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IRAN AND THE CASPIAN REGION:
THE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF IRANIAN POLICY

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Svante E. Cornell

Students of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran note the existing dichotomy between a mainly, and increasingly, pragmatic orientation and elements of Islamic fervor, as exemplified by Iranian supports for various radical groups in the Levant and in Turkey. Likewise, observers correctly note that Iran's main strategic concern, and indeed the chief threat to its territorial, military and economic security, lie in the Persian Gulf region. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emerging unrest on its northern border has deflected a significant amount of Iranian interest from the Gulf, and required it to spend considerable energy on devising a strategy toward the Caucasus, Central Asia and Russia. But whereas warnings were issued in the west in the early 1990s concerning the danger of an 'Iranian model' taking over Central Asia, the last ten years have shown a different development. The Islamic Republic's policies have centered on the Caucasus, Russia and the Caspian sea, and give interesting insights into the priorities and policy choices made in Tehran – and often defies conventional wisdom. How is it that the self-proclaimed defender of Islamic values and politics has aligned itself against Azerbaijan and tilted toward Armenia in the conflict between these states? How is it that Tehran has developed a strategic partnership with Moscow that has led it to defend and cover up Moscow's brutal suppression of a small Muslim nation's rebellion in the Russian North Caucasus? Additional issues of concern are Iran's policies in the Caspian sea and the recent trends in Iran's northern relations, which seem to indicate an increasing activism.

Iran's northern policy can hardly be said to have evolved into a coherent strategy in the decade that has passed since the collapse of the USSR. Disagreements within the ruling circles in Tehran have ensured a certain level of mixed signals. Yet, in spite of these differences, a transition of power in the mid-1990s, and domestic unrest, Iranian policy has proven remarkably stable and durable. Three main facets of this policy are identifiable: First, concern over the emergence of an Azerbaijani state on its immediate border, leading to a gradual

tilt toward Armenia in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict; second, a dramatic improvement in security relations with Russia that, despite a shaky basis, have proven enduring and in fact developed into a strategic partnership; and third, a desire to influence the development of oil and gas resources in the Caspian sea, seeking to avoid Turkish influence over pipeline routes and ensure a maximum level of Iranian participation – a policy that has accentuated in the later years.

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: RESPONDING TO CONFLICT

As far as Iran was concerned, the dissolution of the Soviet Union produced numerous opportunities in the middle and long term. But the immediate consequences were overwhelmingly disturbing. This was the case especially in the Caucasus, which posed two challenges to Iranian security, one containable and short-term, and the other long-term but immensely larger. The short-term threat was the spillover of regional conflicts into Iran's territory. The Afghan war in the 1980s had lead to the influx of close to three million refugees that put a considerable burden on Iran's economy and society. The emerging conflicts in the Caucasus and Central Asia put a potential threat of a similar kind.[1] More pointedly, the two countries most affected by conflict were also the ones with the strongest cultural affinities with Iran: Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. Whereas Tajiks are the only large nation in the region speaking a Persian tongue, and therefore attract solidarity from Iran, Tajikistan is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, and moreover does not share a border with Iran. Whereas the Tajik civil war did affect Iran and Tehran did involve in mediation and humanitarian aid to Tajikistan, the turmoil in Southern Central Asia hardly posed any direct security threat to Iran.[2] But the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, which had broken out long before the dissolution of the USSR, was another matter. The Azerbaijanis speak a Turkic language closely connected to Anatolian Turkish, thereby having a clear connection to Turkey, but are by far (over 75%) Shi'a Muslims, making Azerbaijan one of only a very few countries in the world sharing Iran's majority religion. Moreover, Armenia and Azerbaijan both share a border with Iran, and much of the fighting between the two states in 1993 took place close to the Iranian frontier, leading to refugee flows of Azeris displaced by an Armenian offensive on the territory of Azerbaijan. As such, the disorder emanating from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the South Caucasus had a direct bearing on Iran. Not only was Iran subjected to a potential refugee flow of tens of thousands of Azeris, but it was also threatened by a regional conflict in which Russia was clearly involved but in which Turkey was also being drawn in. When Marshal Shaposhnikov, head of the CIS chiefs of staff, famously warned Turkey of a Third World War should it get involved in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict,[3] this potential for uncontrolled escalation in its neighborhood was not lost on Iran. As a result, Iran was one of the first countries to offer its good offices to mediate the conflict and achieved several abortive cease-fires in 1993. Iran's efforts at mediation were nevertheless hampered both by developments in the Caucasus and the international community's determination to keep it out of the Caucasian conflict. Armenia used the Iranian-mediated cease-fires as a way of buying time and regrouping forces before resuming its offensive; the Azerbaijani government was highly suspicious of Iran, as will be discussed below; and the UN early on delegated the efforts to solve the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict to the OSCE—an organization to which Iran, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, was not a member.[4] The escalation of conflict in the Caucasus, in particular Armenian attacks on the Azerbaijani

