

Chapter VI

CONTESTED BORDERS IN THE CAUCASUS

Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan. The Historic Origins of Iranian Foreign Policy

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1. Introduction

Starting in the 18th century, Iran found itself involved in the "Great Game"⁽¹⁾ (to use Kipling's phrase), in which the great powers of the time, Britain and Russia, were engaged in a struggle for influence. At stake for the former was a retention of its authority over the Indian subcontinent, and for the latter, countering British influence and securing access to the warm seas. At that time, the rulers of Iran tried desperately to preserve their country's independence by opposing Russia and Britain. This policy was based on the search for an equilibrium between the great powers. It had been formulated in the 19th century by one of the most brilliant prime ministers the country had known, Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir.⁽²⁾ The Russians and British laid claim to regions which, historically, had never been theirs: on the contrary, they had either belonged to Iran or been under Iranian cultural influence. The Russians' aggressive designs on the region could be checked only by the imperialist ambitions of Great Britain, which culminated in the conquest of the Indian subcontinent.

The independence of the Indian subcontinent and the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf failed to extricate Iran from the struggle between the great powers. Britain passed the baton to the US, and the battle for hegemony between the US and the USSR was to rage throughout the cold war. It was less a question of conquering territories than of imposing their influence on a country rich in raw materials - oil in particular - and located at one of the most sensitive geostrategic points on the globe. Iran could never be certain that the process of territorial or ideological expansion by its northern neighbour had really come to an end. The 1945 crisis in Iranian Azerbaijan

and the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 were there as a reminder of the danger represented by Soviet troops. Iran's fear of Communist contamination guided its foreign and domestic policy, just as the search for a balance of power had done since the 18th century. From that standpoint, the crumbling of the Soviet empire and the sudden disappearance of the 1700-kilometre-long border with the USSR have had important geopolitical consequences and represent an event of crucial importance in the history of Iran.

Thus, for the first time since the 18th century, the diminishing of the "menace from the north" granted Iran respite and simultaneously engendered new ambitions. It created new geostrategic opportunities in the Caucasus and Central Asia, while at the same time opening new routes to Europe by way of the Caucasus. This specific road network had been completely blocked after the Communist takeover in Russia. Today Iran has many points in common with its new neighbours, be they historical, cultural or linguistic; so, despite many differences, there are also many opportunities for rapprochement which that country intends to exploit.

The chapter that follows will attempt to show how Iran's foreign policy in relation to Azerbaijan is rooted in that country's past relations with Russia, and later the USSR. It will reveal certain traits of Iranian political culture by illustrating the sensitivities and contradictions that have gone to make up its vision of foreign relations.

2. National Security and the Problem of Nationalities

Observers who follow Iranian foreign policy closely are struck by both its inherent contradictions and, over time, the extraordinary continuity which marks it. In every period, changing policy reflects the frustration and helplessness felt by Iran towards the great powers which dominated that country for over two hundred years. This frustration and helplessness are compounded by memories associated with having been constantly invaded throughout history, in turn by the Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Afghans, Russians and British.

As Graham Fuller put it, the Persian carpet reflects quite a few characteristics of the Iranian spirit. In his view, it is a culture given to extravagance in almost all respects.⁽³⁾ This is also reflected in foreign policy. Traditionally, Iranians have a marked propensity for over-exaggeration in vocabulary and imagery when describing people and events. Thus, for example, the king was addressed as "pivot of the universe" or "the shadow of God" and, in anti-western rhetoric, people speak of "great" and "little Satan". In a recent study, Ervand Abrahamian⁽⁴⁾ shows how the Iranian political vocabulary, with words like "puppet" or "spy", tends to present international relations as a puppet show in which foreign powers control local political figures with invisible strings. For Khomeini, imperialism, aided by a "fifth column" consisting of different minorities (Jewish, Bahai, Masonic, etc.), was a permanent threat to the Moslems of Iran. In consequence, he saw spies and plots everywhere. Observers have noted the existence of political paranoia in Iran - using the term to denote not a mental illness but a political style, whose origins may be traced back to historical experience.

