start, the demands were initially purely apolitical, aimed at solving an environmental problem. Even some of the region's elected deputies were among the voices of protestors, and their open letter was published by the official press agency Fars. In spite of this, the regime took a very hard line against the demonstrators. In turn, the demonstrators reacted by raising political and nationalistic issues in the protests.³⁴

At demonstrations in mid-2011, banners with such slogans as: "Lake Urmia is drying up; Iran has ordered its execution," and "Urmia is thirsty, Azerbaijan must take a stand or lose the lake" were common. In response to the regime's unwillingness to act on the issue, what started as an ecological protest has become a nationalistic in nature. The problem has come to be interpreted as one of the inaction (some would say deliberate) of the Persians is leading to the disappearance of one

of Azerbaijan's natural wonders. Conspiracy theories have even emerged claiming this to be a carefully planned geoengineering project by the regime which wishes to turn the fertile territory of southern Azerbaijan into a salty desert (because the salt from the dried-up lake would be spread by the wind to the surrounding areas, where it would contaminate the soil). The fact that some Azerbaijani nationalists believe such theories about the regime's plans for the total destruction of the region indicates their high degree of alienation from a regime whose representatives tend to be perceived as foreign usurpers.³⁵

The Regime's Reaction to Azerbaijani Protests

With any anti-regime protest, the Islamic regime generally responds in the same manner—harsh repression of demonstrations. State intervention against protests has become increasingly severe, especially since the 2009 presidential election riots. The Basij militia is usually deployed and uses batons, water cannons, and rubber projectiles to disperse the protesters. Typically, there are arrests and quasi-legal or even illegal abductions of selected demonstrators, followed by harsh interrogations and imprisonment. Demonstrations also tend to be put down by the pro-regime vigilante group Ansar-e Hezbollah (Supporters of the Party of God), which concentrates on enforcing Islamic morality among the citizens and on suppressing anti-regime opposition and signs of protest.³⁶

The deployment of Ansar-e Hezbollah in Azerbaijani territories is not, however, as frequent or massive as is the case in Iran's central and eastern provinces. There, the group does not have a very large membership base, and it only exhibits itself prominently in Tabriz, where it assisted the Basij in suppressing demonstrations. The group's most visible personality, and at the same time, an example of the group's weakness in Iranian Azerbaijan is Ruhollah Bejani, head of Ansar-e Hezbollah in Tabriz. Bejani gained attention in late 2011, when he launched a rhetorical

attack on the Azerbaijani consulate in the city in response to the anti-Islamic policy being pursued in Azerbaijan.³⁷ In April of 2012, he repeated his demands to close the consulate, even calling upon President Ahmadinejad to do so due to the consulate's plans to hold a "gay parade" in Tabriz.³⁸ These demands were not met, however, making Ansar-e Hezbollah even more marginal in the eyes of the locals.

The regime has also responded to Azerbaijani separatist tendencies by placing greater control over the university environment. This is also being carried out by the Basij group. In the mid-2000s, they installed their own loyal teachers, leading to the formation of the Basij Teachers Organization. The goal of its establishment was to strengthen the influence of its members over other academics and influence the manner of instruction. The organization claims to have over 15,000 members, accounting for about a quarter of all university teachers.

There is also a Basij Student Organization, an association of students who are also members of Basij units. For many young people, membership in Basij may be the only way to receive a university education. The organization has 650,000 members in 700 Iranian universities. Among the organization's main tasks are the coordination of confrontations with reform activists and the exertion of pressure on university administrations concerning the schools' social, moral, and political shortcomings.³⁹

This regime structure not only limits and controls academic freedom, but also serves for the rapid suppression of student riots or protests of any kind. Its effectiveness was clearly visible during the post-election demonstrations in Iranian Azerbaijan (and elsewhere) in 2009, when student unrest was harshly suppressed by paramilitary units. There was even a Basij raid of universities and of student dormitories in which tear gas and batons were used and mass arrests were made.⁴⁰

The raids were especially harsh at the University of Tabriz and included beatings, arrests, violent interrogations of students, and destruction of property. When compared to

events at the universities in Tehran, there was a double standard was evident. While the raids at the University of Tehran were investigated by a specially appointed committee of the Iranian National Security Council, the incidents in Tabriz were ignored. Demonstrations and student unrest originally directed against the result of the election thus quickly assumed an ethnic dimension. The local press immediately began questioning why events in the Azerbaijani territory were dealt with differently.⁴¹ In addition to the suppression of riots, the Iranian regime also employs sophisticated methods in order to infiltrate separatist groups, monitor them, and eliminate them. According to information confirmed by Iranian government officials and academics, separatist cells are emerging among Traktor Sazi soccer fans (see aforementioned), which is leading to the politicization of their demands. Generally, these cells meet in Nakhchivan, the (northern) Azerbaijani exclave, where Iranian citizens have no visa requirements. Traktor fans view the team as a defender of the rights and freedom of the Azerbaijanis. Yet support for the team among Iran's Azerbaijani community is longstanding and thus difficult to abolish. The Iranian government has thus allegedly attempted to infiltrate the network through agents in order to identify and prosecute those fans who are the most politically engaged.⁴²