[1] Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, 'Iran's Role as a Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis', in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters, Brussels: VUBPRess, 1996.

[2] See Mohiaddin Mesbahi, 'Tajikistan, Iran, andd the Politics of the "Islamic Factor"', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 16 no. 2, 1997, pp. 141-159.

[3] *Turkish Daily News*, 21 May 1992.

[4] See Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000, pp. 328-330; Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, 'Iran's Role as a Mediator in the Ngorno-Karabakh Crisis', in Bruno Coppieters, ed., *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels: VUBPress, 1996.

exclave Nakhchivan on the Iranian border, actually led Iranian forces to briefly cross over the Araxes border river on more than one occasion in 1993, while increasing diplomatic pressure on Armenia to contain its offensive. This period coincided with the formative phase of Iranian policy in the Caucasus, which more than anything else meant to assess the impact in the short as well as long term of a development that could not but have a fundamental impact on Iran: the creation of an independent Azerbaijani state to its North.

THE AZERBAIJAN QUESTION

The area inhabited by Azerbaijani Turks in fact lies not only in what is today the republic of Azerbaijan, but in large tracts of northern Iran. Indeed, the term 'Azerbaijan' was the designation of a geographical area on both sides of the river Araxes long before, in the twentieth century, it became the ethnonym of a distinct self-conscious people, referred to variously as the Azeris, Azerbaijanis, or Azerbaijani Turks. Estimates vary regarding the distribution of the Azerbaijanis, but it is beyond doubt that Azerbaijanis in Iran form at least twice the number that exist in the independent state of Azerbaijan. Estimates close to the Iranian government mention a number of 15 million; nationalist Azerbaijani sources talk of close to 30 million. The real number is likely somewhere between these two. The figure of 20 million often mentioned in the literature is certainly no exaggeration, and the Azerbaijanis are by far the largest minority in Iran, followed by Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens and Baluchis. They are also the perhaps most well-integrated minority in the country, given their long attachment to Iran and the Shi'a factor common with the Persian population. Conventional wisdom indeed stresses the strength of their Iranian identity, and the weakness of their ethnic Turkic or Azerbaijani identity. To a certain extent, this is true, considering the fact that the representation of ethnic Azeris in the economy, Ulema, and to a lesser extent the political spheres in Iran is high. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is a native of the Khameneh city of the West Azerbaijan province, and is known to be half-Azerbaijani, and to speak Azeri. This illustrates the fact that much like the Kurds in Turkey, Azeris in Iran are not hampered by their ethnic origin, as long as they assume and integrate into the language and culture of the majority population. Large parts of the Tehran Bazaar is in Azerbaijani hands, and Azerbaijanis are numerous in the high ranks of the armed forces. The strength of Iranian identity among Azerbaijanis is derived from the fact that the Safavid dynasty, which ruled Iran from the early 16th century, was Azerbaijani in origin – visitors to Baku will find Shah Ismail Khatai, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, as an important element of republican Azerbaijani identity.

