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The Challenges of Identity Politics in Iran

Ramin Jabbarli

In recent decades, identity has played a prominent role in politics across the globe. The world has witnessed a transition from mainly class-based to identity-based social movements. From civil rights and feminist movements in the West to the nationalist movements in the (former) Soviet Union, all were identity-oriented movements. Indeed, the rise of new social movements in the world is, in some sense, an extension of the rise of identity-oriented movements. Currently, even class grievances are problematized in the intersection of class and other collective identities such as race, ethnicity, religion, and citizenship status. Iran is not an exception in this trend. Precisely because of its ethnic and religious diversity, identity is that much more of an important factor in contemporary Iranian politics.

Collective identities are identities that are shared by members of a group. Generally, individuals have more than one collective identity and these can be based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. The strength and relative salience of each of these collective identities for an individual depends on many socio-political and contextual factors. While for some individuals, religious identity is the most important one, others may prefer to emphasize their ethnic identity over their national and religious ones. Studying various cases shows that when a group collectively engages in politics, its collective identity become politically relevant. Thus, in order to understand political and social movements in a society, it is crucial to investigate identity motives and their developments. Generally, individuals take part in collective actions as members of a group.

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They weigh the costs and benefits of their action for the group to which they belong. This goes a long way towards explaining why answers to the question "who are we?" is important to take into consideration when examining issues related to the political participation of people.

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Sociologists and social movement scholars have studied the causal relationship between group identification and mobilization. A leading figure in this burgeoning field, Bert Klandermans of Vrije University in Amsterdam, has delineated the causal relationship between group identification and mobilization in his numerous publications. His research indicates that a collective identity gains political relevance when it becomes the focus of a struggle for power—in other words, when the issue of collective identity becomes politicized. This struggle can focus on various things, like scarce resources, prestige, and political, cultural, or economic power. The involvement of social groups in a struggle on behalf of a collective group to change, alter, or defend a situation politicizes the relevant collective identity and makes that

identity more salient or more important for the group members. Then, this increased salience strengthens group identification and finally, strong group identification results in a consensus over social movements' viewpoints and facilitates coordination for actions among members of a group.

Sometimes, the politicization of collective identities is just the beginning of a story. Its complexity can increase when different collective identities are in conflict. As noted above, individuals have multiple identities. However, shared grievances and the awareness of said grievances can make one identity more important than others.

Under some conditions, individuals may have dual identities—two salient identities—as when, for instance, both subordinate ethnic identity and superordinate national identity come to be important for individuals. Since there is a causal link between identity salience and political actions, having two salient identities leads to a complex political stance. This is mainly dependent on state policies: when people have dual identities, the outcome

may vary from integration—by keeping both identities—to developing a separatist identity, which means having a strong subgroup ethnic identity and relegating national identity to the sidelines.

Tracing these developments in Iran shows that the political implications of identity politics not only impact on the internal security of Iran but also reveals some of the country's geopolitical advantages and risks. Current ethnic relations in Iran, and their regional implications, cannot be understood without taking into account the development, salience, and historical context of the country's religious, national, and ethnic identities.

Ethnic-Azerbaijani Turks in Iran—a group that comprises approximately one-third of Iran's population of 84 million—will be the main focus of this essay. Herein, I will begin by explaining the historical junctures and sociopolitical processes that have politicized collective identities before briefly discussing the geopolitical implications of politicized identities.

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A note on language before proceeding: in this essay, the terms 'Azerbaijani Turks' and 'Azerbaijanis' and 'ethnic-Azerbaijanis' are used interchangeably. Unless noted otherwise, references to 'Azerbaijan' are to be understood to be referring to those parts of present-day northwest Iran that have been historically (and are presently) populated by ethnic-Azerbaijanis.

The Safavid Empire and Inclusive Identity

The sixteenth century was a turning point in the history of the peoples living under the Safavid empire. Although its inhabitants were predominantly Sunni, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Isma'il, in 1501 declared Shia sect of Islam as the empire's official religion and implemented policies that converted almost the entire population to Shia Islam. This has had a long-lasting socio-political impact on Iranians, mainly due to its intense (and distinct) rituals. A religious sect needs intense rituals to hold people with different ethnic backgrounds

together. A religion with intense and emotional rituals decreases interethnic differences and increases similarities as members of a sectarian supra-identity—the Shia sect, in this case. Historically, religions with intense rituals impeded the disintegration of multiethnic empires by employing such a mechanism. The major developments in Shia rituals happened under the Safavid empire. Most of the Shia-specific rituals that are related to the tragic battle of Karbala (fought in October 680) evolved and were promoted systematically in these years—that is to say, some nine centuries later.