In Iranian Azerbaijan in general, in the case of any hint of anti-state activity, through its developed network of agencies, the regime responds with oppression. When arrested, ethno-lingual rights activists of the Azerbaijani community are routinely tortured by the police. Reports of rape have emerged as well. Due to the lack of official data on the nationalities of prisoners and the fact that many activists are convicted of non-political crimes (such as disorderly conduct), the exact numbers of such prisoners cannot be determined. Most of them tend to receive lighter sentences of a few months. Nonetheless, some activists have received harsher sentences. One such example is journalist Said Mantipour, who was sentenced in 2008 to eight years in prison.⁴³

An additional tactic of the regime has been to incite tensions between the Kurds and the Azerbaijanis. This is an integral part of Tehran's policy, especially in Western Azerbaijan, where there is a populous Kurdish community. During the 1990s especially, the Islamic regime settled Kurds in villages south of the Aras River, along which the national border with Azerbaijan and Armenia runs, in order to create a sort of buffer zone. In doing so, the government created considerable tension between the local Azerbaijani residents and the newly arrived Kurds.

Tehran's efforts to turn the Kurdish and Azerbaijani communities of this province against each other were partially successful and caused a certain worsening of relations between the two groups. This has not, however, developed into a more serious conflict thus far. In addition, according to reports from the region, there is mutual agreement between the leaders of the two communities, which strive for similar reforms (instruction in Kurdish and in Azerbaijani Turkish as well as the establishment of ethno-administrative autonomy, etc.).⁴⁴

The Situation in Iranian Azerbaijan from the Early 2000s

From the early 2000s, in spite of the restrictions imposed by the Iranian authorities, Azerbaijanis have almost regularly held mass marches to their national symbols of Mount Savalan and the Bazz fortress. On these marches are Separatist slogans, pan-Turkic symbolism, and the illegal flag of so-called South Azerbaijan (which has a structure similar to the flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan) are not unusual.⁴⁵ In addition to these marches and the increasingly frequent clashes between soccer fans of Azerbaijani and Persian origin, anonymous posters calling for instruction in Turkish, along with the flags of Azerbaijan and of Turkey, have also begun to appear in Tabriz, Urmia, Maraz, Sulduz, Ardabil, and several other towns of Iranian Azerbaijan. The posters are put up overnight in prominent places and are then immediately torn down by the police and militia units.

The state has created an absolute information embargo on such activities. The majority Persian population, thus, has only a limited awareness of the situation in the region. Even the state's top representatives at times exhibit such ignorance. One such example took place in the spring of 2006 during an official visit by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tabriz at the local university. Azerbaijani students provocatively welcomed the statesman with the traditional greeting of pan-Turkic radicals known as the "wolf's head" (*kurtbaşı*). Ahmadinejad interpreted the gesture as a local greeting, and he returned it without knowing its political connotations. Pictures of the president inadvertently using the greeting of an organization that his regime has harshly repressed still circulate the internet.⁴⁶

In September 2010, field research conducted by Emil Souleimanov revealed a surprising development among Iran's Azerbaijani community. For example, there is almost open talk in Tabriz about the need for federalization in Iran and for the establishment of Azerbaijani autonomy. One even hears occasional assertions about the need for Azerbaijan to split away from Iran. In stark contrast to the situation in the early 1990s--when it was hardly possible to hear a Turkic language in Tabriz--or even in the early 2000s--when scarcely half of the population spoke a Turkic language in public--Azerbaijani is now commonly spoken in public and many listen exclusively to Azerbaijani and Turkish music.

According to some unverified reports from independent sources, in the spring of 2009, there were explosions at police stations in several places in Western Azerbaijan, said to have been the work of Azerbaijani separatists. Some reports claim that this was the joint activity of Azerbaijani separatists with Kurdish separatists, who have a longstanding tradition of armed resistance in the region. Similarly, though isolated, incidents occurred in 1996 in the same part of Iranian Azerbaijan. The government in Tehran successfully nipped those incidents in the bud, however, in part due to the limited support Azerbaijani separatists had at the time from their

compatriots.⁴⁷

These developments are an indication that an emancipation phase for Azerbaijani nationalism is underway, in parallel with the emergence and development of elements of armed resistance. Despite the obstacles, it is apparent that the nationalistic groups of Iran's Azerbaijanis have broad support. In view of the repressive nature of the Iranian regime, one could scarcely imagine that such movements could function without support from abroad, whether provided by foreign governments or the diaspora.