This said, recent studies have re-evaluated the conventional neglect of the distinct identity of the Azerbaijanis in Iran.[5] These studies point to a recurrent political expression of distinct Azerbaijani identity throughout the post-World War II era in Iran. During the revolution, the strong following of the ethnic Azeri Ayatollah Shari'at Madari in Tabriz and other parts of Iranian Azerbaijan has been considered to be linked to a perception among Azerbaijanis of Shari'at Madari as a representative of the interests of the Azerbaijanis.[6] It is reasonably clear that a separate and distinct Azerbaijani identity has been growing among the citizens of north-western Iran. Whereas hardly representing an immediate threat to the regime in 1991, the size, and economic as well as strategic significance of the Azerbaijani minority was certainly an issue Iran treated with utmost caution.

In this context, the emergence of an independent Azerbaijani state in 1991 could not have been greeted with anything but dismay in the ruling circles in Iran. Whether irredentism would grow strong there or not, the very existence of Azerbaijani statehood was

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[5] Brenda Shaffer, 'The formation of Azerbaijani Collective Identity in Iran, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 28 no. 3., 2000, pp. 449-478; Nasib Nassibli, *Iranda Azérbaycan Mésélési*, Baku: Ay-Ulduz Néshriyatí, 1997; Nassibli, 'The Azerbaijan Question in Iran: A Crucial Question for Iran's Future', *Caspian Crossroads*, Winter 1998; Alireza Ashgarzadeh, *The Rise and Fall of South Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1945-46): A Look at Hegemony, Racism, and Center-Periphery Relations in Contemporary Iran*, Paper presented at a seminar on Race and Racism, University of Toronto, December 1999.

[6] Shaffer, op. cit., pp. 454-459.

set to act as a magnet for significant numbers of Azerbaijanis in the South, and would in the long term ensure that distinct Azerbaijani identity in Iran would not wither away, but quite to the contrary, gradually increase. To be added to this, the nascent Azerbaijani republic was endowed with relatively large oil resources for a comparatively small population, and thus had the potential of acquiring significant wealth, whereas Iran has been in a state of economic decay due to war, a stagnant economy – and, significantly, U.S.-imposed economic sanctions and international ostracism. Hence much in the same way that Turkey has made it a foreign policy priority to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq, Iran would have preferred the continuation of the pattern established with the 1828 Turkmanchai treaty which confirmed the Russian conquest of substantial Azeri-populated areas.

As the war over Karabakh escalated, Iran was domestically torn in devising a policy. Religious and ethnic Azerbaijani forces advocated support to the brethren in Azerbaijan against the Armenian infidel.[7] Meanwhile, the foreign policy establishment saw the weakening of the republic of Azerbaijan as concomitant to Iranian national interest, and therefore pursued a policy of tacit support for Armenia in the conflict. Whereas Iranian vacillation and hesitation in the first years of the 1990s can be ascribed to these internal divisions, the general direction of Tehran's policy soon became clear. with the exception of instances where it became necessary to restore a balance by preventing Armenia from turning the region into chaos (since too much suffering and chaos in Azerbaijan would risk arousing Iranian public opinion) Tehran used the conflict to pressure Baku. Iran served as Armenia's main purveyor of electricity and goods, and after the Armenian conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, Iranian trucks have been supplying most of the secessionist enclave's needs.[8] The decisive factor tilting Tehran towards Yerevan was nevertheless the policies of the Popular Front government in Baku, which ruled Azerbaijan from mid-1992 until June 1993. Led by President Abulfaz Elçibey, the Popular Front government oriented Azerbaijan toward Turkey and the west, and gradually developed a vehemently anti-Russian and anti-Iranian policy. Elçibey himself was a convinced secularist, despised Iran's theocracy and openly criticized Iran's denial of cultural rights to the Azerbaijani minority. Worse, Elçibey before ascending to the presidency spoke of Iran as a 'doomed state', and openly flouted the idea of reunification of Azerbaijan. In a sense, Elçibey and his nationalist policies was precisely the Azerbaijani government of Tehran's worst fears, and pushed Iran further toward Armenia. Indeed, Iranian economic support played an important role in keeping Armenia alive at a time of economic embargo from Turkey, and of course, the severing of trade links with Azerbaijan. Should Iran have sided with Azerbaijan and joined the joint embargo on Armenia, the latter would have had to rely only on supplies through Georgia.

