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## Strategic and tactical uses of ethnicity

### Insights from the Azerbaijani question in Iran

Gilles Riaux



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AVERTISSEMENT

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### Abstract

This *Paris Paper* explores the literature on ethnicity in International Relations to present a conceptual framework based on the concepts of strategy and tactics, as defined by Michel de Certeau. The aim is to dismantle the ethnic variable into simpler components to reveal the uses of ethnicity and map practices at different levels. Then this analytical framework is applied to the Iranian case study, a highly multi-ethnic society whose recent history has witnessed a long series of conflicts between the state and ethnic groups. To discard deprivation as a key factor in mobilization, the analysis is focused on the Azerbaijanis, the most-integrated non-Persian ethnic group in Iran. In strategically using ethnicity to promote national identification, the Iranian state and the Soviet Union have produced an ethnically-based framework in the Iranian society in which ethnic mobilizations can surface. They emerge as a tactical move allowing marginal actors to contest the state, its legitimizing principles, and its policies. The strategic and tactical uses of ethnicity provide new elements for understanding the Iranian polity, its management of diversity, and its centre-peripheries relations.

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### ■ INTRODUCTION

In 1985 Donald Horowitz' claimed that "the importance of ethnic conflict, as a force shaping human affairs, as a phenomenon to be understood, as a threat to be controlled, can no longer be denied".<sup>1</sup> Since then it has taken some time to properly consider the role played by ethnicity in shaping world politics. Basically the startling outbursts of ethnic violence following on from the collapse of communism in the Caucasus and Yugoslavia compelled researchers to tackle what had become a burning issue. Much research is now devoted to understanding how ethnic groups challenge the world order and security, and how to create conflict resolution through peacekeeping operations.<sup>2</sup> Far from being a trend coinciding simply with the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, interest in ethnicity has remained high. Once again, political events were decisive in keeping the question of ethnicity to the forefront, as ethnic groups have often been portrayed as key actors in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The projects to redraw state borders for both countries along ethnic lines are typical of a conception in which political violence is rooted in ethnic diversity and peace resolution can only be attained through partition.<sup>3</sup> The entire argument relies on the fixity of ethnic identity (due to socio-biological<sup>4</sup> or cultural reasons<sup>5</sup>); it involves a quest for a fitting state and the conflicts

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<sup>1</sup> HOROWITZ Donald L., *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, p.xi.

<sup>2</sup> GURR Ted R., HARFF Barbara, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, Boulder, Westview, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> KUFMAN Chaim, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars", *International Security*, vol.20, no.4 1996, pp.136-175.

<sup>4</sup> VAN DEN BERGHE Pierre, *The Ethnic Phenomenon*, Westport, Greenwood Press, (1981) 1987, James Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, New York, Saint Martin's Press, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> HUNTINGTON Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996; PETERSEN Roger D., *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

often required to obtain it. Historical accounts and quantitative analysis of ethnic conflicts have undermined the credibility of essentialist approaches.<sup>6</sup>

A strongly contrasting approach is constructivism, which has become one of the most influential approaches in ethnic studies over the past decades. The major contribution of this approach relates to postcolonial situations and the impact colonial policies have in generating inter-communal tensions.<sup>7</sup> Constructivist readings of ethnicity claim that collective identities are an ever changing product of social discourse not based any ontological differences, and this enables them to question ethnic bonds from a cultural-ideational perspective and to explain why ethnicity is a pervasive mode of conflict in world politics. Despite the valuable contribution constructivism has made, it has encountered difficulties in providing efficient empirical tools to conduct research. In particular it has not been thorough in providing precise definitions of what ethnic symbols are,<sup>8</sup> in measuring the disjunction between objective stakes and emotional

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<sup>6</sup> Numerous valuable studies have been based on the empirical case of ex-Yugoslavia. BOUGAREL Xavier, *Bosnie, Anatomie d'un Conflit*, Paris, La découverte, 1996. SEKULIC Dusko, HODSON Randy, MASSEY Garth, "Who were the Yugoslavs? Failed Sources of a Common Identity in the Former Yugoslavia", *American Sociological Review*, vol.59, no.1, 1994, pp.83-97. The outbreak of ethnic conflicts has been analyzed using recent data analysis in relation with competing claims for access to state power, CEDERMAN Lars-Erik, WIMMER Andreas, MIN Brian, "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis", *World Politics*, vol.62, no.1, 2010; pp.87-119. In addition, the effectiveness of partition as an efficient policy to prevent ethnic conflict by creating appropriate states has been largely discredited by the statistical evidence. SAMBANIS Nicholas, "Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature", *World Politics*, vol.54, no.4, 2000, pp.437-483.

<sup>7</sup> Seminal constructivist works include BRASS Paul R., *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974, YOUNG Crawford, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, ANDERSON Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983, CHATTERJEE Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, AMSELLE Jean-Loup, M'BOKOLO Elikia (ed.), *Au cœur de l'Ethnie : ethnies, tribalisme et l'Etat en Afrique*, Paris, La découverte, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> KAUFMAN Stuart J., *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001.

effects,<sup>9</sup> or in investigating the multiple interactions between the various agents involved in a conflict.<sup>10</sup> To remedy these deficiencies, research on ethnicity needs to tackle the different uses of ethnicity so as to dismantle the concept into its constituent parts and thus make it operational. To this end I argue that a conceptual relationship between strategy and tactics helps establish an analytical framework to help explain the genesis of ethnic conflict.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section, after going over some of the literature on ethnicity, presents a conceptual framework based on the concepts of strategy and tactics, as defined by Michel de Certeau. The second section introduces the Iranian case study and explains the apparent contradiction between nationalist overtones and a highly multi-ethnic society. The third section deals with the strategic uses of ethnicity in the Iranian context to analyze how various macro-actors produce an ethnically-based framework. The fourth section is about the tactical uses of ethnicity and its re-production within an already defined ethnic framework. The concluding remarks try to make sense of how ethnic conflict is structured in the Islamic Republic of Iran in the light of integrating strategies and tactics.

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<sup>9</sup> BRUBAKER Rogers, LOVEMAN Mara, STAMATOV Peter, "Ethnicity as Cognition", *Theory and Society*, vol.33, no.1, 2004, pp.31-64.

<sup>10</sup> BRASS Paul R., *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2003.

### ■ DISMANTLING ETHNICITY IN CONFLICTS

Looking at the literature on ethnic conflicts from the three levels of analysis identified in international politics<sup>11</sup> helps to pinpoint the main discrepancies. The first level views ethnic conflicts as being driven primarily by the actions of individuals or outcomes of psychological elements. Rational choice theory, which explains patterns of behaviour in societies in terms of choices made by individuals, has frequently been applied to the study of ethnic conflicts. It has however failed to make substantial progress in this field as its focus on the micro-rational incentives facing individuals, which only affords comparatively weak tools for understanding (or even on occasions recognizing) everything subsumed within the notion of identity. If ethnic conflicts are reduced to a struggle between individuals pursuing (mainly) material benefits, it becomes impossible to admit any explanation that does not rely on the prospect of material benefits.<sup>12</sup> One regrettable consequence has been to undermine the distinctiveness of ethnic conflicts, leading to a tendency to re-conceptualize violent ethnic outbursts as straightforward civil wars driven by a simple quest for power.<sup>13</sup> In a parallel vein instrumentalist accounts of ethnic conflicts describe the role played by community leaders in rallying populations around a set of symbolic elements.<sup>14</sup> They thereby provide meaningful insights into the contentious dimension underlying ethnic conflicts, but fail to tackle the cognitive framework making the eruption of conflict possible.

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<sup>11</sup> WALTZ Kenneth N., *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, New York, Columbia University Press, (1959) 2001.

<sup>12</sup> KAUFMANN Chaim, "Rational Choice and Progress in the Study of Ethnic Conflict: A Review Essay", *Security Studies*, vol.14, no.1, 2005, pp.180-193.

<sup>13</sup> The growing empirical literature on civil war has failed to provide effective definitions and measurements, and so as things stand it is not an adequate concept to replace that of ethnic conflicts. SAMBANIS Nicholas, "What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol.48, no.6, 2004, pp.814-858.

<sup>14</sup> HROCH Miroslav, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.



The second level analyses international politics on the domestic stage.<sup>15</sup> For ethnic conflicts the main factors are the capacity of states to address the concerns of their constituents, the impact of state ideology on inter-ethnic relations, and the extent to which the political system can rely on peaceful procedures to solve conflicts.<sup>16</sup> Looking at the institutional and ideological frameworks leads to a normative analysis of what is dysfunctional in the society and thus responsible for the outburst of ethnic rage. It leads to seeing ethnic conflicts as merely symptomatic of a crisis affecting a single country. Instead of considering ethnic mobilization, analyses of this type focus on disintegration or irredentism, and other security-driven issues. Here again, the notion of ethnicity is not addressed in its own right, but as the indicator of institutional or ideological failures of a given state.

The third level has been the most heavily influenced by International Relations theory. In a neo-realist attempt to study the systemic dimension of ethnic conflict, Barry Posen has recycled the idea of security dilemmas and applied them to ethnic conflicts in which groups can no longer trust each other. Ethnic conflicts occur in unstable environments caused by the disintegration of the state, when offensive strategies are enforced to prevent threats from other groups.<sup>17</sup> The return to anarchy suggested by Posen draws attention to a process of radicalization in which belligerents are compelled to take actions for their security. But it fails to tackle the role of institutions in constructing ethnic identities and posits the cohesion of the ethnic groups, which tend to be seen as autonomous actors -as if they were states. However it remains unclear how loosely aggregated

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<sup>15</sup> WELSH David, "Domestic Politics and Ethnic Conflict", in Michael E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp.43-60.

<sup>16</sup> DE NEVERS Renée, "Democratization and Ethnic Conflict", in Michael E. Brown (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, op. cit., pp.61-78.

<sup>17</sup> POSER Barry, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict", *Survival*, vol.35, no.1, 1993, pp.27-47.

communities (that can be very large) could exist in the first place given the free-riding occurring at the individual level.

If ethnicity has been recognized as a “substantive issue” in International Relations,<sup>18</sup> the growing literature on the subject has failed to address the multiple and paradoxical uses of identity and delineate them. In fact the relations between cultural action and political action need to be reconsidered to avoid dragging politics back into culture.<sup>19</sup> Far from being some easily-operated set of ethnic symbols or inescapable cultural heritage, the importance of ethnicity resides in what different individuals make of it in their daily practices. Studying ethnicity involves investigating the various loci where ethnicity has been and is produced, and the interactions between the different producers. To this end, ground-breaking work has been carried out to map the multiple meanings of the term ‘identity’ by reintroducing social structures and institutions into the analysis. This has resulted in splitting up the polysemic term ‘identity’ into three constituent concepts: “identification” (administrative categorization), “social images” (categorization of representatives), and “belonging” (individual socialization).<sup>20</sup>

To take this approach further, I propose to borrow from Michel de Certeau’s conceptual framework and his dialectic of strategy and tactic to think about the different uses of ethnicity. He develops the concept of strategy as “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power [...] can be isolated. It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as

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<sup>18</sup> CEDERMAN Lars-Erik, “Nationalism and Ethnicity”, in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of Interantional Relations*, London, Sage, (2002) 2008, pp.409-428.

<sup>19</sup> “The political enunciation of culture [...] involves a bundle of essential genres that are historically sedimented and hybridized.” in BAYART Jean-François, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, London, Hurst, 2005, p.121.