A careful analysis of these nationalistic movements must therefore address the foreign influences affecting the development of these groups. Due to the scarcity of sources, this aspect is the most difficult to research. In Iran itself, sources on this topic are entirely lacking, as the regime attempts to quash any information of this character for security reasons. Likewise, the members of Azerbaijani nationalistic groups in Iran avoid discussing foreign support for fear of possible accusations of espionage, etc. The outline that follows is therefore based mainly on fragmentary information available in countries that support southern Azerbaijani nationalistic groups or have supported them in the past.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF AZERBAIJANI NATIONALISM IN IRAN

In addition to internal security problems in Iran posed by its Azerbaijani minority, the Azerbaijani element is also important in terms of foreign relations. As a regional power with interests beyond its own borders, Iranian policy on this matter has been pragmatic. Though the issue of the Azerbaijani minority has been of secondary importance both with regards to Iran's own foreign policy and that of external powers, the issue could play a significant role in the political, military, and economic security of the entire Middle East. Among the most important foreign powers influencing the position of the Azerbaijani nationalists in the Islamic Republic are the United States, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, and also Israel. The following

section will deal with security and Iran's relations with those countries.

The United States

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the U.S. relationship with Iran has been a complicated one. Tehran went from being a key ally of Washington to its archenemy practically overnight. The long-term American position with respect to the Islamic Republic has thus been antagonistic, and since the overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, Iran has become the main adversary of the United States in the region. American interests and activities have, however, been more concentrated in the Persian Gulf than the Caspian Sea region (primarily due to its close ties with Saudi Arabia and the so-called Carter Doctrine).⁴⁸

Since 1995, the United States has enforced harsh economic sanctions against Iran and its energy industry sector, and it has attempted to limit Iranian participation in energy projects in the Caspian Sea and elsewhere. For example, in November 1994, an agreement was signed between Azerbaijan and Iran to provide a one-quarter share in the energy and drilling consortium Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) to Iran, so that the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) was to enter the consortium. By April 1995, however, the agreement had been cancelled, and the NIOC was excluded from the consortium, primarily due to firm American opposition. Richard Kauzlarich, the U.S. ambassador in Baku at the time, openly threatened that unless the Iranian company were removed from the list for the consortium, the American firms would completely pull out their 40 percent share. In response, Iran immediately accused President Aliyev of Azerbaijan of being a puppet of the "Great Satan."⁴⁹

The U.S. (as well as European) position with respect to Iran has also blocked any Iranian participation in the Nabucco project. This is, of course, a purely political decision, since from an economic, technical, and energy viewpoint, Iran has the largest deposits of natural gas (the second-largest supply of

natural gas in the world) and would have been the main supplier from the region to Europe. The transport of this gas would have to cross through Azerbaijan or directly through Turkey, and any infrastructure or pipeline would ultimately run through the territory of Iranian Azerbaijan. As such, neither the West nor Azerbaijan and Turkey would wish for unrest in the region, which could jeopardize the energy infrastructure.

As far as the U.S. relationship with the Azerbaijani minority is concerned, according to available information, in 2003-2004, Washington was still working to instigate Azerbaijani separatism in Iran. However, as a result of the relatively weak ethnic self-awareness of the Azerbaijanis and their apolitical nature at the time, the plan was not successfully realized.⁵⁰ At that time, SANAM (South Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement) leader,⁵¹ Dr. Mahmudali Chohraganli (Chohragani in Persian), was received at the highest level in Washington in 2003 and again in 2004.

Following the failed U.S. efforts to activate separatism in northwestern Iran, the 2006 unrest came as a surprise both to Washington and to Tehran. Although the government in Tehran has traditionally accused the instigators of unrest of having ties to the United States and Israel, the fact that the Western media barely covered the events in northwestern Iran indicated that the Americans had no connection with them.⁵² Developments in recent years, however, indicate the situation in Iranian Azerbaijan has changed. In the foreseeable future, it may be possible to foment Azerbaijani separatism and thereby to weaken the central government in Tehran.

