Iran is not a Persian monolith, as it is often portrayed. Owing to waves of migration and foreign invasion over its long history, the Iranian plateau has become home to a diverse assortment of people speaking a range of languages and adhering to numerous creeds. The “Iranian” languages spoken in Iran include Persian, Kurdish, Luri, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Tat and Talish. But there are also Turkic languages such as Azeri and Turkmen, and Semitic languages such as Arabic, Hebrew and Assyrian. Likewise, Iranian citizens profess many different religious beliefs, including the dominant Shi’i Islam, but also Sunni Islam and several kinds of Christianity.

Out of this mix of linguistic and religious groups, however, only a few have been designated as “minority” or “ethnic.” These are the Azeris, the Turkish-speaking Shi’a in the northwestern province of Azerbaijan; the Sunni Turks of the northeast; the mostly Sunni Kurds; the Arabs of Khuzestan; and the Baluch of the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan. The diversity of the rest of the Iranian population is usually ignored in “ethnic” inventories of the country. Apart from a few tribal groups, everyone else is lumped together in the vague category of “Persian.”

In comparison with other multi-ethnic states in the region, however, Iran’s national identity has been coherent and stable. Through British and Russian occupation, the Shah’s
authoritarian rule and the tumult of the 1979 revolution, there have been revolts organized along ethnic lines, but these have not bedeviled the state as much as their counterparts in Turkey and Iraq. That history, along with the essentially non-ethnic character of many “ethnic” grievances under the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic, might tempt one to conclude that Iran does not face an ethnic problem. This is not exactly right.

Under the Islamic Republic, and particularly in recent years, ethnic politics have gained a new salience. The Islamic universalism of the revolutionaries undercut the dominance of Iranian nationalism. More recently, the greater press freedoms permitted at the height of Iran’s reformist moment of 1997–2004 allowed for more public expression of ethnic identities and demands. How these demands will fare today, with the indefinite suspension of reform under the hardline presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and with Iran’s increased international isolation, is an open and worrisome question.

Border Politics

The torrent of separatist nationalist aspirations unleashed by World War I did not affect Iran nearly as much as it did the Ottoman Empire and Czarist Russia. With its long tradition of statehood and deeply rooted sense of national identity, Iran managed to preserve its territorial integrity.

Arabs, Kurds, Azeris, Turkmen and Baluch were not indifferent to the new ethno-nationalist movements across Iran’s borders, but they did not take root at this time.

Nationalist agitation among the Kurdish tribes of the former Ottoman Empire grew in opposition to the creation of a republic in Turkey strongly identified with Turkish nationalism. In the southern parts of the Kurdish region, the efforts of British officials to fashion a purely Arab entity in Mesopotamia lent a nationalist disposition to the Kurdish resistance in Iraq and contributed to a sense of Kurdishness.\(^1\) “Azeri” identity originated in the attempts of a number of Caucasian Muslim intellectuals to formulate a concept of national identity. Assisted by decisive ideological and military support from the Young Turks, by the end of World War I these efforts bore fruit and a new state called Azerbaijan was established in the Caucasus.\(^2\)

On the other side of the hill, so to speak, the Kurdish parts of Iran and the Turkish-speaking province of Azerbaijan did not go through this process of ethnic or national identity formation. The creation of a modern, highly centralized state by Reza Shah Pahlavi did encounter widespread resistance from traditional leaders in the provinces, almost all of whom had their power base among the “ethnic” groups. But none of these conflicts assumed a distinct ethnic expression.\(^3\) The Kurdish tribal leaders of Iran were aware of developments abroad, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan, and a handful of Kurdish activists tried to promote a trans-tribal solidarity, but to little avail.\(^4\) The tribal nature of Kurdish identity held fast. The fate of Azeri identity in Iran was no different. The swift reincorporation of the Republic of Azerbaijan into the Soviet orbit by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s curtailed the further development of nationalism there, and there had been little time for it to reverberate in Iranian Azerbaijan.\(^5\)

World War II brought upheavals. Reza Shah was deposed and exiled by invading British and Soviet forces in 1941, leaving the country seething with resentment. While poverty, famine and Reza Shah’s arbitrary rule were the main cause, some provincial elites also resented the previous regime’s promotion of a narrowly defined Iranian identity that neglected the country’s ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity.\(^6\) But the formation of ethnic identity still required an external stimulus.