Shia rituals played a significant role in maintaining Shia solidarity over the centuries. At present, 90-95 percent of the Iranian population is Shia. The religious identity of most Iranians is a legacy of the Safavid empire and the forced conversion from Sunni Islam to Shia Islam of the population under its control. The development of Shia rituals even continued after the collapse of the Safavid empire until 1925 and the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty.

Since the geography of Shia identity exceeds the borders of Iran, a strong religious supra-identity in the age of nation-states brings opportunities to have an impact on the citizens of other countries. This soft power is an important tool in Iran's geopolitical involvements.

The conversion to Shia Islam has had unintended consequences for society and the region. It allowed the multiethnic state of Iran to establish Shia Islam as a supra-identity to maintain social cohesion and hamper ethnic conflicts inside the country. It also brought some geopolitical advantages. Since the geography of Shia identity exceeds the borders of Iran, a strong religious supra-identity in the age of nation-states brings opportunities to have an impact on the citizens of other countries. This soft power is an important tool in Iran's geopolitical involvements.

Toward Exclusive Nationalism

The period of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) involved a shift from an inclusive religious identity to an exclusive Persian-centered nation-building project. It was under Pahlavi rule that interethnic differences became more prominent and ethnic minorities

came to express openly their grievances. These grievances were then able to be turned into claims of various sorts. The culmination of this claims-seeking was the formation of the autonomous regions of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in northwest Iran, which were in turn followed by brutal campaigns of suppression orchestrated by the political center of the country.

A comparison of Azerbaijanis' movements prior to and after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 demonstrates continuity in both the demands and grievances of ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran. Prior to 1925, Azerbaijanis mainly focused on demanding state decentralization and the establishment of a federative system. Although we can trace continuity in the demands of Azerbaijanis before and after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, the exclusive nationalism of the Pahlavi regime also caused the emergence of new grievances. Each will be examined in turn.

A comparison of Azerbaijanis' movements prior to and after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 demonstrates continuity in both the demands and grievances of ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran.

Iranian Azerbaijan, and especially Tabriz, played a vanguard role in the Constitutional Revolution of Iran. One of the most important outcomes of the revolution for Azerbaijanis was the provincial committee. As Leiden University's Touraj Atabaki writes in *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and Autonomy in Twentieth-Century Iran* (1993), "the role which Azerbaijanis played in urging the Majles to adopt the idea of provincial councils cannot be overestimated."

The Constitutional Revolution began in 1905 with a series of protests leading up to August 1906 when the Shah's government capitulated and conceded to convene a National Assembly (Majles). Shortly thereafter, in September 1906, the Council of Tabriz (Anjoman-e Tabriz) was founded in order to elect deputies for the National Assembly but soon became a regional parliament in its own right. The Supplementary Code, which established provincial and local councils, was ratified by Muhammad Ali Shah in October

1907 and contained 122 articles on provincial and local committees' law. According to this, an *ayalat* or province was defined as being a part of the country that has its own central government and sub-provinces *(velayat)*. In total, Iran was divided into four provinces, with Azerbaijan becoming one of these. The law went on to explain how provincial committees were to be formed, the election of deputies conducted, and the scope of these committees' authority in each province. Academic research points to the weight of national elements in Azerbaijan's committee. For instance, in his book, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* (2011), prominent historical sociologist Nader Sohrabi argues that "newspapers, Assembly minutes, and memoirs clearly indicate that some kind of national organization of committees was in the making."

In June 1908, the Shah ordered a bombardment of the Majles in Tehran. A civil war between constitutionalists and royalists began, with most of the drama taking place in Tabriz. When news of the Majles bombardment reached Tabriz, the Council of Tabriz withheld the news from the public in order to muster and arm constitutionalist forces in the city against the royalists. From here, its forces

were led by one of the great figures of the Constitutional Revolution (and an ethnic Azerbaijani), Sattar Khan. In the course of the next 13 months, the constitutionalists were able to gain the upper hand in the civil war and force the Shah to make further concessions.