<sup>20</sup> AVANZA Martina, LAFERTE Gilles, “Dépasser la « construction des identités » ? Identification, image sociale, appartenance”, *Genèses*, no.61, 2005, pp.134-152.

the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets and threats [...] can be managed.”<sup>21</sup> This attitude is typical of military strategy but also of modern politics - especially in Durkheim’s conception of the state. “By contrast with a strategy [...], a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power [...]. It takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings [...]. In short a tactic is an art of the weak.”<sup>22</sup> Using the interrelated opposition between strategy and tactic, it is possible to consider ethnicity as being produced by various agents constrained by the prevalent conceptions of social belonging within a given society.

Instead of classifying agents and then counting them by ethnic criteria, the aim here is to reveal the uses of ethnicity by mapping practices at different levels. The ethnic variable must therefore be dismantled into simpler components to explore how and when it can shape social relations in a conflictual way. In analytical terms ethnicity becomes both a resource enabling action and a rule constraining it, and its various uses depend upon the agents’ positions in society. To investigate the different uses of ethnicity in a given society I propose to take Iran as an empirical case study. As a combination of strong nationalism and a multi-ethnic society, Iran is a particularly rich and meaningful case study.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> DE CERTEAU Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, pp.35-37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> This case study formed the core of my doctoral thesis. RIAUX Gilles, *Ethnicité et nationalisme en Iran. La cause azerbaïdjanaise*, Paris, Karthala, 2012. I am grateful to the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche and the Institut Français de Recherche en Iran for their institutional support.

### ■ THE AZERBAIJANI QUESTION IN IRAN

Contemporary Iran, as heir to the Persian empires that preceded it, is a highly multi-ethnic country whose recent history has witnessed a long series of conflicts between the state and ethnic groups. Potential separatist and secession movements have been considered as latent threats to the state institutions. This fear has been reinforced by external attempts to fan ethnic tensions in Iran so as to weaken the central government and win political concessions from Tehran. Within this context the dominant approach in Iran to ethnicity has been driven by security concerns and the wish to curb any ethnic demands. A similar trend can be observed in the literature tracking the reasons behind ethnic conflicts. But by looking at the Azerbaijani question and considering the attempts made by a well-integrated group to bring about change in the system of ethnic relations, we can move beyond this perspective.

### Ethnicity and nationalism in Iran

Contemporary Iranian history has been marked by periods of nationalist fever, with the Tobacco Protest (1891-1892), the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) and the Movement for the Nationalization of Oil (1951-53) being the best-known examples. Recent mobilizations in favour of the nuclear programme (2005-2007) are part of a tradition of nationalist protest against foreign encroachment. In the light of these recurring protests nationalism has been described as a driving political force in Iranian politics, as initially argued in Richard Cottam's seminal work<sup>24</sup>. Three main points have been suggested to explain the strength of Iranian nationalism: the cultural heritage indebted to Persian language and literature, the progressive Shi'itization of the country that has fed into

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<sup>24</sup> COTTAM Richard W., *Nationalism in Iran. Updated through 1978*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979.

Iran's isolation from the rest of the Islamic world, and the continuous political entities that have ruled over the Iranian plateau since the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 B.C.E.)<sup>25</sup>. The strength of nationalism and of state power in Iran has tended to overshadow the ethnic diversity which has always been a decisive feature of the country. Iran is a multi-ethnic society in which roughly more than 50 percent of its citizens are of non-Persian origin. Despite the scarcity of official statistics, ethnic groups make up over half of the population, and Persians are only a relative majority in Iran. The following table is based on one of the most reliable sources of data on ethnic population.<sup>26</sup> It shows the ethno-linguistic complexity of Iran.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> AHMADI Hamid, "Unity Within Diversity: Foundations and Dynamics of National Identity in Iran", *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.14, no.1, pp.127-147, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Percentage of the population declaring they speak a language other than Persian, based on a sample of 30,715 individuals from the Socio-Economic Survey of Iranian Households (2002). It was conducted by the Statistical Centre of Iran in collaboration with the "Monde iranien" research group (CNRS, University Paris III, INALCO, EPHE), and sponsored by the Institut français de Recherche en Iran.  
<http://www.ivry.cnrs.fr/iran/Archives/archiveRecherche/statistique/Tableaux-pdf/Tab02.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Religious minorities are excluded from the field of this study. Despite their historical significance, the size of the non-Muslim communities has dramatically decreased in Iran over the last decades. Moreover, the overall framework of the Islamic approach towards religious minorities makes it a different issue beyond the scope of this paper.

Ethnic and regional language	Percentage of population speaking this language
None (considered as Persians)	45.5%
Azeri Turkish	23.3%
Lori	9.8%
Kurdish	6.6%
Mazandarani	4.5%
Gilaki	3.5%
Arabi	3.4%
Baluchi	2.4%
Turkmen	0.6%

*Iranian population according to ethnic origin and regional language*

The ethnic distribution in Iran follows distinct geographical parameters. The Persians live on the Iranian plateau, whereas ethnic groups are located in the underdeveloped peripheries of the country. As a consequence, the non-Persian groups are affected by numerous factors that are indicative of their unequal position within Iranian society. They have lesser access to economic, cultural, and social resources than the Persians, whose geographic location in the central part of the country provides better opportunities for education, employment, and services. Besides, ethnic differences tend to coincide with religious differences in Iran. Most Sunnis (as a religious minority) belong to ethnic groups living in the peripheries and are in the majority in the provinces of Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchistan, Golestan, and Khuzestan.<sup>28</sup> A side-effect to this peripheral

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<sup>28</sup> Sunni populations in the Iranian peripheries suffer from harsher living conditions: all the demographic, social, and economic indicators in these regions are below the national averages. Data from the Socio-Economic Survey of Iranian Households, op. cit..

pattern of settlement is that most Iranian ethnic groups are also present in neighbouring countries (Azeri Turks in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Arabs in Iraq and the Gulf countries, Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, Baluchis in Pakistan, Turkmens in Turkmenistan).

Iran has a long history of provincial uprisings that regularly challenged the central government as soon as its authority began to show signs of weakening. The aftermath of the First World War saw the virtual collapse of the central state whose authority was threatened by provincial uprisings. Reza Khan's first task before assuming power was to quell the revolt in the Soviet Republic of Gilan in 1921 and Ismail Aqa Simko's insurrection in Kurdistan in 1922. Once crowned as Reza Pahlavi in 1925, he had to see off the revolt led by Dost Mohammad revolt in the remote province of Baluchistan in 1928, as well as multiple local conflicts with the tribes in the rural areas of Iran.<sup>29</sup> After the Second World War, semi-autonomous Republics were proclaimed in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, under the patronage of the Soviet Union, endangering Iranian sovereignty. Once again the new monarch Mohammad-Reza Shah (1941-1979) sent troops to crush the restive provinces, in late 1946. During the Islamic Revolution, ethnic movements rebelled against the new regime in Khuzistan, Kurdistan, and Golestan, resulting in fighting between them and revolutionary forces. Rebellions were quickly crushed except in Kurdistan, where the Islamic Revolutionary Guards had to use large-scale military force to re-establish government control.

Since the end of the war with Iraq, Iran has once again seen ethnic mobilizations occurring in its peripheral provinces. After setting out their demands for cultural recognition in a myriad of publications in the 1990s, ethnic groups have subsequently expressed these demands more vocally in massive demonstrations. In recent years their protests have turned violent, leading the authorities to repress them brutally. In Khuzestan, rumours of

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<sup>29</sup> CRONIN Stephanie, *Tribal Politics in Iran. Rural Conflict and the New State, 1921-1941*, London, Routledge, 2007.

a government plan to disperse the province's Arab population began to circulate in April 2005. A protest erupted in Ahvaz. It was violently suppressed, leaving as many as 54 people dead. On 12 June, in the run-up to the presidential elections, there were four bomb blasts in Ahvaz and two others in Tehran, killing up to 10 people. In Kurdistan the PJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan, an ethnic-Kurdish group thought to have links with Turkey's PKK) has waged armed resistance against the Iranian government since the Iranian security forces opened fire on a demonstration in 2004. In 2005 the PJAK was supposed to have killed at least 120 Iranian soldiers.<sup>30</sup> In Baluchistan, a group known as Jundollah (also known as "Peoples Resistance Movement of Iran") has orchestrated a series of high-profile attacks against Iranian security forces and state representatives since 2003. They claimed responsibility for an attack on the motorcade of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during his visit to Baluchistan province, in which at least one of his bodyguards was killed and others injured. 2006. They have also organized bombings targeting Shi'ite mosques and ceremonies in Baluchistan. The Iranian security forces are currently engaged in low-intensity counter-insurgency operations across the country against an array of ethnic movements.

The very particular human geography of Iran (a heritage from imperial days) and the regular uprisings in the peripheral provinces have mainly led to restricted approaches to ethnicity, based on the degree of integration of the various groups.<sup>31</sup> A high degree of integration based on objective criteria assures the loyalty of any given ethnic group to the central government.<sup>32</sup> This security-driven approach basically assumes that potential conflicts are likely to happen among the most deprived groups. This conception follows deprivation theory in the study of mobilizations:

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<sup>30</sup> BRANDON James, "Iran's Kurdish Threat", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol.4, issue 12, 15 June 2006. [http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/uploads/TM\\_004\\_012.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/uploads/TM_004_012.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> The level of integration is mostly defined in terms of the economic share of national wealth and political participation in central government.

<sup>32</sup> RAMEZANZADEH Abdollah, *Internal Conflict and International Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict. The Case of Iran*, Leuven, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1996.



social movements have their roots among people who feel deprived of certain resources. From this perspective, individuals lacking some service, good, or comfort are more likely to mobilize so as to improve their condition. Even if the notion of deprivation has been re-conceptualized relative to others and in terms of discrepancies between expectations and actual conditions,<sup>33</sup> it is still unable to conceive of emerging social movements as being motivated by anything other than deep, widespread discontent.<sup>34</sup> The main problem with relying on this concept is that as a post-hoc interpretation it is based on circular reasoning. This kind of criticism goes back to the 1970s literature on social movements. Hitherto the question of ethnic mobilization in Iran has tended to be investigated without taking into account progress in the field of social movements.<sup>35</sup> By drawing on these achievements, I argue it is possible to study the various implications of ethnicity in Iranian politics. And so rather than simply analysing *why* there is a mobilization, it becomes possible to enquire into *how* a mobilization evolves and so, ultimately, understand the logics behind ethnic conflict.

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<sup>33</sup> GURR Ted R., *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970.

<sup>34</sup> According to Jenkins and Perrow, "Social movements arise because of deep and widespread discontent. First there is a social change which makes prevailing social relations inappropriate, producing a strain between the new and the old. Strain then generates discontent within social grouping. When discontent increases rapidly and is widely shared, collective efforts to alleviate discontent will occur [...] Fluctuations in the level of discontent account for the rise of movements and major changes in movement participation." JENKINS Craig, PERROW Charles, "Insurgency of the Powerless: Farm Workers Insurgency, 1946-1972." *American Sociological Review*, vol.42, no.2, 1977, p.250.

<sup>35</sup> The issue of cultural differences between societies has been addressed by Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule who have demonstrated the absence of ontological differences between social movements in Muslim countries and those in the rest of the world, and hence the heuristic capacity of social movement analysis in the Middle East. BENNANI-CHRAÏBI Mounia, FILLIEULE Olivier, (eds.), *Résistances et protestations dans les sociétés musulmanes*, Paris, Presses de Sciences po, 2003.

