

Ethnicity in Contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran

the Case of “South Azarbaijan”

by

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INTRODUCTION

The media coverage of issues related with the Islamic Republic of Iran during the recent few years has been almost limited to the sole problem of nuclear power and alleged plans of creating weapons of mass destruction, while many other issues including nationalism and minorities in Iran have seemed to be out of sight. However, claims about the existence of major problems such as unfair treatment of minorities have been repeatedly declared and an entire network of modern resources such as internet web-sites has grown to raise the issue of Arabs, Kurds, Baluchis, Turkmen and Turkic speaking Iranian Azarbaijanis. The latter have been called Azeris¹ or Azerbaijanis and often identified with the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan just across the state border to the north of Iran.

The claimed government policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran during the last three decades following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 could be defined as pan-Islamic, which excludes all ethnicities (including Persians, which comprise the majority of the population) and refuses to divide people based on their ethnic origin, while the nineteenth article of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran adopted in 1979 declares: "All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege".² The Constitution acknowledges no ethnic minorities meaning that "all Muslims form a single nation (the *ummah*)" and stating that the duty of the government is "formulating

¹ Whether Azeri or Azerbaijani, Azari or Azarbaijani, the notion of the terms and even a slight difference of spelling the word with an *e* instead of *a* after *z* varies greatly from meaning an Iranian from the northern provinces of Iran to a distinct nation bearing its own, supposedly Turkic identity due to the language spoken in the region. To differentiate between those in Iran and those in the Republic of Azerbaijan the terms *Azarbaijani* and *Azerbaijani* will be used accordingly.

² Article 19, The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran; available at http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html (accessed April 12, 2009).

its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world".³ Thus, the priority is given to the religious but not the ethnic identity. This principle led to the acknowledgment of some religious minorities within the state (Zoroastrian, Christian and Jewish Iranians) and has failed to recognize the Muslim segments of the population distinguished by a specific language of theirs as bearers of a distinctive separate identity.

Some of the basic concepts that lie at the grounds of the arguments provided by Azarbaijani nationalists in Iran include firm statements of a distinct Azeri identity, existence of an Azerbaijani nation and a notion of the divided fatherland or brethren divided by the Arax river.⁴ Brenda Shaffer's recently published book is an example of constructing an image of the divided nation. She brings up her ideas and view of the matter throughout the book by arguing against the perception and theses proposed by authors such as Touraj Atabaki, which stand on the other side of the "barricades" attempting to point out that the matter related to the Azarbaijanis and Iranian citizens should not be interpreted as an issue of an oppressed group facing the challenges imposed by the Iranian and therefore alien authorities, and that labelling the northern provinces of Iran as *Güney Azərbaýcan* (South Azarbaijan)⁵ bears a direct political

³ Article 11, *The Constitution*.

⁴ Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (MIT Press, 2002).

⁵ Many supporters of the idea and the general movement have been quite actively using the online resources as well. Examples are the www.oursouthazerbaijan.com and www.azadtabriz.com web-sites as well as a number of others, which are, interestingly enough, usually providing links to other web-sites of similar content but created by the Kurdish, Arab and other nationalist activists. An analysis is necessary to answer the question whether their cooperation and mutual support is limited to posting virtual links or there is a real common agreement and understanding of the nationalist discourses.

connotation which could also justify territorial claims or ideas of "reunion" of the "North" with the "South".

The current research is aiming to look at the specific case of the Azarbaijani Turkish nationalism in Iran questioning the appropriateness of the term "South Azerbaijan" as well as the relevancy of the accent the Azarbaijani nationalists and foreign authors and media have put upon the issue, which, as the thesis would argue and imply, is primarily a matter of Iranian interior affairs between the central government and its subjects. In other words, the existing problems of the Muslim or non-Muslim Iranian citizens speaking either Farsi or the Turkic dialect of Azarbaijan are often shared by both and are not "allocated" specifically to the Persians or Azarbaijanis based on their linguistic differences and ethnic identities. Yet, many of these issues, which could be viewed as internal social problems of all Iranians have been interpreted by the above-mentioned parties from a rather simplified nationalistic perspective, according to which there is a long-lasting pattern of Persian chauvinistic dominance upon the Azarbaijani subjects of the state. It would also be exactly what this thesis intends to argue against with an aim to demonstrate the fallacy of the nationalist point of view claiming about the existence of an age-old Persian-Azeri "ethnic clash" or conflict. A motto-like statement that can be found on one of the nationalist web-sites⁶ or better say "web-platforms", where numerous links to external sources and other amateur nationalist web-sites are provided, could be applied in line with the above mentioned argument here. Although used in a different and rather exclusive context by the nationalists, the claim "*Iran is not Persia*" is still a valid argument if approached from the perspective of the all-inclusive and supraethnic identity and perception of Iran and Iranians, which, undoubtedly, is not limited to the Persians (as they are understood

⁶ <http://www.turkiran.com> (accessed 26 May 2009).

today- those for whom Farsi is the mother tongue) but also Azarbaijanis (the Turkic-speaking Iranians in the modern terms), Kurds, Georgians (who have converted to Islam centuries ago unlike their "ethnic brethren" in the predominantly Orthodox Christian Republic of Georgia) and others.

The sense of insecurity, isolation from the outer world, limited access to information other than that provided by the central government and general discontent with the results of the Islamic Revolution, which had inspired large masses of people regardless of their linguistic and even religious identity (a paradoxical example could be the participation of some Christian Armenians in the Islamic Revolution), equally concern not only those in the northwestern provinces of Iran but all others as well, just as, on the other hand, the construction of the Islamic Republic was successfully implemented not by a single linguistic group (the dominant Persians) but to a large extent by the other groups as well among which the Azarbaijani Iranians have been prominent.

It should also be mentioned that these concerns or anxieties do not necessarily refer to all Iranians neither it could be stated that a significant majority of the population is upset with the situation they have in the country. Quite the contrary, even if they admit that some reforms could or should be implemented especially in the socio-economic spheres, many Iranians still display some kind of confidence both in themselves and their state, although one might possibly expect that an Islamic form of government or the specific way of managing the state in Iran could hardly enjoy the support of the popular masses.⁷

⁷ These generalized assumptions are not pretending to provide grounded proof of a statistics-based research of the popular opinion and are to a large extent based on my personal observations and curious conclusions made before and after a visit to Iran, where it turned out, quite surprisingly, that much of the discontent and both negative or

Finally, the thesis will try to look at the possibilities of drawing parallels between Iran and other similar states with diverse populations in an attempt to see whether there is some room for a kind of system, which would manage rather than eliminate the diversity within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

positive comments about the current state of affairs that were expressed by regular Iranians (shopkeepers, taxi and bus drivers, employees of the student dormitory, students and University employees as well as minor officials) do not necessarily or always have a strong local flavor be that anti-clerical or, moreover- "chauvinist" Persian. These comments did not differ greatly from other similar opinions in many other parts of the world: social and economic hardships, hope for a better government etc. Issues of ethnicity, whether introduced by a Turkic-speaking Azarbaijani living in Tehran or an Armenian custodian of the Christian church in Isfahan sounded far less problematic than what can be read in the works referred to in this research.

Chapter 1.

The Debates in the Literature

Access to information, dissemination and publication of the theories has always been important and necessary for advancing the nationalist ideology forward. Benedict Anderson, although in a slightly different context, has emphasized the important role of the *print-languages* and *print-capitalism* in providing the bases for national consciousness. Not only it helped to share and exchange information but also led eventually to fixing and standardizing the languages. The communication provided by the newly emerging means also "formed, in their [the fellow-readers] secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community".⁸ If previously it could often be done primarily by word of mouth (due to the limited access to writing or printing materials as well as low literacy rates) and later through print media such as periodicals, pamphlets and books, the next generations already gained access to the wider capabilities of the modern means such as radio and television. Finally Internet, as a new phenomenon, which emerged during the last quarter of the twentieth century and quickly developed into a widely available and effective instrument, has also become a strong weapon for informational warfare. This research has also referred to numerous web-sites of individuals, nationalist parties, organizations or groups of sympathizers.

Brenda Schaffer's works and the nationalist web sites are not the only sources and works that build up the nationalist discourse of the "Southern Azerbaijanis". Politically active figures in the neighboring Republic of Azerbaijan as well as some of

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 43-45.

the Western authors, who have demonstrated some familiarity with the issue, have also been contributing to the creation of the assumption that a much larger number of the fellow compatriots live in the southern part of the vast Azerbaijani homeland.

Jamil Hasanli, a member of the Milli Majlis (Parliament) of the Republic of Azerbaijan and a professor at Baku State University, has recently published a book which serves as an example of how the semi-official and semi-academic figures of the Azerbaijani Republic perceive the issue of "Southern Azerbaijan" and some aspects of the history of Azerbaijani people. In reference to the "21 Azer movement" the author claims that it "embodied the character of a national movement. It formed a sense of the motherland and a system of national values in the minds of the Iranian Azerbaijani population".⁹

Other authors such as Audrey Altstadt,¹⁰ who also suggests a discussion and description of the Azerbaijani identity, and Tadeusz Swietochowski¹¹ have dedicated some of their major works to Azerbaijan and the question of Azerbaijani identity. Swietochowski describes the rise of national identity among the Azerbaijanis- the Turkic-speaking Muslims of Russia's borderland with Iran- at the opening of the 20th century. The work is primarily focusing on the period between the Russian Revolution of 1905, when Azerbaijanis began to articulate their national aspirations, until the establishment of Soviet Azerbaijani Republic in 1920. He refers to 1918 as the "high

⁹Jamil Hasanli, *At the Dawn of the Cold War: the Soviet-American Crisis over Iranian Azerbaijan, 1941- 1946* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

¹⁰Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1992).

¹¹Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: a Borderland in Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) also Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: the Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

watermark of the national movement" which was determined by the proclamation of the Azerbaijani Republic.

A completely different point of view is introduced by Touraj Atabaki,¹² whose work introduces the background of Iranian political history in the 20th century including the role played by Azarbaijani politicians in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-06, the drastic reforms of the autocratic Reza Shah's regime and its effect on ethnic identity in Iranian Azarbaijan. Atabaki draws on Turkish, Persian, and Azeri sources as well as British, French, American, and Soviet materials and interviews with surviving members of the period of autonomous government in Iranian Azarbaijan. The author questions and to a great extent refutes the arguments of the nationalist discourse provided above and by doing so he significantly contributes to the debate and provides some basis for further development of the thesis proposed by the current research.

