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The Dynamics of Ethnic Identity in Iranian Azerbaijan

Fereydoun Safizadeh

Introduction

The population in Iran has doubled since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and today it stands at nearly 75 million. Iran has a multiethnic, multi-tribal, multilingual, multicultural and multi-religious society. In addition to the historic Persian-Iranian identity, the population has a multi-layered and multi-faceted cultural, linguistic, tribal, religious, regional identification and affiliations. The diversity of society harks back to an earlier era, prior to the imposition of either/or dichotomous principles of ethnic nationalism at the turn of 20th century in Europe and elsewhere. Today, this dichotomous envisioning of society is best exemplified by the figure such as the one below where you have a highly simplified chart representing the composition of the society that is ethnographically unable to capture any of the multi-faceted and the multi-layered dimensions of group identity in Iran.

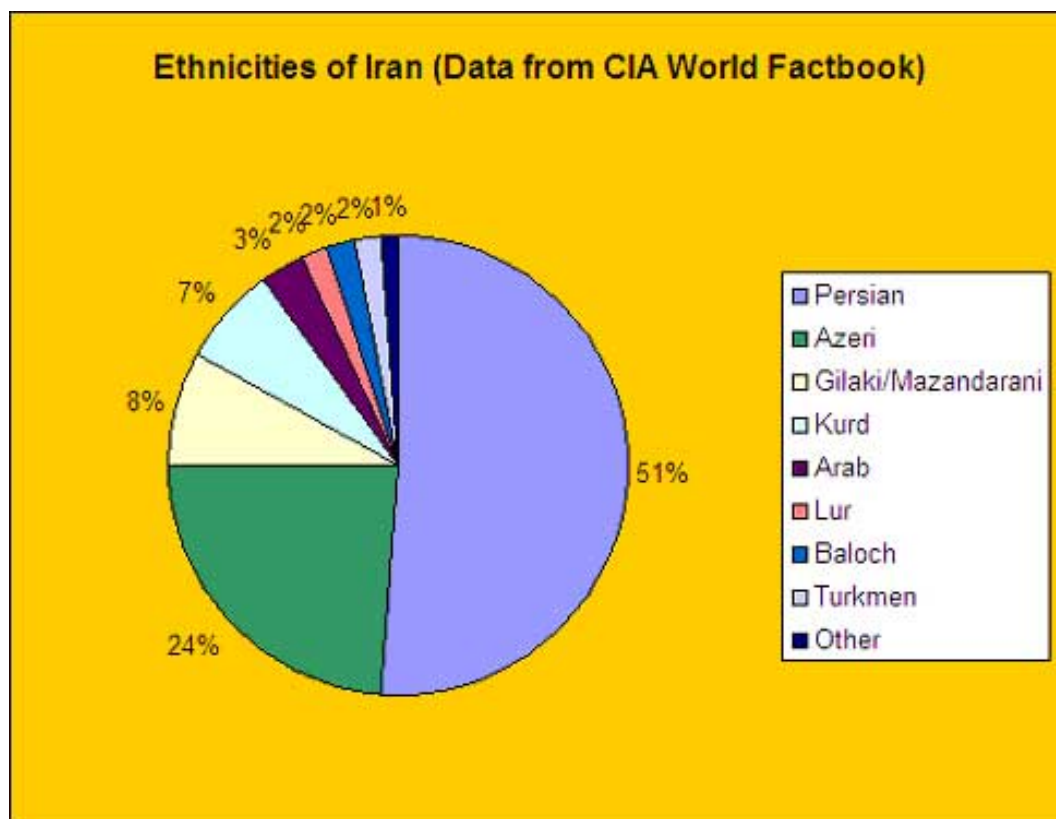


Figure 1. Ethnicities in Iran, Data from CIA World Fact Book, 2010

Persians, Azerbaijani Turks, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Turkmen, Kurds, Lurs, Baluch, Arabs, but also others with tribal affiliations such as Bakhtiari, Qashqa'i, Shahsavan, Turkoman and

smaller tribes, and various religious affiliations such as Armenians Christians, Assyrians, Baha'i, Chaldeans, Isma'ilis, Jews, Shi'a Muslims, Sufis, Sunni Muslims, Zoroastrians and other smaller sects such as Ahl-e Haqq or Ali Allahis and other regional groupings have lived and coexisted with one another for centuries.

Persians are the largest ethnic group (approximately 51%) inhabiting the provinces of Tehran, Esfahan, Fars, Khorasan, Yazd, Kerman, Bushehr, Hormozgan, Markazi (Arak), Qom, Gilan, Mazandaran, Semnan, Qazvin, the majority of Hamadan province including the city of Hamadan, majority of the North Khorasan, majority of Khuzestan province, Eastern parts of Lorestan province (Borujerd), northern half of Sistan and Baluchistan (Zabol), southern and western half of Golestan province including the provincial capital of Gorgan, eastern half of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari including the city of Shahrekord.