### Studying a non-deprived ethnic group

The Azerbaijanis, the most-integrated non-Persian ethnic group in Iran, constitute an excellent case study to overcome the variable of deprivation. They speak a Turkish language, belonging to the Oghuz branch and related to the Turkish of Turkey, but with much stronger Arabic and Persian influence. They have coethnics in the Republic of Azerbaijan which was established as an independent state after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>36</sup> In Iran they live in the north-western provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardebil, and Zanjan. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century they migrated en masse to Persian cities, mostly Tehran. Consequently, the Azerbaijanis are scattered across all of Iran and Tehran has become the city with the largest Azerbaijani population. Azerbaijanis are Shi'ite, the faith of nearly 90% of Iranians and the main theological source of inspiration for the Islamic Republic. This common faith has been the major factor behind their attachment to a supra-ethnic Iranian state. Since the Turkish invasions in the Middle Ages, the main ruling dynasties in Iran have been of Turkish descent. In addition, Azerbaijanis do not suffer discrimination due to their ethnic background and have access to the highest positions in society. Many of them have been bureaucrats, businessmen, high-ranking clergy, top army officers, or else academics, and they make up a significant proportion of the Iranian intelligentsia. These significant positions across various fields in Iranian society have led the Azerbaijanis to be seen as a well-integrated ethnic group with limited prospects of separatism, especially in comparison to other groups like the Kurds or the Baluchis.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan was part of the Iranian Empire until it was conquered by Russia at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>37</sup> HIGGINS Patricia J., "Minority-State Relations in Contemporary Iran", *Iranian Studies*, vol.17, no.1, 1984, pp. 37-71; AMIRAHMADI Hooshang, "A Theory of Ethnic Collective Movements and its Application to Iran", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol.10, no.4, 1987, pp. 363-391; RAMEZANZADEH Abdollah, *Internal Conflict and International Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict. The Case of Iran*, op.cit..

Despite this apparent social integration, the Azerbaijanis spoke put on several times during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to call for cultural and political changes. The conflict between the north-west periphery and Tehran reached its climax in the aftermath of the Second World War, with the establishment in December 1945 of a provincial government in Azerbaijan that fiercely opposed the central state.<sup>38</sup> The provincial government, headed by Prime Minister Ja'far Pishevari, declared its autonomy though not independence. A limited portion of tax receipts was sent to the central government, and local administration was to be based on a combination of self-government and Tehran appointments. The local government advocated strong support for the Azerbaijani language via educational and cultural programmes so as to overcome Reza Shah's policies of centralization and Persianization. Although supported by the Soviet Union, the provincial government did not last more than a year, and after months of faltering recovery the central state sent troops to take back the restive province and brutally suppress the autonomous government. However the year 1946, with the most institutionalized opposition to the state's central authority,<sup>39</sup> has remained a milestone in Iranian modern history.

The latest spate of ethnic unrest in Iranian Azerbaijan was the massive demonstrations from May 22 to May 28 2006. The protest was triggered by a cartoon in a national newspaper depicting the Azerbaijanis and their language in insulting terms. It was initiated by cultural activists and students before spreading to all the cities of the province. Tens of thousands of angry protesters marched in the streets and destroyed national symbols such as branches of the national bank. The focus of the protests soon shifted from the controversial cartoon to broader political issues. The protesters called for the removal of local officers, cultural rights

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<sup>38</sup> ATABAKI Touraj, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> This year also saw the creation of an autonomous government in Iranian Kurdistan, known as the Republic of Mahabad. Like the Azerbaijani provincial government it enjoyed the support of the Soviets, but it fell three days after that of Azerbaijan.

for Iranian ethnic minorities, and the devolution of real powers to the provinces. The cartoon created the opportunity to express long-term grievances against the central government and its allegedly discriminatory policies against non-Persian communities. To circumvent the crisis the government shut down the newspaper and jailed its cartoonist. But the main response has been massive repression in the streets and the arrest of many Azerbaijani activists. The state authorities, including the Guide 'Ali Khamenei and the President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, defended the repression by blaming foreign powers for instigating ethnic strife in the country. The month of May crystallized opposition between protesters asking for new policies and state authorities employing a security approach to ethnicity.

A diachronic approach needs to be taken in order to make sense of ethnic outbursts in Iran, especially those involving a “well-integrated group”. This helps to locate the conflict in its own historicity and explain how it is structured. That is why it is useful to monitor the different uses of ethnicity without automatically focusing on the most violent chapters. It is thus constructive to examine the conflict within the perspective of the Islamic Revolution, which enabled it to be materialized in the public arena. The revolutionary period offers the chance to spot tactics in the making and reveal how the conflict was made possible by the fall of the Shah. But the preceding decades show how power relationships, here the ethnic hierarchy, can be manipulated to achieve rationalized long-term objectives. The end objective is to understand the genesis of the ethnic conflict opposing ethnic activists and state institutions.

### ■ STRATEGIC USES OF ETHNICITY

Ethnicity has been deployed for various strategic uses in Iran, always involving attempt to transform the uncertainties of multiple identities into

one readable social belonging. The establishment of a place of power means that totalizing discourses have been built up to organize and classify the populations, and control their territories. This quest for unity has brought about a transformation in the resources assigned to each ethnic identity and the rules incumbent upon it. It has shaped the context in which ethnic mobilization can surface and the forms ethnic conflict takes. In the case of the Azerbaijani question two major state actors were involved: the Iranian Pahlavi state reorganized ethnicity to promote political centralization, whilst the Soviet Union used ethnic identity to justify territorial expansion. The procedures they implemented were divergent, even if they both conceived of ethnicity as the primary political identification determining state loyalty.

### *Promoting the Iranian nation and the denial of ethnic diversity*

In Iran this conception resulted from the appropriation by modernist elites of the Western concept of the nation. Inspired by European Orientalism, the intellectual advocates of Western-oriented nationalism attempted to found a new Iranian identity, based on the Persian language and on a pre-Islamic past.<sup>40</sup> These two elements made Iranian nationalism an attractive ideology, one that was fully endorsed by the Pahlavi dynasty. This new conception of identity based on language and territory was also appreciated in Western countries for it was in accordance with the dominant model in Europe. But one of its side-effects in Iran has been the denial of ethnic markers, at least within the public arena.

The task of turning Persian into a national language was easy compared to other idioms. Modern Persian benefits from its rich linguistic materials. It has been an administrative language for eleven centuries, is related to European languages, and possesses a very rich literary heritage. Modern

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<sup>40</sup> VAZIRI Mostafa, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity*, New York, Paragon House, 1993.

Persian goes back to the 9th century, with origins in the Middle Persian of the Sassanians, who ruled Iran from the 3rd to the 7th centuries. This has enabled the transmission of a Persian cultural heritage (especially through poetry and literature). In the Book of Kings (Shahnameh) completed in 1010, the great Iranian epic poet Ferdowsi tells the legendary history of the kings of Iran from its origins to the advent of Islam, in order to stoke Iranian pride. He writes in a form of Persian 'purified' of any Arabic influence. One understands why the Book of Kings - which even illiterate Iranians know by heart thanks to the storytellers who have recited it in popular cafés down through the centuries - has become the symbol of the permanence of the Iranian nation and a source of national pride for Western-oriented nationalists. The latter aspired to an a-historical history: they were nostalgic for Iran's pre-Islamic past and despised the 'Arab invaders', their language, and their religion (Islam), and they still hold them responsible for the decline of Iranian civilisation and the ills of contemporary Iranian society.

In addition to taking Persian as a national language, the history of Iran was also re-interpreted to serve the present. This is a classical phenomenon of nationalism, seeking to show "the continuity and unity of the nation through the ages, despite oppressions, setbacks and betrayals".<sup>41</sup> The continuity and unity of Iran was thus said to stretch back through over twenty-five centuries of imperial history, thus showing the extraordinary endurance of the ancient civilisation and the Aryan race through the ages. Two periods were clearly distinguished, with the one being glorified, the other slandered. The pre-Islamic past was glorified and associated with the grandeur of Persian culture and the Zoroastrian religion. But Islamic culture, on the contrary, was qualified as foreign to Iranian traditions and thereby rejected. It was identified as the cause for ruin when the Arab, Turkish and Mongol conquerors successively controlled the country during

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<sup>41</sup> THIESSE Anne-Marie, "Les identités nationales: un paradigme transnational", in Christophe Jaffrelot, Alain Dieckhoff (eds.), *Repenser le nationalisme*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2006 p.209.

several centuries of foreign domination. The reference to pre-Islamic Iran served several purposes. It made it possible to discredit Islam, seen as the cause for the country's decline, whilst establishing a counterweight to European influence by stressing the imperial grandeur and exceptional refinement of Iranian civilization. Reference to pre-Islamic Iran became a means to call for a new era of power and glory.<sup>42</sup>

In the name of the new restrictive conception of Iranian identity, references to Turks (and other groups like Arabs or Mongols) were rejected as exogenous to Iran. The concept of Azerbaijan was reshaped to bring it into line with the newly defined Iranian nation and shear it of any Turkic elements.<sup>43</sup> According to Taqi Arani, a leading intellectual and one of the first communist leaders in Iran, "it is a disgrace for Azerbaijanis to be mistaken for Turks [...] To deprive Azerbaijanis of the honour of being Persians is flagrant injustice".<sup>44</sup> To use Goffman's terms, such a conception led to "normative expectations" with respect to the "social identity" of Azerbaijanis who had to endeavour to hide their ethnicity. Obvious signs of Turkishness in public spaces were discredited and their bearers stigmatized. Mahmoud Afshar, an intellectual and nationalist, explained the political rationale for limiting the presence of non-Persian identity markers: "what I mean by the national unity of Iran is a political, cultural, and social unity of the people living within the present borders of Iran [...] Achieving national unity implies the institution of the Persian language across the whole country, the disappearance of regional differences in

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<sup>42</sup> The Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) made multiple references to pre-Islamic Iran, and even the name of the dynasty was picked in reference to the written form of various ancient Iranian languages.

<sup>43</sup> The most prominent and scientifically-based work defining the Persian nature of Azerbaijan was carried out by Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946) in relation to the ancient language of Azerbaijan, Azeri. He argued that the ancient Azeri language had been closely related to Persian, and that the influx of Turkic words began only with the Turks' invasions from Central Asia. His argument helped to advocate the linguistic assimilation of Persian in Azerbaijan. KASRAVI Ahmad, *Azari ya zaban-e bastan-e Azerbaijan*, Bethesda, Iranbooks, 1993.

<sup>44</sup> ARANI Taqi, "Azerbaijan ya yek mas'aleh-ye hayati va mamati-ye Iran", *Farhangestan*, vol.1, 1924, pp.247-254.

dress, customs, and other things, and the elimination of tribal leaders. Kurds, Lors, Qashqa'is, Turks, Arabs, Turkmens shall not differ from one another by wearing different clothes or speaking a different language."<sup>45</sup> In the name of the nation, all ethnically-distinguishing signs had to disappear from the new Iranian society.

The new conception of ethnicity was enforced using a very classic set of state policies to foster national identification so as to bolster the political institutions of the Pahlavi regime. The army played a leading part here, and its primary tasks were to weaken tribal power, to extend central government authority throughout the country, to destroy local authorities, and to disarm and pacify civilian populations.<sup>46</sup> Non-Persian groups were the first to be targeted by the military as their loyalty towards central government was viewed as dubious. Normative expectations to expel non-Persian signs from public life were relayed by official institutions that required the use of the national language and enforced a notion of Iranian identity as defined by the criteria of Iranian nationalism. Whether in education, the military or in cultural institutions, considerable efforts were made to give primacy to Persian identity and downplay minority cultures. Schools were the first stage in enforcing the exclusive use of Persian amongst new generations. Arani insisted on the need for a massive educational effort in Azerbaijan: "If compulsory primary education is not yet feasible in all of Iran, it must be implemented in Azerbaijan at any cost; this is essential not only for education but also for political reasons."<sup>47</sup> Such policies imposed a devaluation of ethnic cultures, hampering intergenerational transmission and rendering standardization impossible. They played a part in displacing non-Persian elements from the public realm under the Pahlavi regime.