The question of identity and in this case the Iranian identity is the central subject for Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet's work¹³ where she explores how the Iranian conceptions of national geography influenced cultural and political change. The "frontier fictions," or the ways in which the Iranians viewed their often fluctuating borders and the conflicts surrounding them, the author argues, played a dominant role in defining the nation. On these borderlands, new ideas of citizenship and nationality were unleashed, refining older ideas of ethnicity. With a focus on geography, Kashani-Sabet attempts to give a description and explanation of Iranian nationalism, which embraces all of its peoples, as well as the primarily Turkic-speaking population of the

¹²Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and Autonomy in Twentieth-Century Iran* (London: British Academy Press, 1993).

¹³Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804-1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Azarbaijan provinces. These two works could be viewed as the antithesis and the opposing view that the Azarbaijani nationalist literature has to face.

However, an all inclusive approach to the Azarbaijani case in Iran suggests that it is not quite a "movement" as it is often declared to be and that it is not always a matter of identity or feeling of kinship with those in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Ervand Abrahamian, a Distinguished Professor of History at Baruch College and the City University of New York, whose primary interests as a historian include the Middle East and particularly Iran, has stated in a recent commentary letter referring to the proposed research:

The Azeri issue is not a typical "nationality problem". It is much more complex and nuanced. Most Azeris identify themselves as Iranians and not just because of Shi'ism. There is a strong Iranian identity.¹⁴

Indeed, in order to look at the questions of ethnicity and identity from the theoretical point of view as well as to attempt to draw parallels between the Iranian and other possibly similar cases, the works of Rogers Brubaker¹⁵ and Anthony D. Smith¹⁶ would be essential for an understanding of the terms and phenomena as well as the correlation between ethnicity, nationalism and politics. Rogers Brubaker argues that although ethnic group is still perceived as a homogenous actor by many authors, journalists etc; ethnicity, race, and nation are not things in the world but perspectives on the world: ways of seeing, interpreting, and representing the social world, as noted in the introduction.

¹⁴Ervand Abrahamian, "RE: Questions on Iranian Studies,"

<Ervand.Abrahamian@baruch.cuny.edu> ; Nov 25, 2008. Personal email.

¹⁵ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Anthony D. Smith, "Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism," *International Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, (1996), 446.

Finally, since Iran has been a multicultural and polyethnic state throughout its history, understanding Iran could hardly be possible without understanding the basic aspects and tools to keep a multicultural society or state functioning. Arend Lijphart's theory of consociational democracies would particularly be an important source for comparative methodology to look at the case of Iran and possible views of a future Iran with probably federal/consociational rules and ways of managing the state.¹⁷

Both the nationalist discourse and that of the authors such as Atabaki, Abrahamian or Kashani-Sabet, as well as the theoretical approaches of the above-mentioned scholars will be significant assets for dealing with the issue of Azarbaijan and although there is a vast number of other publications, there still seems to be little reference to the relatively recent matter of "Southern Azerbaijan" movement, which as the proposal suggests, would be the primary case to undergo an examination and research.

¹⁷ Arend Lijphart, *Thinking About Democracy: Power Sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008).

Chapter 2.

Language and Ethnicity in Iran

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been concerned with what it believed to be foreign intervention into its internal affairs after it became known that the US Department of State has launched a new project to finance the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty for broadcasting Azeri-language programs into Iran "in a bid to influence opinion among the significant ethnic Azeri population there".¹⁸

As it is often the case, terms like "ethnic Azeri population" are used in such articles with a presumption that these "ethnic populations" do exist there as distinct, different and in some cases even alien parts of the larger society or community of the Iranians. Indeed, it does not take too much to notice the difference between Farsi and the Turkic language spoken largely among the Iranians of the northwestern provinces of Iran, but the linguistic difference clearly seen in this case does not necessarily prove to be the sole and most powerful basis for identifying the "ethnicity" and origin of the various groups and moreover for ascribing an identity different from that of the rest and similar to that of the "brethren"¹⁹ across the river, that is the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The news did raise questions and caused anxieties in Iran, as it would be expected, given the fact of the harsh hostility between Iran and the USA. The Islamic Republic saw this decision as an attempt of destabilizing the country through the use of issues of ethnicity, insufficient language policy, minority rights and encouraging

¹⁸ Joshua Kucera, "Iran: US Government Planning Azeri-Language Broadcasts to Iran," *Eurasia Insight* (March 10, 2008); available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav031008a.shtml> (accessed April 12, 2009).

¹⁹ Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren*.

secessionist movements based on, in this case, linguistic differences of the inhabitants of particular regions from the majority. The issue of minorities has not, however, been a surprisingly and newly emerged phenomenon; it has been accompanying Iran throughout the entire twentieth century. The claims on the two sides could further be extended to statements and accusations of mostly Western states (primarily the USA) and organizations such as the UN, Amnesty International and others warning about the need for Iranian authorities to rethink the central government's policies towards those, who are considered to be ethnic minorities (not recognized as such by the Islamic Republic though) and the rebuttals from the Iranian side strongly influenced by the general anti-Western attitudes and fears of a forced break-up of the nation along ethnic and linguistic borders and arguing that there is no such problem of "ethnic minorities" or "linguistic issues" in the country, which has been home to diverse cultures, religions and languages for many centuries.

As mentioned above, the Islamic government does not differentiate and identify its citizens in accordance with their linguistic or ethnic distinctiveness, therefore, the population censuses in the country do not contain any reliable statistic data regarding the numbers of those, who could be considered as minorities in the above mentioned terms. There are, however, figures, which mostly have a speculative character, provided by foreign organizations and states as well as active nationalists. *The World Factbook*, an online project of the CIA, which provides systematically updated information about all countries, estimates the total population of Iran at about 66.5 million.²⁰ It includes some statistic data about the republic's population in terms of ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity. Since in most cases the figures reflecting the ethnic and linguistic

²⁰ "Iran", *The World Factbook*, CIA; available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html> (accessed April 03, 2009).

composition of Iran are almost identical, one could conclude from here that "ethnicity" and ethnic distinctiveness in this case is shaped and identified in parallel and along with linguistic differences. The percentage of the major ethnic groups comprising Iran's population according to the CIA Factbook is the following: Persian 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2%, other 1%. And in case of languages the numbers are: Persian and Persian dialects 58%, Turkic and Turkic dialects 26%, Kurdish 9%, Luri 2%, Balochi 1%, Arabic 1%, Turkish 1%, other 2%. One can note, that to the 51% "ethnic Persians" another 7% of Persian and Persian dialect speakers is added, while the 24% "ethnic Azeris" are included within the larger linguistic group of Turkic and Turkic dialect speakers, reaching about 26% of the total population. Discrepancies can be noted with others as well: Kurds, Arabs, and Balochis. On the other hand, 1% of Turkish speakers appear separately under the definition of "languages" while no "ethnic Turks" are mentioned in the "ethnic groups" section, moreover, Turkish is a language, which just as the Turkic language spoken among the Iranians of the northwestern provinces, is a member of the Turkic family, therefore it could also be easily added to the above-mentioned 26% of Turkic dialects. Finally, the 8% referring to the Gilaki and Mazandarani as a separate ethnic group in the first case and then most probably including them within the 58% of Persian speakers is just another example of making rather imaginary and created and not clearly defined and really existing assumptions as to where the border between a Gilaki and a Persian should be drawn or how close Mazandarani and Persian are to each other to form just dialects of the Persian language.

There is no reason to believe that either of the two conflicting opinions are objective to the maximum possible extent and bear no influence of broader relations both between the West (let us assume for a moment, that there is a clearly defined

phenomenon as "the West" in this case since that is not necessarily a central issue here) and Iran as well as between the central ruling authorities of the Islamic Republic and Iranian citizens, whose "mother tongue" is other than Farsi- the sole official language of the state. In other words, the debate is not limited within the framework of international relations at all but is a rather important issue of the internal affairs of Iran, a multilingual state with a diverse population but yet a strong "Iranian" identity. Ervand Abrahamian, a prominent scholar in the field of Iranian studies, finds that the Iranian national identity is "fluid and contested like all others", but at the same time he notes that:

Although national identity is often deemed to be a modern invention, the *Shahnameh*²¹ refers to Iran by name more than one thousand times, and the whole epic can be read as a mythical history of the Iranian nation. Among Iranians- as among some other Middle Eastern peoples- national awareness seems to have long preceded the modern era. Of course, how it was expressed and who articulated it has not always remained constant.²²

Iran, with its diversity and multiplicity of languages, is not, however, the only such case although it does have certain distinctions from other similar states, which would be discussed below.

A number of works by David Laitin, which are the result of his researches on various parts of the globe for the last several years, have been referring to similar issues raised here- that is the relation of language and politics, linguistic and ethnic policies in a number of states different both in terms of their locations and the periods of history, during which they have encountered these issues. The importance to look particularly at language policies and relation between language and identity is framed by Laitin in the

²¹ *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) is a tenth-century epic written by the Iranian poet Ferdowsi.

²² Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

statement that "the pressures for national identity are most keenly felt in the domain of language".²³ Similarly, Benedict Anderson has considered language as an essential factor for the emergence of nationalism.²⁴

The question whether there is a political logic which convincingly explains and substantiates the idea that an ideal state is one, in which the political borders correspond with the boundaries of the "nation" and cultural or linguistic dividing lines is raised and further developed into a more direct and outright query: "will multicultural states break up into their national components?"²⁵ As an answer to this there comes the belief that "the longer-term equilibrium is one that supports cultural heterogeneity within and across state boundaries"²⁶ an approach, which seems to match that of the supporters of Iran's integrity, which, naturally, should not be guaranteed at the expense of that very heterogeneity.

Laitin looks at the examples of a number of states that are believed to be either ideal nation states with clearly defined natural boundaries (Japan) or nation states which have successfully become such due to an initially existing common essence or homogeneity and kinship among its constituting parts (Spain, France). Another group of countries, which on the contrary, have emerged as multicultural states in the post-colonial period, are undergoing an analytical research aiming to find the reasons why and how the above-mentioned European countries had managed to create unified nation states, while the post-colonial states are often described as artificially created entities, which would possibly never be able to successfully reach the form of the classic nation-

²³ David Laitin, "The Game Theory of Language Regimes," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, Vol. 14, No. 3, *The Emergent World Language System. Le Système Linguistique Mondial en Formation* (Jul., 1993), 228.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

²⁵ David D. Laitin, *Nations, States, and Violence* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 82.

²⁶ Ibid.

states with a significantly dominant national culture and language. One of the two historical factors, as suggested by Laitin, that have significantly affected the logic of state building and based on which India, for example, should not be viewed along with Spain or France is that:

In the early periods of state formation, states did not provide basic primary education, hospital care, and a range of social services... But twentieth century states emerged in an era when states were expected to provide these services to all citizens- and thus the language of provision was an affair of the state²⁷.

Although Iran existed as an independent and sovereign state also in the pre-twentieth century period and in that term it is an exception as a state, that was not colonized, it still emerged as the Islamic Republic (the policies of which are studied here) only three decades ago. The nineteenth-century Iran, on the other hand, could still be defined to some extent as a loosely centralized state unifying semi-independent regional leaders with no centralized educational system or other social services described above but with an obvious role of the Persian language as the *lingua franca* as it will be described further below.