Persians form also at least half of the populations in the bilingual cities of Kermanshah, Ahvaz and Zahedan. The younger generations of Lur, Bakhtiari, Kermanshahis along with the Shia Kurds, Shia Arabs and the Sunni Baluchs often consider themselves to be Persians and generally speak the dialect of the capital Tehran.

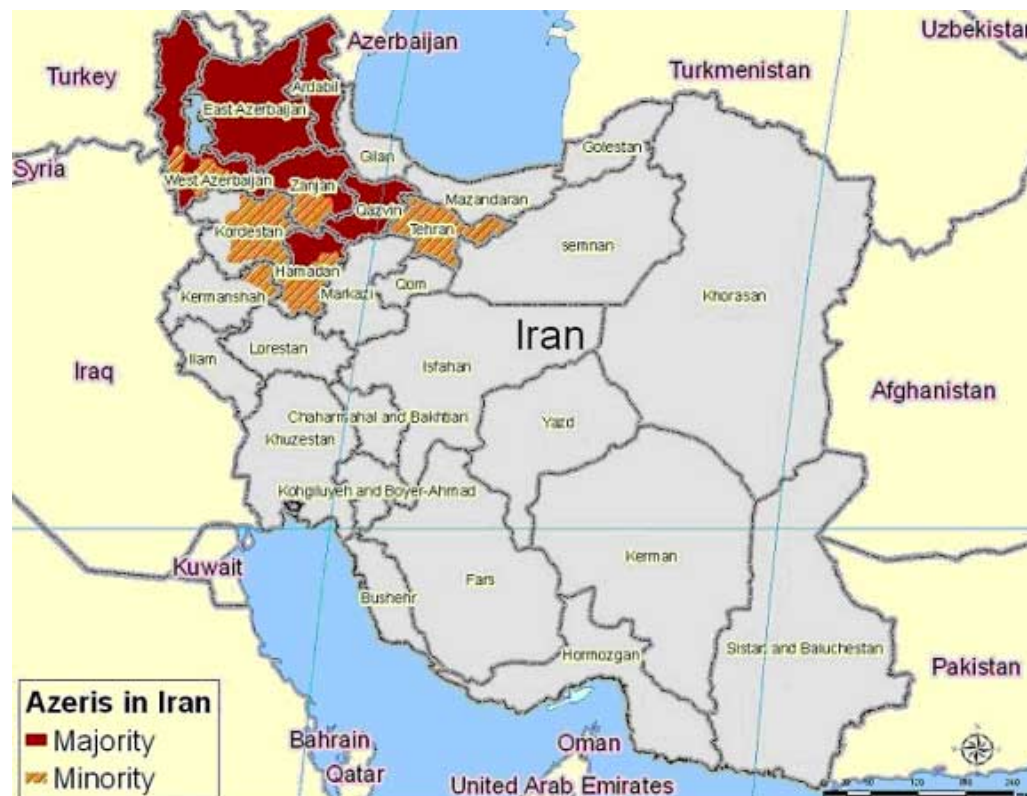


Figure 2. Azeri Turks in northwest Provinces of Iran. Data from CIA World Fact Book, 2010.

The Iranian Azerbaijanis, also known as Azeris or the Turkish-speakers are located in the province of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, Qazvin, Tehran, Hamadan and Kurdistan. Figure: 2 indicates where the Iranian Turkish-speakers Azeris are located in the majority and minority. Iranian Azerbaijanis are primarily Shi'a Muslims, and are the second largest ethnic group in Iran after the Persians (24%) although Turkic speakers include others such as the Turkoman and the Qashqa'i people who live in other parts of Iran. Prior to the 20th century, and the Pahlavi period, the identity of Iran was supra-ethnic, although much of the political leadership since 11th century had been Turkic. Some scholars have argued that the Iranian Azerbaijanis are an Iranian people similar to Kurds who speak a Turkic language due to a process called "language displacement" or "Turkification" of their language that happened around 15-16th century. The Russian invasion and annexation of Iranian lands in south Caucasus (Treaty of Golestan 1813, Turkomenchay 1828) set in motion the beginnings of an ethno-national consciousness not only in the lands under Russian and later Soviet control, but among the Turkish-speakers in northwest Iran. Despite this ethnic consciousness and identity Iranian Azerbaijanis are rather well represented at all levels of political, military, religious and intellectual life of Iran. The city of Tehran is said to be the largest Turkish-speaking city in Iran with 20-30 percent Turkish-speakers or persons of Azerbaijani extraction. Since the start of Pahlavi rule in Iran in 1925 and the concern with the ideologies of nationalism in the post-Ottoman period, education in Persian language was seen as an important national unifying force in the country which began to overshadow the multilingual nature of society at that time. The consequence of such thinking and policy for Turkish-speakers, as well as others groups such as Kurds, have been that they have not been allowed to formally learn their language in schools. In the case of Iranian Azerbaijanis, since the Islamic revolution in 1979, some Turkish newspapers and radio programs have been allowed, but with the break up of Soviet Union, Iranian government's concern over irredentist tendencies have grown. Today, some of Iran's Azerbaijanis are striving for language right, better cultural recognition and more appreciation of minority rights.