Azerbaijan

The relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan has been quite problematic from the very beginning, when the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan gained its independence. Iran's concerns over the irredentist and separatist tendencies of its Azerbaijani minority have influenced to a considerable extent its relations with its

neighbor to the north. During the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran was not inclined to take sides with its fellow Shi'a. Instead, Iran supported its Christian adversary by providing weapons from Russia and the Armenian diaspora. Nonetheless, the independent state of Azerbaijan has had a limited role in the emancipation efforts of its southern ethnic relatives. A much more important player is Turkey (see below), where thousands of Iranians go to work and witness its modernity, progressiveness, and prosperity.

Nonetheless, since Azerbaijan's existence as an independent state, Iran has systematically attempted to weaken that state. One way has been by creating problems with and blocking solutions to the status of the Caspian Sea. Iran has long backed Russia's position regarding the division of the body of water, thereby deliberately weakening Azerbaijan's ability to do surveying and drilling in the disputed Caspian waters. Azerbaijan's economy and its relationship with the West mainly revolve around the extraction, processing, and export of energy resources, and Iran has long been engaged in efforts to complicate this for Azerbaijan. Tensions peaked in July 2001, when an Iranian warship forced an Azerbaijani survey ship with experts from British Petroleum to leave the territorial waters around the Araz-Alov-Sharg field. The field is located a full 100 kilometers to the north of the Soviet-Iranian border and is claimed by Tehran. The incident effectively ruined the chance of work beginning in that field in the foreseeable future.⁵³ Teheran also opposed construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline, but its efforts to stop this failed and the pipeline was completed and began operating 2006. This was one of Tehran's biggest political defeats in the region.

Another factor in mutual security relations has been Iranian attempts to export its radical Shi'i dogma to its northern, secular neighbor. Iran's religious leaders have attempted to gain influence in Azerbaijan's mosques, to spread their ideology, and to support Islamist-oriented political groups, such as the Islamic Party of

Azerbaijan. Despite that party's growing popularity, Teheran's efforts to Islamize Azerbaijan are not likely to succeed in the near future.⁵⁴

As for the military security dimension, Azerbaijan's orientation toward the West has elicited Iranian fears of the possible use of its neighbor's territory to attack the Islamic Republic. Iranian representatives regularly warn Azerbaijan about its orientation toward the United States and Israel and the harsh consequences for Azerbaijan if a threat of any kind were to come from Azerbaijani territory.⁵⁵

In particular, Iran suspects Azerbaijan of allowing the United States to use Azerbaijani territory for reconnaissance activities against the Islamic Republic. In this regard, Ali Larijani, speaker of parliament and former secretary of the Iranian Security Council, stated that if Azerbaijani territory were to be used for an attack on Iran, Tehran would carry out reprisals against the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline and other strategic facilities in Azerbaijan.⁵⁶

As a result of increasing Iranian pressure on Azerbaijan, the two countries signed a non-aggression pact in 2005, according to which the signatories would not permit a third country to build military bases on their territories to be used for an attack on the other party.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the mutual distrust between the two countries continues and is growing, as Azerbaijan establishes closer ties with Iran's archenemy, Israel (see below).

In spite of the problematic relations between the two countries, official Azerbaijani policy distances itself from the affairs of its southern neighbors. President Ilham Aliyev has regarded the question of southern (Iranian) Azerbaijan as being exclusively Iran's internal political affairs, despite increasing demands of southern (Iranian) Azerbaijanis for the expansion of their ethno-lingual rights. Still, the Azerbaijani government seems to have had a certain degree of unofficial influence. According to some reports, the Tractor Sazi soccer team receives financial support from Baku. This aside, however, post-Soviet Azerbaijan has tried to distance itself as much

as possible from the events in Iranian Azerbaijan, and it has not made any official declarations of support for the separatist movements. Nonetheless, the government in Baku has not closed the SANAM headquarters on its territory in spite of Tehran's protests.⁵⁸

Interestingly, since the early 1990s, Azerbaijani nationalists have referred to northwestern Iran exclusively as "Southern Azerbaijan," a term which is forbidden in Iran. Their goal is the unification of the two Azerbaijanis and thus the formation of a powerful country in the region.⁵⁹ It is questionable whether the government in Baku is determined to support separatism of the Azerbaijanis in northwestern Iran (with the support of the United States, Israel, or other Western countries, but without security guarantees from them).⁶⁰

Baku may, however, find the southern Azerbaijani card a useful means to exert diplomatic pressure--if limited--on Iran for at least two reasons. The first might be a demand that the Islamic Republic take a more favorable position toward Baku concerning the question of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The presence of an increasingly nationalistic Azerbaijani community in Iran might, if the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh were to erupt again, cause Iran to behave in accordance with the desires of its Azerbaijani population. A second reason might be the possible escalation of disputes over the still undefined mutual boundaries on the Caspian Sea.⁶¹