Particularly, the case of India could be a more or less appropriate sample for further comparison with Iran, although, for a number of reasons, due to their recent history and particularly the current differences among the forms of government one could also easily draw a firm distinction line between these two states.

Unlike India, Iran has not been colonized but rather went through a quazi-colonial experience and therefore, there is no language of the colonizer, which in the

²⁷ Ibid., 90.

case of India has remained as some kind of legacy of the colonial period and today shares the status of a "link language"²⁸ along with Hindi.

The English language saw little or no resistance in independent India to a large extent due to the fact that most of the educated and skilled citizens were trained in English. It is also not the language of any of the indigenous peoples inhabiting India be that a dominant plurality or an ethnic minority, therefore, it could be seen as the one neutral language rationally chosen to become the official language of the entire Union of Indian states. Thus, English as one of the three languages in the 3±1 model, which is used by Laitin to define the Indian case, does not have its equivalent in Iran. That leaves the Iranian case rather with a presupposed 2±1 model in which Farsi as the official language of the Republic would be the 2-1 language of a native Farsi-speaker living in the capital Tehran, Farsi and Arabic could be the 2 languages of an Arab Iranian from the Khuzestan province, and Farsi, Azarbaijani Turkish and Armenian would be the 2+1 languages of an Iranian Armenian living in the city of Tabriz in the East Azarbaijan province with a predominantly Turkic-speaking bilingual population where Farsi is again spoken virtually by all citizens and has always been the dominant literary language of classic poetry, written works of the "Enlightenment" and "Modernization" periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as official communication.

A comparison of the constitutional provisions regarding languages in the two states would be necessary to look deeper on the interesting differences between Iran and India, where the actual multiplicity and diversity are quite similar, while the different constitutions and political structures as well as state ideologies and historic experiences, as mentioned above, have lead to two dissimilar situations. The Indian

²⁸ Ibid., 89.

Constitution has acknowledged English and Hindi as the official languages on the All-Union level, while many Indian states have also used their right to choose the local languages for official use in spheres like primary education, street signs, documents and jobs in the public sector.²⁹ In the case of Iran, however, Article 15, Chapter II of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic reads:

The Official Language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.³⁰

Therefore, although not banned completely, the "regional and tribal languages" are still only to be taught on secondary basis after Farsi (Persian) and can be used in mass media or possibly in schools but never gain a status of an official language of a given region. The local authorities are also strongly dependent on the central government, which again in accordance with the Constitution, appoints governors of the provinces as well as city and divisional governors. That could be seen as an additional obstacle as a result of which local authorities would often refrain from raising a locally used language to a higher status and thus possibly causing discontent of the centre. The leaders of the Islamic Republic do not seem to be really concerned with "assimilating" the local linguistic minorities or systematically oppressing any use of their languages as many nationalist circles like to claim, however, there does seem to be a policy of "rationalization", where a single language is selected as the official language of the state in all of its internal and foreign affairs. One other problematic detail is the formulation of the "regional and tribal languages" as well as the Persian terms of *zaban* (language) and *lahje* (dialect). There is no clear definition of those tribal

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Article 15, *The Constitution*.

languages nor there is a plausible and convincing methodology or criteria for a firm distinction between a language and a dialect or between two different languages in general let alone the Islamic Republic.³¹

In terms of "rationalization" as it was used above to describe the Iranian language policy, David Laitin suggests three different methods tentatively marking them as:

(R1) Rationalization through the recognition of a *lingua franca*, which is spoken and understood practically universally within the boundaries of the state, but is not associated as the mother tongue of a significant language-group living within that state.

(R2) Rationalization through the recognition of the language of a majority group.

(R3) Rationalization through the recognition of the language of a minority group.³²

Iran would be classified under the (R2) criteria in this case although it should be noted at the same time that (R1) could very much be appropriate too as long as the condition that the *lingua franca* should not be that of a significant language-group in the state is revised for on one hand those, for whom Farsi is considered as the "mother tongue" constitute hardly half of the total population of the state and thus it is not quite a majority but rather a "dominant plurality", on the other hand Farsi or the Persian language has indeed served as a *lingua franca* and the language of the royal courts and classic literature throughout centuries not only on the territory of modern Iran but also far beyond it in the surrounding territories, the South Caucasus, parts of nowadays Iraq and the Ottoman Empire, Afghanistan and the vast territories of Central Asia, which

³¹ David D. Laitin, "What Is a Language Community?" *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jan., 2000), 144.

³² *Ibid.*, 151.

have been historically and culturally bound within the so-called "Iranian world" which bears a connotation of rather cultural and linguistic and to a much lesser extent political unanimity. Therefore, Farsi has already been "spoken and understood practically universally" long before a modern-type state of Iran had emerged and was accused of an assimilative policy aiming to establish a "nation-state of the Persians".

The complexity of the Iranian case also derives from the unique Islamic nature of the state formation where no ethnic or linguistic minorities are officially recognized, therefore one could not even expect to find a notion of ethnic or linguistic minorities in the Constitution but rather the quoted formulation of "regional languages". The only minorities that are officially recognized are the religious ones limited, however, only to Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians. The latter are predominantly Persians and their case as objects of the linguistic policies is irrelevant here, while the Christian Armenians, for example, freely use their language in printed media as well as in community schools. Therefore if for example a Turkic-speaking Iranian living in Tabriz, the capital of the East Azarbaijan province, can use his distinct language both at school and local media as well as the universities³³ as a "regional language" the same person might face problems with doing so in the capital city of Tehran or, let us say, the Mazandaran province, while a Christian Armenian has an access to Armenian-language press not only in Tehran, but also in Isfahan, where there is a large Christian community, and Tabriz at the same time. Neither the first nor the second example, however, should be viewed as a rule but rather as "most likely" cases.

³³ A Wikipedia article on ethnic minorities in Iran cites a work by Annika Rabo and Bo Utas: "There is in fact, a considerable publication (book, newspaper, etc.) taking place in the two largest minority languages in the Azerbaijani language and Kurdish, and in the academic year 2004-05 B.A. programmes in the Azerbaijani language and literature (in Tabriz) and in the Kurdish language and literature (in Sanandaj) are offered in Iran for the very first time", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_minorities_in_Iran (13/04/2009).

Another specificity of the Iranian case is that of the status of the Arabic language by acknowledging its significant role in Islam. Article 16, Chapter II of the Iranian Constitution preceded by the article about the official language, states:

Since the language of the Koran and Islamic texts and teachings is Arabic, and since Persian literature is thoroughly permeated by this language, it must be taught after elementary level, in all classes of secondary school and in all areas of study³⁴.

Khuzestan, one of Iran's southern provinces, has a large Arab-speaking population, which can mechanically be viewed as a beneficiary of this specific approach towards the Arabic language.

Returning to the initially quoted question raised by David Laitin, it would be possible to assume that Iran as a multicultural state has been able to secure an "equilibrium that supports cultural heterogeneity" as far as it does not resemble the image of a "classic nation-state" in which the borders of the state match with the linguistic borders. However, there are always demands for changes on behalf of the minorities as well as possible discrepancies between the expectations of the center and millions of Iranians. There is an example of such discrepancies or deepening mistrust in the recent issue cited earlier: while on one hand the Turkic language of the Azarbaijani Iranians is not prohibited from usage in media and education, there still seems to be lack of confidence and a belief that the center is implementing a "chauvinist" policy of assimilation while the central government at the same time finds reasons to suspect its subjects in promoting "undesirable" activities, cooperation with foreign powers and destabilizing the state.

³⁴ Article 16, *The Constitution*.

There is an aphorism³⁵ that says salary is the necessary minimum to keep the people going to work in the mornings and not going to the barricades in the evening. Quite similarly Iran's language policy could probably be defined as a necessary minimum to keep the state functioning and satisfy the citizens, who may have certain linguistic demands and will to use a second language of theirs except for Farsi instead of "going to the barricades" with further claims of a distinct identity based on their language or dialect, leading to secession.

³⁵ Most probably it belongs to a verified author whom, unfortunately, I have no knowledge about.

Chapter 3.

Federalism as a Solution

"These people should not be called minorities..."

In order to avoid the creation of a wrong image of Iran, in which there were no ethnicity or nationality issues whatsoever, it should be noted, however, that the twentieth-century Iran, both before and after the Islamic Revolution, has been unable to create a kind of stability and state of affairs, where no such tensions as ethnic or linguistic "cleavages" would have a chance to emerge. The period of modernization and creation of a centralized state of the "European model" initiated after the World War I assumed a kind of society "by definition organized around the distinctive concepts of nation and state" while modernization and modern state building were supposed to "require a low degree of cultural diversity and a high degree of ethnic homogeneity. Along with ethnic and linguistic diversity, the existence of classes, too, was rejected".³⁶ This, though, should not necessarily be perceived simply as forced "persianization" but rather an attempt to build a state, where the identity and sense of belongingness to the clearly defined state supersedes the other identities and affiliations since "every citizen regardless of his/her ethnic origin enjoyed the right of personal achievement in the newly established administration, as long as he/she appreciated the state definition of Iran as a modern integrated nation-state".³⁷ This state-building through elimination of

³⁶ Touraj Atabaki, "Ethnic Diversity and Territorial Integrity of Iran: Domestic Harmony and Regional Challenges," *Iranian Studies*, vol 38, number 1, March 2005, 29-30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

diversity could be compared to the linguistic "rationalization" described in the previous pages.

The views of the Islamic government towards the issues of ethnicity and linguistic diversity have already been introduced in more detail above. In addition to that, the image-bearing expression made by the founding spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Khomeini would be an illustrative example of the kind of approach that the post-revolutionary Iranians would have to face:

Sometimes the word minority is used to refer to people such as the Kurds, Lurs, Turks, Persian, Baluchis, and such. These people should not be called minorities, because this term assumes that there is a difference between these brothers. In Islam, such a difference has no place at all. There is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages, for instance, the Arabs or the Persians. It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united... They create the issues of nationalism, of pan-Iranism, pan-Turkism, and such isms, which are contrary to Islamic doctrines. Their plan is to destroy Islam and the Islamic philosophy.³⁸

Besides the already clear view of ethnicity and nationalism through the eyes of the new Islamic establishment, one can also find implications about an undefined "they", which will later appear repeatedly within the context of conspirological hypotheses about foreign plots to "destroy Islam". Indeed, Iran has witnessed numerous cases of foreign interference into its internal affairs with different goals and covered under various explanations be those described simply as "cooperation" and "alliance" with the pre-republican Iran or attempts to "democratize" or "liberate" Iran from within after the Islamic revolution.