The Islamic Revolution, the 1980 American hostage crisis, the eight year war with Iraq, and the on-going hostilities in the realm of international relations has set Iran on a course of development that is in a daily contentious relationship with the United States, Europe and Israel. Particularly, the development of atomic energy has been an issue in the forefront of international political relations. The United States and Israel have been threatening to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities, while Iran counteracted that the development of nuclear energy is their national right according to the terms of None-Proliferation Treaty. Within this larger context are the national and international implications for Iran's ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity and their relationship to each other with the government as the ultimate arbiter. This article is an ethnographic examination of the dynamics of the relationship between Turkish-speakers and the Persian-speakers following the Cockroach Cartoon incident and the turmoil that followed it in the spring of 2006.

This is a sensitive time in Iran's history. It is not clear what is in store for Iran. In as much as there are plans to possibly use bunker buster atomic devices to get at nuclear sites in Iran, there are also plans to use ethnic tensions as "internal atomic bombs" in "democracy operations" and "regime change" in Iran. It has been said that if Khuzistan, the oil producing province, is separated from Iran and turned into another Kuwait, Iran will be finished. Thus, it is important to find out what are the "ethnic" issues and regional grievances and to stop the simplifications that go on.

In Iranian Azerbaijan the answer to my question "*Is There Anyone in Iranian Azerbaijan Who Wants to Get a Passport to Go to Mashad, Qum, Isfahan or Shiraz?*"(1) remains no, even after the May 2006 Cockroach Cartoon unrest.(2) My fieldwork findings(3) in Tabriz between January and July of the same year, categorically underscores this response. Of course, if you listen to some international broadcasting on Telestar or the Turkish Satellites(4) you may think otherwise. But the truth is that when one reaches the final question "Do you want to get a passport to go to Mashad, Qum, Isfahan or Shiraz?," even the most ardent of Azerbaijani rights advocates go through a reality check and reply that they are not talking about separation from Iran. Now that this important question has been answered, maybe we should stop worrying about Azerbaijani minority problems in Iran. But in fact, this has exactly been the problem and the pattern in dealing or better said, in not dealing, with ethnic minority issues in Iran and in the Turkish-speaking provinces in particular. So, what can be said that sheds some new light on the relationship of Turkish and Persian-speaking people and communities in Iran?

It should also be said that in referring to Turkish-speakers in this paper I am only referring to the people in northwest Iran, and not the Turkmen or the Qashqai people, who are important Turkic speaking peoples in other parts of Iran.

Some Basic Questions about Iranian Azerbaijan

The first issue is locating Azerbaijan geo-politically and culturally. Geo-politically this is an obvious question with the various provincial divisions going back to the time of Reza Shah (1925-1941) (5) and even earlier. The northern and the western boundaries of this area are clear, the international borders with the Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Armenia (previously USSR), and Turkey. The southern boundary is somewhat diffused with Kurdish, Turkmen and Persian-speaking people, with a significant number of Turkish-speakers in and around the city of Hamadan. The eastern and southeastern borders of this cultural area has in recent years been pushed into the cities of Karaj and even into the capital, Tehran, where a low of 25% and a high of 40% are Turk, Azeri or Azerbaijani, or an extraction of Turkish-speakers. As far as many local people in northwest Iran are concerned, it is not absolutely clear whether the *raison d'être* for the present provincial divisions into East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil and Zanjan are simply because of administrative needs and logistics.

Culturally, as the recent Cockroach Cartoon unrest has demonstrated, the make up of Iranian Azerbaijan is inclusive of all Turkish-speaking areas in northwest Iran. There were anti-Cockroach Cartoon demonstrations in Tabriz, Urmieh, Ardabil, Zanjan, and in numerous other smaller cities in all the four Turkish-speaking provinces. Many people in all Turkish-speaking areas found the *Iran* newspaper(6) *sousk*, Cockroach Cartoon offensive and reacted strongly to it.