Iranians are fiercely proud of their culture and consider it to be one of the

most ancient in the world. As a result, they feel different from and even superior to their neighbours, defining their specificity in opposition to the non-Iranian peoples who surround their country. One of the most marked dividing lines is the dichotomy between Iran and Turan, in other words, between the Iranians and the Turks.(5)

Iran is composed of numerous nationalities. Not all of them speak Persian or are of Persian origin - the Azeris, the Turkmen or the Baluchis, for example. These minorities were incorporated into modern Iran as a result of the nation-building process begun in the 16th century by the Safavids, and later through the process of modernization. The idea of a national state has been developed particularly in the 20th century. Iran remains nervous of autonomist tendencies within its borders - tendencies which have sometimes been exploited by political groupings, and even encouraged by foreign powers. There is a fear (even if such a possibility seems unlikely) that Russia or some other neighbour will take the risk of encouraging a revolutionary or separatist movement. On the whole, however, the longevity and predominance of the Persian culture have favoured the integration of the Kurdish, Baluchi, Turkmen and Arab minorities. Nevertheless, the demonstrations of February 1994 in the city of Zahedan, in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan - where certain autonomist desires were combined with slogans hostile to the regime - have demonstrated that the central authority cannot ignore the problem of minorities.

3. The Islamic Revolution and Foreign Policy

The Iranian revolution of 1978-79 has opened a new chapter in foreign relations. Change constituted the very essence of the revolutionary project.(6) This project was, first and foremost, a universalization of the world involving all of humanity (and so homo islamicus was born). It aimed to reconstruct the social order and communicate its conception of the universe to the whole world. With the Islamic revolution, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran abandoned the resolutely pro-Western stance which had typified the previous regime, in favour of an Islamic one.

In Islamic foreign policy,(7) the world is conceived as being divided into Dar al Islam, the Moslem world, and Dar al Cherk, the "world of impiety and polytheism". Olivier Roy remarks that, "according to this theory, there is no territorialized national state endowed with frontiers and a legal personality. Al Umma, the community of believers, is not divided into states, and furthermore, the infidel state should not be put on an equal footing. The very basis of modern diplomacy - relations between sovereign states which are theoretically equal - is missing."(8)

The Islamic Republic has tried to present itself as the religious centre of the Moslem world - here finding itself in competition with Saudi Arabia - and would like to exploit Shi'ism with this political end in view. In Islamic diplomacy, the state must serve religion, while religion serves the needs of the state. In this context, foreign policy was duty-bound to show its independence of the great powers and to promote the Islamic revolution.

The different phases of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic could be described as follows:

- o From February 1979 until June 1981, under the government of Bazargan and the presidency of Bani Sadr, the liberal currents still had the upper hand. During that period, senior officials attempted to maintain cordial relations with the West and even with the United States, pursuing a policy of non-alignment. This policy was in line with that of Mossaddegh, the prime minister who proclaimed the nationalization of Iranian oil at the beginning of the 1950s.(9)
- o From 1981 to 1984, Iran went through a period of isolation, adopting a policy of confrontation which left it few allies in the region.(10)
- o Since 1984, a certain amount of pragmatism seems to have set in.(11) This corresponds to a change of power inside the country and numerous failures abroad. Domestically, a more realistic leadership has taken matters in hand. Like the rival faction, which has sometimes been seen as idealist, it still wishes to extend the Islamic order, but it has proven to be more conciliatory in the field of foreign policy. This new tendency is illustrated by the presidency of Rafsanjani, termed "moderate" in the West due to its policy of opening up Iran to the outside world.