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<sup>45</sup> AFSHAR Mahmoud, "Aqaz-nameh", *Ayandeh*, vol.1, no.1, 1925, p.5.

<sup>46</sup> CRONIN Stephanie, *The Army and Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1910-1926*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1997 and CRONIN Stephanie, *Tribal Politics in Iran. Rural Conflict and the New State, 1921-1941*, London, Routledge, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> ARANI Taqi, "Azerbaijan ya yek mas'aleh-ye hayati va mamati-ye Iran", op. cit., p.254.



Development policies and the transformation of the Iranian economy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been part of the state's strategy to foster national unity and to centralize power. Rising oil exports provided the government with huge resources to pay for the country's infrastructure and industrial base. But overall, development policies have systematically benefited the central provinces, which were the ones to receive public investment. As a result the country's economic development, based on oil and gas, produced a concentration of business activity in the capital. Tehran even became the exclusive centre of Iranian modernization in the 1960s and 1970s, making it the vibrant showcase of a Westernized civilization.<sup>48</sup> The polarization of economic growth was detrimental to surrounding provinces that remained on the sidelines of the country's economic transformation. In the case of Iranian Azerbaijan, this marginalization was reflected in the decline of the province and of its main city Tabriz in particular, from their positions of pre-eminence in the early 20th century.<sup>49</sup>

Another consequence of the polarization of economic growth was the displacement of rural populations to urban centres, a significant factor in redefining ethnic stereotypes. Azerbaijan was a primary source of emigrants, being rural, densely populated and little industrialized. The influx of a poorly educated workforce, who often found it difficult to speak Persian, contributed to the introduction of stereotypes presenting Turks as clumsy and crude. At the time of urbanization, they were seen as rough-hewn peasants fresh from their rural surroundings. Speaking a heavily accented Persian, they ended up with poorly paid menial jobs. They were however considered hardworking men, and were industrious and successful in trade. Migration-related stereotypes about Turks abounded in

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<sup>48</sup> MADANIPOUR Ali, *Tehran: The Making of a Metropolis*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 1998.

<sup>49</sup> A former capital of the Iranian empire, Tabriz was once largest and most active city in the country, acting as a gateway between Iran and the rest of the world up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tabriz was at the forefront of the struggle against the Qajar dynasty during the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911).

the popular imagination. Under the Islamic Republic, the decline in migration from Iranian Azerbaijan and increased in migration from other provinces (including Kurdistan) and Afghanistan have reconfigured ethnic hierarchy. But stereotypes die hard, and their pervasiveness continued long after the social processes that brought on their advent.

The prevailing nationalism, the associated state policies, and the economic and demographic changes occurring during the Pahlavi era were part of a strategic rationalization. According to de Certeau, a strategic rationalization seeks to create its own place and be freed of its own environment. This production of exteriority from society reached its peak with the lavish 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Iranian empire celebrated at Persepolis in 1971. The divorce from the concrete functioning of society had multiple effects that resonated during the Revolution of 1979. One of them has been a systematic devaluation of the Turk-Azerbaijani identity (among other ethnic identities). A core objective of the overall strategy was to foster a Persianized national identification and thus provide the social basis of a powerful central state.

### *Soviet penetration and the fostering of ethnic identification in Iranian Azerbaijan*

In modern times there have been frequent attempts by foreign countries to fan ethnic tensions in Iran or empower local groups so as to gain political concessions from the country's central government. British involvement in Southern Iran in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Saddam's claims on Khuzestan in the name of Arab solidarity, and way the Bush administration played the ethnic card<sup>50</sup> are all well-known examples. But

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<sup>50</sup> Traditionally the United States used to back the territorial integrity of Iran and support the centralization policies of their allies, the Pahlavi dynasty. However, under the Bush administration, the American neo-conservatives openly advocated the right to independence of the major ethnic groups composing the country. In addition, Shirin Hunter argued that the plan to foster ethnic demands not only played a part in the so-called

Moscow was the only power to pursue a sustained long-term policy in which ethnic groups were systematically used to advance strategic objectives. Without being fully successful, this policy built up resources ethnic activists drew on in their struggle with the Iranian authorities.

Following on from its conquest of the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia aspired to taking over Northern Iran, the new limes of the Empire. The Soviet Union continued where the Russian Empire had left off and, as soon as it had recovered from the Civil War that had exhausted the country, set its territorial ambitions on Iranian Azerbaijan. What really matters in our case is not the strategic continuity but the innovation introduced by the Soviets in their foreign-policy making, and in particular their attempt to use the minorities as a Trojan horse for Soviet penetration in the Middle East in general, and Iran in particular.<sup>51</sup> This policy was in tune with the conception of ethnicity developed by Stalin. Despite its emphasis on a *New Soviet Man*, the archetype of certain qualities said to be emerging as dominant among all citizens of the Soviet Union, and irrespective of the country's long-standing cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, the Communist regime had implemented rather unexpected nationality policies.<sup>52</sup>

In the Soviet Union language was considered as the primary determinant of nationality. Soviet perceptions of ethnicity were also strongly flavoured by ethnogenesis, which analyses the evolution of a single group in order to isolate its characteristics distinguishing it from others. This conception had

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regime change policy, but also sought to downgrade the size and power of Iran in the Middle East. TOHIDI Nayereh, "Ethnicity and Religious Minority Politics in Iran", in Ali Gheissari (ed.), *Contemporary Iran. Economy, Society, Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p.315.

<sup>51</sup> TER MINASSIAN Taline, *Colporteurs du Kommintern. L'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient*, Paris, Presses de Sciences po, 1997.

<sup>52</sup> The politics of ethnicity in the Soviet Union have been well studied since the seminal article by SLEZKINE Yuri, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism". *Slavic Review*, vol.53, no.2, pp.414-452, 1994.

political implications: territories and specific institutions were granted to administratively recognized ethnic groups. In Transcaucasia, Muslim Tatars together with the Armenians and Georgians were established as a national group.<sup>53</sup> This led to the creation of three Republics after the disintegration of the Transcaucasian Soviet Republic in 1936. Among them, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was favoured and received a large territory and a long border with Iran, as a possible channel to influence the large Azerbaijani community in Iran and the political future of the Soviet Union's southern flank.<sup>54</sup> In addition to this new institutions in the Azerbaijan Republic were in charge of promoting a comprehensive Azerbaijani identity and developing its specific features through scientific and cultural work. A vast amount of knowledge was produced in the fields of ethnology, linguistics, and history to provide the academic foundations for the newly established national group. Olivier Roy has shown how these national discourses became firmly rooted in Muslim Soviet Republics over the course of nearly seven decades of Soviet rule.<sup>55</sup>

The knowledge defining the Soviet Azerbaijani nation was enlisted to serve Soviet strategic interests in Iran. It was only with the Second World War that this plan really became effective. At the outbreak of the conflict German influence was paramount in Iran. This sympathy caused concern once Germany launched its invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. To avoid Iranian territory being used as a base for German military operations, London and Moscow forced the Shah to resign and invaded the country in the summer of 1941. Iran was divided into three zones with British troops in the South and Soviet ones in the North, with Tehran remaining unoccupied. The strategic importance of Iran for the allies increased when

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<sup>53</sup> Between 1918 and 1920, the years after the fall of the Tsarist Empire, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia obtained independence, before the Red Army took over the new Republics.

<sup>54</sup> WIXMAN Ronald, "Applied Soviet National Policy: A Suggested Rationale", in Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, Gilles Veinstein, Enders Wimbush (eds.), *Passé turco-tatar, Présent soviétique*, Paris, Editions de l'EHESS, 1986, pp.449-468.

<sup>55</sup> ROY Olivier, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*. London, I.B. Tauris, 2000.

it became the main corridor for American supplies to support the Soviet army. To control the occupied lands, the Soviet Union sent numerous troops – their numbers varied across the country but there were normally between 20,000 and 60,000 of them. The vast majority of the soldiers were Turkish-speakers, though there were also many Armenians.

The presence of the Azeris in the occupying forces was used to justify a cultural policy. Theatre, opera and ballet companies were brought in from Baku. In addition to Azeri performances, propaganda organs were set up to address the Soviet forces. The main publication was *Vatan Yolunda* (On the road of the fatherland), an Azeri-Turkish newspaper published in Tabriz that included many articles dealing with the culture, language, and history of Azerbaijan. These various services for the Turkish-speaking soldiers of the Red Army were also available to the Iranians. They were a change from the Reza Shah's policy of excluding non-Persian references from the public life. They also created opportunities for young Iranians to become aware of the Soviet-style Azerbaijani nation and to be involved in the production of cultural items under Soviet sponsorship.<sup>56</sup> Not only was the Red Army to protect a major supplies route, its objectives were also to advance Soviet strategic interests in the Middle East. According to Jamil Hasanli, who draws on various Soviet sources, the various actors on the communist side were not necessarily motivated by the same goals. Moscow was primarily interested in the issue of oil and its influence in Iran as a whole, whilst officials from Soviet Azerbaijan in contrast wanted to incorporate Iranian Azerbaijan into their Republic, which meant dismembering Iran.<sup>57</sup>

During the Second World War, the Soviet Union toned down its revolutionary rhetoric and instead stoked national feeling so as to mobilize the masses in the Great Patriotic War against the German invaders. This

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<sup>56</sup> Mohammad Zehtabi and Mohammad Ali Farzaneh, who became major ethnic activists, first encountered the Azerbaijani question via their involvement in the Soviet propaganda apparatus during the Second World War.

<sup>57</sup> HASANLI Jamil, *Güney Azerbayjanda Sovet-Amerika-İngiltere qarshidurmasi 1941-1946*, Baku, Neshriyyat Azerbaijan, 2001.

policy was also implemented in the Caucasian Republics where expressions of public support for the homeland were encouraged. Academic and cultural works were produced to strengthen the administratively recognized ethnic groups, such as the Azeris. The Soviet Azerbaijanis who were in charge of developing the propaganda apparatus in Iranian Azerbaijan benefitted from the nationalist impulse in their homeland, and were able to use the new material produced in Soviet Azerbaijan to expand their activity in Iran. During the occupation the Iranian Azerbaijanis were exposed to a major campaign seeking to develop their sense of national consciousness and to indoctrinate them in the virtues of the Soviet way of life.<sup>58</sup> With the victory over the Third Reich approaching, the Soviets did not reduce their occupying forces in Iran as they were supposed to do. Instead they increased their propaganda and provided support to the Azerbaijani members of the *Tudeh*, the Iranian Communist Party. They actively backed their founding of the Democratic Front of Azerbaijan, as a way to advance their pawns in northern Iran and establish an allied regime there.<sup>59</sup>

The Soviet-oriented organization was mainly composed of the Azerbaijani secessionist branch of the *Tudeh*. Protected from Tehran's wrath by the Soviet troops occupying northern Iran, the Democratic Front established the Provincial Government of Azerbaijan. In its first statement, the new provincial authority declared that the Azerbaijanis were a distinct nation but had no ambition to become independent. They voiced three major demands: the use of the Turkish language in local schools and government bodies; the retention of tax revenues in the province; and the setting up of

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<sup>58</sup> The literature produced in this period is a blend of national themes and references to the Soviet model. BERENGLIAN Sakina, *Azeri and Persian Literary Works in Twentieth Century Iranian Azerbaijan*, Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1988.