After Elçibey's overthrow and Heydar Aliyev's arrival to the presidency, relations improved somewhat, but only on the surface. While refraining from nationalist rhetoric, Aliyev mainly pursued and refined the foreign policy inaugurated by the Popular Front, and tension with Iran has remained. Whereas the Iranian-Armenian cooperation has blossomed in political, economic, scientific and cultural spheres, Baku repeatedly blames Tehran for supporting Armenia against it.[9] Aliyev has personally voiced the offense felt by Azerbaijanis over Iran's close ties with Armenia.[10] As recently as in March 2001, President Aliyev walked out of a meeting with an Iranian minister after the latter informed of Iran's plans to restore a bridge over the Araxes between Iran and Armenian-

[7] Ramezanzadeh, op. cit., p. 168.

[8] Eg. *International Herald Tribune*, 20 September 1996, and numerous eyewitness accounts of trucks with Iranian license plates in and on way to Nagorno-Karabakh.

[9] For an example for a diplomatic row between Baku and Tehran, see Sanobar Shermatova, 'Harsh Words between Iran and Azerbaijan', *Moscow News*, 7 April 1996.

[10] Eg. 'President Aliyev Says Iranian Relations with Armenia Offend Azerbaijan' *Turan* news agency, Baku, 3 August 1999. (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts)

occupied territories of Azerbaijan.[11] President Aliyev's planned visit to Tehran has been postponed a number of times. A crucial issue of discord is the Azerbaijani aim to open a consulate in Tabriz, basically stated since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two states.[12] One of Iran's largest cities, Tabriz is the historical capital of Iranian Azerbaijan. Whereas Iran opened a consulate in Nakhchivan in 1993, Azerbaijan's request has not been granted and remains a contention. In 1999, Iran's ambassador to Baku stated that the issue of opening a consulate will be resolved only after a package of proposals from Iran has been accepted – hardly standard diplomatic procedure.[13] As will be discussed in detail below, the issue of the Caspian sea's legal regime has been another major source of disagreement between the two states. Meanwhile, whereas the Azerbaijani media and opposition often discuss the issue of 'South Azerbaijan' and make anti-Iranian comments, the Azerbaijani government has maintained a relatively clear line of non-interference in Iranian Azerbaijan. However, official Azerbaijani sources regularly complain of Iranian intelligence activity on Azerbaijani territory, especially alleged support for radical Shi'a movements in Azerbaijan.[14] Iran's apprehension toward Azerbaijan has not been attenuated by Azerbaijan's openly pro-western policy and its close links to Israel. Even worse from Tehran's perspective, Azerbaijan has courted the United States and NATO, including subsequently downplayed statements of a presidential advisor in 1999 and a defense minister in 2001 inviting NATO to set up bases in Azerbaijan. Iran's rhetoric has not laid far behind that of the Azerbaijani government. Iranian voices have at various occasions stated that the reunification of Azerbaijan should indeed take place, but that it should occur as the return of the presently independent Azerbaijan to its historic motherland -- Iran.[15] Official voices have nevertheless generally been less provocative. Yet, on a visit to the city of Qerm near the border with Azerbaijan, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei recently told a local crowd that 'beyond these border there are Muslim brothers like you who love Islam, the clergy, and the Islamic Republic'. Yet two days earlier Khamenei had struck a different tone, saying that Iran 'will forcefully defend its border regions, including the Caspian Sea borders … against any aggressors'.[16]

A decade since Azerbaijan's independence, the issue of Iranian Azerbaijan has acquired increased significance in Iran. Azerbaijani political activity has increased rapidly.[17] However, to Azerbaijan's role should be added the major impact on Iranian Azerbaijanis that Turkish culture has had, specifically through satellite television beamed to Iran. The depiction of 'Turks', (the principal self-identification of Iranian Azerbaijanis) as highly educated, wealthy and proud individuals disseminated by Turkish private and public television, contrasts sharply with the Persian perception of Turks as a lower culture inculcated on Iranian Azerbaijanis.[18] In sum, the influence of Turkish culture and Azerbaijani statehood has radically increased self-awareness of Iranian Azerbaijanis. Politically, this has taken the shape of movements to improve cultural rights and political participation. Azerbaijanis have demanded schooling in the Azerbaijani language, and various degrees of local autonomy. Tehran's answer to most Azerbaijani demands has been stern. The unofficial leader of the

[11] 'Iranian Diplomat's Stance Makes Azeri President Interrupt Meeting', ANS TV, Baku, 29 March 2001.