In the latter case the ethnic differences, grievances of nationalist groups or organizations have been used or at least considered by the foreign states. One such example is the warm reception offered to Mahmoudali Chehregani- the prominent Azarbaijani nationalist- by the US authorities. Chehregani's "peregrinations", as Robert

³⁸ Ibid., 38.

Olson³⁹ termed his active visits to the Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey, some of the European states and finally the USA, included numerous meetings with US senators, State Department and Pentagon officials.⁴⁰ There is a discrepancy between the statements quoted in the news report that should be noted. While the US defense officials accept that they have met with Chehregani as well as many other Iranians to speak "on occasion, but not for the purposes of setting up, supporting or encouraging internal opposition to Tehran", Chehregani himself declares that "we [the Azerbaijani Turkish nationalists] already feel their [US] political support, and they are analyzing which financial and physical support they will give to the Iranian opposition".⁴¹ Depending on where he speaks, Chehregani introduces different and sometimes contrary visions for the future of Iran and "South Azerbaijan". Therefore, for those and many other similar reasons, as well as due to the populist declarations about fighting against the "foreign evil" and "external enemies of the nation" that could be often heard during the rise of the Revolution and afterwards, it has not been rare in Iran to introduce any form of local nationalism or simple political opposition to the mainstream ideology as something injected from outside with a purpose to destroy the state. As it is often the case in such claims and anxieties- the paranoid views of the existence of plots and conspiracies are not always groundless in fact. Nevertheless, they do not necessarily (and in all the cases) explain the entire situation completely. The example with Chehregani's claims and demonstrated connection with the US officials would be one such case to limit the argument here.

³⁹ Robert Olson, "The 'Azeri' Question and Turkey-Iran Relations, 2000-2002," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Winter 2002, 79.

⁴⁰ Sharon Behn and Khadija Ismayilova, "Pentagon Officials Meet with Regime Foe," *The Washington Times*, 2003; available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20051028032730/http://washingtontimes.com/world/20030603-103140-3533r.htm>; accessed 19 May 2009.

⁴¹ Ibid.

United Azerbaijan vs. Federal Iran

It would be more relevant and important to look deeper at his particular view of Iran as a federal state still maintaining its territorial integrity but giving more autonomy to the ethnic minorities: an idea, which could be further elaborated and even possibly found as a wise solution for all similar problems in the Islamic Republic, but yet, neither well-designed and grounded by Chehregani nor seriously considered or trusted by the Iranian authorities, in part due to those very assumptions that it is rather some form of foreign involvement in its affairs and not a genuine will to bring stability into the country.

As mentioned above as well as in the chapter, discussing the linguistic policies and realities in Iran, it has often been perceived by nationalists that the only ideal state is the one, in which the boundaries of the state, and better say the nation-state, coincide with the ethnic, linguistic boundaries. However, although this may be the case in some particular matters of interstate or interethnic relations with a long history or one could cynically say "tradition" of mutual mistrust and conflict for this or that reason, it is still not an argument to validate all claims of any emerging "national awakening" and "self determining" nationalist group. Particularly in the Iranian case, where, as quoted from Abrahamian's book, whether "fluid" or "contested" but still- there has always been a broader Iranian identity that included all other local or linguistic identities, the perception of incompatibility between different communities and identities is somewhat exaggerated and as Katharine Adeney argues "such an approach denies that identities are malleable and situational, and that individuals have more than just one. [...]"

positing the inevitability of conflict either at the international or domestic level conceals more than is revealed".⁴²

Federalism has been proposed as a way to "manage rather than eliminate ethnic differences"⁴³ but Adeney makes sure to differentiate between federalism and the consociational form of government proposed and elaborated by Arend Lijphart.⁴⁴ One of the online sources, indeed, which claims to be bringing together a number of ethnic, nationalist movements in Iran, united with a common goal to establish a federal democracy within the territory of the current republic declares:

We believe that a federalist system of government on the basis of nationality and geography is the only political mechanism that is enduring, and allows all Iranian nationalities to realize their aspirations and exercise self rule in the framework of a free, united and democratic Iran.⁴⁵

Since the "Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement" (SANAM) led by Mahmoudali Chehregani is also mentioned in the list of these organizations among others such as the "Azerbaijan Diplomatic Mission", "National Movement of Iranian Turkmenistan", "Azad (Freedom) Party of Kurdistan" etc, it would be reasonable to admit that as a source of SANAM's and "Southern Azerbaijani" activist's declared purposes and aims.

In defense of the kind of federalism based on "nationality and geography", which would also mean creation of ethnically homogenous units, Katharine Adeney finds that it "enhances security and provides conditions for the promotion of a dual identity and identification with the institutions of the central government, which may

⁴² Katharine Adeney, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict Regulation in India and Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁴ To be discussed below.

⁴⁵ *Manifesto*, The Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran, (Stockholm, 2007); available at <http://iranfederal.org/en/?p=5#more-5>; accessed 26 May 2009.

inhibit secession" and that once an ethnic group is provided with security within the multiethnic state "the motivation to secede is diminished".⁴⁶ However, the argument could be questionable, since on the example of the Azarbaijani Iranians, although the latter have often been perceived as one of the most politically and culturally active and integrated segments of Iranian society (for different reasons, including the fact that Tabriz, the centre of the north-western Turkic speaking regions has long been the capital of Iran and then the residence of the Qajar crown princes) and to some extent even the leading figures (especially during the early twentieth century Constitutional Revolution as well as the Islamic Revolution, with leading Azarbaijani Iranians such as Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari and the current Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) there are still groups and organizations to claim dissatisfaction, sense of insecurity and will to unite with "Turkish brethren" both in the "Northern Azerbaijan" and Turkey. Chehregani's controversial activities and mutually opposing statements in reference to the federal Iran ensuring its territorial integrity and, on the other hand, irredentist aspirations of "Azerbaijani reunification" and pan-Turkism flavored expressions have been quoted in media and researches: during a meeting with the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan Chehregani called the latter an "elder brother" as well as declared on a different occasion:

Karabakh is a part of united Azerbaijan without division between South and North. Brave nations determined their own borders. Southern Azerbaijanis are always willing to liberate Azerbaijan lands. When the northern Azerbaijanis want to liberate Karabakh, the southern Azerbaijanis are ready to sacrifice themselves for this cause.⁴⁷

Further speculations and attempts to interpret such statements would inevitably lead to questions such as what a "united Azerbaijan" exactly means and how it fits

⁴⁶ Katharine Adeney, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict*, 19.

⁴⁷ Robert Olson, *The 'Azeri' Question*, 73.

within the "federal Iran", how or why do the "Southern Azerbaijanis"- supposedly the citizens of "federal Iran" for whom the nation and national interests should normally be limited within the state they are the subjects of- sacrifice themselves for the cause of a neighboring country etc? The pan-Turkic nature of the "Southern Azerbaijani" nationalism is best seen in another statement by the leader of the SANAM movement in Turkey, although in other cases it declares its devotion to the idea of a free, democratic and federal Iran instead of a "Turkish world":

The Southern Azerbaijan issue has a strategic importance because of the future of the Turkish world. There are 1 650 000 university students in Iran, half of whom are Azerbaijanis. The road to the Turkish world passes through Tabriz.⁴⁸

While at the same period of time Mahmoudali Chehregani has stated in the USA that he is a supporter of the kind of Iran, which would resemble the US and the border between "Southern" and "Northern" Azerbaijan (meaning the state border between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan) could be like that of the borders between EU states.⁴⁹

A unique approach to federal democracy

As mentioned earlier, a similar, but yet peculiar and unique approach towards the multiethnic or multilingual societies like Iran has been developed by a number of scholars, among whom Arend Lijphart appears as the most prominent advocate of the creation of states in which identities should serve not as dividing lines, but rather ensure stability within the system by crosscutting each other. The notion of crosscutting

⁴⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁹ Mahmoudali Chehregani, "Azerbaijani Turks of Iran: Will They Lead a Revolution Again?" *CSIS Caucasus Project Meeting Notes* (Washington D.C., August 8, 2002), 5; available at <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/events/020808.pdf> (accessed May 19, 2009).

cleavages was developed by Seymour Martin Lipset⁵⁰ and his co-author Stein Rokkan⁵¹ and later influenced other works by authors to follow. Lipset, particularly, has been arguing against the kind of federalism in which the division goes "between different ethnic, religious, or linguistic areas, as it does in India and Canada. Democracy needs cleavage within linguistic or religious groups, not between them".⁵²

The theory of the crosscutting cleavages makes a distinction between two types of those: vertical, which divide the society based on religious, linguistic, ethnic and other similar criteria and horizontal cleavages, which are related to the economics, social class, income, type of job etc.⁵³ Dogan argues that the equilibrium in pluralist democracies and complex societies (of which Iran can be a good example of) is founded on the "criss-crossing" and intersections of these vertical and horizontal cleavages, which on their turn form "the originality of each nation".⁵⁴ However, it is not as perfect and unproblematic as it may sound initially. While many states with diverse populations have managed to reach the kind of equilibrium described above, others have either failed to do so at some point after a period of seemingly unchangeable stability or have never managed to reach a consensus among the members of the society often forcibly brought together within the boundaries of a newly emerging state.

⁵⁰ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963).

⁵¹ Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (Toronto: The Free Press, 1967).

⁵² Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* quoted in a conference paper presented by Arend Lijphart, "Power-Sharing and Group Autonomy in the 1990s and the 21st Century," *Constitutional Design 2000* (University of California, San Diego, December 9-11, 1999), 15; available at <http://www.tamilnation.org/conflictresolution/consociationalism/Lijphart.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2009).

⁵³ Mattei Dogan, "Class, Religion, Party: Triple Decline of Electoral Cleavages in Western Europe." In *Party Systems and Voter Alignments Revisited*, ed. Lauri Karvonen and Stein Kuhnle (London: Routledge, 2001), 93.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The "vertical" and the "horizontal" may often cease to secure the harmony and balance between the groups and their identities. It is expected to be more likely that the state may fail more often due to the "malfunctions" of the first or the "vertical" criteria, since unlike the social or economic spheres, where reforms and changes in the economic climate are supposedly easier to accomplish through dialogue and agreements among (for example) the social groups, a similar compromise or dialogue around cultural issues is seen as difficult or even impossible:

You cannot ask a Flemish person to speak French part of the time or a Calvinist to be partly Catholic. People are Catalan or Basque rather than Spanish, Slovenian or Croat rather than Yugoslavian. If you are born in Tuscany you have four centuries of anticlericalism behind you, whereas in Veneto you are more likely to take the Catholic view of things.⁵⁵

This resembles to some extent the debates about the reasons of the collapse of the Soviet Union, whether it was about the economic and social issues or the relatively loose control over freedom of speech, which spilled into or simply flared up the pre-existing ethnic tensions and nationalist conflicts. The argument that a compromise or at least dialogue is "difficult or even impossible" sounds similar to the earlier mentioned concept of the "inevitability of ethnic conflicts" in multiethnic societies.