Israel

Since the 2000s, Israel has developed ties with Azerbaijan in order to promote its interests in the region. In wake of the dispute with Turkey, Israel is increasingly inclined toward the secular and cooperative Azerbaijan. Historically, Azerbaijani-Israeli/Azerbaijani-Jewish relations have been good. Of importance to Israel is the fact that there have never been strong manifestations of antisemitism in Azerbaijan (considerable numbers of so-called Mountain Jews live within Azerbaijani territory, as well as

Ashkenazi Jews),⁶² and that Azerbaijan is a Muslim but decidedly secular country. For Azerbaijan, on the other hand, the alliance is beneficial for economic reasons (Israel imports up to one-sixth of its crude oil from Azerbaijan) as well as from a military/security standpoint.

The most striking example of cooperation on this front was the February 2012 arms deal for the import of 1.6 billion dollars' worth of Israeli weapons to Azerbaijan, in particular anti-aircraft and antimissile defense systems.⁶³ The deal has caused speculation that Israel might request to use Azerbaijani territory to attack Iran. It has thus purchased defensive military technology in the case of a retaliatory attack. There is also speculation that Israel has been granted access to an Azerbaijani military airbase in the south of the country, which could be used for an aerial attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.⁶⁴ The proximity of this infrastructure and its possible use by Israel to destabilize the Iranian regime through the Azerbaijani minority is truly suggestive.

While Israeli activity in Iranian Azerbaijan cannot thus far be documented completely or definitively, it is possible such activities will increase in the near future. This is already apparent from the Israeli-Iranian rivalry within the territory of independent Azerbaijan. In early 2012, plans for a terrorist attack on the Israeli ambassador in Baku and on several representatives of the local Jewish community were uncovered.

The Azerbaijani authorities immediately accused the Iranian secret services, which were said to have masterminded, financed, and directed the entire operation. At the same time, there were speculations that Israel's secret service, the Mossad, had foiled the attack, which would confirm its presence and activity on Azerbaijani soil.⁶⁵ Just two months later, the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security announced the arrest of 22 people accused of treason and espionage for Iran's Revolutionary Guard. According to the ministry, the group was said to have already been operating on Azerbaijani territory since the 1990s in order to carry out sabotage operations and terrorist attacks on embassies and organizations of the

United States, Israel, and other Western countries.⁶⁶

These activities and the rivalry between Iranian and Israeli secret services on Azerbaijani territory could also spill over into Iranian Azerbaijan. If this were to occur, it would mean a far greater risk for the security of the Islamic Republic. One of Israel's long-term goals is to destabilize the regime in Tehran. The approach is thus identical to that of the United States. Another possibility involving the Azerbaijani minority in Iran is direct support of Israeli military operations against the Islamic Republic. As Israeli Brigadier General Oded Tira reportedly commented on rumors of the use of Azerbaijani military airbases by Israel, "With the help of Azerbaijan, Israel could count on the support of Iran's Azerbaijanis."

Turkey

Iran's relations with the moderate Islamist government in Ankara are relatively warm. This is in part due to Tehran's efforts to maintain normal relations with Turkey, an important economic partner and a significant regional player. Though Ankara has made official statements in favor of Iran with regards to the imposition of sanctions on the Islamic Republic, if Tehran were to obtain nuclear weapons this would pose a security risk to the Republic of Turkey.

Yet Turkish-Iranian relations have not always been good. In fact, there have been more periods of hostility than normalcy between the two. In the past, for example, the Iranians have supported the Turkish Hizballah offshoot, leading to a cooling of relations in the 1990s. The Turks also fear Tehran may support Iraqi (and Turkish) Kurdish separatism, as in the past (for example, during the Iran-Iraq War).⁶⁷

From a historical and ethnic perspective, Turkey also has very close ties with Azerbaijan and is its closest and most important ally. In spite of this, however, and in view of its limited economic and political potential, Turkey has not been able to help

Baku reach a more effective resolution of its dispute with Armenia or to provide Azerbaijan with security guarantees in the potentially explosive region. It is true in this regard that Turkey's efforts to play a leading role in the region have run up against a number of obstacles. While both sides appeared to have great expectations in the mid-1990s, such hopes have faded and have been replaced with a much more moderate, pragmatic approach--with the main emphasis on relations based on mutual economic advantage.⁶⁸ In addition, after Baku established a direct connection with the U.S. administration, Ankara's role as an intermediary between Baku and the West was noticeably weakened. Nonetheless, in agreement on a number of key foreign policy issues, relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan have strengthened. With the more active military-political engagement of the United States in the region since 2001, this has further become apparent.