[12] RFE/RL, 14 February 2000; IRNA, 19 January 2001.

[13] ANS TV, Baku, in Azeri, 1500 GMT 30 July 1999.

[14] Most recently, see a report in the official newspaper *Yeni Azérbaycan*¸ 7 April 2001. Available in English as 'Azeri Paper Details Iranian Intelligence Activities during Month of Muharram', *BBC Monitoring Service* , 7 April 2001.

[15] Ayatollah Mohsen Shabestary, Friday prayer leader in Tabriz appointed by Ayatollah Khamenei, stated that 'The Azerbaijan Republic was once ours. So, if there is any talk of unification of the two Azerbaijans, it is they who should come back to Iran', *Sobh* Daily (Tehran), 28 May 1996, quoted in *Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities: Discrimination in Law and Practice*, New York: Human Rights Watch /Middle East, 1997.

[16] *Agence France Presse*, 27 July 2000.

[17] Shaffer, op. cit.., pp. 460-463; Ashgarzadeh, p. 24.

[18] Shaffer, op. cit., pp. 462-463.

Azerbaijani community, Tehran University professor Mahmud Ali Chehregani, has twice been prevented from assuming a parliamentary seat. In 1996, after receiving overwhelming support from the electorate in the first round of voting, his name was summarily removed from the ballot in the second round – leading to popular demonstrations containing 40,000 people in Tabriz, which were suppressed by force.[19] In 2000, Chehregani was simply denied registration. This again led to large riots in Tabriz, with several thousand protesters. Tehran answered by deploying troops on the streets; eyewitnesses reported that Tabriz for a few days looked like 1978-79 revolution. Apparently, Tehran is intent on suppressing Azerbaijani claims with force. If this policy continues, the radicalization of segments of the Azeri population is inevitable, and will lead the to the escalation of an issue that could have been solved through a relatively low amount of concessions. Needless to say, escalation of tension in Iranian Azerbaijan cannot fail to involve the republic of Azerbaijan – irrespective of the stance of the Azerbaijani government.

THE RUSSIAN-IRANIAN ALLIANCE

The end of the cold war led to several realignments of power in the Middle East. A major one was the Turkish-Israeli entente; of equal significance was the Russian-Iranian strategic partnership.[20] A Russian-Iranian rapprochement occurred as early as 1989, when Iranian president Rafsanjani visited Moscow and concluded numerous agreements, and laid the foundation of the Russo-Iranian relationship. This relationship bases itself on a number of shared foreign policy interests and mutual gains. These include opposition to American hegemony, the containment of Azerbaijan, opposition to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, preventing Turkish inroads into the former Soviet South, and mutually beneficial military and nuclear cooperation.[21] Earlier, the two countries shared positions on the Caspian Sea, but this is no longer the case, as is seen below.

Opposition to American hegemony is an ideological and rhetorical element in the Russo-Iranian cooperation. In practice, US sanctions on and isolation of Iran increased Tehran's need of finding friendly, and influential, allies. Its relationship with Russia, its links to China as well as fresh signs of a possible entente with India[22] are elements in this: Tehran has been increasingly successful in breaking out of its international isolation by forging lasting and improving ties with Asian great powers. All of the Islamic Republic's newly found partners see Iran as a geopolitical lynchpin in the future of Eurasia; in contrast to smaller regional states near Iran's borders, they see no threats but significant opportunities, both political and economic, emanating from Iran.

A main element of Russian-Iranian relations has been military and nuclear cooperation. Under international sanctions but in a volatile region, Iran has been desperately looking for a secure and stable supply of weaponry. Meanwhile, whereas Russia has very little to offer in terms of trade, the major exception to this is arms. The sale of Russian weaponry has hence become a major source of hard currency earnings for the hardly pressed Russian budget. In this context, Iran and Russia were ideal trading partners. Iran has received various types of weaponry from Russia, including submarines and top-of-the-range fighter jets. Likewise, Russia was able and willing to export nuclear technology to Iran, including various forms of 'dual-use' technology, which could be of assistance in Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program. This Russian policy has been incomprehensible to some observers, given that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons does not lie in Russia's national interests. However, this can be explained by the

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[19] *Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities: Discrimination in Law and Practice*, New York: Human Rights Watch / Middle East, 1997; Shaffer, op. cit., pp. 465-466.