However, despite the peculiarities of the semantics, whether the relations between the segments of the population can be termed as "dialogue", "compromise", "mutual tolerance", "peaceful coexistence" or "supranational solidarity" there are still quite a few states, which are far from being ethnically or linguistically homogenous nation-states and yet do not seem to be challenged seriously by matters of ethnicity and secessionism.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 94.

Arend Lijphart's idea regarding the issue of ethnic cleavages is that it "can be easily laid to rest" regardless of the society we are considering, whether in the West or somewhere else. In order to reach the desired peaceful coexistence through "conciliation and compromise" the representatives of those groups- ethnic, linguistic, religious and others- should be given the chance to be represented in the decision-making process. That is the basis of the power sharing concept supported by Lijphart. Its realization is believed to be much easier in parliamentary rather than presidential or plurality systems for a number of reasons including but not limited to the fact that the "president almost inevitably belongs to one ethnic group, and hence presidential systems are particularly inimical to ethnic power sharing".⁵⁶

If applied to the Iranian case, this concept might possibly work effectively because although there is a president in the country, he still does not have the status of the most powerful body. Iran's somewhat complicated political structure is based on a number of secular and religious "councils" of different range: from the Parliament to the local councils in towns and villages. It should be noted that the Constitution of the Islamic Republic makes sure that the religious minorities get their own seats in the Parliament. Thus, there are at least five non-Muslim MPs (one representative elected jointly by the Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, one Zoroastrian, one Jewish and two Armenian Christians) in the unicameral Iranian legislative body.⁵⁷ On the other hand, however, there is still the Supreme Leader, who has the authority to appoint individuals to some of the key positions in the state. He is also the chief commander of the armed forces and not less importantly- there is no time limit or notion of "terms in office" for the Supreme Leader's position.

⁵⁶ Arend Lijphart, *Thinking About Democracy*, 169.

⁵⁷ Article 64, *The Constitution*.

Two very interesting observations and points suggested by Arend Lijphart are worth mentioning here. First he discusses the issue of whether the segments of the population- ethnic or linguistic minorities, religious communities and other similar groups- should be pre-determined by the formal legislation of the state or should they be provided a chance for self-determination. It is necessary to clarify, that the kind of self-determination mentioned here should not be confused with the repeatedly announced right of nations for self-determination, which is most frequently interpreted simply as opting for secession and independent state-creation. The self-determination discussed by Lijphart refers primarily to the matter of determining who belongs where and how or what kind of groups should/could be created within the state to be represented. To a large extent it refers to the choice of the individual to be perceived as a member of a specific "group", "segment" or "minority" or to opt for the kind of identity which does not differentiate people based on their linguistic and/or religious distinctiveness. In other words, it is the right of self-determination of an Azarbaijani Iranian to identify himself as a member of the Turkic-speaking "ethnic minority" provided with cultural autonomy and the basic right to be represented in the decision-making process or to emphasize his "iranianness" regardless of the language he speaks at home. The advantages of the self-determination model substantiated with theoretical elaborations and practical examples from Lebanon, Cyprus, New Zealand etc are listed in a few points in Lijphart's book:

It avoids the problem of invidious comparisons and discriminatory choices. A formula which makes group membership optional instead of obligatory could perhaps reduce the fear of those who wish to preserve their group identity, and perhaps prevent pressure being exerted upon

those who do not wish to define themselves as members of a specific community but as Lebanese.⁵⁸

The Belgian model in which only three (Dutch, French and German) cultural councils were established as well as the 1960 Cypriot constitution, which specified the Greek and Turkish segments are some of the examples, where the pre-determination model was applied. On the contrary, the Dutch, Swiss and Austrian cases of "consociational democracy" are listed as those of the self-determined kind.⁵⁹

The way the religious minorities are represented in the Iranian parliament is a clear example of the pre-determination model, while there is no specified pattern of self-determination for the linguistic/ethnic groups, although it could be argued that they are still represented in the parliament simply through elections, since the absence of ethnic differentiation in the Islamic government system automatically gives a way to Kurdish, Turkic, Arabic or Balochi speakers into both the legislative and the executive bodies to hold high positions. Examples include the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei of Azarbaijani origin and the former defense minister Ali Shamkhani- an Iranian Arab. There is no provision in the foundation of the legal system of the Islamic Republic giving a priority to Persians. In addition to that, the intermarriages, particularly between the Persians and Azarbaijanis, are quite common and many members of the cultural and political elite are often of mixed origin.

The second point that Lijphart makes may initially sound somewhat unusual or unexpected. The author poses a question whether the consociational rules should be based on formally designed and recognized documents "or rely on merely informal and unwritten agreements and understandings among the leaders of the main groups".⁶⁰ I

⁵⁸ Arend Lijphart, *Thinking About Democracy*, 71-73.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Arend Lijphart, *Power-Sharing and Group Autonomy*, 16.

call this unexpected, since it is often the case that issues of managing diversity within the state or preventing the possible ethnicity-based conflicts (or conflicts with other reasons, where ethnicity is just used as an excuse) are perceived as confrontations of stubborn and resolute parties filled up with hatred and mutual mistrust. Lijphart takes the side of the informal rules since they are expected to be more effective due to their flexibility and perhaps because they assume "a higher level of trust among groups and group leaders". The alternative, that is the formal constitutional and legal regulations, is only suggested for "deeply divided societies".⁶¹ On the one hand there is probably no indisputably effective way of measuring whether the society in Iran is a "deeply divided" or strongly coherent one. On the other hand, however, the general impression and image of Iranian society, notwithstanding the nationalist leaders with claims of "national awakening movements", is far from an inharmonious union of quarrelsome ethnicities.

Yet, the proposed "informal rules" may lead into confusing interpretations of the state of affairs. If there are no formal rules for balancing the society in terms of ethnic differences nor there are formal obstacles for preventing anyone from participating in the cultural and political life based on his/her ethnicity or linguistic distinctiveness- is that due to some informal and unpublished agreements or is it the "natural way" things work in the Islamic Republic? Those would be questions to be left for speculations and suppositions only. It should be emphasized, however, that there are numerous restrictions and frames mainly established due to the strictly Islamic but not "Persian nationalist" nature of the state as well as some constitutional provisions

⁶¹ Ibid.

allowing the Supreme Leader or the Guardian Council to make arbitrary decisions such as preventing some of the candidates from running for the presidential elections etc.⁶²

Despite the vociferous claims of the supporters of a "Southern Azerbaijan" movement to bring change in Iran, make it a democratic federation of peacefully coexisting nations etc, I was unable to find anything more than the "Manifesto" quoted above, which is just a short text with basic statements of declarative nature. It may be possible, that a more detailed proposal, document or text exists in either form- online or printed- but it was not made public or promoted as much as the news about Chehregani's this or that meeting with nationalist circles abroad or US officials in Washington. One of the significant shortcomings of the current research is my insufficient knowledge of Turkish or the Turkic dialect spoken in Iranian Azarbaijan, because there might still be at least some kind of detailed elaboration introducing the "democratic federal Iran" imagined by the Iranian Azarbaijani nationalists (if one still believes that the "Southern Azarbaijan" movement is not seeking secession from Iran). However, even if it exists, it would still raise a question: why would a document referring to the fate of the entire state appear in the Turkic dialect, spoken only by the Azarbaijanis and not in Farsi- the universally spoken language in Iran? Is the appeal and envision for a future Iran only addressed to the Iranian Azarbaijanis or the entire population of the state? And finally, if it is the first case, then how can the "Azeri"-centered calls in a Turkic dialect praising the "Turkish world" be addressed to the diverse segments of the "Iranian people"?

There are other similar "movements" in Iran led by Kurdish, Arabic, Balochi and other individuals, groups and parties. Those also range from basic demands for cultural autonomy to calls for secession and independence as well as a federal Iran. One

⁶² Article 110, *The Constitution*.

of those is the "Balochistan United Front (Federal Republican)", which advocates the establishment of a federation in Iran and has even proposed a constitution, although incomplete, for the future state of Sistan and Balochistan within the Iranian federation.⁶³ The trilingual (English, Balochi, Farsi) web site of the organization is poorly designed and introduced with a large number of grammatical errors etc. However, even in its imperfect and unfinished version, this proposition of a "Constitution" is a unique sample of attempts to initiate the debate. The authors of the text note that they have studied the constitutions of Belgium, Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, USA, India and other states, which could serve as examples for the future multinational Iran.⁶⁴

⁶³ <http://balochunitedfront.org/constitution/constitution.htm>; accessed 26 May 2009.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 4.

Regional factors across the state borders

Crossborder nationalism

A specificity of basically all cases of ethnic nationalism inside Iran is the fact that all of them have some kind of "kins" across the state borders. They can either be sharing the same language but be different in terms of religious affiliation (Iranian Arabs and the Arabs of the neighboring states, where the former are predominantly Shi'a Muslims unlike most of the Arabs across the border, who are Sunni) or be basically identical both in terms of language (notwithstanding the possible distinctions among dialects on the local level) and religion but divided between two or more states (a good example would be the Balochis, which are concentrated in contiguous regions between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan) etc. The Iranian Arabs best demonstrated their stronger attachment to their Iranian identity rather than the linguistic "kinship" with the Iraqi Arabs during the Iran-Iraq war, where Saddam Hussein was particularly expecting to succeed in the Arab-populated regions of Iran- a fruitless anticipation. Another example is the Turkmen-speaking population of northeastern Iran near the state border between Iran and the post-Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan. Their voice and activities are usually given less coverage. The emergence of Turkmenistan as a "kin-state" probably has its direct influence on the Turkmen Iranians, but it does not seem to have been enough for creating a consolidated idea of a "nation" partially due to the fact that the notion of a Turkmenistan or Turkmen nation-state itself owes to the Soviet policies

of nation-making and building republics in Central Asia by selecting a "titular nation" and naming the newly-built union republics after them.