However, the Constitutional Revolution came to an inglorious end. With the help of the Russian Empire, the Shah managed to re-establish control over the country and stifled parliamentary politics. But the legacy of Azerbaijan's role in the Constitutional Revolution lived on in the memories of the intelligentsia and later activists like Shia cleric, parliamentarian, and political leader Mohammad Khiyabani. Here the veracity of the continuity thesis is clear: the role of Azerbaijan in calling for provincial councils—and its role in organizing and mounting the constitutional cause—are clear indications of the ideology of federalism and popular support for the cause.

Moreover, an examination of the short-lived Azadistan provincial state in Azerbaijan (it lasted from early 1920 and fell in September of the same year) demonstrates both the similarity and the continuity of the claims and demands in the movement as well. Although the dispute between Tehran and

Tabriz in this movement erupted over the treaty between Iran and Britain, the demands of the Azadistan movement were very similar to those of the constitutionalists of Azerbaijan as well as those of the Azerbaijani Democratic Party (ADP), an anti-Pahlavi party supported by the Soviet Union that ruled the Azerbaijan People's Government from November 1945 to December 1946 under the leadership of Jafar Pishevari. Decentralized governance was a common theme in the demands of all these movements.

In various writings, Ervand Abrahamian, a leading historian of modern Iran, argued that, as he put it in one publication, Khiyabani had complained that Azerbaijan "received neither fair parliamentary representation nor just budgetary allocations from the central governments." Khiyabani was consistent with the idea of federalism. He wanted greater local autonomy for Azerbaijan within the framework of Iran, as indicated by his calls for provincial councils and his attempts to set up a local government.

Twenty years after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, Azerbaijanis still had the same demands. An analysis of articles in *Azerbaijan,* the official mouthpiece of the ADP, as well as

various other documents from that era, makes it clear that the ADP movement represented a continuation of the same trend, albeit in a different political context: the articles published in various newspapers at the time support this continuity thesis. In the paragraphs that follow, I will refer to some of the characteristics. One difference between the ADP-led movement and the two prior movements—namely the constitutionalist one and the Azadistan one—is that the ADP placed greater emphasis on cultural autonomy, the right to be educated in the mother tongue, and making the Azerbaijani language an official language in Iran's Azerbaijan province.

The ADP strongly demanded a federative system or a provincial and sub-provincial committee. Here we can only make reference to the main threads of the arguments and demands made in outlets such as *Azerbaijan*, the ADP's official newspaper. First, democracy and freedom cannot be established in Iran without decentralizing power. Second, local self-governance is a right guaranteed by the Constitution. Third, references in the 1941 Atlantic Charter to self-determination apply to the rights of Azerbaijanis in Iran. Fourth, although self-determination is a "natural right," the ADP does not

consider itself a secessionist party and self-determination is not necessarily equivalent to separatism and should not be understood as a call for the disintegration of the country. Fifth, examples like the United States, the Soviet Union, and Switzerland demonstrate that self-determination can strengthen the unity of a country.

Even today across Iran, there is a strong assumption among people that political change is not possible without the involvement of Iranian Azerbaijan. We see the same assumption in various articles found in the newspaper *Azerbaijan* in the period immediately following World War II. For instance, in an article that appeared in mid-September 1945, entitled "Azerbaijan Once Again Takes its Historic Burden," the author refers to the role of Azerbaijan in political change and argues that the Freedom of Azerbaijan is necessary as a prior condition for this change. The ADP does not demand provincial governance merely for decreasing the power of the central government, ADP leaders also think that the provincial government will allow

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them to preserve their culture and language, but also to get rid of internal colonization. In the same article, the ADP demands ethnic rights and by saying that "the other ethnicities are waiting to see our first step" considers Azerbaijan as a vanguard in demanding ethnic rights as well.

A New Grievance

There is a significant difference between the constitutional revolution and the Khiyabani movement, on the one hand, and the ADP, on the other hand. In contrast to the first two, the ADP placed greater emphasis on cultural rights such as education in the mother language, the preservation of culture, and making the Azerbaijani language an official one in Iranian Azerbaijan. This shift in emphasis was mainly due to an increase in the cultural oppression of Azerbaijanis after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran. Prior to this, minority ethnicities in Iran had not had to contend with an exclusivist version of Persian nationalism.