[20] Galia Golan, *Russia and Iran: A Strategic Partnership*, London: RIIA, 1998.

[21] For a most comprehensive survey of Russo-Iranian relations, see Robert O. Freedman, 'Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 4 no. 2, Summer 2000.

[22] On India, see eg. Rifaat Hussein, 'The Changing Indo-Iran Relations', *The News International* (Islamabad), 22 April 2001. (www.jang.com.pk/thenews)

rather short-sighted nature of Russian foreign policy, the Russian need for hard currency, and the repeated evidence of foreign policy decisions during the 1990s that have been or may still become harmful for Russia. For example, Russia supported the *de facto* secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia and of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan; undoubtedly, the emergence of secessionist mini-states in the South Caucasus increased the perceived feasibility, in the eyes of the Chechen leadership, of establishing an independent Chechnya. Likewise there is circumstantial evidence that elements in the Russian defense ministry are manipulating the threat of radical Islam in Central Asia in order to keep the Central Asian states in Moscow's orbit. With 20% of Russia's population being Muslim, this is indeed a perilous policy, as was the support for secessionist minorities in the South Caucasus. This short-sightedness is related to the *ad hoc* and tactical character of Russian foreign-policy making that characterized the Yeltsin period, but seems to be remaining under Vladimir Putin's presidency although a reining in of different arms of the Russian state has occurred in the past year. But various lobbies, including the atomic energy ministry, retain a strong influence on foreign policy making. The atomic energy ministry, under its head Yevgeny Adamov, has been an influential advocate of Russian nuclear technology sales to Iran.[23] As a result, Russia has ignored – and increasingly made a point of ignoring – American protests to its nuclear deals with Iran. The construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactor has been speeded up with the arrival of Russian technicians, and the reactor is scheduled to be completed in 2003.[24] It should also be noted that numerous Russian scientists and researchers in the nuclear field but also in the realms of biological and chemical warfare are on Tehran's payroll while remaining in their laboratories in Russia – a fact which has been allowed to go on basically unchecked by Russian authorities.

An additional area of concord between Moscow and Tehran has been the war in Afghanistan. For different reasons, both Iran and Russia have felt it necessary to contain and counteract the ruling Taliban movement that controls ca. 80-90% of Afghanistan's territory.[25] Russia fears that Taliban consolidation over Afghanistan would pose a danger of Islamic radicalization in Central Asia and Muslim republics in Russia such as Dagestan, Tatarstan or Bashkortostan. Whereas certain groups in Moscow are willing to use the Islamic threat to Central Asia as a short-term tactical instrument to regain influence over Central Asian states, the bulk of the Russian foreign policy establishment does view Islamic radicalism as a significant long-term threat. Iran's apprehension with the Taliban movement stems mainly from the vehemently anti-Shi'a sectarian character of the Taliban, which it inherits from the Orthodox Deobandi school of Islam that has been mixed with the Salafi'i (often referred to as Wahhabi) current of thought emanating from Sa'udi Arabia and Pashtun tribal codes to form the peculiar brand of Islam espoused by the Taliban.[26] The Taliban reject Shi'a Islam and have repressed the Shi'a, ethnic Hazara minority of Afghanistan more harshly than other minorities. The fact that the Afghan war has taken on an increased ethnic component has also affected Iran as the minorities with cultural or religious links to Iran, the Hazara and the Tajiks, are in opposition to the Taliban. Moreover, under the Taliban, the drugs trade originating in Afghanistan has become an increasingly serious problem for Iran. Iran has adopted a tough stance on narcotics, lauded by international drug control

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[23] See Robert O. Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Under Yeltsin and Putin*, unpublished, p. 14.

[24] Viktor Vishniakov, 'Russian-Iranian Relations and Regional Stability, *International Affairs*, (Moscow), vol. 45 no. 1, 1999.

