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IRAN'S ETHNIC FACTIONS THREATEN TO SPLIT THE STATE*

S. Enders Wimbush

The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California

April 1980

While the eyes of the world have been fastened on the plight of American hostages in Tehran and on the fanatical city mobs that cheer each new proclamation by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran has been slowly fraying at the edges.

No facet of the conflict in Iran is likely to affect the post-crisis political environment more fundamentally than unrest and militancy among that state's important ethnic minorities. The changing political equation is a very simple one: The dominant Persian majority is rapidly losing its ability to control events along Iran's periphery, which is inhabited primarily by non-Persians.

Ethnic minorities have seized the opportunities resulting from chaos at the center to advance a variety of local demands. In its present state of disarray, the Iranian army--or at least those soldiers and units loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini, for it should be remembered that Iran's army is a multiethnic one--will probably not be able to contain local rebellions for very long, and there is no suggestion that this situation will improve in the future.

Therefore, the Iran that emerges from the continuing turmoil will logically contain not one center of power, as in the shah's time, but several, thereby confronting policymakers with a complex international dilemma that they should have addressed long ago, and for which they should have formulated sensible policies and contingency plans. In other words, Iran, like the majority of the world's countries, is not an ethnically homogeneous nation but a diverse multiethnic state.

The problem of confusing nations and states is a common one. For example, Americans insistently refer to the inhabitants of the Soviet Union as "Russians," when in fact ethnic Russians constitute less than 50 percent of the population and only one of some 140 distinct ethnic groups.

* This article appeared originally in the *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1979.

A similar confusion exists concerning Iran, which is inhabited not only by Persians but also by a number of sizable minorities including Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs and Baluchis, as well as the less-populous Lurs, Bakhtiari, Qashqais and others. Demographic data about these peoples are difficult to find and unreliable.

Azerbaijanis are the largest minority, estimated to number from 4 million to 5 million. They are followed by the Kurds, who number between 2-1/2 million; Baluchis, 600,000; and Turkmen, 500,000. Added to the smaller groups, it is probable that ethnic minorities comprise as much as one-third of the Iranian population, perhaps more.

Importantly, the larger minorities inhabit strategic border areas and hence are potentially disruptive of Iran's relations with adjacent states. The Kurds have been the most bothersome in this regard, influencing at various times in recent history Iran's relations with Iraq, Turkey and Syria. The Azerbaijanis are split almost evenly between Iran and the Soviet Union and have been the center of several controversies between those two states in the last five decades.

Turkmen are also split between the Soviet Union and Iran, although the great majority live in the former country. Baluchis, in southeast Iran, have historically been a restive force in Iranian politics. They are divided in ever-changing proportions among Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Iranian Arabs live primarily in the province of Khuzistan bordering Iraq, but are more worrisome to the authorities because they inhabit and work in Iran's vital oil-producing areas.

The current crisis in Iran is perhaps a classic example of a state's multiethnic fabric unravelling under the impact of a breakdown of central authority and of the speed with which the infection of ethnic self-assertiveness is passed from group to group.

It is not surprising that the Kurds were the first to press their national demands on the Khomeini regime, even to the point of taking up arms. Kurds have long sought a unified national homeland embracing the Kurdish populations of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey and the Soviet Union. Their strong historical traditions, distinct language, culture and religion were at odds with the Iranian practice, which forcibly discourages the observance of cultural traditions that are not Persian, which requires

the teaching of the Persian language and Persian history in schools, and which accepts Shia Islam--Kurds are Sunni Muslims--as the state religion.

Baluchis and Turkmen, who have similar grievances against Iranian authorities, were rapidly infected by Kurdish activities and moved to oppose the reconsolidation of an imperial Iranian state. Iranian Arabs, who seek to stem the flow of Persians to Khuzistan--a migration that has relegated the Arabs to a minority in what they consider to be their own national region--joined in with demands of their own. Thus began an epidemic of minority protest which has culminated in an armed rebellion of the state's largest minority, the Azerbaijanis.

