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CSIS Caucasus Project Meeting Notes
Azerbaijani Turks of Iran: Will They Lead a Revolution Again?
Dr. Mahmoudali Chehregani
August 8, 2002

On July 12 President George Bush clearly stated his “dual track” Iran policy “based on moral clarity.” The policy calls on the U.S. to specify the destructive policies of the Iranian regime, while at the same time engage the Iranian people who want increased democracy and freedom in their lives.

When talking about Iran, many people only think of the ethnically Persian population of Iran. Iran has 11 different ethnic groups, of which the Azerbaijani Turks are considered to be anywhere between 16 to 34 million of Iran’s total population of 67 million. The Azerbaijanis have historically been in the forefront of revolutions in Iran. Since 1995 the national awareness movement in Iran has been gaining momentum, with some voices calling for unification with North Azerbaijan (Republic of Azerbaijan), and others in favor of increased cooperation among the Turkic world.

One of the most prominent Azerbaijani Iranian activists is Dr. Mahmoudali Chehregani, the leader of GAMOH (National Movement of South Azerbaijan). Chehregani ran in Iran’s 1995 parliamentary elections and received nearly 600,000 votes in Tebriz. Since then he has been jailed three times and severely tortured. He left Iran eight months ago to inform the international community of the developments inside Iran, and has visited several European cities, as well as Azerbaijan and Turkey. In the U.S., he has met with representatives of the Administration, Congress, media, and research institutes.

CSIS Caucasus Project hosted Dr. Chehregani on August 8 to learn about his movement and also the situation of the Azerbaijanis in Iran.

Dr. Mahmoudali Chehregani

Iranian Islam

- The Iranian Islamic regime considers Khomeini as God’s representative on earth. In this belief:
 - The concept of God is metaphysical; he chose prophet Muhammad as his representative on earth
 - Muhammad then chose the twelve imams of Shia Islam
 - The last Shia imam Muhammad Mahdi is hidden but still alive
 - Ayatollah Khomeini and later Khomeini were chosen by the last imam
 - Therefore the Ayatollah is divinely chosen and is the Velayete Faqih, a person appointed by Allah to lead the faithful
 - Whoever opposes the Velayete Faqih opposes Allah, which is heresy and therefore punishable by death
- This belief does not leave any room for reform, and this regime can never be compatible with democracy



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Positive Impact of Globalization

- The last decade has brought globalization and exposed Iranian youth to democracy and introduced new ways to circumvent oppressive rule
- The Islamic regime then came up with a theater of “reform” to prolong their rule
- In front of the curtain, there is a democracy and reform “show” for the Western world and the Iranian youth to convince them that there is conflict between the reformers and the hardliners
- However, the only and real power in Iran is behind the curtain. Khomeini has full control and there is strong agreement and conformity within the regime
- Khatami cannot do anything Khomeini would oppose

Message to United States

- 70 million Iranians are grateful to President George Bush for his new Iran policy and his July 12 statement.
- He gave us enormous emotional support in our struggle for democracy and human rights. We are less scared of the regime now.
- We have seen how Americans have liberated people in Afghanistan from an oppressive regime, spending its own money and risking the lives of its own sons

Europe still fooled

- When in Europe (in Denmark, Switzerland, France, and Germany) I said the Iranian regime is evil and that while Europe is promoting a “dialogue of civilizations” Iran is killing our culture
- We need emotional and financial support to “tear down the curtain”

Azerbaijani Turks and Iranian Revolutions

- The Iranian government fears that the Azerbaijani Turks would once again lead a pro-democracy uprising against the regime
- Last century saw four major revolutions in Iran, all of which were led by Azerbaijani Turks
- 1905-1911—Constitutional Revolution began in Tebriz, then center of South Azerbaijan
- 1920—Pro-democracy revolution under Sheykh Muhammed Khyabbani
 - Also began in Tebriz and South Azerbaijan was independent for 6 months
 - Soviet Union and Iran jointly suppressed this state, killings tens of thousands of Azerbaijani Turks
- 1945-46—the Azeri Turks were able to establish a state in South Azerbaijan
 - This state lasted one year and again, the Soviet Union and Iran put it down and in the process killed 40,000 people
 - Within that one year Turkish radio stations were established and Tebriz began to become an urban center
 - Turkish schools were opened and books began to be published in Azerbaijani Turkish