The second question has to do with the politics and poetics of the terms Turk, Azeri or Azerbaijani. A minimum of twenty million or so native Turkish-speakers refer to themselves as Turks. They do not see why others insist on referring to them as something other. Anthropology tells us that generally we should stick to the emic categories, that is, native categories of thinking and understanding of a particular local group that are meaningful to them (Barrand 2002. Interestingly, a meeting was held in Tehran about the May 2006 Cockroach Cartoon unrest by journalists of *Iran* and *Sharg* newspapers(7), Turkish-speaking colleagues were specifically invited to assess the impact of the Mana Neyistani *sousk*, Cockroach Cartoon, on writers and editors own ethnic, cultural and linguistic sensitivities and sensibilities when publishing about minority populations(8). It was suggested by the Turkish-speaking journalists, that a first step is, to call Turkish-speakers Turks, as they themselves do, and not keep referring to them as Azeri or Azeri-speakers, which has become the nomenclature of the print world in Iran particularly since the Islamic revolution. The term Azeri has found a fashionable currency for distinguishing Iranian Azerbaijanis or Turkish-speakers from those in Turkey and the post-Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan and other groups in Iran. Yet the test of the native usage is, when two Iranian Azerbaijanis or Turkish-speakers not knowing a third person, will ask each other whether that the third person is a “Turk or a Fars” (a Turk or a Persian), not “an Azeri or a Fars”, or of another ethnic group, such as Armenian, Assyrian or a Kurd(9).

The third question has to do with historical and political issues. Invariably, when discussing Iranian Azerbaijani and Turkish-speaking issues or identity, the discussion takes on a specifically historical and political dimension, with the usual cast of topics such as: the Turkic invasion of Iran, whether Iranian Azerbaijanis are Turks or Azeri, if their language is Turkish or Azeri, whether Azeri is actually a dialect of Persian still spoken in its original form in remote villages of Iranian and even Republic of Azerbaijan, or issues relating to various social and political movements in Iranian Azerbaijan(10), such as the Constitutional Movement or the Movements by the anti-colonialist Shaikh Mohammad Khiabani (1920), or the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, the Peoples Government of Azerbaijan by Seyyed Ja’far Pishevari (1946). Accurate and multi-dimensional understanding of these historical events and periods is extremely important. But they have become a substitute for understanding the contemporary conditions of life in the larger Iranian Azerbaijan and the Turkish-speaking areas. What is real today is that at least twenty million or more people live and work in that part of Iran with a particular language, customs and a way of cultural practice, some of which are very much like any other people in Iran, and others which are not. What these people

want is an empathetic understanding, respect and acknowledgement, and an end to the denial and erasure of their particularities, and an end to the continual ridicule and stereotyping of their ways, culture, language or their accents.

The fourth issue continues to be in the area of language. For Iranian Azerbaijanis, language is an important marker of distinctiveness and identity. Such high level of language consciousness is barely a hundred years old. Previously educated people in Iranian Azerbaijan were multilingual in several languages: Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Kurdish, Assyrian, Armenian, or even Russian or a European language. The majority of common folk were generally monolingual, the majority as Turkish-speakers, but some were multilingual in Kurdish, Assyrian and Armenian as well. The primary cause of linguistic distinctiveness or identity has been the result of the 20th century nationalistic efforts to homogenize the population of Iran through Persian language education for better integration of the diverse peoples of the country(11).

Iranian Azerbaijanis have been in a unique position linguistically. They are content and happy to do their talking in Turkish, their writing in Persian and their religion in Arabic. But their capacity for multi-lingual living is being challenged both internally and externally with either-or choices in the name of national identity or ethno-national consciousness. What you find on the ground is resistance to both these homogenizing options.

The key issues in the area of language are: 1) mother tongue, and what this entails in terms of thinking, expression, and comfort of communication; 2) the experience of second language acquisition, and the issue of fluency and accent; and 3) the social issues and dynamics related to knowing another language, in this case Persian.

For most urban Iranian Azerbaijanis speaking Turkish as mother-tongue, Persian has been a second language, and for many rural individuals, it is a very recent second language. Exposure to Persian has changed in the last forty years with the presence of radio and television, nevertheless, language issues are present for every family with children. How to facilitate the learning of a second language, and the feelings that individual mothers and fathers have about the forced nature of having to insure that their children learn Persian so that they succeed better in school and in the country as a whole is a matter of important concern. Persian-speakers do not appreciate the second language acquisition achievements of the Iranian Azerbaijanis. This is because few of them learn the languages of other minorities in Iran. Turkish-speaking Iranians have more in common with their Persian-speaking compatriots when the Persian compatriots have to learn another language, such as English, in a foreign country. While probing the question of “how does language, such as a different language or accent, shape one’s feelings about different people”, an informant of mine reacted with his own question “is there an negative attitude about minority languages and cultures in Iran?”, and answered his own question, “from the jokes about the Turkish-speakers and their accents, one would have to say yes.”

The issue of mutual intelligibility or unintelligibility is an important subject in any multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. In Iran, a fair amount of miscommunication, conflict, animosity and hostility revolves around this reality. It is here that the social usefulness of the jokes and stereotypes about Turks or Turkish-speakers becomes evident. When Persian-speakers with a historically privileged sense of self and culture cannot understand the minority, the Turk becomes the numskull or *khar*, the donkey. The figure of donkey is an important one for defining the attributes of the Other. I asked my informant if he had a joke that I might use in my paper. He promptly came up with one which I found distasteful, and decided not to use. I censored myself. But later, I thought the joke exemplifies the distasteful nature of many jokes that Persian-speakers often tell about Turkish-speakers and Turkish-speakers sometimes tell about Persian-speakers.