In many respects, the Azerbaijanis' protests are ironic. Like the dominant Persians, they are Shia Muslims and, therefore, they have escaped the religious discrimination dealt to Kurds, Turkmen, Baluchis and other Sunnites. Moreover, Azerbaijanis for many centuries have accepted Persian culture--the state culture--as their own, even though ethnically they are Turkic and speak a dialect of Turkish. Many of the great Iranian dynasties--including the greatest, the Safavid dynasty--have been Turkic, and Azerbaijani nobility have always been accepted at an equal level with Persian nobility. Today, many prominent Iranians are Azerbaijanis. While the Azerbaijanis have had to make concessions regarding the use of their distinct language and the teaching of their own history, they are for the most part well-integrated into Persian society, and most consider themselves Iranians.

Since the 1920s, there have been several Azerbaijan "independence movements," although one must approach the appraisal of these movements with caution. For the most part, they were the products of Soviet attempts to influence particular Iranian policy decisions by creating a specter of internal unrest among Iranian Azerbaijanis, which the Soviets then could control. This was the general pattern of events surrounding Sheik Mohammed Khiabani's National Democratic Party in 1920, Kuchik Khan's Soviet Socialist Republic of Ghilan in 1921 and Ja'far Pishihvari's Democratic Party of Azerbaijan in the 1940s. There can be no doubt that the participants in these different movements sought

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more autonomy within the Iranian state or outright separation from it, but there is little evidence of mass support for the movements.

Not surprisingly, each movement collapsed when the Soviets withdrew support--including military support. In the case of Pishihvari, the Soviets abandoned him to his fate when they successfully exacted oil concessions from the Iranian government. This long experience suggests that the Soviets are not interested in an Azerbaijani independence movement for its own sake, perhaps from fear that what happens in Iranian Azerbaijan could be transmitted across the border to Soviet Azerbaijan.

There has been no acknowledgment to date of Soviet involvement in the current Azerbaijani protest, and judging from the swift escalation of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, it is difficult to imagine why the Politburo would want to risk destabilizing another part of the Soviet border with Asia by intriguing in Iranian Azerbaijan.

Rather, the current round of Azerbaijani protests appears to have been suggested by the protests of other ethnic minorities--a kind of bandwagon effect--and carried to arms by the personal feuding of two old men, Ayatollah Khomeini and the religious leader of Iranian Azerbaijan, Ayatollah Kazem Shariat-Madari. The Ayatollahs' mutual antipathy is clearly based in part on rivalry for leadership of the Islamic revolution, a position Shariat-Madari believes should be his because he is older than Khomeini and assisted the younger man to attain his standing as an ayatollah. That each man should lay claim to a loyal group of followers--even to the point of armed conflict--is perfectly within the Shia tradition of emulation for ayatollahs and unquestioning support of them.

It would seem to matter little that on most of the fundamental issues regarding the establishment of an Islamic republic, the two men are reported to be in concert. The armed attack on Shariat-Madari's house in Qom several days ago by Khomeini partisans was an unpardonable provocation to those who follow the Azerbaijani leader, and they responded in kind.

Khomeini's charge that the Azerbaijanis supporting Shariat-Madari "were opposed to Islam from the very first day" is unlikely to cause

anything but amusement from the objects of the attack, all of whom probably are fervently committed to Shiism. Nor is his charge that these renegades are "corrupters of Islam" likely to stir much more resentment than if one Catholic accused another of being a bad Christian. But similar blasts at Kurds, Baluchis or Turkmen, who are Sunni Muslims, will probably prove to be much more serious.

By accusing Sunnites of undermining his Islamic revolution, and by implication of perverting Islam itself, Khomeini faces the real danger of forcing open a schism that lies at the very heart of Islamic civilization, the Shia-Sunni split. To date, Khomeini has judiciously confined himself to speaking of the "brotherhood of Islam," benignly avoiding mention of a subject that every Muslim knows lurks just beneath the surface. One slip of his acerbic tongue could bring this house of cards down, sending non-Shia ethnic minorities into open opposition to participation in a new Iranian state and costing Khomeini the moral support of most of the world's Muslims, who are Sunni.