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- After suppressing the revolution, the Iranian government gathered all of the Turkish publications that had been published during the year and publicly burned them
- All the activists who worked for the South Azerbaijani state were hunted down and persecuted
- As a result the Azerbaijani rights movement went into hibernation for 50 years
- 1979—Islamic Revolution was spearheaded by the Azerbaijani Turkish majority in Tebriz
 - Islamic governance had not been tried before and Azerbaijani Turks believed that the Shah's regime was so repressive that an inclusive democratic regime would establish democracy under Allah
 - The result was worse than before

History of Azerbaijani Turks in Iran

- Since Islam's introduction to the region Azerbaijani Turks have been in power in Iran
- Until 70 years ago Azerbaijani Turks made up 51.5% of the population of Iran
- Despite the fact that Azerbaijani Turkish population has increased we are told by the regime that it has actually decreased to 25%
- We believe Azerbaijani Turks are the majority ethnic group in Iran today with about 32 million—this number goes up to 34 million with the 2 million Turkmen living near the Caspian
 - 20 million live in South Azerbaijan
 - 10 million in Tehran—the capital is 70% Azerbaijani Turks
 - 2 million Kashkaii Turks
 - 2 million Horasan Turks

Negative Assimilation

- Even though we are the largest group in Iran, all nine state television channels are in Farsi
- All 100 radio stations are in Farsi
- We gave the world many writers and poets, including Dede Gorgud (Turkic world's equivalent of Homer); UNESCO declared 1999 to be the Year of Dede Gorgud.
- In the Iranian university system there are 200 linguistic departments for Farsi, but not a single one for Turkish. Not even in Tebriz
- Even Iran's uncivilized and undemocratic constitution says that all languages of minorities may be practiced outside the public sphere
- Article 15 of the Iranian constitution allows Azerbaijani Turkish to be used in South Azerbaijan, but this law only exists on paper
- Shah Pahlavi called the Azerbaijani Turks "Donkeys"
- Fars chauvinists still use this slur today
- Pahlavi banned the Azerbaijani Turkish language from schools and would literally muzzle students who tried to use the language, or who used it by accident
- Our only fault is wanting to live like humans and speak our language



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History of the GAMOH Movement

- I was elected to the Majlis in 1995 with 600,000 votes in Tebriz
- My platform was bringing democracy to Iran, and under article 15, attaining cultural and linguistic rights for the Azerbaijani Turks
- I protested the practices of the regime which violated our rights and demanded that all articles of the constitution that respect our rights be upheld
- I went to schools, homes, mosques and other public places to say that this regime is abusing Islam; Islam does not allow torture
- The regime believed I was going to “awaken” South Azerbaijan
- Officials of the regime wanted me to resign on Tebriz radio, but I would not
- I was then arrested and tortured—I was hit on the head with the butt of a rifle, which damaged my neurological nerve. It has left me partially paralyzed on the left side of my body and blind in my left eye
- They said that they would stop the torture if I declared on television that I was an agent of Turkey and Israel
- I was jailed three times which led Amnesty International to condemn Iran two years in a row for human rights violations.
- Thanks to the international attention, and a letter from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, I was finally let out of jail
- Because I did not give in, the National Movement of South Azerbaijan (GAMOH) has become very strong over the last 7 years
- Once a year we have a gathering at Babek castle (Babek is a liberty symbol of South Azerbaijan)
- This year the festival was held on July 4-5 and about 1.2 million people showed up despite ten checkpoints established by the regime to discourage attendees
- Our multi-million member movement is spearheaded by 700,000 Azerbaijani Turkish students
- For the first time in Iran’s history, the Azerbaijani Turkish students and intellectual elites are separating themselves from the Farsi elite
- Our movement has communication lines with Kurds, Arabs, and other minorities that have been assimilated by the dominant Farsi culture
- We have established over 1,000 committees in towns, villages and cities
- These committees address the cultural needs of the Azerbaijani Turk population
- After six years of only using our pens and tongues, some in the movement are complaining that all we do is talk
 - Some of them have begun to form “defense” committees

Goals of the movement:

- We support the territorial integrity of Iran and do not seek unification with Republic of Azerbaijan or Turkey
- We do not want to live under the Islamic regime; we want democracy in Iran
- We envision Iran in a federalist form that respects the rights of Azerbaijani Turks



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- Hopefully in the future our border with Republic of Azerbaijan will be like that of EU countries

Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan

- Iran never wanted the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan and worked with the Soviet Union/Russia to prevent the Republic of Azerbaijan from becoming a state
- Iran attempts to weaken the Republic of Azerbaijan because a peaceful and prosperous North Azerbaijan will serve as an example to South Azerbaijan
- Iran is building mosques in Azerbaijani villages to draw Azerbaijan closer to Iran
- Many Iranian spies are placed in Azerbaijani villages
- If not for the United States and Turkey, Iran would occupy Azerbaijan's section of the Caspian Sea

Q&A

You claim that in Iran Azeris are discriminated against, but Khomeini himself is an Azeri.