The transition to a modern state in Iran under the Pahlavi dynasty also coincided with the transition to exclusive Persian nationalism and Aryanist ideology in Iran, which used state power as a means to force the assimilation of non-Persian ethnicities. Prior to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, ethnic groups were able to publish some newspapers in their mother tongues. We can see newspapers printed in the Azerbaijani language or bilingual newspapers (Azerbaijani-Persian) appearing in this period. Even the official organ of Khiyabani movement, *Tajaddod*, was a bilingual newspaper. Reza Shah's regime tried to create a monolithic Iranian nation based on the Persian language and culture. Thus, the ADP movement represented not only a struggle for provincial governance but was also a backlash against the frankly racist policies of Reza Shah that targeted the cultural heritages of non-Persian Iranians.

One indication of this backlash was the resumption of newspapers published (in whole or in part) in the Azerbaijani

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language during the ADP period. The official organ of the ADP, *Azerbaijan*, was a bilingual newspaper and from the newspaper's first issue, articles featuring discussions of cultural rights and education in the mother language were present, along those arguing for the need for the provincial government. Jafar Pishevari, the ADP's leader, considered language as the foundation of national identity. Indeed, Pishavari used the term "Iranian nations" in his speeches and complained about insufficient budgetary allocations for Azerbaijani culture. In one such speech, he asserted that a consequence of Reza Shah's coup had been the destruction of Azerbaijan's culture.

The resilience of the ADP in putting forward language demands can also be seen in its response to critiques by the *Tehran* newspaper. After *Tehran* accused the ADP of separatism because of its demands for Azerbaijani to gain official language status and for education to be conducted in this same language, in mid-September 1945 the ADP

responded with an article called "Mother Language." In this article, the ADP defended the right of Azerbaijani children to be educated exclusively in their mother tongue until grade three, arguing that Persian should be introduced into the curriculum thereafter and be taught alongside Azerbaijani. Explaining the pedagogical soundness of this approach, the article then went on to discuss the political importance of preserving the mother language before concluding that "a nation without its own language will be enslaved."

Universal education has been launched during in this period, too, whereas prior to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, only 5 percent of the population had been literate. Although universal education has provided some opportunities in the process of exclusive nation-building, it had a double-edged impact on society. On the one hand, universal education had allowed the government to implement its forced assimilationist program in schools; on the other hand, universal education has made linguistic and ethnic differences more visible in society. The ban on language usage, which was and remains a main marker of ethnicity, significantly intensified subordinate ethnicities' perceptions of being discriminated against.

Banning non-Persian languages, economic and cultural discrimination against Azerbaijanis and other non-Persians, and the lack of fair political representation in the executive branch of government all resulted in the further politicization of the identities of Azerbaijanis and some other major ethnic groups. In the ADP's newspaper, *Azerbaijan,* numerous articles written during the rule of the Azerbaijan People's Government, which began in November 1945 and came to an end in December 1946, demanded an integrative policy toward non-Persian ethnicities (as opposed to an assimilationist policy) as central to the struggle to preserve their respective identities. Otherwise, numerous articles made clear, the ADP would be compelled to pursue a separatist identity project.

Along with increasing the pressure on various non-Persian ethnic groups, the Pahlavi regime also imposed new restrictions on clerics and religious groups; it also radically restricted the wearing of the hijab. In the decades that followed, clerics also developed their own set of grievances. Since control over the network of religious groups and mosques remained with the clerics, by the time the Pahlavi regime began to wobble, this network was able easily to facilitate mass mobilization against

the dynasty and take the lead in organizing what eventually became the Islamic Revolution.

The backlash against the Pahlavi regime's exclusive nation-building project was strong for at least two reasons. First, by excluding non-Persians from the nation-building project the regime politicized the identities of the major ethnic minorities. Second, the Pahlavi regime virtually abandoned the use of the supra-identity of Shiism without replacing it with a new inclusive supra-identity. This failure in exclusive nation-building resulted in the politicization and radicalization of aggrieved ethnic and religious groups. Thus, not only did ethnic identities become more prominent and more politicized over time as a result of rising ethnic grievances and the placement of barriers to the promotion of Shia identity, but these also triggered the involvement of aggrieved clerics in the struggle for political power.

And we all know the result: all these struggles and grievances, especially the active anti-Pahlavi regime involvement of clerics in Iran, finally led to the 1979 revolution. It was not by chance that right after the Islamic Revolution (in 1980) the Muslim People's Republic Party, a moderate party

associated with Azerbaijani Shia Islamic cleric Sayyid Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, demanded decentralization and greater language rights along with others. The point is that ideological differences aside, a remarkable continuity can be traced in between various ethnic-Azerbaijani movements in Iran from the Constitutional Revolution onwards.