This change of orientation may be explained by the successive failures of revolutionary policy. Shi'ite Iran did not manage to bridge the gap between Shi'ites and Sunnites in the Moslem world, nor to place itself at the head of the Sunni dissenting movements, whether in Egypt, Afghanistan or Algeria. Iran has been unable to replace Saudi Arabia as the backer of Sunni movements and has therefore been reduced to taking over small groupings of minor importance. Nor has the country been very successful in destabilizing conservative regimes in other Moslem countries. In pursuing its policy of promoting pan-Islamism, Iran has run into opposition from three sides: Arab, Sunni and conservative. As a result, the leadership has returned to more realistic objectives. Even if their neighbours' ideologies conflict with that of the Islamic Republic, the leaders of Iran aim to maintain good relations with the leaders of these countries, making their presence felt by providing various useful services or taking part in peace negotiations. The government of Iran also wish to strengthen its economic links with these neighbours. This does not necessarily represent a change of aims and objectives, but rather - primarily - a correction of its strategic course.

Iran has taken a very cautious attitude to the conflict between the Azeris and Armenians, for example. It has at times given discreet support to the latter, despite its official declarations of support for the Moslem cause in the world. It has cordial relations with the ex-Communist leaders of Central Asia and the Caucasus. And a certain detente has been taking place in Iranian-American relations, facilitated by Iran's stance on the Gulf conflict. The quest for a more pragmatic policy does not mean that Iran has renounced its revolutionary traditions. More than ten years after his death, Khomeini continues to be the main point of reference in discussions on foreign policy principles. When it comes to exporting the revolution, the Islamic Republic also has a distressing record, including, amongst other acts, its support for an abortive coup d'etat in Bahrein in January 1980, its responsibility for the bombings of Kuwait in December 1983, the dispatch of the Revolutionary Guards to the Lebanon and complicity in the taking of hostages in that country. Even today, Iran stands accused of supporting Islamic movements in

According to some observers(13), Iran resembles the former USSR in that the foreign policy of both states can be pictured as two circles. In the Soviet Union, the first circle included the objectives of the former Russian Empire and the second, those of socialism. Similarly, in the Iranian imperial vision, the first circle is represented by nationalism and the submission of adjoining territories, while the second embraces revolutionary ideology and the support given to revolutionary movements in distant countries.

4. Conflicts with Russia in Iranian Historical Memory

Iran's position vis-a-vis Azerbaijan can only be understood on the basis of an analysis of the historical relations between Iran and its mighty northern neighbour. Conflicts and wars with Russia form part of the historical memory of the Iranian people. The first Russian (Muscovite) embassy was established in Iran in 1561, attesting to the long tradition of contacts between Iran and Russia. The Russian advance to the south started with Peter the Great; and in 1722, the Russian Army for the first time occupied the greater part of the then Iranian Caucasus and the provinces of Gilan, Mazandaran and Astarabad on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. Nadir Shah Afshar managed to drive the Russians out of the occupied territories. In 1783, Catherine the Great established a Russian protectorate over Georgia, which was later reoccupied by Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar, who recaptured Tiflis in 1795. In 1801, Alexander I provoked the first great Iranian-Russian war by proclaiming the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Empire. A consequence of this defeat was that Georgia and a part of Armenia were lost. The western powers did not seem unduly concerned by this: "The arrival of the Russians in Georgia and their definitive occupation of the country in 1801 did not attract the attention of European statesmen, too preoccupied with Napoleonic wars."(14) The Gulistan Treaty, signed on 12 October 1813, after another Iranian defeat, had grave consequences for Iran. This treaty bound the Emperor of All Russias to aid the Shahinshah of Iran to perpetuate his dynasty - implying that he had a right to intervene in Iran's political affairs. In the future, the Russians would constantly support the sovereign in the face of any attempts at modernization or democratization.