- Because he is a mullah and claims to be a Sayed (direct descendent of the Prophet), he may as well be an Arab
- He was raised in the Farsi language and culture and is not really an Azeri

You said clearly that you are not in favor of division of Iran, yet you described oppression against the ethnic groups. What will the future then look like—how can you reconcile the two?

- Unification between South and North Azerbaijan would cause regional problems for years to come
- We have thought about it and concluded that the world is becoming smaller every day
- We hope that one day the region can become like the EU
- At the same time, Iran may become a second Balkans if problems are not addressed soon—there is growing tension
- Tolerance and patience might wear out in one or two years and we may have to resort to violence
- Our national honor has been violated and we cannot put up with it for too much longer

What is the choice for Azeris then?

- We hope for a democratic and federal Iran like Germany or the United States—the Iranian flag with the Azerbaijani flag underneath
- We want the ability to express our cultural traditions
- We will struggle to prevent the destruction of Iran; there are 10 million Azerbaijanis living in the area that is historically not Azerbaijan and we would not want to see active conflict

I read on your website that re-unification with the Republic of Azerbaijan is your movement's ultimate goal, please address the discrepancy between the website and your



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statement here today. Also, the plight of your people is too common in the region. Do you see any similarities between your struggle and the struggle of the Kurds in Turkey?

- I have never said unification is our goal
- But I cannot predict what will happen
 - Russia divided Azerbaijan in 1813
 - If and when Azerbaijani Turks decide to reunite no one can stop it
- The Germans and Vietnamese reunited and it is not unreasonable to believe that the Azerbaijani Turks will unite
- Reunification, however, is not our goal
- We are seeking cultural and linguistic rights for the Azerbaijani Turks within Iran's territorial integrity
- I am not a UN human rights official so I can not judge other conflicts with authority, but whenever cultural rights are denied it is bad
- However, our situation in Iran is the same as Turks in Turkey—we are the majority, not minority. The Kurds in Turkey are more like the Farsi in Iran.

You seek U.S. assistance for your struggle but with the Axis of Evil statement it will be difficult. How can assistance come to your country?

- President Bush's statement of July 12 (in which he said the U.S. will no longer attempt to engage the "reformers" and will only work with dissidents) scared the Iranian regime and strengthened the student movement
- His words gave us enormous emotional support
- Radio broadcasts from Radio Free Europe (RFE) and the Voice of America (VOA) help a lot, however we need more broadcasts
 - RFE broadcasts are jammed, but still we get it 15 minutes a day
 - VOA we only get 30 minutes a week—we tape the broadcasts and distribute the cassettes in schools, from homes to homes

How much do the people in South Azerbaijan know of the pro-democracy leaders in North Azerbaijan? How much is known about Elchibey and that he was the only democratically elected president of Azerbaijan? How is information circulated between North and South Azerbaijan?

- The border between the two Azerbaijanis is open and one can cross to within 40 km of either country without a visa or passport
- Every day 50,000 Azerbaijanis cross the border and exchange information orally
- Million of Southern Azerbaijanis are within the immediate vicinity of the border and have access to North Azerbaijani and Turkish radio and TV broadcasts

Officials of the Republic of Azerbaijan say that they will not interfere in the internal affairs of Iran—what help can they provide to you?

- I am pleased with President Aliyev's policy on this issue; we have not met personally, but there is no need



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- I was allowed to enter Azerbaijan and thousands of supporters were allowed to greet me at the airport
- On the second day of my visit, National Security Minister took responsibility for my safety
- I met with all of the television channels and media outlets and even members of Aliyev's party
- I agree that the Republic of Azerbaijan should not interfere in Iran's affairs and I hope that Iran will stop interfering in Azerbaijan's affairs

It seems that you do not believe that there is a real solution and that is why you always refer to the Balkans. Do you want third party involvement?

- We want as many parties as possible to get involved; we have 11 ethnicities
- We are in touch with the leaders of many of most of these groups, including the pro-democratic Farsi leaders
- One year ago we began forming committees in the villages in the city—for now their main weapon is their pens and tongues
- My fear is that if the international community does not follow what is going in Iran, the increasing tension can lead to bloodshed
- But I do believe that with international attention, these ethnicities can all achieve their goals without bloodshed