The end of World War II provided it, as the Leninist concept of the “right of nations to self-determination” came to guide Moscow’s foreign policy. The Red Army, which occupied the northern half of Iran, imported a large mission of experts from Soviet Azerbaijan and started to promote a sense of Azeri nationalism.\(^7\) A similar strategy—though on a much smaller scale—was initiated in the Kurdish areas of occupied Iran.\(^8\) This policy climaxed in the creation of autonomous governments in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan in 1945, under the guise of “liberating the Kurds and the Azeris from the oppression of the Persians.” After extensive
negotiations between Tehran and Moscow, and owing partly to the firm stand of the United States, the Soviets withdrew their troops, and it did not take long for their puppet governments to disintegrate. But the Soviet monopoly on ethnic politics in Iran remained intact; the “right of nations to self-determination” provided the ideological framework, while Moscow continued to support the remnants of the nationalist movements.9

In view of the decisive role of external support for such movements, pre-revolutionary Iran normally sought a “diplomatic” solution for occasional ethnic problems. In the early 1930s, Iran, Iraq and Turkey came to a general agreement to refrain from manipulating ethnic and tribal groups against each other. As a result, the Turkish government reined in pan-Turkish agitation, while the Iranian did their best to contain Kurdish nationalism, which had designated the Arabs and the Turks as its main adversaries.10 After its 1958 coup, Iraq adopted a more radical attitude toward its eastern neighbor, promoting pan-Arab sentiment among the Arabs of Khuzestan, leading Tehran to support the rebellion of the Barzani Kurds in Iraq. But Iran and Turkey upheld this accord until the end of the Cold War.

The regime’s Islamic universalism dealt a heavy blow to bulwarks of Iranian identity—particularly Iranian nationalism—in the process encouraging ethnic identity.

refrain from manipulating ethnic and tribal groups against each other. As a result, the Turkish government reined in pan-Turkish agitation, while the Iranian did their best to contain Kurdish nationalism, which had designated the Arabs and the Turks as its main adversaries. After its 1958 coup, Iraq adopted a more radical attitude toward its eastern neighbor, promoting pan-Arab sentiment among the Arabs of Khuzestan, leading Tehran to support the rebellion of the Barzani Kurds in Iraq. But Iran and Turkey upheld this accord until the end of the Cold War.

Ethnic Resurgence

In the turmoil of the Islamic Revolution, there were more serious, but unavailing attempts to stir up ethnic politics. The Soviet Union, the traditional patron, was pursuing its policies through other means and those Iranian leftist groups that were eager to play on ethnicity to weaken the Islamic Republic were not strong enough to do so.11 Only as Iranian relations with Iraq deteriorated toward war were ethnic issues set aflame. In Khuzestan, where the Iraqis propped up a number of separatist groups, and in Kurdistan, where some opponents of the Islamic Republic sought the backing of Baghdad, Iraq tried to follow in the Soviets’ footsteps.12

Although the Islamic Republic managed to suppress most of the “non-Islamic” forces driving the revolution, at the same time, and probably inadvertently, it laid the groundwork for the eventual resurgence of ethnic politics on a much more solid base later on. The new regime’s attempts to promote Islamic universalism dealt a heavy blow to bulwarks of Iranian identity—particularly Iranian nationalism. Besides symbolic acts such as dropping the Iranian national insignia of the lion and the sun, and attempts by hardliners to destroy such historical sites as Persepolis, the new regime also undertook a general revision of Iranian history. The history of Iran, particularly the pre-Islamic era, was condemned as an unending cycle of repression and subjugation, while building blocks of modern Iranian nationalism such as secular education were denounced as “Pahlavi ploys.” In the process, the idea of Persian as a “national” language binding together the different ethnic groups of Iran was also branded a “Pahlavi ploy,” and came under sustained criticism from ethnic activists. As a result, it was not only a new set of Islamic values that vied to replace Iranian nationalism, but a multitude of local and ethnic identities as well.13 A number of external developments have hastened this process: the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, the reemergence of an independent Republic of Azerbaijan, and the creation of a Kurdish safe haven in Iraq, particularly in the aftermath of the US-led invasion.

Another inadvertent consequence of the Islamic Republic’s promotion of an ardent Shi’i identity was a backlash in the Sunni areas of Iran. In Azerbaijan, and among Shi’i Arabs of Khuzestan and the Shi’i Kurds of Kermanshah, Bijar and Qorveh, this new emphasis did serve to strengthen a sense of communal unity, but at the same time it alienated the Sunni Kurds, Baluch and Turkmen. Alongside the increasing pull toward Iraqi Kurdistan among the Sunni Kurds, in regions such as Baluchistan, this resentment has provided a breeding ground for Sunni fundamentalism with clear links to the “Wahhabi” madrasas of Pakistan.