A key link between Turkey and Iran and between Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as Ankara's main political tool in the region, is energy. In Turkey, the diversification of EU efforts to rid themselves of dependence on energy imports from Russia in line with Turkey's own economic and political interests. Turkey has an eminent interest in becoming a key Eurasian power corridor.

The effort become a strategic energy crossroads at the frontier of Russian Siberia, the Caspian region, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East is manifest in particular in the foreign policy of the governing party, which has an interest in building up Turkey's international political standing as an important trans-regional country seeking admission to the EU.⁶⁹ A key project for Turkey is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline, for which the main oil supplier is Azerbaijan. Potentially, of course, the crude oil pipeline also offers connections to other countries of the region. The increased supply of Caspian oil and gas to Europe, however, is hindered by the still unresolved status of the Caspian Sea. In addition, since July 2012, there has been a ban on the import of Iranian oil to Europe.

Larger transports of Iranian energy

resources to Europe through Turkey have been blocked for political reasons. This, of course, has not prevented Ankara from having its own policy with respect to its eastern neighbor. Iran is the second largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey, which is vitally dependent on gas imports. The gas is imported through the Tabriz-Ankara gas pipeline, with plans for expansion through the construction of the so-called Persian Gas Pipeline at the cost of 1.3 billion dollars.⁷⁰

Nonetheless, in April 2012, Turkey announced plans to cut its consumption of Iranian gas by 20 percent. The first and most likely explanation for this is pressure from Ankara to lower the price of Iranian gas, which is more expensive than gas supplied from Russia. Second, there is speculation about U.S. pressure on Turkey to abandon Iranian energy resources as part of economic sanctions.⁷¹

All energy exports crossing overland from Iran to Western markets, whether from the Persian Gulf or of the Caspian Sea, would necessarily have to pass directly through the region of Iranian Azerbaijan. This is the case with the new transport infrastructure as well. Any threat to the crude oil and gas pipelines, whether targeted attacks by armed groups or even the loss of Tehran's control over that territory, would necessarily mean a threat to Turkey's business interests and its energy security. However positively Ankara may view the emancipation efforts of the ethnically close Azerbaijani minority in Iran, if the situation were to get out of control and/or if the secure supply of energy resources from Turkey's eastern neighbor were to be disrupted, this would have serious consequences for Turkey.

Russia

Russia is itself a country with considerable energy wealth. In the 1990s, it became an important supplier of weapon systems to the Iran, a key trade partner, making the launch of its nuclear program possible. Russia and Iranian interests in the Caspian Sea region are similar. As for the Persian Gulf, Russian energy companies have attempted to secure

lucrative contracts for the development of Iranian oil and gas fields. In spite of international sanctions, Russian companies have successfully penetrated the Iranian energy market. The most important Russian companies involved in expansion there are Gazprom and Transneft.⁷²

Russia's policy towards Azerbaijan has been shaped by its long-term ties with that territory and by Russian energy and business interests. Both Tehran and Moscow favor a weak Azerbaijan that is not oriented toward the West. Russian relations with Turkey, as a suitable transport node for energy going to Europe, are also much like those of Iran.

Russia has long acted as a key ally of Teheran, regularly rejecting and vetoing harsh sanctions on Iran at the UN Security Council. It has strong commercial and other interests in the Islamic Republic as well, and has a similar position regarding the Caspian region. It has no interest in the strengthening of the Azerbaijani element within the state of Iran. At present, a strong, pragmatic, and stable Iran is more useful to Russia than an Iran weakened by domestic squabbles, which would threaten regional security and strengthen the positions of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and its Western allies.

CONCLUSION

While it appears an emancipation phase is underway for Azerbaijani nationalism coupled with the emergence and development of elements of armed resistance, the powerful, restrictive Iranian regime has made this very difficult to carry out. As Azerbaijanis represent Iran's largest ethnic minority, their strengthening separatism would pose a far greater threat to Iran's territorial integrity than that of the already active Kurds, Baloch, and Khuzestani Arabs. Unlike the marginal (Sunni) Kurds, Baloch, and Arabs, many Azerbaijanis are in important positions in Iranian society, in large part due to their strong influence in militia, army, and police units as well as in the state apparatus. Moreover, the Iranian Azerbaijanis territory is of great strategic importance to the country, both for agricultural production its strategic location as a major

export route to Turkey and the European Union. The ethno-separatist aspirations of Iran's Azerbaijanis could also influence Iran's other (smaller) Turkic nationalities, e.g., the East Mazandarni and Khorasani Turkmen, concentrated near the border with Turkmenistan and with a population of nearly 1.5 million.