"Two friends were walking along a river and they hear a donkey braying and passing gas once in a while. The Persian-speaker tells the Turkish-speaker that the donkey is speaking Turkish. The Turkish-speaker laughs and responds, it is true, but the problem is that the donkey is mixing in Persian once in a while."

This is a balanced joke. Often jokes are highly one sided and just as stinging. The famous British anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown (Radcliffe-Brown, 1965) has explained that a joking relationship is a kind of friendliness expressed by a show of hostility. It is only "sham hostility" and the parties are not expected to take offense. Nevertheless, a joking relationship symbolically recognizes the separateness between two groups, and the potential for conflict. But at the same time, it obligates the parties to interact in a friendly way with one another, thus, actually minimizing the chance that conflict will occur.

Such functional explanations aside, it is how the jokes and stereotyping engages the other that matters, especially when there are grounds for misunderstanding and miscommunication, about important issues, such as politics, religion, loyalty or economic rights. This is the concern in Iran today. The fact that Persian-speakers tell jokes about many people in Iran is not a good answer for bad taste, and disrespectful behavior, which for the sake of national interest, security and decency is unnecessary.

The Souk, Cockroach, Cartoon and the Streets of Tabriz

This brings me to the subject of the latest round of so-called unpremeditated offenses against a minority population in Iran which is supposed to be cute, just a cartoon for kids and not big deal! So, what was the Friday May 12, 2006 *Iran* newspaper *Jomeh* edition, cartoon by Mana Neyistani about, and why did it lead to such an unrest on Monday May 22nd in northwest Iran(12)?

Most people will hardly have paid enough attention to the actual cartoon, and may be puzzled why a children's cartoon caused such a region-wide protest and unrest that lasted

almost a week, left at least four persons dead, many injured, and an unknown number of persons arrested and imprisoned. Initial calls for an apology by various groups in Iranian Azerbaijan went unheard for a week by the newspaper. Finally, the newspaper's negative reaction to the call for an apology was published on Monday May 22nd (1385/3/1) which triggered the afternoon demonstrations in Tabriz.

It is worth paying close attention to the actual cartoon. The title of the cartoon story was *Che Konim Ke Sousk ha Souskemoon Nakonand*, (What Should We Do so that the Cockroaches Don't Turn Us into Cockroaches). The story begins "it is the month of Khordad (June-July), and with the coming of summer heat come the cockroaches. In the past several years a new "veersion" (the English word is written in Persian in the cartoon) of cockroaches has arrived that are four-season cockroaches, and are not affected by heat or cold" (the new version of cockroaches have evidently arrived in Iran via air travel). The story continues that "it is that time of the year that the old and new "veersion" cockroaches come out of the toilet scaring poor little Sara, who runs to her mother screaming *maman sousk, sousk...*" The cartoonist states that "... in dealing with cockroaches ... one should not adopt violence, because it takes the fun out of it. In a civilized way, we should sit at a table and have a dialogue with them." He continues, "Unfortunately, the cockroaches do not understand human language, and the grammar of their own language is so difficult that 80% of them prefer to speak the language of others." The cartoonist continues "when cockroaches do not understand their own language, how do you expect them to understand us. It is at this point that dialogue comes to an end, and you have to resort to more violent ways."

The first cartoon plate shows Sara and the cockroach sitting at a table with Sara attempting to speak with the cockroach, and the cockroach replying in Turkish (but written in Latin letters) "*Namana*" or "what." With this plate establishing the cockroach as a Turkish-speaker, the eight other plates go on graphically and distastefully to discuss how the cockroaches live in toilets and eat human waste and so on, and how a civilized person should deal with them. If one is a Turk, an Azerbaijani, a Turkish-speaker or an "Azeri", and reads the cartoon carefully, it is not difficult to get offended. With close attention, it also becomes clear that this cartoonist has neither Iranian nor Western sensibilities. He is caught in the twilight zone of two or more cultures, and in a position to play with people's feelings, in this case, the feelings of Iranian Turkish-speakers. As one informant reacted "he needs to sit in jail and drink some cold water (think), and stating that it is just a kid's cartoon is not an acceptable answer."

What happened in Iranian Azerbaijan in the week following the publication of the cartoon, and how it can be interpreted is another problem. Given that ethnic and minority issues are highly sensitive in Iran these days, just getting an outline of what exactly happened was a challenge.