<sup>59</sup> According to Swietochowski, the Soviets' strategy in Iranian Azerbaijan had much in common with the one they were pursuing in Eastern European countries at that time. SWIETOCHOWSKI Tadeusz, *Russia and Azerbaijan: a Borderland in Transition*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995.

provincial assemblies.<sup>60</sup> This resulted in a major conflict with the central government, for whom these demands were unacceptable, one in which the Great Powers had their say. Under the pressure of its former allies, the Soviet Union withdrew its troops in the aftermath of the victory against Germany, in what has been described as the first crisis of the Cold War.<sup>61</sup> Without Soviet backing, the Democratic Front of Azerbaijan fell under the threat of the central government, which sent troops to the seditious province. The demise of the provincial government in December 1946 forced many activists to flee in exile to the Soviet Union.

Despite being short-lived, the provincial government has become a landmark in the nationalist historiography of Azerbaijan, and is viewed as a time of awakening and pride for Azerbaijan, finally freed from the Persian yoke. This representation of a time of glory arose mainly from the praise of the Baku intelligentsia for this period during the decades following the fall of Pishvari's government. At that time, Iranian Azerbaijani writers were published and celebrated in Baku, and former Soviet propagandists who had been active in Tabriz during the Second World War wrote novels and poems evoking their experiences during these days of hope before the 'Pahlavi chauvinist-bourgeois government' (to use the Soviet phraseology) imposed a crackdown in Iranian Azerbaijan. It was the work of Soviet Azerbaijanis who had previously been directly involved in the occupation that brought the Iranian Azerbaijan question to a subject of future political significance. Soon Soviet academia was busy accumulating vast amounts of knowledge about the language and literature of Iranian Azerbaijan, and setting up a historiography positing the homology between Iranian

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<sup>60</sup> ABRAHAMIAN Ervand, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982, p.399.

<sup>61</sup> L'ESTRANGE FAWCETT Louis, *Iran and The Cold War. The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992. Fawcett also argues that the Soviet Union did not have sufficient resources to move forward in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Following on in the tradition of Russian geopolitical thinking, Eastern Europe took priority over the Middle East and so Moscow chose to seize the historic chance to dominate territories of the former German and Austro-Hungarian empires.

Azerbaijan and Soviet Azerbaijan. Special sections were opened in the Azerbaijan SSR Academy of Sciences and the Nizami Institute - the main literary institution - to study Iranian Azerbaijan with a focus on the national liberation struggle which soon became a canonic research topic.<sup>62</sup>

This Soviet effort has been described as a long-term policy to foster Azerbaijani national identification in Iranian Azerbaijan, to detach it from Iran and bring it within the Soviet Empire.<sup>63</sup> In Baku the uncertainties of history and the fluidity of ethnicity could basically be transformed into readable concepts conferring each Iranian actor with a pre-defined role, adapted to the Soviet matrix of ethnicity and its strategic rationalization. Since then Iranian Azerbaijan has been labelled “Southern Azerbaijan” in an open desire to unify the two Azerbaijanians in the future. The Persian population was presented as an oppressive force dominating the revolutionary masses, made up of the ethnic groups of the Iranian periphery. Devising all these academic and cultural references, summarized in the expression “Southern Azerbaijan”, led to the construction of a nationalist political syntax based on Soviet rules but adapted to Iranian Azerbaijan. This syntax was made of a biased historiography full of the heroes and martyrs of Azerbaijan, and a nationalized geography with the symbolic places of Azerbaijan and a revolutionary future. This ready-to-use nationalist discourse provided future ethnic activists with opportunities to be socialized to new conceptions of ethnicity established by the *Soviet other*.

With the Islamic Revolution, there was an attempt to export this recently established political syntax via books, folk groups and individuals so as to extend Soviet influence in Iran. Once again the Soviet Union took the

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<sup>62</sup> Examples of dissertations include DEVELI Memmed Develi, *Jenubi Azerbayjanda Milli hokümetin teshkili ve fealiyyeti, (1945-1946)*, Baku, 1967, MIRZEDADE S., *Iran Azerbayjanın Milli Majlisi ve onun qanunvericilik fealiyyeti*, Baku, 1971, ABDULLAYEV Vilai, *Iran Azerbayjanında milli azadlıq herekatında metbuatin rolu, (1941-1946)*, Baku, 1975.

<sup>63</sup> NISSMAN David B., *The Soviet Union and Iranian Azerbaijan. The Use of Nationalism for Political Penetration*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1987.



opportunity to put ethnicity to strategic use. This was still part of a long-term ambition to subvert power relationships in Iran at the expense of the central government and its Western allies. Once again, there were varying motives on the communist side and the opportunity was not seen in the same way in Moscow and Baku. But the revolutionary turmoil that had gripped Iran meant ethnicity could be used in tactical ways, allowing the conflict to spread.

### ■ TACTICAL USES OF ETHNICITY

Tactic has been defined as the art of the weak who have to play on and with an imposed location that is organized by the law of the other. As a procedure, a tactic acquires validity via the relevance it lends to time, especially the precise circumstances in which actions take advantage of a favourable situation. Lack of autonomy and favourable timing may be clearly seen in the tactical uses of Azerbaijanity in post-Second World War Iran. Ethnic mobilization as a form of tactical move was made possible by the transformation of the political context within a constrained setting. It was only with the Iranian Revolution itself that conditions arose in which the ethnic conflict could emerge, as it enabled specific categories to become aware of the Azerbaijani issue and to call for the recognition of their rights. To document tactical uses of ethnicity and the forms taken by ethnic conflict, it is necessary to trace the trajectories of individuals whose protests during the Revolution were representative of the way the ethnic conflict was structured. Their trajectories help to explain the origins of the ethnic conflict and understand the uses of ethnicity in Iranian society.

### Emerging awareness of the Azerbaijani question: a marginal attitude amongst the educated middle class

Discrimination and relative deprivation are the main explanations put forward to account for ethno-nationalist centrifugal movements contesting the Iranian central state. Consequently the probability of ethnic mobilization in Iranian Azerbaijan is supposed to be lower than in other provinces due to the integration of the community in Iranian society. Only foreign encroachment can foster mobilization, as during the Second World War. Ervand Abrahamian has proposed a more intricate analysis to understand how individuals became involved in supporting a separatist movement during the war. He studied members of the *Tudeh*, the Communist Party of Iran, comparing the trajectories of those who remained faithful to the party to those of people who broke away to create the *Ferqa-ye Demokrat-e Azerbaijan* and proclaim an autonomous government in Iranian Azerbaijan. He emphasized the homogeneity of the *Tudeh* disciples, part of a young Tehran intelligentsia quite unprepared to address the issue of centre-periphery relations: “As Western-educated intellectuals, they associated centralization with modernization. As Persian intellectuals, they favoured the rapid expansion of the state educational system. As Orthodox Marxists, they viewed society through a class perspective, ignoring the ethnic dimension. Linguistic and regional issues were therefore ignored in all three of the major political statements made in the early years of the party.”<sup>64</sup> This generational, geographical, and intellectual solidarity conflicted with the position of the older communist militants making up the *Ferqa-ye Demokrat-e Azerbaijan*. They came mainly from Azerbaijan and did not necessarily master Persian. Their experience of Marxism had resulted from political commitments made over the course of the various revolutionary episodes affecting the

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<sup>64</sup> ABRAHAMIAN Ervand, “Communism and Communalism in Iran: The Tudah and the Firqah-I Dimokrat”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.1, no.4, 1970, p.301.

Caucasus and northern Iran in the early part of the 20th century. The latter group had fewer cultural resources, as defined by the new Westernized Iranian standards, and these limited resources hampered their access to high positions in Pahlavi society. But the comparison is also about secondary socialization and trajectories that exposed them to different conceptions of ethnicity and its social meaning. Abrahamian's distinction helps explain the reasons behind the timely break with the *Tudeh* when the opportunity was created by the Soviet occupation of Northern Iran.

The differentiated social positions accounting for the conflict within the *Tudeh* and for the autonomist shift of the *Ferqa-ye Demokrat-e Azerbaijan* diminished gradually with the extension of the modern educational system, the development of the educated middle class, and restricted contact between Iran and the Soviet Republics of the Caucasus in the decades following the Second World War. These years were a period of swift modernization in Iran with the ultimate objective of making the country Western in character and militarily strong. Unlike his father, Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979) had large economic resources due to rising oil income which could be used to modernize the Iranian economy and society. But the modernization process on which his country embarked was highly dependent on the West, especially the United States. One result of this was the expansion of a Westernized educational system and a rapid growth in the number of students: Between 1966 and 1976 the number of students in Iran rocketed from 52,294 to 437,089. Many found their way into the civil service, where numbers rose from 672,000 to 1,673,000 over the same period, accounting for up to 1/3 of the workforce in the cities.<sup>65</sup> Basically, the social characteristics of the *Tudeh* leadership had become more and more widespread in Iranian society and it is interesting that a new generation of supporters of the Azerbaijani nation came from this background, being members of this educated middle class supposedly at

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<sup>65</sup> Jean-Pierre Digard, Bernard Hourcade, Yann Richard, *L'Iran au XXe siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 1996, p.334.

the forefront of Iranian modernization and supporters of nationalist ideology.<sup>66</sup> The role played by Turkish-speaking members of the educated middle class in bringing the Azerbaijani question into the political arena raises a major issue. The argument of discrimination is not relevant here, and this means we have to look for other reasons explaining their commitment.

The main feature of the educated middle class is their access to modern education, which in turn provided them with extensive cultural capital. If in the 1950s and 1960s it was comparatively easy to transpose good education into economic success and access to enviable positions, things were considerably more difficult in the following decade.<sup>67</sup> The rise of the educated middle class as a promoter of change in Iranian society occurred at the same time as the central government was implementing policies to foster its Persianized conception of the Iranian nation. As a result, markers of Turkishness were removed from the public arena, or at least its most visible parts, and Turkish identity was depreciated. What was the outcome of these policies for the educated Turkish-speaking middle class? According to Alain Dieckhoff, “if social mobility was promoted by the central government and offered real economic and social benefits, the intelligentsia had only residual interest in engaging in a strategy of dissociation even though a total loss of cultural identity may be enough for social promotion”.<sup>68</sup> In Iran opportunities for drawing on cultural capital acquired during formal education ensured high social mobility and

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<sup>66</sup> It is interesting to note that modernization expanded communal identification into rural areas, without necessarily leading to ethnic mobilization. According to Abrahamian, technological developments, “together with the commercialization of agriculture and the settling of some tribes, produced paradoxical results [...]. In the peripheral provinces, ethnicity grew as communal identity based on one’s immediate village and tribe gave way to a broader identity based on one’s language and culture. Villagers and tribesmen who had in the past viewed themselves as belonging to small local communities now saw themselves as Kurds, Turkomans, Arabs, Lurs, Baluchis, or Azeris.” Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982, p.428.

<sup>67</sup> KIAN-THIEBAUT Azadeh, *Secularization of Iran: a Doomed Failure? The New Middle Class and the Making of Modern Iran*, Paris, Peeters, 1998.