Although Azerbaijani emancipation efforts and anti-regime protests have been overshadowed by the general mass unrest following the 2009 presidential elections, this issue is still a threat to Iran's domestic security and integrity as a state. Suppression of the post-election protests of course did not bypass the territory of Iran's Azerbaijanis, which was ravaged by members of the Basij and of the Ansar-e Hezbollah. Aware that universities have become one of the centers for possible resistance, the Iranian regime has strengthened its presence there through Basij organizations.

Above all, soccer has played an important part in Azerbaijani-Persian tensions and has served as an outlet for expressions of Azerbaijani nationalism as well as anti-Persian intolerance. Beyond soccer, Azerbaijani nationalists have adopted the campaign to prevent the ecological catastrophe of Lake Urmia, sometimes described as the pearl of (southern) Azerbaijan. Conspiracy theories revolving around the issue are abundant and these "environmental" protests are thus becoming more and more politicized.

In the international arena, the Azerbaijani card could be used to weaken Iran. This might be an option for Israel and the United States in particular, which have long had a troubled relationship with Iran. While U.S. attempts in this regard in the early 2000s failed Israel has taken this somewhat further. Israel's primary interest is in building close political and security ties with that country in the event of a possible confrontation with the Iran. Using the Azerbaijani minority for logistical support in case of an attack against Iran could be useful, though is not a building block of Israeli strategy. A more effective tool would be to mobilize this minority in order to weaken and preoccupy the central government. Thus far, however, neither the United States nor Israel

has provided substantial support to the Azerbaijani emancipation movement.

The role of the northern Azerbaijanis in the region of Iran inhabited mainly by their ethnic relatives is not yet entirely clear. While Baku's official policy has distanced itself from this issue, considering it an Iranian domestic affair, there has been some influence. In any case, the independent state of their compatriots has certainly served as a strong motivational element for Iran's Azerbaijanis. Still, many Iranian Azerbaijanis tend to view Turkey as a model. Beyond ethnic and linguistic ties, Turkey's modernity, advanced economy, and culture are also appealing. In comparison, Northern Azerbaijan tends to be perceived as a weak, economically unproductive country controlled by a single clan. Turkey itself, however, has complicated ties with Iran, as it is, on the one hand, largely dependent on the Iranian energy supply, but, on the other hand, is a natural regional rival. The contradiction between its economic and energy interests on the one hand and its ethnic and power politics on the other hand has kept Turkey from any serious involvement in the issue of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran. Still, Turkey has considerable potential to influence this situation, and in many regards it has more impact than Azerbaijan itself. Ankara's increasingly Islamist orientation does not leave much room for the United States or Israel to promote their interests through Turkey, and independent Azerbaijan may be a more likely partner.

In comparison, Russian policy wants a stable Iran, a weak Azerbaijan, and a Turkey that is not too strong--Turkey being a U.S. ally and NATO member. The ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic emancipation efforts of Iran's Azerbaijanis are thus somewhat contrary to these Russian political goals. With regards to Iran's Azerbaijanis and in the case of unrest and ensuing Iranian suppression of this minority, Russia would most likely follow a policy of strict noninterference with Iranian domestic affairs. It could also undermine any U.S. efforts to address such a potential situation at the UN Security Council.

The risk of growing internal tensions

among nationalities is inherent to all multiethnic states, which fear threats to their territorial integrity, domestic security, and international standing. If the Azerbaijani loyalty to the idea of Iranian statehood were to end, this would have severe repercussions for Iran's regional security and future as a state.

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NOTES

¹ The Turkophone ethnic groups include the Azerbaijanis, Turkmen, Qashqai, Avshars, and Qajars. Ethnic Iranians living within the territory of the Islamic Republic include (in addition to the predominant Persians) Kurds, Lurs, Talysh, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Baloch, Pashtuns, and Hazaras. Constituting a minority nationality of Semitic origin is the large population of Arabs living mainly in the southwest of the country near the shores of the Persian Gulf.

² James Minahan, *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), pp. 1765–66.

³ The language spoken by the Azerbaijanis is commonly referred to as Azerbaijani in the Republic of Azerbaijan. In Iran, this is more commonly called "Azerbaijani Turkish," the term used in this study.

⁴ "Southern Azerbaijan," *Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) Report*, The Hague (2010), p. 4, <http://www.unpo.org/downloads/319.pdf>.

⁵ This includes broadcasts by the Iranian state television station Sahar 1. The station in question is intended primarily for viewers in northern Azerbaijan, and it strives to disseminate Iranian state propaganda and

Iranian culture. The Sahar network also operates similar stations in other languages of worldwide and regional importance. See: Sahar, “Azeri TV of Sahar Universal Network,”

http://www.sahartv.ir/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=574&Itemid=53 (accessed March 3, 2011).