In 1826, a new Iranian-Russian war began over the occupied territories. This ended in yet another Iranian defeat and the signing of the Turkmanchai Treaty with Nicholas I in 1828. Under this treaty, Iran lost Northern Azerbaijan and the greater part of Armenia, including its capital, Erevan. The Iranian defeat instilled in the minds of people in certain intellectual and military circles the conviction that the 17 cities of the Caucasus must be reconquered. Subsequently, this even led to the formation of a pan-Iranian party, comparable to the pan-Turkish movement of Enver Pacha.(15) In 1828, another treaty confirmed the limitation of Iranian sovereignty in favour of the Russian Empire.(16) During the latter half of the 19th century, the Russians continued to support the Shah's struggle against trends towards democratization within the country.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Iran underwent a revolution. As a result, restrictions were put on the powers of the sovereign and Iran became a constitutional monarchy on the Belgian model. The Russians were resolutely opposed to this - in June 1908, they backed the coup led by Muhammad Ali

Shah. The Cossack brigade, founded in 1879 with Russian aid⁽¹⁷⁾ and commanded by Colonel Lyakhov, bombarded the parliament. In 1909, the Shah was overthrown by the revolutionary armies and forced to take refuge in Odessa.

In the early 20th century, there were extensive commercial relations between Iran and Russia. Nearly 60 per cent of Iran's foreign trade was with Tsarist Russia. Numerous lines of communication were built linking the cities of northern Iran with Russia, and by 1911 about 200,000 Iranian labourers worked in Russia's industrial regions, including Baku and Tiflis. The ties between Azerbaijan and Iran were as much political as economic. For example, the Iranian emigres were clearly politicized and influenced by the Russian revolutionary ambience. Many "constitutionalists", who later became Social Democrats and Communists, also came from regions in northern Iran which had close links with Russia. The Edalat Party, which later became the Iranian Communist Party, was formed in the Baku oilfields in 1918.

The 1917 revolution led to the emergence of an independent republic in Transcaucasia. In May of that year, the Muslim National Council proclaimed the independence of Azerbaijan. This evoked much anxiety in Iran and Iranian Azerbaijan. In April 1920, the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan was proclaimed. In Iran the same year, as a result of numerous clashes with the central government, Sheykh Muhammad Khiabani (a deputy from Tabriz who had close links with groups from Soviet Azerbaijan) announced the formation of a local government. This declaration signalled the beginning of an autonomist movement within Iran, which the Tehran authorities represented as a separatist movement which had connections with foreign powers.⁽¹⁸⁾ This movement was crushed by government forces.⁽¹⁹⁾

During the Second World War, as a result of the proclamation of neutrality by Reza Shah, the allies invaded Iran so as to be able to transport munitions and arms to the USSR. The Soviets occupied Iranian Azerbaijan in 1941, staying there for almost five years. In 1945, after debates on the adoption and use of the Azerbaijani language, Pishevari, a member of the Communist Party, took up the language cause and proclaimed the founding of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan. The party was supported by Soviet Azerbaijan. It had been agreed that all foreign troops stationed on Iranian territory would leave the country after the end of the war, but the Red Army, instead of honouring this agreement, armed and supported the separatist Azerbaijani and Kurdish movements. Only after difficult negotiations between the Iranian and Soviet authorities was an accord reached, providing for the withdrawal of Soviet troops in exchange for an oil concession. Moscow then announced that the Azerbaijani question was an internal Iranian problem, and it withdrew its support for the separatist movement. In November 1946, this movement succumbed to attacks by the central Iranian government.⁽²⁰⁾

After the withdrawal of the Soviet Army, the aim of Soviet policy was as much to support the Iranian Communist Party, Tudeh, as to develop cordial inter-state relations. This policy was riddled with contradictions and, as the need arose, Tudeh was sacrificed in the name of national interests. Moscow, always critical of Iran's growing military dependence on the USA, became a supplier of arms to Tehran. This balancing act can be interpreted either as an Iranian strategy of playing the Soviet card against the American, in order to consolidate its position in the negotiations, or as a Soviet attempt to

encourage the Shah to relinquish the Western card.

To prevent ideological contamination and weaken any attempt at autonomy, Iranian Azerbaijan was ruled as a province by a governor. It was divided administratively in 1946, with two capitals, Tabriz and Rezaye. In January 1993, the Iranian parliament adopted a new law which divided Eastern Azerbaijan and created a third Azerbaijani province, with Ardebil as the new provincial capital. This policy, common to both the old regime and the new, revealed the anxiety with which the Iranian authorities viewed the Azerbaijanis' determination to become independent.