What is clear is that the unrest, at least in Tabriz, was minimally organized, and it started on university campuses where students photocopied the cartoon page and circulated it and

demanded an apology. Through word of mouth, word spread about the cartoon. The extensive use of mobile telephone and text messaging was so effective that the authorities suspended mobile service for several days. The initial city wide demonstration began around 4:00 pm on Monday May 22nd near Rasteh Kuche Street, Maydan-e Namaz (Prayer Square), in front of the Bazaar, and around Tabriz University. Tabriz bazaar was shut down early while shopkeepers and others joined demonstrations heading towards the Governor General's office. The Governor General and his deputies elected not to come out and respond to the marchers which further aggravated the demonstrators. The bazaar protesters flowed into a major artery in the city, and were joined by numerous other groups heading towards Tabriz University. Similarly, other groups were heading down from the University area into the city center. When the two groups met at a major intersection (Chahar Rah-e Ab-e Rasaan), they were confronted by security forces using tear gas and clubs to halt and disperse the marchers, and violence broke out. The confrontations lead to the burning of police vehicles, banks and the breaking of shop windows. Clashes took place throughout the city for the next several days while special riot forces had to be flown in from Tehran. They were reinforced with irregular brown-shirt type forces from outside of the city, that were housed in mosques for several nights and supplied with chains, cables and clubs for beating marchers, demonstrators and innocent bystanders. The marchers and demonstrators received an unusually violent beating as the security forces rounded up individuals believed to be instigators and ring leaders. Rumors spread that Persian and non-Turkish-speaking forces had been flown in to deal with the situation. Similar violent confrontations took place in the city of Urmieh, where the state television station was set afire. Demonstrations and marches also took place in Miyandoab, Marand, Ahar, Ardabil, Miyaneh, Zanjan, and many other cities and towns. Demonstrations were particularly violent in Marand and Ardabil.

The main demand of the demonstrators was an apology from the *Iran* newspaper and the cartoonist. Given that the *Iran* newspaper is the official organ of the Iranian government itself, the apology took on a slightly different meaning. When the apology finally came, it was too little too late. By that time the protest had gathered so much momentum that only an acknowledgement, a statement or an apology from the Government and the Supreme Leader, *rahbar*, Ayatollah Khameneie, was going to suffice. Once the government realized the extent of the unrest and the potential for its continuance, the Tehran judiciary quickly took steps to shut down the Iran newspaper, and jailed the paper's editor and the cartoonists (Mehrdad Qasimfar and Mana Neyistani) on the charges that they had offend the Iranian Azerbaijanis, caused mayhem and exposed the country to foreign instigations. Mr. Haddad Adel, the Speaker of the Parliament, appeared on national television, in one of the Azerbaijani-Ardabili mosques in Tehran and praised all Azerbaijanis for their support of the revolution, the war (Iraq War 1980-88) and for their patriotism. Finally, *rahbar*, Ayatollah Khamenei himself addressed the nation on May 28th on the events in Azerbaijan, praising again the "Azeri-speaking" Iranians for their religiosity, patriotism and industry, and blamed the foreign hands in fomenting the unrest. Speaking in Turkish (with an accent) he offered his own and the government's version of the demonstrator's slogans: "*Azerbaijan-e Jaanbaz*

Ingilabdan Arlirmaz”(Patriotic Azerbaijan will not separate from the Islamic Revolution), and “*Azerbaijan Oyakhdi Inglaba Dayakhdi*” (Azerbaijan is Awake and Depends on the Revolution). The demonstrator’s quickly responded with “*Azerbaijan Oyakhdi Oz Dilina Dayakhdi, Farslar Biza Gonakhdi,*” “*Azerbaijan Oyakhdi Oz Dinina Dayakhdi*” (Azerbaijan is awake and depends on its own language and religion; Persians are our guests). A more economically oriented slogan was “*Soghan, Yeralma bir Quimat, Mivada bir Quimat, Dash Bashuwa bi Geyrat*”(onion, potato one price, fruit another price, ...) or a more ultra-nationalistically oriented slogan was “*Fars, Russ, Ermani, Azerbaijan Doushmani*” (Persian, Russian, Armenian enemies of Azerbaijan). Once again, the primary blame was put on foreign countries and their agents for causing unrest and turmoil among a minority population in Iran.

Eventually, the head of East Azerbaijan Judiciary(13) announced that in East Azerbaijan alone, 330 persons were arrested, eighty to eighty-five persons for being ring leaders of the demonstrations and marches, another 20-25 persons, for being key instigators of violence. A number of the key instigators were said to be of the Bahai religion and or communists and two individuals to have ties to the State of Israel. Another 50 individuals were to be tried for throwing rocks and damaging public or private property. He also indicated that 9 and 15 persons were arrested in the cities of Marand and Ahar respectively. The number of how many were arrested in the other Turkish-speaking provinces was uncertain.