The case of the Kurds was and still is much more complicated due to different factors including the greater "popularity" the issue of "Kurdistan" has received in recent times. The largest segments of the Kurdish speakers are concentrated in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Iran's common border with the first two is a particularly unstable region due to the long-lasting conflict between the Kurdish nationalists and central government in Turkey as well as the creation of an autonomous Kurdish unit in the north of Iraq. Its emergence caused anxieties and fears both in Turkey and Iran, since for both it could mean a new wave of Kurdish irredentist activities endangering the territorial integrity of the state. This has even become a factor binding the two competing states and forcing them into precarious coordination of the foreign and internal policies linked to the Kurdish issue. On the other hand this has turned into a restraining power preventing Turkey from supporting their "Turkic brethren" in Iranian Azarbaijan. Interestingly enough, Mahmoudali Chehregani, the admirer of the "Turkish world" and Turkey, replied to a question drawing a comparison between the struggle of the Kurds in Turkey and his struggle:

I am not a UN human rights official so I cannot judge other conflicts with authority, but whenever cultural rights are denied it is bad. However, our situation in Iran is the same as Turks in Turkey- we are the majority, not minority. The Kurds in Turkey are more like the Farsi in Iran.⁶⁵

Commenting on this would require some sense of humor for a number of reasons. First, of course, it is not the exclusive right of the UN officials to judge the conflicts, second- the Kurds, the conflict and the region under discussion are directly linked to the region and issues that Azarbaijani nationalists are expressing their strong

⁶⁵ Mahmoudali Chehregani, *Azerbaijani Turks of Iran*, 6.

interest in. Third- there is no reliable source putting the number of the Turkic-speaking Azarbaijani Iranian population anywhere more than about a quarter of Iran's total population. And finally, comparing the struggle of the Kurds in Turkey with the life of the "Farsi" in Iran, even if one believes that the Persian-speakers are a minority of Iranians, would imply a strictly exclusive and majoritarian approach to the issues of ethnicity within a state, where the majority gets all, leaving the minorities with no choice but assimilation- basically a problem the very same Azarbaijani nationalists are willing to solve. This is also conflicting with another statement by Chehregani during the same meeting in 2002, where he said "our movement has communication lines with Kurds, Arabs, and other minorities that have been assimilated by the dominant Farsi culture".⁶⁶ In the reality, not only the "Southern Azarbaijani" nationalism denies to acknowledge that there are, at least from the very nationalist perspective adopted by them, existing problems and reasons for the Kurdish struggle in Turkey, they also find that the Kurds living in Iran's northwestern provinces are in fact "guests of Azerbaijan" and should either "behave" or leave "Azerbaijan".⁶⁷ Finally, for the case of the "Southern Azarbaijani" nationalism the existence of the Republic of Azerbaijan as a perceived "kin state" is of vital importance. The story of selecting a name for the newly created republic for the Muslims of the South Caucasus is a particularly interesting one.⁶⁸ Interestingly enough, one of the political movements led by the Azarbaijani Iranian intellectual Sheikh Khiabani, which was retrospectively interpreted as a

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁷ Some of the demonstrations that were organized in Tabriz during the last few years also had anti-Kurdish slogans such as *آذربایجان بیدار است، کردها مهمان ما هستند* (*Azerbaijan is awake, the Kurds are our guests!*) available at http://www.azargoshnasp.net/recent_history/atoor/responseasgharzadeh/asghrazadehresponse.htm (accessed April 24, 2009).

⁶⁸ See for example Touraj Atabakai, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and Autonomy*.

"national Azeri revolt for freedom",⁶⁹ was not a struggle for an independent "Azeri fatherland" but rather a movement "committed to preserving the country's territorial integrity and to the establishment of Iranian nation-state" where "political demands did not go beyond seeking a fair distribution of executive powers between the central government and local authorities throughout Iran".⁷⁰ Most importantly, in reference to the name issue, Touraj Atabaki writes:

On 27 May 1918, when the new Republic of Azerbaijan was founded on the territory north of the Araxes River and south-east of Transcaucasia, the adoption of the name 'Azerbaijan' caused consternation in Iran, especially among Azerbaijani intellectuals. Khiyabani and his fellow Democrats, in order to dissociate themselves from the Transcaucasians, decided to change the name Iranian Azerbaijan to *Azadistan* (Land of Freedom).⁷¹

The Republic of Azerbaijan as a "kin state"

Claims of national awakening, calls for unification as well as generally developing concepts of a single homeland of all Turkic speaking peoples of the South Caucasus and northern Iran within a geographic and political entity called 'Azerbaijan' and divided into Northern (the Republic of Azerbaijan) and Southern (West Azarbaijan and East Azarbaijan provinces of Iran) parts have also been largely supported in the Republic of Azerbaijan, which had just gained independence as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Abulfaz Elchibey, the president of the Azerbaijani Republic in the early 1990s was particularly an ardent advocate of pan-Turkish unity and a devout

⁶⁹ See Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren; Alireza Asgharzadeh, Iran and the Challenge of Diversity: Islamic Fundamentalism, Aryanist Racism, and Democratic Struggles*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); as well as numerous nationalist web pages such as http://www.arshiv.gamoh.info/en/xiyabani_en.html (accessed April 18, 2009).

⁷⁰ Touraj Atabaki, *Ethnic Diversity and Territorial Integrity*, 33-34.

⁷¹ Touraj Atabaki, "Recasting Oneself, Rejecting the Other: Pan-Turkism and Iranian Nationalism." In *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World: Nationalism, Ethnicity and Labour in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Willem van Schendel and Erik J. Zürcher (London: I.B.Tauris, 2001), 77.

supporter of the "Southern Azerbaijani" case. His explicitly anti-Iranian stance is also believed to be a factor that led to the paradoxical tacit support provided by the Islamic Republic to Armenia instead of the "fellow Shi'a Muslims" of the Azerbaijani Republic during the Armenian-Azerbaijani war. Although the subsequent presidents (Heydar Aliyev and his son Ilham, who succeeded his father as the Azerbaijani president) and their governments pretended to adopt a completely new policy, occasionally there were still some contentions between Iran and Azerbaijan around this issue such as the case below:

In spite of Azerbaijan's disclaimers that it did not support the Azeri nationalist activities of the NLMSA⁷² or the UAM⁷³, feathers flew in Tehran when maps were published in Azerbaijan showing the Azeri flag fluttering over both Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan-Iran on the cover of a fifth grade primary school textbook. The textbooks had been printed by Aliyev's political party on 20 April.⁷⁴

President Ilham Aliyev on a different occasion has declared that there are about 30 million⁷⁵ Azerbaijanis in Iran and that he thinks "every nation, every country takes care about their people round the world, and Azerbaijan is not exclusion. Therefore, the better life of Azerbaijanis who live outside Azerbaijan, for us, is one of the top priorities".⁷⁶ Acknowledging 30 million Iranian citizens as the people of Azerbaijan as a country would hardly be accepted with indifference in Iran.

⁷² National Liberation Movement of Southern Azerbaijan

⁷³ United Azerbaijan Movement

⁷⁴ Robert Olson, *The 'Azeri' Question*, 75.

⁷⁵ Note that the number is highly exaggerated as it is the case with other "Southern Azerbaijani" nationalists. Pretend that the number of Azarbaijani Iranians comprises the maximum of what international organizations or the CIA web site are providing- about a quarter of the total population. Logically, if 30 million are a quarter of the total, then the total population of Iran should be around 120 million- almost twice more than what is mentioned in the previous pages based on data from the *CIA World Factbook*.

⁷⁶ Ilham Aliyev, "A Conversation with Ilham Aliyev," presided by Brent Scowcroft [Rush Transcript; Federal News Service, Inc.], *Council on Foreign Relations* (April 26, 2006); available at

Thus, the Azerbaijani nationalism and nation-building process has been providing legitimacy to the relatively recent phenomenon of naming the territory that is north of the Arax river with a name identical to that of a region in the north of Iran. There were constant attempts of grounding and justifying the actions and aspirations of the Azerbaijani state as well as the nationalist circles within Iranian Azarbaijanis by invading the fields of humanities, especially in history, art, philology and anthropology. In some cases, which occurred especially in wartimes (World War II with the Soviet occupation of Iran's northern provinces; the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) conflict between post-Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan), such controversies went as far as the denial of evidence that people of the respective groups used to admit during peacetime or in otherwise normal contexts and on the other hand the creation of similar evidence, which did not necessarily exist at all. A major factor of confusion or undue simplification lies in the tendency, frequent enough, and, sometimes, surreptitiously, to ignoring evidence of past historical reality, even when available, effectively equalizing and proportioning it to the contemporary political situations. Obviously, the Azerbaijani "schools" of Oriental Studies and educational centers, which conducted researches in the fields of humanities, as well as all other institutions were descendants and by some means the followers of the previously designed and established Soviet discourse.

Building or reshaping the new national identity, which would fit the interests of a newly-independent state and a relatively recently shaped image of the "divided nation" included rewriting or reinterpreting history, inventing new traditions as well as trying to go as far as possible, when speaking about the roots of the nation. The

http://www.cfr.org/publication/10547/conversation_with_ilham_aliyev_rush_transcript_federal_news_service_inc.html (accessed May 13, 2009).

primordial views on national and historic issues have been prevalent both during the Soviet era and after it. In the case of post-1991 Azerbaijan it was also a serious matter of building the national identity, providing a reasonable history based on consequent facts and logic, which would lead to the assumption that they are the descendants of an autochthonous group, which has been a victim of the neighboring nations and was ruled by Russians and/or Persians. Note that many of the ruling dynasties in Iran such as the Qajars were actually speaking both a Turkic dialect of their own and Persian at the same time though, therefore, being Turkic speaking Iranians and constituting a part of Iran has been reinterpreted as being an "Azeri nation" suffering under "Persian yoke". Such views often fail to acknowledge that describing the past by using modern terms of nationalism heavily relying on linguistics can not always work effectively as noted below:

...The Qajar monarchs, speaking in their own dialect of Turkish with their own tribesmen and in court Persian with their royal administrators, would have viewed linguistic diversity- had they ever contemplated the subject- as a permanent and unalterable fact of life imposed on man by God.⁷⁷

Therefore, defining and separating a national identity of the Turkic speaking Shi'a Muslims of the nowadays Islamic Republic from the broader understanding of the Iranian nation and putting them, on the other hand, into the same basket with the Turkic speaking Azerbaijanis of the post-Soviet republic based on linguistic distinctiveness and/or similarity is a phenomenon just as recent as the emergence of an Azerbaijani state on the whole.

Numerous authors both in the Republic of Azerbaijan and elsewhere have established a trend and a discourse, which primarily aims to prove and justify the

⁷⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, "Kasravi: The Integrative Nationalist of Iran," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Oct. 1973), 273.

existence of an "Azerbaijani or Azeri nation since times immemorial". It is essential to note that refusing to acknowledge that today there is certainly a community, whether ethnic, cultural or civic (primarily based on citizenship), in the Republic of Azerbaijan, members of which generally identify themselves as "Azerbaijani", would simply mean closing one's eyes at an existing phenomenon. However, in some cases the simple matter of letting someone chose whatever he or she wants to identify himself or herself with, creates a number of conflicting issues not only within the academic fields. Here it also intervenes into the territorial disputes and provokes violent clashes with others, who have serious claims on the same territory, heritage or the surrounding region in general. It is necessary to emphasize in such cases that a newly emerging nation-state and nationalist ideology often elaborates and creates a story or history, which fits the needs of the still-to-be created national identity, by connecting the history of a given territory with the history of the people who inhabit it at the current time. As Harry D. Harootunian writes with a reference to N. Poutlantzas:

The modern nation form supplied the occasion... to produce a 'historicity of territory' and a 'territorialization of a history', both the calling and the content of the national narrative.