Inclusive Supra-identity Serving Exclusive Nationalism

Iranians of different ideological, religious, and ethnic backgrounds were all involved in the processes leading up to the 1979 revolution. Virtually every major identity group had its own grievances against the Pahlavi regime and, in turn, incentives to join the movement to overthrow the dynasty. But ultimately, it was the movement spearheaded by Shia fundamentalists that emerged victorious. As soon as they consolidated power, they moved to eliminate opponents and rivals through various means.

The Islamic Revolution also had implications on issues having to do with collective identities. For instance, the Islamic revolutionaries made use of a wide range of

propaganda tools at their disposal to revive Shiism as the official and overarching identity of the country, which effectively encompassed the ethnically diverse, yet religiously homogeneous society. They also declared Islamic solidarity as the main principle of their foreign policy. Yet, as Brenda Shaffer aptly put it in the inaugural re-launched edition of *Baku Dialogues*, "Tehran almost always puts pragmatic interests above ideology in instances where Islamic solidarity conflicts with primary geopolitical interests."

The revolution also had a consequential impact on national and ethnic identities. Although the Islamic regime had denounced the nationalist account of the Pahlavi regime, in practice the doctrine of Persian supremacy has remained untouched. The country's ethnic minorities continued to suffer from economic, cultural, and political discriminations in the wake of the 1979 revolution. Moreover, the provisions regarding ethnic equality and language rights contained in the Islamic Republic's

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constitution have never been implemented in practice.

Despite all this, revolutionary Iran was able to manage, for a time, the ethnic grievances of predominantly Shia ethnicities through the promotion of Shia Islam as the country's most salient identity. Unlike the Sunni sect, the Shia one has a greater capability to unite its believers and to strengthen their sense of Shia solidarity. This strength stems from Shia's intense, repetitive, emotional, and collectively practiced rituals. Practicing intense religious rituals turns these into a most salient collective identity. Under this condition, ethnic minorities with a strong sense of Shia identity may find they are able to disregard ethnic discriminations, at least to a certain extent. In addition to this, promoting religious identity as the most salient identity in a modern nation-state paves the way towards covert ethnic domination. One reason that after the Islamic Revolution Persian supremacy continued relatively undetected is because it was nested below the country's Shia identity. This situation has made the

boundaries of dominant Persian ethnicity less visible, eased domination due to lack of strong awareness, and finally perpetuated ethnic discrimination. However, the trend may change when the level of religiosity declines, when events question the authenticity of religious solidarity, or when religious identity comes into conflict with other collective identities.

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The Islamic Solidarity Principle in Action

It was no accident that Iran used religious rather than nationalistic rhetoric to mobilize Iranians during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. During that war, countless individuals of discriminated ethnic backgrounds, particularly Azerbaijanis, sacrificed their lives on the frontline to defend Iran. Given that ethnic minority groups comprise over 50 percent of Iran's population, and that each group experiences various forms of discrimination, the war itself played a significant role in creating interethnic solidarity.

Under the Islamic Republic, Shia Islam has been promoted as the country's umbrella identity to which people are expected to adhere. Additionally, the Iranian regime has continually declared "Islamic solidarity" as its principal foreign policy approach. Such a policy allowed for salient religious identity to transcend the boundaries of ethnic identity and, therefore, hamper ethnic grievances. In fact, because Iran is a predominantly Shiite country (90 to 95 percent), the strength and popularity of Shiite Islamic belief have effectively spilled into the concept of Iranian national identity, thereby strengthening the sense of belonging to Iran.

Although the Islamic Republic of Iran professes Islamic solidarity as the main principle in its foreign policy, the regime has been very selective in applying it in practice. For instance, not only has Iran remained silent with respect to the tragic plight of China's Uyghur minority—a Turkic ethnic group whose members traditionally professes Islam and resides mostly in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region—but has also recently signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with China. In the case of the Chechens in Russia, the principle of Islamic solidarity has not been practiced, either.