The government and the authorities elected a three pronged approach to the Azerbaijan unrest. While the security forces dealt extremely harshly with the participants in the demonstrations and marches with beatings, arrests and instilling of fear, in national newspapers, radio and television there was a short lived public relations campaign of formulaic praise to allay the feeling of Iranian Azerbaijanis. This was combined with arrests of journalists, and blocking the distribution of local papers, thus, choking off any discussion in the local media of what had just happened, and the causes of such spontaneous protests and unrest.

Obviously, attributing such public protests and demonstrations to the publication of a cartoon is a simplification of the issues and problems facing the people of Iranian Azerbaijan. Clearly, the cartoon was seen as “*tahgir*” or insult to the identity of Turkish-speaking people. On the other hand, people talked of economic disparity, regional underdevelopment, and *hoviya zedai*, obsession with identity, both Persian and Turkish, as the main causes for the surfacing of dormant dissatisfactions. Many informants argued that the causes of unrest in Iranian Azerbaijan should not be sought on the other side of the Iranian borders, but in the wrong and unfair policies of the government and the local administrators. Some wondered why it was that with such economic, social and cultural potential, Iranian Azerbaijan was among the less-developed provinces of Iran. Others asked which economic policies were responsible for budget allocation for East, West Azerbaijan and Ardabil provinces that combined were less than the budget for some other provinces such as Kerman or Yazd. At a

conference in Tehran two days after the start of the Azerbaijan unrest on *Tanavo'e Farhanghi va Hambasteghi Melli*, (Cultural Diversity and National Unity) on Wednesday May 24, 2006 Mr. Hashemi-Rafsanjani stated that the cause of Azerbaijan unrest was “*za'f-e tadbir*” or weak policies and management(14). The reformists (“2 Khordadis”) believe such unrest was unlikely to happen under their watch as their handling of the situation would have been much more professional and sensitive. Only one newspaper, *Etemad Melli*, in a front page article, criticized the Minister of Interior, the government spokesperson, and the security forces for blaming foreign countries and their agents(15). The article asked how powerful can foreign hands be to have caused such unrest in Khuzistan, Sistan, Baluchistan, Kerman, and now in larger Azerbaijan (four Turkish-speaking provinces), or to have orchestrated the cartoon and its publication, as well as the crash of C-130 airplane killing high level *Sepah Pasdaran*, Revolutionary Guard personnel. If indeed, foreign agents have been able to cause all of these events, then what have the security and intelligence forces and the political authorities been doing all this time? The article continued, assigning the weakness in management and policies of the government to the work of foreign agents as offensive to the people of Iran, especially to the already offended people of Azerbaijan.

At the local level, recrimination had started between various authorities, particularly from the Tabriz Mayor(16) as to who should have done what, when and where to prevent the escalation of the unrest and violence. He was critical of the governor of East Azerbaijan(17) and stated that if he had come out of his office and not been afraid, and had attempted to lead and manage the protesters, it is possible that the events would not have gotten out of hand and turned violent. Without orders from Tehran, it is unthinkable that the Governor General could have done anything on his own. What was clear was that no one was going to take responsibility for anything. The local newspapers were warned not to “act against the interests of the state” and “not to prolong the subject”, and they did a good job dancing around the issue.

President Ahmadinejad's Trip to East Azerbaijan

For sometime there had been an on-going expectation regarding if and when President Ahmadinejad was going to pay his official visit to the province of East Azerbaijan. Without much notice, the president started his visit to East Azerbaijan, the 16th on his list of provincial visits, on July 12, 2006. He began his four day stay with a major speech in Tabriz at the Bagh Shomal/Takhti, Stadium to which everyone had been invited, summoned, and bussed to from various government offices, factories, etc. As Imam Jomeh of Tabriz(18) and other local dignitaries welcomed the president and listed the needs of the city and the province, what was most noticeable was the President's choreographed attention to Zionism and its western supporters at the international level, and to the needs of young men, and especially young women at the local level. Over the next four days President Ahmadinejad visited most other provincial cities and some small towns, at each stop adding more details to the general outline of issues raised in the Tabriz speech. In every city or town a sport hall was promised both to young men and young women, as well as public assistance for getting married(19). In

as much as the larger Azerbaijan unrest was blamed on foreign hands, the government was keenly attempting to appease the young men and women, and to address some local needs. As job creation for the young men and women is much more difficult to achieve, the government was doing what was practical, to keep the young busy and off the streets, particularly through sports and the marriage option.