While the task of the national narrative was to concretize the link between history and territory, and to exceptionalize the particular story that had been carried out by the folk, this did not mean that the idea of the national was able to reach and permeate the space-time matrices of everyday life⁷⁸.

It is, obviously, not only about the Azerbaijani attempts to connect the current inhabitants of the territory, previously known as Albania, to its Christian population in the middle ages. The identity issue and the matter whether the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan is that of Caucasian, Iranian or Turkic origin has been a major

⁷⁸ Harry Harootunian, "Shadowing History: National Narratives and the Persistence of the Everyday," *Cultural Studies*, 18 (2004), 191.

topic for debates never independent from the political conjuncture of the time concerned.

This idea of the divided nation was also a part of the Soviet policy and goes along with other events such as creating an "Azerbaijani Democratic Republic" in the north of Iran after occupying it during World War II and most possibly attempting to merge the newly-created republic within the boundaries of the enlarging Soviet empire. In the Islamic Republic of Iran "the South Azarbaijan" movement has been viewed by the authorities as an attempt for secession. The term itself, labeling the northwestern provinces of Iran as *Güney Azərbaican*⁷⁹ (South Azarbaijan), is quite controversial and disputable since the territories known as *Azarbaijan* have primarily (or often solely) been related to what is located to the south of the Arax river.⁸⁰

Anthony D. Smith, as well as a number of other authors, suggests that since politics are correlated with ethnicity and nationalism, one could study the impact of the latter upon the former and adds that "this can signify either the ways in which ethnic groups and nationalist movements seek their political goals [...]; or the role of culture and ethnicity in creating states and influencing state systems".⁸¹ Rethinking and thoroughly studying ethnicity and nationhood does not necessarily mean or intend to

⁷⁹ Many supporters of the idea and the general movement have been quite actively using the online resources as well. Examples are the www.oursouthazerbaijan.com and www.azadtabriz.com web-sites as well as many others.

⁸⁰ Numerous works of ancient authors and geographers as well as researches by modern experts and historians have generally agreed that Azarbaijan, previously known as Aturpatakan, is located to the south of the Arax river, while the territories mostly including the region between Arax and Kura rivers in the South Caucasus, have been known as Albania, Arran in the middle ages and then different khanates under the Persian rule and gubernias (provinces) under the Russian rule. The term Azarbaijan hardly ever applied to these territories. A compilation of citations and quotes, which mention the territory occupied by Azarbaijan geographically, is available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_name_Azerbaijan, where the history of the term is introduced.

⁸¹ Anthony D. Smith, "Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism," *International Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, (1996), 446.

“minimize their power or discount their significance”, as proposed by Rogers Brubaker, he rather argues that it is just to expound “their reality, power and significance in a different way”.⁸² Further in his work Brubaker states that such phenomena as ethnicity, race and nationhood do exist but primarily as “cognitive perspectives” and writes about those perspectives:

Instead of simply asserting *that* ethnicity, race and nationhood are constructed, they can help specify *how* they are constructed. They can help specify how- and when- people identify themselves, perceive others, experience the world and interpret their predicaments in racial, ethnic or national rather than other terms.⁸³

It is the matter of *how* a nation was and still *is* being built in the two specific societies and republics described here. Ziya Bunyatov has been one of the most prominent figures in contemporary Azerbaijani academic circles and held the position of the Vice President of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. The proto-history research has been a very topical subject for almost all nations that bear the post-Soviet heritage. Normally it appears to be in function with political projects, with a strong reference, implied or openly expressed, to contexts of inter-ethnic debates, or even of political and military conflicts. In the Caucasian context, for example, this subject gained importance with the emergence of the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) question, long before it became an armed struggle. This argument would comply with Benedict Andersen's idea that "if nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical', the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past and glide into a limitless future".⁸⁴ It arouse as the "azerbaijanization" process, in recent Azerbaijani historiography, of the ancient Caucasian Albanians who

⁸² Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11-12.

are, as a whole, an extinct population. The result is the equalization of the Azerbaijani identity and the Caucasian Albanian one, or at least the affirmation of a strict continuity between the two, justified by the simple fact that the two ethnic groups, presumably, have followed each other as inhabitants of pretty much the same territories. Similar claims and connections have been sought between "Southern Azarbaijan" and Media as its supposed ancestor state, therefore legitimizing claims of being "ancient", "autochthonous" and "distinct" descendants of the Medes and bearers of the heritage of the latter. Apart from Ziya Bunyatov, who was mentioned previously, Farida Mamedova⁸⁵ is another active supporter of this theory along with others.⁸⁶

Bunyatov led to a questionable assumption that the Caucasian Albanians (not to be misperceived as the Albanians in nowadays Balkans) were the ancestors of today's Azerbaijani people, in a quest for the roots of the Azerbaijani ethnicity.⁸⁷ While being a prominent academician within the Republic of Azerbaijan, Bunyatov was on the other hand heavily criticized and accused of cases of plagiarism or misrepresentation and distortion of history. Thomas de Waal particularly mentions this historian in his recent book:

Buniatov began a poisonous quarrel for which the Caucasian Albanians themselves should take none of the blame. (Their true history has not become any clearer as a result). Buniatov's scholarly credentials were dubious. It later transpired that the two articles he published in 1960 and 1965 on Caucasian

⁸⁵ See Farida Mamedova, *"Istoria Alban" Moiseia Kalankatuiskogo kak Istochnik po Obshchestvennomu Stroiu Rannesrednevekovoii Albanii* (Baku: Elm, 1977). Among her main works it is also worth to mention *Politicheskaya Istoriya i Istoricheskaya Geografia Kavkazskoy Albanii: III v. do n.e. - VIII v. n.e.* (Baku: Elm, 1986).

⁸⁶ Particularly Kemal G. Aliev, *Kavkazskaia Albania I v. do n.e. – I v. n.e.* (Baku: Elm, 1974) and others, who were mentioned in Prof. Boghos L. Zekiyan's keynote speech and paper "Culture, Policy, and Scholarship in the Sub-Caucasian Region: Some Methodological and Critical Remarks" presented on June 06, 2008 at the International Conference "Iran and the Caucasus: Unity and Diversity" in Yerevan, Armenia. <http://armacad.org/iranocaucasica/programme.pdf>; accessed 9 January 2009.

⁸⁷ Ziya Bunyatov, *Azerbaijan v VII-IX vv.* (Baku, 1965).

Albania were direct plagiarisms. Under his own name, he had simply published, unattributed, translations of two articles, originally written in English by the Western scholars C. F. J. Dowsett and Robert Hewsen. But his main intention was evidently political and here he succeeded brilliantly.⁸⁸

That is to say, one of the attempts to justify the existence of the proposed nationhood and to answer the question of *how* and *why* an Azerbaijani national identity could appear in the South Caucasus and northern Iran, did not manage to create a fully comprehensive myth and chain of events leading to a logical and smooth emergence of the Azerbaijani or Azeri nation. It should be mentioned, that Bunyatov was assassinated near his apartment in 1997, just a few years after Azerbaijan became an independent state. As Anatoly Khazanov interestingly states that he knows "at least four cases when anthropologists in the ex-Soviet Union fell victim to assassinations, apparently because they were advocating policy that did not suit some extreme groups in their societies",⁸⁹ it shows once again, how much importance was and is still given to what the anthropologists, historians and other scholars working in the related fields would have to say to the public and what kind of consequences deviation from the main discourse could have. These research areas simply were never free or independent from the state policy, be that the Soviet Union and attempts of nation-building or the newly-independent states, which face the need to revise the history.

When speaking of continuity between ethnic groups belonging to different periods of history, it is possible to distinguish two types of correlation: fusion and exclusion.⁹⁰ The fusion type would act when a new ethnos is born from the synthesis of

⁸⁸ Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (NY: New York University Press, 2004), 152-153.

⁸⁹ Anatoly M. Khazanov, "Anthropologists in the Midst of Ethnic Conflicts," *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (April, 1996), 5.

⁹⁰ A point that Boghos L. Zekiyan made in his keynote speech and paper mentioned above.

two or more groups of peoples, while the type of exclusion, opposite to that of fusion, implies the unilateral domination of a new culture of emigration, and the marginalization, if not suppression and extinction, of the preceding local culture. The domination of a new culture on the pre-Colombian cultures in North America could be a good example here. As far as the case of passage in the Caucasian cultures from the Albanian one to the Turkic (later to be called, Azerbaijani or Azeri) is concerned, it is evident that this latter followed almost entirely the exclusion model. Considering the relation between the Azerbaijani and Albanian cultures as based on the model of fusion instead of that of exclusion would mean mistaking a space succession and territorial conquest with use of force for an anthropological-cultural connection and development. In other words, the current Turkic inhabitants of the Republic of Azerbaijan could not be the heirs of the Caucasian Albanian culture, but rather a new element, which came to dominate in the region since the middle ages.

The other mainstream point of view, which dominates within the Azerbaijani or pro-Azerbaijani circles, suggests that the inhabitants of the territories on both sides of the Arax river, that is to say the Republic of Azerbaijan in the north and some of the Iranian provinces in the northwestern parts of the Islamic Republic of Iran (primarily the Ardabil, Azarbaijan-e Gharbi (West Azarbaijan) and Azarbaijan-e Sharqi (East Azarbaijan) provinces) are the same people or the same nation divided between two great powers (Russian Empire and Iran). However, sharing the same group identity, be that the ethnic or national identity, does not mean sharing just the language or religion, as it is in the case of the population of these territories. Based on previous works by other authors as well as their own studies, Philip Smith and F. L. Jones "identified two dimensions of national identity: an ascriptive dimension resembling the concept of ethnic identity described in the historical and theoretical literature, and a voluntarist

dimension closer to the notion of civic identity".⁹¹ However, neither the shared historical origins nor a sense of common civic identity can be viewed among the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran. What they have in common is religion (Shi'a Islam) and their Turkic language. However, on one hand, the language, that these people share, is extremely close to Turkish spoken in Turkey and could thus mean that those in Turkey, in the Republic of Azerbaijan and in the north of Iran have a common identity, while the common religious affiliation does not speak in favor of the common Turkish or Turkic identity, since the majority of Muslims in Turkey are Sunni. Shi'a Islam is the dominant religion in Iran, thus, being shared among the inhabitants of the northwestern provinces as well as the majority of the rest of the Iranian population, one could state that the common religion as well as belongingness to a common state (Islamic Republic of Iran) are among the basic elements forming an Iranian identity in which the inhabitants of the above-mentioned provinces have their own place and could not be viewed as the same with those in the Republic of Azerbaijan only because they share the same religion.