<sup>68</sup> DIECKHOFF Alain, *La nation dans tous ses Etats*, Paris, Flammarion, 2000, p.58.

prevented possible dissociative tendencies. The depreciation of the relative value of Turkish-Azerbaijani identity was perceived by the educated middle class as a necessary step in the process of national standardization and considered part of the broader theme of modernization imposed by Mohammad Reza Shah at a fast pace so as to turn his country into a respected great power. The members of the Turkish-speaking educated middle class were free to develop their own use of ethnicity, and to abandon stigmatized signs of their Turkishness; they could then refrain from expressing their Turkishness in order to affirm their full Iranian identity.<sup>69</sup>

With regard to the educated middle class, identity stigma presents a paradox that needs to be clarified if we are to account for certain commitments which, though exceptionally rare, are central to understanding the origins of the protests in Azerbaijan. Through the educational system, individuals assimilated a modern culture largely defined according to the Persian criteria of Iranian nationalism. Commitment to the prestigious Persian language with its rich literary heritage and to the heritage of classic Iranian civilization, the sense of occupying a special position in the Middle East, the assertion of national independence, and indeed all the core elements of Iranian nationalism, remained the unshakable tenets for the modern middle class irrespective of political or ethnic divisions.<sup>70</sup> As a result, the relationship of the educated middle class to the world was formed via the prism of identity as imposed by Iranian nationalism. This raised the issue of the coexistence amongst the Turkic-speaking educated middle class of an enhanced Iranian identity and a stigmatized Turkish identity, regarded as backward and uneducated. Even though many chose to set their Turkishness aside, there

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<sup>69</sup> The refusal to express Turkishness could be confined to the public sphere, but it sometimes extended to the private sphere and led them to distance themselves from their ethnic background and sometimes to lose their mother tongue.

<sup>70</sup> MASHAYEKHI Mehrdad, "The politics of nationalism and political culture", in Samih K. Farsoun, Mehrdad Mashayekhi (eds.), *Iran: Political Culture in The Islamic Republic*, New York, Routledge, 1992, pp.82-115.

was a minority of the educated middle class who were committed to defending their Azerbaijani identity. Could such a commitment be affirmed against Iranian nationalism, but also through the prism of that same Iranian nationalism? Here, the explanation offered by ethnic activists that the Azerbaijani national revival is a form of resistance against the excesses of Iranian nationalism is simplistic.<sup>71</sup>

Simplistic, that is, unless we take the term resistance in the sense put forward by Michel Foucault: resistance, or rather multiple resistances, is not merely an adverse reaction to domination or its negation. It is “never in a position of exteriority in relation to power”.<sup>72</sup> It refers always to the situation it opposes and acts as a counter-strategy, embedded in a multiplicity of power relations. If this resistance is at the heart of and not outside the power that causes it, then we need to return to Partha and develop Chatterjee’s idea of nationalism as a “derivative discourse”. Chatterjee examined the colonial context, characterized by the inability of post-colonial societies to develop identities independent of the dominant Western categories. Such an inability makes nationalism a “different discourse, yet one that is dominated by another” from which it selects its constitutive elements.<sup>73</sup> The derivative approach can be used in the case of Iranian Azerbaijan. Indeed, the new Azerbaijani identity was understood according to the standards of Iranian nationalism, the dominant discourse in the intellectual and political fields. It served as a model for reinterpreting the Turkish tradition in Iran in order to attribute modern

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<sup>71</sup> Resistance to Iranian nationalism is the principal explanation put forward by advocates of the Azerbaijani cause for their commitment. According to them, “mobilization is a response to the Iranian central government and its pro-Persian policies”. Interview in Tabriz, July 2004.

<sup>72</sup> FOUCAULT Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité. La volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p.128. Alireza Asgharzadeh used the word resistance in explicit reference to Foucault to describe the ethnic mobilization in Iranian Azerbaijan. But he restricts the notion to the production of a discourse as a simple domination practice. ASGHARZADEH Alireza, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity. Islamic Fundamentalism, Aryanist Racism, and Democratic Struggles*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.157.

<sup>73</sup> CHATTERJEE Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, op. cit., pp.116-120.

features to Azerbaijani identity that would be endowed with virtues at least equal to those attributed to Iranian identity.<sup>74</sup>

Choosing to put forward an identity emphasising Turkishness which was denied by the authorities remained a marginal choice during the Pahlavi era. A few individuals were involved, often exploring their cultural identity through literature, folklore, and children's stories where it was possible to avoid censorship. The issue was also examined in non-published political writings that circulated amongst the people concerned with the Azerbaijani question.<sup>75</sup> The rationale behind this marginal attitude of some of the educated middle class calls for some explanation, and is rooted in their secondary socialization that put some distance from their reference group. Some of them crossed the Iranian border and lived abroad in Turkey and Soviet Azerbaijan where they experienced new conceptions of ethnicity, and where Turkishness was valued. Several future advocates of the Azerbaijani cause completed part of their graduate studies in Turkey. This led to a cognitive dissonance with their previous education in Iran, marked by the ideological prism of Iranian nationalism. The student experience in Turkey might well have awakened a sense of Turkish stigmatization, thus making it possible to identify with Azerbaijani cause.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Reza Baraheni expressed this relation in poetic terms: "The enemy, by imposing his conditions on me, had given me training useful in combat. The enemy's strongest weapon was his language, his culture and these I had learned as much as any songs of the daughters of the enemy. I tried to be the tongue of my oppressed nationality in the language of the oppressor. Linguistically speaking, the deep structure of my revolt against the establishment was in the language of my own nationality, but under the given historical conditions the deep structure had transformed itself into the surface structure of the Persian language. I tried to sing in the words of the master against the dominion of that very master. Now the falcon could not hear the falconer, the center could hold no longer. I was free." BARAHENI Reza, *The Crowned Cannibals: Writings on Repression in Iran*, New York, Vintage Books, 1977, p.113.

<sup>75</sup> For a presentation of some of the books dealing with the Azerbaijani question in Iran after the Second World War, see BERENGLIAN Sakina, *Azeri and Persian Literary Works in Twentieth Century Iranian Azerbaijan*, op. cit..

<sup>76</sup> Hamid Notqi expressed how during his days in Turkey he became aware of the diglossia in which he was living. "I used to think that in our language [Azerbaijani Turkish] only comic, satiric, poems were written. I thought, if a poem was for the purpose of laughter it would be written in Turkish, but if it were to be serious, it would be written in Persian. It

For others in Tabriz, socializing among militant groups close to the Iranian Left helped to generate an awareness of the Azerbaijani question. In the 1960s, growing criticism by intellectuals of the Iranian modernization which they condemned as a process of Westernization cutting Iranian society off at the roots led to new perceptions of ethnic cultures.<sup>77</sup> In Iranian Azerbaijan, some members of the left-wing movements started to promote Azerbaijani culture in addition to their political ideas. They organized small cultural groups whose activities were dedicated to saving a cultural heritage threatened by the Pahlavi modernization.

All these men starting to be concerned with the ethnic issue under Mohammad-Reza Shah were unable to raise their voices and call for change in ethnic issues. The Iranian authorities forced them to restrict their activities to remote places whence it was impossible to launch a proper mobilization. Basically, their activities were limited to private social gatherings where they put forward their arguments about ethnic issues.<sup>78</sup> Hamid Notghi and Gholam-Reza Sabri Tabrizi described these activities as “cultural contraband” and “a risky and dangerous adventure”.<sup>79</sup> It was only the precise circumstances of the Iranian Revolution that enabled them to leave their hideout to become engaged in a conflict with the authorities. The political opening meant that many in the educated middle class, now aware of the ethnic issue, had opportunities to challenge the ethnic hierarchy and force the new authorities to consider the Iranian ethnic diversity. In addition to this the Revolution provided researchers with an

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was only after my trip to Istanbul, that I discovered that here [in Turkey] they had serious poetry [written] in Turkish. At first I was surprised. Then, gradually, we discovered that we too could have serious poems”, in *Varliq*, no.101-102, 1996, p.54.

<sup>77</sup> The best-known figure is Samad Behrangi (1937-1967) who collected folklore from Iranian Azerbaijan and published a selection of tales when he worked as a teacher in rural areas. Behrangi died in a swimming accident in the Araz river, an accident which has been described as an act of the Iranian secret police.

<sup>78</sup> Several booklets dealing with Azerbaijani language and culture were published during the 1960s, revealing a still limited but growing interest in ethnicity.

<sup>79</sup> NOTGHI Hamid, SABRI TABRIZI Gholam-Reza, “Hail to Heydarbaba: a comparative view of popular Turkish and classical Persian poetical languages”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.21, no.2, 1994, p.246.



abundance of publications which helped them to identify individuals, observe group structures, and understand relationships among different players in the ethnic question. Paradoxically, the revolutionary turmoil has made it easier to map the tactical uses of ethnicity than the authoritarian modernization of the Pahlavi.

### Mobilizations during the revolutionary period

The Revolution offered the whole of Iranian society great opportunities to engage in politics. Members of the educated middle class receptive to the ethnic issue were no exception to this, even if their ardour was marginal compared to the universalist passion which seized Iranian society at the time. There was a clear surge in the number of publications dealing with Azerbaijani language and culture during the revolutionary period:<sup>80</sup> those who were interested in the Azerbaijani issue were ready, and when the ban on the use of ethnic language was lifted in 1979 they seized this opportunity to promote their ethnic roots. The establishment of an Islamic Republic, seen as a break with the Persian nationalist regime, was supposed to create opportunities for a change in the hierarchy of ethnic Iranian identities and provide new resources to the non-Persian groups. In this context, two ethnic tactical options emerged depending upon the social positions the ethnic activists occupied (or were perceived to occupy).<sup>81</sup> One option was to access state benefits via the mediation of elites and institutions close to the centre of power, and the second to autonomously accumulate resources. Both options function in the spaces

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<sup>80</sup> Between 1979 and 1984, 188 books on these subjects were published in Iran. GÖKDAG Bilgehan, HEYAT Reza, "Iran Turklerinde Kimlik Meselesi", *Bilig*, no.30, 2004, pp.76-79.

<sup>81</sup> Touraj Atabaki divides these two options between different ideological stances, opposing Marxists to former Marxists. In addition to some inaccuracy in labelling the later group as former Marxist, this typology fails to explain how they have been involved in ethnic mobilizations. ATABAKI Touraj, "Ethnic Diversity and Territorial Integrity of Iran: Domestic Harmony and Regional Challenges". *Iranian Studies*, vol.38, no.1, 2005, p.41.

of the other, produced by the policies of the Iranian central government and the Soviet Union.

The first option emerged among a group of educated and privileged middle-class individuals who rallied around the quarterly review *Varliq*.<sup>82</sup> These men made up a solid and socially homogenous group that lobbied the new republican institutions to recognise rights for the ethnic groups composing Iran. All were either high school or college-educated and pursued intellectual, liberal, or executive careers. They lived in Tehran, even though most were from the city of Tabriz. In 1978 the group had founded the *Anjoman-e Azerbaijan* (Azerbaijan Society), a study group that met regularly in members' homes. The group's efforts focused on publishing *Varliq*, the first issue of which appeared in April 1979, three months after the fall of the Shah. The review dealt primarily with culture, language, literature, and Turkic history, but also with the cultural and societal problems affecting the Turks of Iran. An important characteristic of *Varliq* when viewed within the galaxy of ethnic Azerbaijani publications was its extreme longevity, a fact that can only be understood in the light of the multiple resources of its publishers.