Indeed, what Iran has been doing is best described as using Islam as a tool of soft power in various Near Eastern countries, putting it in the service of achieving geopolitical objectives. Especially through the promotion of Shia identity among Shias in the Near East, Iran has been trying to transform local Shia identities into a supra-identity. As discussed above, unlike Sunni identity, Shia identity has a greater capability of becoming the most salient identity. It is no coincidence that one of Iran's main cultural initiatives in the Near East involves encouraging Shias to practice intense rituals. Iran supports and facilitates practicing these rituals among the Shia communities in many countries, including Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Lebanon—and even among minority Shias in predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia.

Iran knows full well that these rituals can create barriers to the integration of Shia communities into the respective national identities of the countries in which they reside whilst at the same time facilitating solidarity with the main Shia country, namely Iran. In general, the function of these seemingly non-political cultural programs is to prepare a social base for Iran's potential presence and intervention—not Islamic solidarity. The main reason is that Iran mostly uses Shia communities living in predominantly Sunni countries to execute its geopolitical ambitions.

For instance, Iran's Lebanon policy is one of the main obstacles to the integration of Shia Lebanese into the national identity of Lebanon. The network of Iran's proxies in predominantly Muslim countries such as Yemen, Iraq, and Syria also demonstrate that the function of salient Shia supra-identity consists in using local Shia communities for Iran's geopolitical interests.

The Case of the Karabakh Conflict

Yet another example of Iran's identity politics can be seen through the lens of the First and Second Karabakh Wars. During the latter, waves of protests by Azerbaijani Turks took place across Iran due to Tehran's perceived support for Armenia. Demands included that the border with Armenia be closed. Although Iran maintains

an officially neutral stance with respect to recognizing Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and its Islamic solidarity principle, nevertheless it has upheld good relations with Armenia over the past three decades and has supported Yerevan, *inter alia*, by allowing its territory to be used by Russia for transporting military supplies to Armenia. Even back in 1992, there were demonstrations against the Iranian regime's Karabakh policy in cities like Tabriz, Urmia, and Tehran.

Primarily due to geopolitical concerns and its concerns about the possibility of the domino effect Azerbaijan's independence could produce on their co-ethnics inside Iran, Tehran has tended to lean towards Yerevan. Such concerns are nothing new. Historical documents suggest that similar concerns were raised following the establishment of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 May 1918. An independent Azerbaijan has always been conceived as a potential threat to Iranian national security. The Iranian regime has preferred to see the

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Republic of Azerbaijan mired in problems, which reduces its attractiveness to co-ethnics in Iran. This is a policy designed to deter the inspiring effect of independence on aggrieved Azerbaijanis in Iran.

The Iranian regime's hope for internal solidarity has not been very successful. In contrast to Tehran's hopes, its foreign policy approach has weakened the sense of belonging to the Iranian national identity among ethnic-Azerbaijanis in the country. This has happened primarily because Iran's Karabakh policy was inconsistent with its acclaimed foreign policy principle of Islamic solidarity. Iran has mostly refrained from expressing Islamic solidarity towards the Republic of Azerbaijan, which is also a predominantly Shia nation. The result has been a feeling of betrayal by ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran towards the central ruling authority in Tehran.

Such an attitude has not only decreased the resonance of Iran's Islamic discourse among its Azerbaijani citizens but also damaged the salience of the country's overarching religious collective identity. Indeed, the third wave of a survey dataset known as Values and Attitudes of Iranians (2015) clearly demonstrates a trend of declining religiosity in Iran. According to this data, 66 percent of Iranians believe that people within the country have become less religious today as compared to five years ago and will become even less religious in the next five years. The percentage of decline in religiosity for Azerbaijanis in Iran is higher than Iran's national average, standing at 70 percent. Of course, state control over religious affairs contributed to the increasing subjective secularization as well. Studies on different cases suggest that state control over religion decreases religiosity. Overall, the failure of Iran's identity politics has crucial implications for Iran because it paves the way for the salience of ethnic-Azerbaijani identity in the country.

The First Karabakh War was an external shock to Iran because its unveiled the regime's exclusive Persian nationalist nature that had been covered by a collective Shia identity. This raised more awareness of ethnic discrimination. Only 39 percent of Azerbaijanis in Iran, according to the aforementioned dataset, say that the state does not discriminate against ethnic minorities. Once one of Iran's most loyal ethnic minorities, Azerbaijanis Turks have gradually become increasingly disillusioned. Awareness of ethnic inequality and discrimination in the context of declining religiosity is accelerating ethnic cleavages among Azerbaijanis in Iran. Recent developments show that the salient Azerbaijani identity translates into action. Despite state repression, the level of expressed solidarity of Azerbaijanis in Iran with the Republic of Azerbaijan is unprecedented.