All dissenting ethnic groups have stressed that their immediate objective is to gain more cultural, linguistic and political autonomy within an Iranian state. There have been no outright calls for national separatism, although some factions of Kurds and Baluchis are known to favor this course. For them, demands for broader autonomy within an Iranian federation may be tactical moves designed to secure a forward position in their fight for national independence. These may be sound tactics and undoubtedly will produce some permanent concessions from whatever government eventually assumes power in Tehran.

However, national independence for these groups appears no more feasible now than it did before Khomeini. This would require the concurrence and cooperation of many governments, most of which are themselves unstable or unwilling to act. Still, if conflicts between the rebelling minorities and the Persian center continue to escalate, demands for total national independence will undoubtedly be heard, especially from the Kurds.

The situation could be complicated still further if minority ethnic groups were to ally against Khomeini. At the present time it is difficult to imagine any long-term minority alliances because

the minorities are themselves divided by religion, language, history and geography.

In the short run, however, the threat of minority alliances against the Persians may force more significant and more rapid concessions from Khomeini and his successors. It is probably for this reason that Ayatollah Ezzedin Hosseini, the spiritual and political leader of Iran's Kurds, has stated that the revolution must go on until all major ethnic groups in Iran win a larger measure of autonomy, implying that what is good for one is good for all and that the minorities must be ready to stand together to achieve their individual objectives.

For Iran's ethnic minorities, Khomeini's Islamic revolution offers an exceptionally fluid environment in which they can press for their own demands with some hope of realizing them. Thus, the situation should be seen for what it is: a chance to achieve political objectives. While most of the individuals who compose the different dissenting groups are devout Muslims, they are not in sympathy with Khomeini's brand of Islam or his concept of Islamic state which would concentrate power in the hands of a few religious figures. Whatever their grievances under the shah, the ethnic minorities, including the Shia Azerbaijanis, understand that they stand to gain nothing from such a political arrangement. In fact, their rights and privileges might be circumscribed even further. Hence their eagerness to make their respective cases before Khomeini can consolidate his power and insist on the implementation of his Islamic constitution.

Civil War between Persians and non-Persians is a possibility, but more moderate voices around Khomeini will probably not allow the situation to come to that. By now it is clear that the Iranian army is incapable of holding the minorities in check; therefore, the Khomeini forces will have to accede to some minority demands.

With the minorities in armed opposition, the state cannot be reconstituted. Furthermore, excessive military activity in crucial border areas is an invitation for foreign intervention, most logically from the Soviet Union. If civil war does occur, the likely contenders are the political left and the devout Muslim right, a conflict that will take place largely in the major cities.

The Iran that emerges from these upheavals will be much different from that of the shah's time. If a new state can be built, it will be one in which minority ethnic groups play a more important role in the governance of their own lives and the management of state affairs. Regional power centers in Kurdistan, Khuzistan, Azerbaijan and Baluchistan will be in a better position to demand political, cultural and economic concessions of the Iranian state, for, among other reasons, the much wider distribution of arms in recent months gives them the power to do so, or at least to cause the government in Tehran serious difficulties.

International realignments are likely to structure the way in which Tehran treats important minorities still further. According to some reports, for example, Iraq, long the implacable enemy of Kurdish autonomy movements, is sending aid to Iran's Kurds. Azerbaijanis in Turkey have indicated their support for their brethren in Iran. In the east, Baluchis undoubtedly will be affected by the fighting in Afghanistan and upheavals in Pakistan. And, of course, looming over all of this is the Soviet Union, which shares Azerbaijanis, Kurds and Turkmen with Iran. Should Soviet leaders feel inclined to promote internal turmoil in Iran or even to intervene militarily, it is safe to assume that they will do so through a minority nationality under the guise of "restoring peace" or of supporting a "fraternal national liberation movement."

Western statesmen will be forced to come to grips with these new realities if they hope to influence events and to reassert their own national interests in this region of the world. Moreover, a commitment to become more adept in ethnic politics should not end with Iran, as ethnic unrest there is symptomatic of the much larger phenomenon of ethnic self-assertiveness worldwide. Similar patterns are evident in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Canada, the Philippines, Western Europe, the Soviet Union and elsewhere. This is not by definition a menacing trend; it will become so if we fail to understand it.