⁶ Minahan, *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations*, pp. 1765–66.

⁷ There is also a Sunni minority in the country, consisting mainly of ethnic Kurds, Baloch, Turkmen, Pashtuns, and some of the Arabs. Together, the Sunnis account for approximately nine percent of Iran’s population. Hussein Hassan, *Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2008), p. 3.

⁸ Minahan, *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations*, pp. 1765–66.

⁹ Sepah-e Pasharan-e Enqelab-e Eslami, literally the Army of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution. They are also known by the names Sepah or Pasharan or by the abbreviation IRGC (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). The Revolutionary Guards were founded by Ayatollah Khomeini immediately after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 to protect the newly imposed Islamic order.

¹⁰ Personal consultation of Josef Kraus with Nima Rashedan, commentator for Radio Farda, November 2011.

¹¹ “Racism in Contemporary Iran: An Interview with Alireza Asgharzadeh,” Association for Defense of Azerbaijani Political Prisoners in Iran (ADDAP), October 9, 2009, http://adapp.info/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=192:profile-dr-alireza-asgharzadeh&catid=32:adapp-exposes&Itemid=47 (accessed March 31, 2011).

¹² “Southern Azerbaijan,” pp. 4–5.

¹³ Mohammed Akhbari, “A Geopolitical Analysis of Ethnicity in Iran, with an Emphasis on Challenges and Opportunities,” *Geopolitics Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter 2009), pp. 56–57.

¹⁴ Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 75–76.

¹⁵ Hamid Mohtadi, “Rural Stratification, Rural to Urban Migration, and Urban Inequality: Evidence from Iran,” *World Development*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (June 1986), pp. 717–18.

¹⁶ “Racism in Contemporary Iran: an Interview with Alireza Asgharzadeh,” ADDAP, http://adapp.info/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=192:profile-dr-alireza-asgharzadeh&catid=32:adapp-exposes&Itemid=47.

¹⁷ Nastaran Moosavi, “Secularism in Iran,” in Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar (eds.), *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives* (Hartford: ISSSC, 2007), pp. 143–45.

¹⁸ Kamyar Abdi, “Nationalism, Politics, and the Development of Archeology in Iran,” *American Journal of Archeology*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (January 2001), p. 52.

¹⁹ “Racism in Contemporary Iran: an Interview with Alireza Asgharzadeh,” ADDAP, http://adapp.info/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=192:profile-dr-alireza-asgharzadeh&catid=32:adapp-exposes&Itemid=47.

²⁰ “İranlı turistler Türkiye'ye geliyor” [“Iranian Tourists Visit Turkey“], *Hurriyet*, February 22, 2011, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/17087969.asp> (accessed July 31, 2011).

²¹ Fardin Alikhan, “The Politics of Satellite Television in Iran,” in Mehdi Semati (ed.), *Media, Culture and Society in Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 98.

²² Cameron Brown, “Observations from Azerbaijan,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2002), p. 68, <http://www.gloria-center.org/meria/2002/12/brown.pdf>.

²³ Personal consultation of Emil Souleimanov with inhabitants of Tabriz, September 2010.

²⁴ Svante E. Cornell, “Iranian Azerbaijan: A Brewing Hotspot,” *Azeri.dk*, November 22, 2004, http://www.azeri.dk/en/articles/Iranian_azerbai

[jan.html](#) (accessed August 1, 2011).

²⁵ There thus exists friction and antagonism between the religious solidarity of Azerbaijanis and Persians, on the one hand--which does not extend, for example, to Kurds, Baloch, and other Sunnis--and their ethnic incompatibility, on the other hand, with the Azerbaijani minority being much closer to the Turks and Azerbaijanis beyond Iran's actual borders. Naturally, this has affects national and regional security.

²⁶ Brenda Shaffer, "The Formation of Azerbaijani Collective Identity in Iran," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 28 No. 3 (2000), p. 470.

²⁷ 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*, Vol. 8 No. 3 (2008), p. 486.

²⁸ Bijan Baharan, *The Hidden Side of Iran: Discrimination against Ethnic and Religious Minorities* (Paris: International Federation for Human Rights, 2010), p. 15.

²⁹ Basij-e Mostazafan, literally the Mobilization of the Oppressed. This is a paramilitary volunteer group under the Revolutionary Guard. During the Iran-Iraq War, it took part in combat operations, but now focuses mainly on internal security--the suppression of demonstrations and unrest; compelling compliance with Islamic laws and morals; and in the event of an attack on the state, it represents reserves for military deployment and home defense.

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