Javad Heyat, the founding editor, is a good example of someone with an accumulation of resources enabling him to find his way through the new institutional setting that came out of the Revolution. He was born in 1925 in Tabriz into an aristocratic family. His father, Ali Heyat, was Chief Justice under the Shah's regime. After attending elementary and secondary school in Tabriz, he went to medical school in Tehran before attending medical school in Istanbul and in Paris to specialize in cardiology. Once back in Tehran he began a highly successful medical career at Hedayat hospital where he performed the first open heart surgery in Iran. Javad Heyat wrote over 80 articles in Persian for medical journals and a score in English

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<sup>82</sup> This polysemous term can be translated as either presence or existence. It means the presence or existence of Turks in Iranian society despite the denial of the imperial regime.

and French.<sup>83</sup> Following the Revolution, Heyat held various academic positions, became professor of surgery at the Free University, and published three surgery manuals. At the same time he also wrote several books on the history and language of Azerbaijan. In 1983 he took part in the first Conference on Turkic Studies at the University of Indiana in the United States, where he presented a paper on Azeri language and literature before and after the Revolution.<sup>84</sup> He has received a number of honorary degrees from the University of Medicine in Istanbul, the Medical School of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Turkish Language Academy in Ankara, and the Academy of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In addition to this it has been said he was 'Ali Khamenei's personal physician until the 1980s, when the latter was President of the Islamic Republic.<sup>85</sup>

As this brief biography demonstrates, Heyat had various forms of capital as defined by Bourdieu. He held unique cultural capital both as a leading figure in the Iranian medical community and as a recognized expert in Turkish studies, in Ankara and elsewhere. His professional practice provided significant income to supplement the family wealth. His personal fortune made it possible for him to finance a magazine that was not profitable and required regular subsidies to carry on. It is thus quite natural that he should assume responsibility as editor-in-chief of *Varliq*. The review's longevity is thus linked to the social capital of the Javad Heyat family as confirmed by his medical career. The Heyat family connections helped negotiate the hazards of Iranian censorship, even under the most repressive periods of the Islamic Republic. The history of *Varliq* is thus inseparable from its central figure, Javad Heyat. But this discussion of Heyat's resources could be extended to other prominent members of the

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<sup>83</sup> Anon., "Iranian Pioneers in Heart Surgery", *Heart News*, Tehran, Tehran Heart Center, vol.1 no.2, 2003, p.12.

<sup>84</sup> HEYAT Javad, "Regression of Azeri Language and Literature under the Oppressive Period of Pahlavi and its Renaissance after the Islamic Revolution", First International Conference of Turkic Studies, Bloomington, unpublished, 1983.

<sup>85</sup> Information collected from sources in Tehran (2004) and in Paris (2006).

*Anjoman-e Azerbaijan* who also held prominent positions in Iranian society.<sup>86</sup>

To recognize the role of ethnic groups under the regime emerging from the Revolution, the *Varliq* group developed a three-stage process: reassessing Iran's ethnic diversity and the place of the Turks in society, framing this new assessment in revolutionary discourse, and claiming rights for ethnic groups that had been deprived of them by the former regime. Their first task was the publication of writings on Azerbaijani culture seeking to affirm the legitimacy of Turkic identity in Iran. Equally the *Varliq* contributors published many books in their respective fields of specialisation: Javad Heyat wrote on the history and literature of Iranian Turks,<sup>87</sup> Mohammad 'Ali Farzaneh re-published a grammar and two books of folktales he had written in the 1960s;<sup>88</sup> Hosseyn Bigdeli wrote a review of Turkic literature.<sup>89</sup> In addition to this collections of poems were published by

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<sup>86</sup> For example, similar remarks could be made about the multiple positions of Hamid Notqi. He was born in 1920, in the Sorkhab neighborhood of Tabriz, into a wealthy family. His father, a literary man, had a collection of old newspapers, including *Mollah Nasreddin*, which his son used to read in his childhood. He went to study law in Tehran, where he met Javad Heyat. Then he went to Turkey to attend Istanbul University's College of Law and finish his doctoral work, and obtain his law degree. Notqi was in Turkey for 5 years. Soon after his return to Iran, Notqi was employed at the Iranian Oil Company, in charge of public relations. A newly opened college, the College of Public Relations, invited him to join its teaching faculty. He taught there for 25 years, and was head of the department for a couple of years there. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Notqi along with a number of friends, including Heyat and other poets and authors, formed a group and started the publication of *Varliq*. It has been the most important publication focusing on different aspects of Turkic languages and cultures in Iran. On average about 20% of its contents are in Persian, and 80% in Turkish. From the very beginning Notqi was the author of leading articles, until a fatal illness forced him to move to the United Kingdom in the 1990s, where he died in 1999.

<sup>87</sup> HEYAT Javad, *Azerbaijan Edebiyat Tarikhine Bir Bakish*, Tehran, 1358; *Tarikhche-ye Torki-ye Azeri*, Tehran, Varliq, 1979, *Mukayiset'ol Lugateyn*, Tehran, Varliq, 1363. Dates are given according to the Iranian calendar for which the first day of the year is March 21. March 21, 1979 equals the first day of the year 1358.

<sup>88</sup> FARZANEH Mohammad 'Ali, *Mabani-ye Dastur-e Zaban-e Azerbaijan*, Tehran, Farzaneh, 1358; *Kitab-e Dede Korkud*, Tehran, Farzaneh, 1358; *Bayatilar*, Tehran, Farzaneh, 1361.

<sup>89</sup> BEGDILI Hoseyn, *Shahriyarla Gorush*, Tehran, 1358.

authors<sup>90</sup> whose purpose was to unveil the soul of Azerbaijan. But the monthly *Varliq* was the flag-bearer publication for their activity. With 100-plus pages per issue, it has soon amassed a wealth of articles, poems, reviews, literary analyses, and studies, on various topics concerning Iranian Turks. The editorial line clearly expressed the notion of a Turkic revival following decades of oppression, thanks to the Revolution. In the first issue of the journal a poem by Notqi spoke of “the curse that tied up my tongue” and of “lost identities” to describe the effects of the Pahlavi regime.<sup>91</sup> It was this curse that the individuals involved in *Varliq* sought to bring to an end after displaying how their ethnic culture and language deserved to be fully recognized in the new Iran.

The Islamic Republic appeared much less hostile toward ethnic groups than the old regime had: Iranian nationalism was no longer the state ideology and many leading figures of the new regime came from an Azerbaijani background. The apparent receptivity of the new regime to calls to reassess the role of ethnic groups in Iranian society led the *Varliq* group to step into the legitimate framework of the revolutionary days. Not only had they criticized the former regime for repressing non-Persian groups, they viewed its fall as putting an end to all ethnic and cultural discrimination. This meant affirming a common destiny with Iran, whilst defending the specificity of Azerbaijan, as stated in the editorial of the first issue of *Varliq*: “Each and every people of the world has the historical and legal right to preserve its national culture, identity and language, no matter how long those peoples have had historical and cultural affiliations with other peoples throughout history. The people of Azerbaijan, together with the other peoples living in Iran, share a common destiny and have contributed to the creation of a common culture, and yet retain a national identity,

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<sup>90</sup> SONMEZ, *Agir Iller*, Tabriz, 1358; SONMEZ, *Isa'nın Son Shami*, Tabriz, 1359; SAVALAN, *Aparidi Seller Sarani*, Tehran, 1357; BEGDILI Hoseyn, *Kehliye Salam*, Tabriz, Vahid Mat., 1359.

<sup>91</sup> NOTQI Hamid, “*Jadu*”, *Varliq*, Tehran, no.2, 1979, p.46.

character, and mother tongue.”<sup>92</sup> This common destiny then had to be integrated into the political upheavals of the time. The unanimity surrounding the overthrow of the monarchy naturally led *Varliq* members to take up the slogan “Down with the Shah!” They found the old regime guilty of maintaining a policy of cultural repression against the Turks of Iran and so Azerbaijani activists saw its fall as just.<sup>93</sup> It was thus expected that the Revolution would lead to the restoration of Azerbaijani pride and put an end to ethnic discrimination: their ethnic background would no longer be stigmatized. To *Varliq*’s editorial team, the Revolution seemed a great opportunity to make up lost ground and call for a newly defined ethnic hierarchy in Iran.

Respecting the legitimate commitment at the time of the Revolution helped make their claims acceptable to the new regime. Their purpose was to influence the institutions of the Islamic Republic and get them to grant a popular status to Turks in Iran. The best example is the constitutional debate that took place during the end of 1979, in which some *Varliq* contributors sought to have a say. The first issue of the journal, virtually the *Anjoman-e Azerbaijan* manifesto, called for the recognition of the “national language and culture of Azerbaijan, the establishment of schools in the coming school year, a national media in the Turkish language, as well as the recognition of the right of the Azerbaijanis to use their mother tongue in the courts and other government offices”.<sup>94</sup> Hamid Notqi identified the most significant claims in the subsequent issue of the journal: “the first four years of school must be taught in the mother tongue, then in both the Persian language and the mother tongue” and “mass media, and among them the radio and television services, must be put in use for expanding information about regional and national

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<sup>92</sup> *Varliq*, Tehran, no.1, 1979, p.3.

<sup>93</sup> YASHAR, “Azerbayjanda milli sistem haqinda”, *Varliq*, Tehran, no.1, 1979.

<sup>94</sup> *Varliq*, Tehran, no.1, 1979, p.10.

cultures”.<sup>95</sup> These claims were part of the speech Notqi gave at the “Seminar on the needs of the Iranian nation for the Constitution” on 24 June 1979. The seminar was held at the University of Tehran after the Assembly of Experts was asked to draft the constitutional text. Also in the second issue, in an open letter to readers, colleagues, fellow citizens and the government, Notqi demanded the recognition and enforcement of the promises made to the people of Iran on the acknowledgment of their rights and freedom, based on arguments from the Koran. In short, the *Varliq* group worked for a reorganization of the ethnic hierarchy to provide ethnic Turks with all the resources that ethnic Persians enjoyed. To a certain extent the new Iran within which they aspired to take part may be described as a Turko-Persian condominium that symbolically acknowledged the great role of both groups. To do that, they operated on the ground that had been left vacant by the demise of the Shah’s regime and took advantage of the emerging republican institutional framework to try to locate their conception of ethnicity.

The second option was also carried by educated individuals, but they drew on the Soviet conception of nationality to transform the Iranian ethnic framework. Instead of lobbying the new institutions they became involved in unequal opposition with the empowering revolutionary forces. It is difficult to adequately account for their activities during the revolutionary period as their efforts were not organized into any formalized, unified structure. The actors in this group bore the brunt of the competition between the various parties, groups, and organizations seeking to establish themselves within a polity profoundly shaken by the Iranian Revolution. Nevertheless, overall ideas emerged in the publications of the time, especially in Tabriz; the centre of their activities. *Ulker*, the first Turkish newspaper with articles in Persian, appeared on the day following the departure of the Shah, 17 January 1979. It was published by *Tabriz Shairler*

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<sup>95</sup> NOTQI Hamid, “Mesele-ye Farhang-e Akvam-e Mohtalef-e Iran ve Kanoun-e Esasi Jomhouri-ye Islami”, *Varliq*, Tehran, no.2, 1979, pp.12-13.

ve *Yazarlar Jamiyati* (Association of Poets and Writers of Tabriz) and called for the recognition of ethnic minorities' cultural rights. The association had a youth section, *Genchi Shair ve Yazarlar Jamiyati*, which published *Genchlik*.<sup>96</sup> The period also saw the return of activists who had been in exile in the Soviet Union. The most prominent was Mohammad Biriya, a former Minister of Culture of the short-lived autonomous government of 1945-46. He returned to Iran after his long exile in Azerbaijan SSR, even though he was quickly arrested and died while in detention. Nevertheless, one of his poetry books was published in Tabriz.<sup>97</sup> Mohammad Zehtabi did not meet the same fate as Biriya even though he was a significant figure in the elaboration of the Azerbaijani question in Iran.<sup>98</sup> Alongside the former figures from Soviet Azerbaijan were many left-wing activists. Some were too young, some had postponed their entry into the middle class to focus on their political activism, yet they were the driving force behind left-wing circles that developed in the 1970s.<sup>99</sup> They were particularly active in the city of Tabriz, where commitment to the left was not inconsistent with support for the Azerbaijani question. These men joined in the great revolutionary days that set Iranian cities ablaze and were involved in the many organizations that gradually moulded Iranian revolutionary society.