This does not mean, however, that these authorities would have opposed participation by the Azerbaijani minority in central government. Political segregation would in any case have been in contradiction to the country's historical traditions, as Iran's history is marked by a great deal of political and economic activity by Azerbaijanis. From the time of the medieval invasions, the Turkish or Turkish-speaking population had even had a higher social status than the Iranians. During the Safavid period, in the 16th and 17th centuries, Turkish was the language of the court. It is even possible to discern a certain attraction for the Ottoman model up to the middle of the 19th century, when Iran began to turn towards Europe. The social depreciation of the Azeris - which is reflected, amongst other things, in disparaging jokes - dates back to this time. Such denigration, however, never had any consequences at the political level.⁽²¹⁾

Despite participation by its elites in the country's economic and political life, a desire to secede on the part of the Azerbaijanis could still emerge, either as a result of social discontent or, as was the case in the post-war period, because of outside support. Such a secession would have dramatic and incalculable consequences for Iran, a multi-ethnic country where centralization was achieved with some difficulty. If the Azerbaijanis were to secede, this would mean the loss of a rich province and a great many cadres and intellectuals. Such a development would also influence Iran's other provinces, and the general stability of the country would be at risk. For Tehran, the reattachment of the Republic of Azerbaijan to Iran would have been as destabilizing as secession, as it would have upset the demographical balance, making the Azeris the largest group in Iran. (9 million Azeris live in Iran today - out of a total population of about 55 million - while the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan numbers 6 million.)

Following the incorporation of part of Azerbaijan into Russia, and later into the Soviet Union, the two Azerbaijanis have taken different routes. The leaders of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in separating themselves from the Soviet Union, expressed a clear preference for the Turkish model of development rather than the Iranian one. In Iran, the modernization programme launched by Reza Shah has, since 1925, been coupled with the centralization of the country and the propagation of the idea of the nation-state. The Azeris of Iran are today considered an ethnic group which forms an integral part of the Iranian nation. Where religion is concerned, on the other hand, the Islamic Republic has been none too popular with the clergy of Iranian Azerbaijan, who even allied themselves with opponents of Khomeini like Shariat Madari.

5. Conclusion

Relations between Russia and Iran have been marked by conflict since the 17th century and have resulted, for Iran, in the loss of many territories in the Caucasus, including part of Azerbaijan. Iran feared both an infringement of its territorial integrity by the Soviet Union, as happened during the Second World War, and ideological contamination of the population within its borders. The break-up of the USSR has meant the beginning of a new era for Iran, although not all of its regional and ideological ambitions have been realized. As far as its quest for regional stability in the Caucasus is concerned, the danger of a reunification of the Azerbaijani people seems to have temporarily receded. Since the annexation of part of Azerbaijan by Russia in the last century, political and economic modernization have taken different routes in the Soviet Union as compared with Iran. Because of these differing historical traditions, the Azerbaijani people's political will to reunite has been weakened. The profound differences between the two parts of Azerbaijan have served to moderate the Azeri populations' reunification drive, which accords with Iran's wishes. On the other hand, these differences have also limited Iran's political and religious influence on the Republic of Azerbaijan - which is very far from suiting the objectives of the Iranian leaders.

Iran has always considered itself a regional power with a mission to prevent Turkey from taking the lead as a dominant power. In this game, Turkey seems to have better cards as far as the Republic of Azerbaijan is concerned. Although pursuing a more pragmatic foreign policy today than in the past, Iran has not really managed to convince the leaders of Azerbaijan of the superiority of its development model over the Turkish model. Thus limited in its ideological and political clout, Iran seems, for the moment, to be putting its efforts into economic projects.[\(22\)](#)