Brenda Shaffer is among those authors, who speak of an "Azerbaijani" ethnic group or nation by applying the term both to the Azarbaijanis (those who live in the West and East Azarbaijan provinces of Iran) and the Azerbaijanis (citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan). Shaffer writes in the introduction of her book:

This book shows that Azerbaijani identity has been the predominant form of collective identity of the Azerbaijani population in both Soviet Azerbaijan and its successor, the Republic of Azerbaijan... Turkic identity forms a substantial and inseparable element of Azerbaijani identity, but rarely takes precedence over distinct Azerbaijani self-perception.

⁹¹ F. L. Jones and Philip Smith, "Individual and Social Bases of National Identity. A Comparative Multi-Level Analysis," *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2001), 103.

In Iran, Azerbaijani identity has remained a significant collective identity among most of the Azerbaijanis in Iran, and for many their primary collective identity.⁹²

This book, however, was followed by a number of reviews and comments, which were far from being supportive of her ideas. The author's methodology was seen as a predominantly biased and unbalanced one, including "selective amnesia in recalling historical data",⁹³ Shaffer is criticized for looking at events and interpreting them not within the broader region and general situation in Iran but in a rather isolated way, she also lacks the support of her assumptions by the existence of any positive results obtained by empirical research and interviews with the local people when speaking about a distinct Azerbaijani identity and especially when assuming that it is the same collective identity, which unites people across the river. Touraj Atabaki particularly emphasizes the importance of a misleading tool used by Brenda Shaffer, when speaking about a bilingual newspaper, published by a group of Iranian Azerbaijanis in Baku. Shaffer gives only a part of the title of the paper and tries to introduce it as an evidence of the existence of some kind of mutual support and common ideology among the Iranian Azerbaijanis and their "brethren" across the Arax river, who were supposedly sharing the same identity, however, as Atabaki writes:

... *Azarbayjan, Joz'-i la-yanfakk-i Iran* (Azerbaijan, an inseparable part of Iran). By referring to the title only as *Azarbayjan*, she omits the direct reference to Iranian territorial attachment in the subtitle [...]. *Borders and Brethren* is an excellent example of how a political agenda can dehistoricize and decontextualize history.⁹⁴

⁹² Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren*, 4-5.

⁹³ Touraj Atabaki, Review of *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* by Brenda Shaffer, *The American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Spring, 2004), 179.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

The distinction that Brenda Shaffer makes between three forms of identity: state, national and ethnic⁹⁵- is labeled “congruent, and at different times competing, even conflicting”⁹⁶ by Mangol Bayat in another, more detailed review of the same work, where he goes on criticizing Shaffer’s book by providing necessary theoretical and historical ground for his arguments.

Another relatively recent publication, which appeared in 1992, immediately after the emergence of the Azerbaijani Republic, contains a major implication in its title already: *The Azerbaijani Turks*⁹⁷- which consists of two elements: Azerbaijan, which is a geographical name, and Turk, which is more related to ethnicity and ethnic identity.

Audrey Altstadt introduces the people she devoted her book to, in the following way:

The Turks of Azerbaijan were classified as Tatars or Muslims in the imperial period and as Turks until 1937. Thereafter, they and their language were called Azerbaijani by Soviet or "Azeri" by some Western sources. An apparently Iranian language called Azeri was spoken in Atropaten; thus, the term is inappropriate for today’s Azerbaijani Turks and their language.⁹⁸

What she calls an "apparently Iranian language" has indeed existed until the late middle ages in the northern parts of contemporary Iran, it is the Azari language (or dialect), which belongs to the Iranian branch within the Indo-European language family.⁹⁹ An article by G. Asatrian about the existence of an Iranian ethnic group, which spoke Azari, raises the question, whether a people, called Azari, existed or not and then leads to a conclusion, which implies that the existence or non-existence of the

⁹⁵ Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren*, 8.

⁹⁶ Mangol Bayat, Review of *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* by Brenda Shaffer, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Summer, 2003), 502.

⁹⁷ Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁹⁹ Ehsan Yarshater, “Azerbaijan vii. The Iranian Language of Azerbaijan,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 1989; available at www.iranica.com (accessed April 15, 2009).

Azari people is by no means related to the newly-built Azerbaijani ethnic identity, which erroneously appears just as Azeri.¹⁰⁰

Finally, a much less serious work, which, however, pretends to be one of the major supporters of the idea of an Azerbaijani identity, which, as the book offers, goes back for at least two thousand years in an uninterrupted way, was introduced by Charles van der Leeuw, a Dutch journalist, who spent several years in Baku, the capital of the Azerbaijani Republic.¹⁰¹ Its importance to the Azerbaijani nationalists could probably be deriving from the fact that the author of the book is foreign and thus he could not be perceived as an "in-group" member of the Azerbaijani society overloaded with prejudice or biases, therefore one could expect a clearly objective scholarly research. However, the book has been largely criticized and even mocked for a number of issues, including a significant number of errors (technical and grammatical), such as calling the ancient Persian priests *Magyars* instead of *magi* on pages 39 and 42, defining the "Greater Azeri Homeland" as a territory which stretches for thousands of kilometers from the Georgian town of Rustavi to the mountains in western Afghanistan,¹⁰² introducing historic events in a rather mixed and sometimes completely opposite direction, and providing an interpretation of the events, which "resembles the one developed by Azerbaijani nationalists in the Soviet era... the historically groundless view that Azerbaijan was always rightfully a nation-state, united and sovereign, anything else being a deviation from its proper status"¹⁰³ etc.

¹⁰⁰ Garnik Asatrian, "Sushestvuet li Narod Azari?" in *Etyudi po Iranskoj Etnologii*, ed. G. Asatrian (Yerevan: Caucasian Centre for Iranian Studies, 1998), 25-33.

¹⁰¹ Chalres van der Leeuw, *Azerbaijan: Quest for Identity: A Short History* (St. Martin's Press, 2000).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰³ Muriel Atkin, Review of *Azerbaijan: Quest for Identity: A Short History* by Charles van der Leeuw, *Russian Review*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Oct. 2001), 663-664.

The importance to emphasize some of these works is explained by the need to illustrate some of the major trends in contemporary nation-building ideology in Azerbaijan and within the supporters of the Azerbaijani identity in "Southern" Azerbaijan. With an aspiration for establishing a powerful nation-state based on a resistant national consciousness and identity, the leadership of the Azerbaijani Republic as well as the nationalistic intelligentsia have managed to find and shape the "others" as a major contributing material for building the "us". The image of a threatening and dangerous "other" has often been ascribed to the Armenians, while the Islamic Republic of Iran has been introduced as the oppressive regime, under which supposedly the fellow Azerbaijanis have been suffering for several centuries, while the search or the quest, as put by Charles van der Leeuw, for an image and definition of "us" is still facing major hardships with signs of failure to reach a convincing conclusion.

CONCLUSION

One of the most recent cases of a chain of mass demonstrations and expressions of discontent, which serves as a good example of how nationalist leaders manipulate with existing data, events or symbols is the so-called "cockroach controversy" in Iran. Discussing historical events from the distant past can often be a matter of disputes and subject to absolutely incompatible approaches to the same phenomenon due to the different sources or just different interpretations of the same sources. Interpreting modern events can also be subject to manipulations, of course, but the larger masses have more chances to get familiar with the "primary source" and make judgments of their own. However, even in that case there is still the danger that certain individuals or groups can manage to raise large numbers of people for the sake of the causes to a large extent made up of nowhere. Of course this does not mean that any kind of grievances that one can find among the Azarbaijani Iranians is completely groundless or that the central government is doing all that is possible in order to satisfy the cultural and social needs of its citizens both in the center and the periphery, but it would be necessary to note that in many cases what the nationalists are claiming is deliberately exaggerated or misrepresented.

The "cockroach controversy" that drew the attention of numerous media resources as well as international organizations was about Azarbaijani demonstrations, that burst out after the publication of some cartoons in the children's section of a state-run newspaper. The article was a satiric reference to the "reformists vs. conservatives" debate within Iran. It conceals a message to the reformist calls of establishing a dialogue with the West trying to show that the "languages" that they speak are mutually incomprehensible and that given the current situation when the political parties or sides

speaking to a cockroach in Persian, but the confused cockroach replied in Azeri, saying: "What?"¹⁰⁵ The boy, however, does not speak Persian there, nor does the cockroach speak Azeri necessarily. If a word in the Turkic dialect was able to cause such unrests, would it mean that the further sentence in Persian is also a basis for the Farsi-speaking part of the population to demand justice and respect towards their language?

Ironically, the author of the cartoons was himself an Azarbaijani Iranian. It is also worth to note that the Iranian government made sure to ban the newspaper (it is a rare case in the Islamic Republic to ban a state-run media source) as well as arrest the cartoonist and the editor.¹⁰⁶

Regardless of the cause and the reasons, the riots were still oppressed by a harsh response from the Iranian authorities, and several people died, while many others were arrested.¹⁰⁷

The slogans that were used at the demonstrations are of particular interest, since among many of those defending the rights of the Azarbaijani Iranians to speak their own Turkic language there were also numerous others demanding more than just cultural autonomy. "Turkey, help!"; "Our Tabriz is in blood, Turkey is watching from far away!"; "The Turkish language is immortal, it cannot be replaced by a foreign language!"; "Azerbaijan is not asleep, it has not given its identity away!"; "This side and that side [of Arax] should become One, Tabriz should be the capital!"; "Death to Iran!"; "Farsi- language of dogs!"; "Death to Armenians!"; "Tabriz, Baku, Ankara-

¹⁰⁵ "Iranian Paper Banned over Cartoon," *BBC News* (May 23, 2006); available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5008420.stm (accessed May 26, 2009).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Iran: Cartoon Protests Point to Growing Frustration Among Azeris," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (May 31, 2006); available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1068797.html>; accessed 26 May 2009.

where the Persians and where we are!"- such were some of the slogans most frequently used in the by the nationalists, whose leaders have been "struggling for justice", "establishing a democratic Iran" and refusing that they have any pan-Turkish aspirations.¹⁰⁸

As a final remark it should be added that the Iranian government has been closing its eyes on many of the issues which can, as the simple example with a cartoon proved, emerge at any moment and which need a more careful approach. If the leadership of the nationalist groups, whether right or wrong, is able to raise significant number of people with various demands and anxieties, that should not be interpreted as simply as a "foreign conspiracy" or "treacherous deeds" of certain individuals. Whether social or cultural, there are obviously some reasons for many Iranians to express their discontent with the current state of affairs. If approached in a considerate and thoughtful manner, many of those issues could be possibly solved much easily or at least peacefully than the violent methods prevailing at the current stage.

¹⁰⁸ A list of the slogans is available in Persian at http://www.azargoshnasp.net/recent_history/atoor/responseasgharzadeh/asghrazadehresponse.htm (accessed May 26, 2009).

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