Iranian Azerbaijanis continue to be in a difficult position. First, is their economic and political dissatisfactions, second, is their cultural dissatisfactions relating to Persian ethnocentricity that has permeated the government's relationship with all minorities. Also, there are the ever present unwanted hands of foreign influence and governments such as that of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey, United States and Israel. Azerbaijani ultra-nationalism is in part fed by the forces in the Republic of Azerbaijan, similarly, Pan-Turkic ideas are fed by forces in Turkey, and a variety of ideas and issues emanate from the United States and Israel directed at Iranian Azerbaijanis and other minority populations in Iran. Many right wing think tanks in United States are openly advocating using the ethnic tensions to destabilize Iran. Similar advocacy can be read in the work of Israeli analysts, who see Iran as one of the last dynastic multi-ethnic and multi-cultural states left in the Middle East ripe for another case of federalism. And there are the satellite broadcasts seeking to further democracy and bring about regime change in Iran. Take the case of previously mentioned international broadcasting on Telestar and Turkish Satellites targeting the Iranian Azerbaijanis. Whether they receive US government support or not is irrelevant, many Iranian Azerbaijanis believe that they are partially US government supported operations especially when the US Congress allocates millions of dollars to further "democracy operations" and regime change in Iran. These broadcasts spouse anti-regime and anti-Persian propaganda, and call for demonstrations of one kind or another at a given place in Tabriz or other cities in Iranian Azerbaijan. For example, in early March 2006 some called for the people of Tabriz to gather at Chahr Rah-e (intersection) of Khomeini and Shariati Street to march towards the Khalifegari, the Armenian social club, to demonstrate against the small number of Armenian households left in Tabriz. The Armenians took refuge in their homes for several days to wait out the storm. Except for the few who heeded the call (several hundred), most people I spoke with in Tabriz found this event to be an utter disgrace, instigated by uninformed and dislocated Azerbaijanis, Iranians, or others, located half way around the world. The first casualties of this type of democracy-promoting broadcasting are often the defenseless small minorities, in this case the Christian population of Tabriz, who have generally been much appreciated for their industry and citizenship. Individuals sitting behind these microphones with access to the latest satellite technologies are often irresponsible ethnic wheeler dealers playing with local peoples' lives, and in the process gaining a good deal of ill will towards the United States and its allies.

To sum up, hardly anyone in Iranian Azerbaijan wants to get a passport to go to Mashad, Qum, Isfahan or Shiraz even despite the sousk, Cockroach Cartoons. As an informant put it:

“we should remember that nothing is forever, like a good marriage, Turkish-speaking Persian-speaking relations need to be cared for, just as the heterogeneity of Iran, Iranian Azerbaijan and Tabriz needs to be appreciated and preserved. With such expansive land to live and work in, oil, gas, people with different languages, cultures and religions why would I want to separate and join somewhere else when I have it all. I should appreciate and care for the gift I have. All we want is our language and ways to be better appreciated by the powers to be. We are not going any where, there is no need to fear our language and ways.”

End Notes

(1) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Sixth Biennial Iranian Studies Conference, London, UK, August 3-5, 2006. I would like to thank the panel participant for their perceptive comments and questions.

(2) A cartoon portraying the life and ways of a cockroach in the daily Iran, the official newspaper of the Government of Iran published by the Islamic Republic News Agency. It supports the policies of the government of President Ahmadinejad.

(3) Fieldwork focusing on dynamics of ethno-national identity and Turkish-speaking and Persian speaking social, cultural and political relations was carried out from February-July, 2006 in Tabriz and Iranian Azerbaijan.

(4) International satellite channels popular in Iran.

(5) The first of the Pahlavi Shahs or kings.

(6) Barrant, Alan 2002. “Etic and Etic”. In Alan Barrant and Jonathan Spencer *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, pp. 275-280.

(7) *Sharg* is an independent, occasionally an oppositional daily which has been shut down a number times by the Government of Islamic Republic of Iran.

(8) *Ibid.*

(9) For a discussion of etic/emic, insider/outsider perspective see also Ward H. Goodenough (1970) *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology*. Chicago: Aldine.

(10) See Ehsan Yarshater (1989) and Yahya Zuka (1973).

(11) Several factors contributed to the high level of concern with territorial integrity at the turn of the 20th century in Iran. First of these was the currency of ideas and demands, primarily in Europe, for the creation of an ethno-national homeland or state by various ethnic or linguistic group within larger political entities before and after WWI. Another important factor was the witnessing of the dismemberment of the Ottoman territories after WWI in the

Middle East. Centralization and linguist homogeneity were seen as important ways to counteract the divisive demands and forces within the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural political state of Iran.

(12) *Iran* newspaper, Jomeh edition, Friday 12, May 2006, cartoon by Mana Neyistani.

(13) Hojjatollah Najaf Aghazadeh.

(14) Former President of Islamic Republic of Iran.

(15) Etemad Melli is the organ National Trust Party headed by Mehdi Karrubi, the oppositional cleric, later one of the leaders of the 2009 Green Movement.

(16) Ali Reza Novin.

(17) Mohammd Kazem Me'marzadeh.

(18) Ayatollah Mohsen Mojtahed-Shabestari. the leader of Friday prayer.

(19) The cost of marriage has become so exorbitant that the government has been assisting in mass public marriages.

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