“Fars”

Although the mounting prominence of ethnic politics dates to the early years of the Islamic Republic, it was only after the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and the slow liberalization of society that ethnic politics found a relatively open and clear manifestation. The main carriers of these ideas were the array of local newspapers that appeared in the provinces, especially newspapers and magazines published at universities, which are usually exempt from the regulations that bind the mainstream press. Most of these newspapers adopted a distinct ethnic stance. Their coverage blamed an omnipresent, oppressive center—a Persian-speaking entity, “Fars”—for grievances such as pervasive poverty and economic underdevelopment, negligible local participation in administration, and the restrictions imposed on local languages. The press found an ideological complement in the plethora of local histories, literary studies and folkloric studies based on local languages and costumes that were also published in the years after 1997.
Gradually, Iranian ethnic groups began to raise a number of common demands upon the state. One of the most important was the protection of local languages and cultures, especially in school curricula. Other grievances concerned lack of equal opportunities in employment and career advancement, the excessive centralization of administrative power, and the share of national revenue allocated to the provinces.14

It is mostly during election season that these grievances get a proper hearing. Ethnic advocacy groups or the members of Parliament for the affected regions form ad hoc alliances to put their demands forward, though the life span of these alliances is short. Recent elections indicate perceptible voting patterns based on ethnic identity. During presidential races, for example, the Sunni regions of Kurdistan cast an overwhelming vote for Ahmad Tavakoli, a relatively obscure rival of President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in 1993, then voted heavily for Khatami in 1997 and 2001, before abstaining in large numbers in 2005. A similar cohesion can be perceived in the mainly Sunni Sistan and Baluchestan, where in 2005 voters favored the reformist candidate Mustafa Moin at the behest of their religious leaders. But as the case of Mohsen Mehralizadeh in the 2005 election indicates, adopting a noticeably ethnic stance does not necessarily ensure electoral success. He emphasized a sense of “Azeriness” in his campaign, winning many votes in heavily Azeri provinces, but failing to break through on the national level.

As the question of ethnicity has not yet attained its proper position in the mainstream of national politics, it has found most vocal expression in a host of insignificant, but radical opposition groups, usually based abroad and therefore of uncertain political standing in Iran.

Price of Stalled Reform

Contemporary ethnic politics in Iran is, in a sense, the offspring of the Islamic Republic. The constitution of the Islamic Republic has specific provisions guaranteeing equal rights to minority groups, such as the rights to practice minority religions and use minority languages in schools and the media and education. Hence most ethnic advocates have believed that concerted activism within the system will suffice for the eventual realization of their demands. The frequent rhetoric of the authorities criticizing Iranian nationalism, and stressing the fundamental equality of all Muslims regardless of ethnicity and race, was also very heartening. During their 1997–2004 ascendency, many reformists in Parliament were willing to endorse ethnic demands. But the slackening, if not total blockage, of the pace of reform, crystallized in the defeat of the reformists in the June 2005 presidential elections, mean that prospects for pursuing resolution of the ethnic question through parliamentary means are not that bright. The Iranian authorities, indeed, could revert to policies of old, whereby ethnic grievances were resolved through a combination of diplomacy and police action.

As long as ethnic politics were driven more by external than internal causes, the policies of old could succeed. With Iraqi Kurdistan gaining near total autonomy from Baghdad and the new lease on life for Azeri nationalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, external factors may again encourage ethnic politics in Iran. But the fact is that the ethnic question in Iran can no longer be considered as just an external phenomenon, and in any case Iran is now so isolated in international politics that diplomacy will be ineffective. The state can no longer get away with simply branding provincial disturbances as foreign plots that have to be dealt with by force. Yet that is what the state tried to do in response to riots that broke out in Khuzestan in April 2005 following the publication of a letter, attributed to former Vice President Ali Abtahi, that called for the forcible relocation of the local Arab population. A police crackdown was also the sole response to demonstrations that shook Kurdistan a few months later in protest of a police killing of a youth in Sanandaj, the center of Iranian Kurdistan.

For the US, therefore, the temptation to use the ethnic lever against the Islamic Republic might prove irresistible. Strangely enough, it is the neo-conservatives, formerly the most implacable enemies of the Soviet Union in Washington, who have shown the most interest in this old Soviet tactic. In October 2005, the American Enterprise Institute hosted a forum called “The Unknown Iran: Another Case for Federalism?” and featuring representatives from Kurdish, Azeri and Baluch opposition groups in exile. The danger is that the approaches of hardliners in Washington and Tehran will reinforce each other.

Endnotes

4 McDowell, pp. 214-228.
9 Nissman, pp. 41-63.
14 For a collection of these demands, see Tribun [Sweden] 3–6 (Spring 1998–Winter 2001).