Notes

1. This metaphor has been largely used to describe British-Russian rivalry in the 19th century. See L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, Princeton, 1984.
2. On this subject, see: R. K. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy of Iran, 1500-1941: A Developing Nation in World Affairs*, Charlottesville, 1966.
3. Graham Fuller, *The Center of the Universe. The Geopolitics of Iran*, San Francisco - Oxford, 1991, p. 13.
4. Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, London - New York, 1993. See in particular Chapter 5.
5. See first chapter in: G. Fuller, *op.cit.*
6. See A. Decoufle, *Sociologie des Revolutions*, Paris, 1970.
7. See Muhammad Reza Djalili, *La diplomatie islamique*, Geneva, 1989 and Olivier Roy, 'Sous le turban, la couronne', in *Thermidor en Iran*, Brussels, 1993, pp. 92-138.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.
9. On Mossaddegh see, amongst other works, one by Homa Katouzian, *Mussadik and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, London - New York, 1990.
10. On this subject, see M. Behrooz, 'Trends in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979-1988', in N.R. Keddie and M. Gasiorowski (eds.), *Neither East nor West*, New Haven - London, 1990, pp. 13-35.
11. R.K. Ramazani, *Iran's Revolution, The Search for Consensus*, Bloomington, 1990, pp. 48-68.
12. On this subject, see a series of articles published in *Le Figaro*, 28 and 30 July and 6 August, 1993.
13. *Ibidem.*
14. Haidar Bammate, 'The Caucasus and the Russian Revolution (from a Political Viewpoint)', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.10, No. 4, 1991, pp. 1-29, p. 4. This article was an English translation of an article published in 1929 by the National Union of Emigrés of the Republic of Northern Caucasus, entitled 'Le Caucase du Nord et la révolution russe (Aspect politique)'.

15. These ideas have not disappeared. Before the Islamic revolution, a well-known Iranian general, Ariana, was expressing pan-Iranian ideas. Even today, the dream of unifying Azerbaijan by re-annexing it to Iran still remains a real hope for some Iranian intellectuals and military men.
16. Occupation of the Caucasus was an essential part of Russia's plan to penetrate into Persia. (...) Indeed, with the closure of the free port of Batum in 1813 and the closing of all transit routes through the Caucasus, Russia effectively excluded all the prosperous regions of northern Persia. From then on, all Russian political activity in Persia started from the Caucasus", Haidar Bammate, op. cit., p. 4.
17. Nassir al din Shah had made many trips to Europe and had accepted the Tsar's offer for the Russians to train an army which would act as personal guard to the Shah. Thus, for about forty years, the "Cossack Brigade" was commanded by Russian officers and served Russia's political aims, rather than those of the Shah of Iran.
18. Khiabani even proposed the creation of a separate entity comprising both Azerbaijanis, which would be called "Azadistan".
19. H. Makki, *Tarikhe bist saleye Iran*, Vol. 1, 1961, pp. 34-54, *Mokhber ol Saltane Hedayat, Khaterat va khatatat*, Tehran, 1961, pp. 314-320.
20. According to one interpretation of these events (see Bruce Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece*, Princeton, 1980), the USSR's attitude towards Iran was aggressive and interventionist. Stalin's aim was to establish puppet states at the southern borders of his country, in order to exert pressure on Turkey and also to push the Western powers out of the region. This description of Stalin's intentions is questioned today by certain specialists on the regions. See Richard Hermann, 'The Role of Iran in Soviet Perceptions and Policy', in *Neither East nor West*, op. cit., pp.63-99. For Iranian Azerbaijan, see A. Kasravi, *Azari ya zabane bastane Azarbaijan*, Tehran, 1938 and, by the same author, *Tarikhe hedjdah saleye Azarbaidjan*, Tehran, Amir Kabir, 1978, or a recent study in English, T. Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and Autonomy in Twentieth-Century Iran*, London, 1993.
21. On relations between Turkish and Persian speakers, see: X. de Planhol, 'Le fait turc en Iran: quelques jalons' in: *Le fait ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan*, Paris, 1988.
22. See M. Sarir, N. Ghorban, 'Tahavollate sanate naft Azebaidjan va mogheyate mantaghei va beinolmelali', *Central Asian and Caucasian Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 , Summer 1993, pp. 169-183.

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