The Second Karabakh War ignited waves of protests from dissidents within neighboring Iran, where Azerbaijani Turks comprise approximately one-third of its population. Protests took place in various cities in both Iran's northwestern provinces and Tehran. From its onset, Iranian authorities arrested hundreds of ethnic-Azerbaijanis peacefully protesting Russian military aid to Armenia and Iran's support of Armenia. In the last year, Azerbaijanis' focus in Iran was on protesting Iran's Karabakh policy and expressing solidarity with Azerbaijanis in the Republic of Azerbaijan. According to human rights reports, in the last year, 87 percent of arrested Azerbaijanis were detained because of their participation in protests related to Karabakh. Some of the arrestees were reportedly

tortured and beaten by both police and intelligence officers.

The forced assimilationist policies by the Iranian government and discrimination against minorities, on the one hand, and the decline of religiosity in Iran, on the other hand, have not only politicized ethnic-Azerbaijani identity in Iran but also radicalized Azerbaijanis' identity decision. In addition to these factors, the victory of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War has increased the level of the ethnic pride of Azerbaijanis in Iran. People tend to identify themselves more with a collective identity of which they are proud. All these factors may augment ethnic mobilization because the increased salience of Azerbaijani identity strengthens their identification as Azerbaijanis rather than Shias or Iranians, and, finally, strong group identification leads to a consensus over Azerbaijani social movements' viewpoints and facilitates coordination for collective action.

Although the Shia supra-identity may have some advantages for Iran in its regional politics, the Azerbaijani identity poses challenges to internal Iranian security through questioning the nature and authenticity of the national and Shia identities.

Although the Shia supra-identity may have some advantages for Iran in its regional politics, the Azerbaijani identity poses challenges to internal Iranian security through questioning the nature and authenticity of the national and Shia identities. Under this condition, the salience of Azerbaijani identity can be consequential for Iran, particularly at critical moments such as those involving political turmoil or when the central government is weak. Furthermore, Azerbaijani Turks are the only non-Persian ethnic groups that live in both peripheral and central regions of Iran. The geographical proximity to the center of power increases Azerbaijanis' potential impact on political processes. Thus, aggrieved Azerbaijanis with their salient identity and weaker ties to the country's other ethnic groups can pursue their own political goals when conditions are favorable.

During the post-Second Karabakh War period, the liberation of the occupied territories revived even further the ethnic-Azerbaijani

movement in Iran. On 24 July 2021, for example, following calls by civil society activists and ethnic-Azerbaijani opposition parties, a protest rally of ethnic Azerbaijanis was held in Tabriz in solidarity with Arab groups upset with the diverting of water from predominantly Arab-populated Khuzestan province's rivers to the predominantly Persian-populated provinces in the central regions of Iran. In addition to expressing support for Arabs in Iran, Azerbaijanis were also demanding their own ethnic rights and were protesting what they perceived as the regime's economic, cultural, and political discrimination against them. For the first time in decades, during this protest ethnic-Azerbaijanis expressed their wish to establish a national government within the framework of the Iranian state by chanting slogans such as "Freedom, Justice, National Government." Empowered by the confidence and pride earned by their ethnic kin in the Second Karabakh War, ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran appear to be reacting more frequently to their general exclusion from the executive branch of the Iranian state and experienced discrimination.

Moreover, for the moment it seems that the new government is more ethnically and politically exclusive than the previous one; and

in the latest presidential election, even members of the political elite considered close to the Supreme Leader, such as his adviser Ali Larijani, were not allowed to run for the presidency. The ethnocratic trend is an important development and may have longer-term political implications for the country. Growing opposition among political elites is almost a prerequisite for successful change in autocracies. Given the increasing number of excluded elites, the odds of cleavage and tension among political elites is likely to increase in the time ahead. As such, the political activism of Azerbaijanis, at both the center and the periphery, could be regarded as a political opportunity by various political groups. It seems that in the post-election environment ethnic identities will remain politized as well. The new president, Ebrahim Raisi, is said to have played a repressive role in the post-1979 period. Since signs of change in the regime's policies toward ethnic groups have not yet made their appearance, maintaining a continuity of policy is likely to result in a more active approach by ethnic-Azerbaijanis and other minorities in the context of the salience of their respective identities in Iranian politics. **BD**