Out of this uncoordinated effervescence there emerged a central figure, Hosseyn Sadeq, recognized as such amongst the small circle of politicized intellectuals in Tabriz.<sup>100</sup> He was born in 1945 in Tabriz, then under Soviet occupation. After studying in Turkey, which played a decisive role in his political commitment, he returned to Iran where he was arrested by the secret police for secessionist activities in the 1960s and 1970s. His

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<sup>96</sup> GÖKDAG Bilgehan, HEYAT Reza, "Iran Turklerinde Kimlik Meselesi", op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>97</sup> BIRIYA Mohammad, *Urek Sozleri*, Tabriz, Yahya Shayda, 1360.

<sup>98</sup> ZEHTABI Mohammad, *Iran Turkchesinin Sarfi*, Tehran, Aramagan, 1358; *Vayganli Adem*, Tabriz, 1359; *Ana Dilimizi Neje Yazak?*, Tehran, 1360.

<sup>99</sup> KIAN-THIBEAUT Azadeh, *Secularization of Iran: a Doomed Failure? The New Middle Class and the Making of Modern Iran*, op. cit..

<sup>100</sup> Based on interviews with relatives of Hosseyn Sadeq and activists of the 1970s, Tehran, Karaj, Paris, 2004-2007.



imprisonment brought prestige but forced him to remain a mere translator. In 1979, he founded *Tabriz Azerbaijan Yazijilar va Shairler Jamiyati*, which brought together intellectuals close to left-wing circles. He launched three successive publications that encountered chronic problems and only lasted a short time: *Yoldash* (Comrade), *Enqelab yolunda* (The Road to Revolution) and *Yeni Yol* (The New Road). These publications shared a common pro-Soviet editorial policy and vehemently condemned the oppression allegedly suffered by the Turks under the monarchy. At the same time he published several books steeped in the idea of a forthcoming national revival,<sup>101</sup> as well as books of poetry under the pen name Duzgun.<sup>102</sup> In 1982 Hosseyn Sadeq was invited to Baku for a conference organized to mark the 60th anniversary of the USSR by the Azerbaijani Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. During the Revolution and the following years, Hosseyn Sadeq played a pivotal role in encouraging people from various backgrounds to become involved in promoting Azerbaijan identity.

Activists like Hosseyn Sadeq took advantages of their connections with Soviet Azerbaijan to extend their influence over a new regime whose future was still uncertain. Soviet institutions like the Azerbaijani Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries organised deliveries of books and newspaper subscription systems for Iran.<sup>103</sup> The many books published in the Azerbaijan SSR were transcribed or translated for publication in Iran. This implied a relationship of dependence with the Soviet Union. Basically it was the Soviet concept of Azerbaijani nationality - coalesced in the phrase Southern Azerbaijan - that was exported to Iran with the help of cultural smugglers like Sadeq or Zehtabi. They promoted a new approach to interethnic relations coined in a pseudo-Marxist reading

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<sup>101</sup> SADQ Hoseyn, *Govsi Tabrizi*, Tehran, 1356; *Sayalar*, Tehran, 1357; *Guneshli Vatan Yaddashlari*, Tehran, 1360.

<sup>102</sup> DUZGUN, *Mejmue-ye She'r*, Tehran, 1358; *Kichik Shiirler*, Tehran, 1359; *Baki Levhalari*, Tehran, 1360.

<sup>103</sup> For example, *Odlar Yurdu* (Country of Fires) was circulated in Tabriz.

of society: Persians were assimilated to the ruling class while the dominated ethnic groups were called upon to overthrow the government and so make room for a new system. Such a reading gave a revolutionary role to Iranian ethnic groups and particularly to their forerunners, the poets and intellectuals.

The autonomous and revolutionary approach of ethnic groups emerged clearly in the objectives Hosseyn Sadeq assigned to *Azerbaijan Yazicilar va Shairler Jamiyati*. They are to “defend the honour of our literary heritage which was almost destroyed by the depredations of the Pahlavi regime” and to prepare “textbooks in the mother tongue for the coming school year”. In order to achieve these, it would be necessary to communicate “the basic programme of our association to the Persian-language Tehran dailies”. It was also necessary “that the provincial and regional associations foreseen in the Constitutional period be revived in a more progressive and modern manner” and that the “state grant autonomy to Azerbaijan”. The administrative unit involved establishing (mainly cultural) institutions allowing autonomous access to resources independently of central government. Subsequently, it would be necessary to “communicate with other writers and progressive organizations of the world”, placing the associations immediately within the Soviet fold. Finally, the idea of autonomy should spread the concept of the “toiling and working class” among the people”,<sup>104</sup> thus giving the intellectual involved in promoting Azerbaijan identity a revolutionary function dear to Leninism and to ethnic groups, that of a proletariat. Such an approach to ethnic relations challenged the existing order by linking ‘non-Persianness’ to the revolutionary class. It located the struggle in the Soviet paradigm of ethnicity as an instrument for political change. But its implementation was rather hazardous as the Islamist militants monopolized the new institutions and vigilante committees controlled the streets of Iranian cities

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in NISSMAN David B., *The Soviet Union and Iranian Azerbaijan. The Use of Nationalism for Political Penetration*, op. cit., pp.50-51.

given the war against Iraq going on in the background. As newspapers and various cultural events were gradually censored and repressed, the promoters of the Azerbaijani question had to retreat from the public arena and cease their activities.

Even if the two options are opposed in this analysis here, there were many connections between them. New publications were read, ideas were circulated and discussed, and activists participated in meetings set up by various organizations. None of these activists stationed themselves within their protected zones and they managed to invest the political arena and raise the issue of ethnicity during the Revolution. In doing that, they used ethnicity to engage in the space organized by the law of the other, be it the Iranian central state or the Soviet Union. To some extent their mobilization played a part in defusing Pahlavi and Soviet pretensions to uniformity and brought the conflict into being. This means that the ethnic conflict appears as the result of a mobilization to alter the allocation of resources relating to ethnicity. But such a commitment was rooted in the uses of ethnicity inherited from their socialization in the mainstream Pahlavi society and its margins.

Against the backdrop of the war with Iraq and the repression of various forces which took part in the Revolution, any moves to defend ethnic rights became unsafe and Azerbaijani activists confined themselves to the comparatively discreet business of registering their culture and heritage - an activity that was better suited to the individuals making up the *Varliq* group. The war was a time of retreat and work for them. It was turned to good account with the patrimonialization of regional cultures and the flourishing of local identities in Iran in the 1990s, which helped to bring into being a new generation of ethnic activists for whom the Iranian ethnic hierarchy is a form of oppression to oppose. So far they have been vibrant advocates of idealized ethnic belongings and lively critics of the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic's institutions.

### ■ CONCLUDING REMARKS

The reference to de Certeau's framework opposing strategy and tactic makes it possible to overcome the main problem in studying the Azerbaijani question in Iran. Instead of looking for the reasons behind ethnic mobilizations, this conceptual framework makes it possible to investigate how ethnicity may become a meaningful contentious object for social agents. The second advantage it offers is that it becomes possible to account for the diachronic dimension in the way the conflict is structured and thus understand how ethnicity changes as a mobilization item. Ethnic belongings are neither discarded in the analysis as a set of symbols manipulated by gifted entrepreneurs or considered to be a primary membership determining social behaviour. In fact ethnicity, while referring to accessible resources and rules of compliance, becomes part of the multiple interwoven stratifications of social classes and connections to the state institutions. One consequence is that the analysis focuses on secondary socialization, showing that ethnicity is not just something inherited from ascendants but is also a pattern transformed through the practices of everyday life. It is here that foreign involvement can be of interest in bringing resources to ethnic activists involved in conflict with the state, and also in shaping the cognitive framework governing them. Each individual's feelings and actions are the product of his or her multiple socializing experiences in various communities.<sup>105</sup> Individuals cannot be reduced to their ethnicity but are defined by their experiences, past and present, which shape their diversified uses of ethnicity. The implications are decisive when seeking to understand the origins of ethnic conflict in Iran. State formation and development policies and the attendant transformation of centre-periphery relations have played a decisive role in shaping ethnic mobilizations. They emerge as a new form to contest the state, its legitimizing principles, and its policies. In the case of Iran, ethnic

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<sup>105</sup> LAHIRE Bernard, *The Plural Actor*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011.

conflicts<sup>106</sup> have mostly become struggles against the growing power of state institutions in Iranian society.

This approach brings new elements for understanding the Iranian polity, its management of diversity, and its centre-peripheries relations. During the Revolution the question of ethnicity remained very much a secondary issue, except in Kurdistan where the new regime had to quell a major protest movement. With the war against Iraq and the Sacred Union to oust the invading forces from Iranian soil the ethnic question almost disappeared from the political agenda. But it has resurfaced since the end of the war and become a major political issue. Under Khatami's presidency (1997-2005) the pluralist posture and the slogan "Iran for all Iranians" fitted in well with the rising claims for cultural and political rights emanating from the peripheral provinces. But the reactions to ethnic unrest and the repressive security approach<sup>107</sup> have shown how the central government finds it hard to take demands into account and implement policies to tackle the issue. After the 2009 elections the large-scale political unrest and heightened factional strife have pushed the ethnic issue into the background. The Green Movement has played a large part in re-mobilizing the Iranian population, especially in the cities on the Iranian plateau. But in the rest of the country renewed political participation has been far more limited, leaving ethnic provinces in a deprived situation that is increasingly experienced and expressed in ethnic terms. One obvious necessary step to defuse the ethnic issue would be to get rid of the ethno-linguistic definition of nationhood and grant cultural rights to ethnic groups. This would entail a redefinition of the Iranian nationhood emphasizing Iranian diversity rather than any unanimity based on religious

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<sup>106</sup> This paper does not pretend to address all the various forms of ethnic conflicts. There are also examples of local ethnic conflicts in Iran opposing groups competing for access to local resources, land, or relations with the local administration.

<sup>107</sup> ELLING Rasmus Christian, "State of Mind, State of Order: Reactions to Ethnic Unrest in the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol.8, no.3, 2008, pp.481-501.

or cultural criteria. But the main issue remains the decentralization and distribution of state resources and political power, which could urge ethnic activists to come back into the fold of Iranian politics. Both moves - recognizing diversity and decentralizing power - seem rather unlikely from a government striving to revive the revolutionary principles and exclude other factions from the political scene. Under these conditions the ethnic issue, far from being resolved, might affect the stability of the regime as well as threaten a political system that has prevailed over multiple hardships and crises.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> This is a reference to David Easton's classic distinction between regime and system.

## Strategic and tactical uses of ethnicity

### Insights from the Azerbaijani question in Iran

This *Paris Paper* explores the literature on ethnicity in International Relations to present a conceptual framework based on the concepts of strategy and tactics, as defined by Michel de Certeau. The aim is to dismantle the ethnic variable into simpler components to reveal the uses of ethnicity and map practices at different levels. Then this analytical framework is applied to the Iranian case study, a highly multi-ethnic society whose recent history has witnessed a long series of conflicts between the state and ethnic groups. To discard deprivation as a key factor in mobilization, the analysis is focused on the Azerbaijanis, the most-integrated non-Persian ethnic group in Iran. In strategically using ethnicity to promote national identification, the Iranian state and the Soviet Union have produced an ethnically-based framework in the Iranian society in which ethnic mobilizations can surface. They emerge as a tactical move allowing marginal actors to contest the state, its legitimizing principles, and its policies. The strategic and tactical uses of ethnicity provide new elements for understanding the Iranian polity, its management of diversity, and its centre-peripheries relations.

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