[25] The conventional wisdom that the Taliban controls 95% of Afghanistan's territory is misleading, given that large parts of mountainous central and northern Afghanistan are controlled by neither the Taliban nor the Northern Alliance. In particular, this seems to be the case for large areas of the Hazarajat of central Afghanistan, northwest of Kabul

[26] For an insight into the Taliban movement, see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, London: IB Tauris, 2000.

agencies, and the extent of the problem for the Iranian state is illustrated by the fact that over 3,000 Iranian border guards have been killed on the border with Afghanistan in the last decade. Iran currently deploys thirty thousand border guard to interdict the flow of drugs through Iran. As a result of these considerations, Iran and Russia have cooperated over Afghanistan and coordinate their support to the northern alliance and to its military commander Ahmed Shah Masoud, with whom Iran has reluctantly made peace after a long period of distrust. Iran directly supports the Hazara Hizb-e-Wahdat faction, which controls landlocked areas of the Hazarajat north and west of the city of Bamiyan, and reportedly drops supplies to its allies by air. Concerning Afghanistan, it should be noted that Iran has welcomed the Taliban's recent destruction of large parts of the opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, and according to Taliban sources, Iran is now considering a dialogue with the Taliban and may support the replacement programs to former poppy growers.[27]

Yet another area of agreement between Moscow and Tehran has been the containment of Azerbaijan's independence. Iran's rationale for obstructing Azerbaijan has been dealt with extensively above; as far as Russia is concerned, the containment of Azerbaijan is a crucial component in its policy imperative of retaining exclusive influence over the South Caucasus. Asserting control over Azerbaijan's routes of oil export have hence become a cornerstone of Russia's Caucasian policy. However, whether under the Elçibey or Aliyev governments, Azerbaijan has stuck to a decidedly pro-western foreign policy, which has put it on collision course with both Tehran and Moscow. Moreover, Azerbaijan from the early days of its independence identified Turkey as its main ally. Although relations between Baku and Ankara have not always been unproblematic, it remains the fact that there is a strong level of popular solidarity and feeling of kinship between the two countries, which is replicated at the political level. Moreover, Turkey's membership in NATO, its relations with Israel and, more importantly for Baku, the United States, make it a key ally which shares Azerbaijan's general foreign policy orientation. As such, Azerbaijan's alignment with Turkey was not well received in either Tehran or Moscow. With its increasingly activist foreign policy, its imposing and growing military power, and increasing self-confidence, Turkey is thought to have ambitions to expand its influence in the South Caucasus. Lately, Turkish attention to Georgia has increased dramatically, and at least on the governmental level, Turkish-Georgian relations are as good as Ankara's relations with Baku.[28] Russia and Iran have interpreted this as the formation of a Turkish-Israeli-Georgian-Azerbaijani bloc supported by the United States. This shared perception of the formation of a U.S.-engineered west-east axis from the Mediterranean to the Caspian sea, and overt American support for the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, bypassing both Iran and Russia, aiming to carry Azerbaijani and Kazakhstani oil to the Mediterranean, has further deepened the feeling of commonality between Tehran and Moscow. To counterbalance the said alignment, they have tried to draw Greece, Cyprus, Syria and more successfully, Armenia into a loose alignment of their own.[29] In sum, Tehran and Moscow work together to prevent increased Turkish influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and contain Azerbaijan's independence by available means.

An important question concerns the viability of the Russian-Iranian partnership. Whereas it has evolved and deepened during the 1990s, it seems reasonably clear that Iran and Russia will keep good relations for the foreseeable future. However, observers ponder whether a defrosting of U.S.-Iranian relations will bring a qualitative change in Iranian policy, and decrease its reliance on Moscow. Whereas a

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[27] Author Interview with Seyid Rakhmatullah Hashimi, representative of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban), Washington, March 2001.

[28] See Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, op. cit., pp. 306-310.

[29] On Eurasian geopolitics, see Svante E. Cornell, 'Geopolitics and Strategic Alignments in the Caucasus and Central Asia', *Perceptions*, Summer 1999.

warming of relations between the two antagonists will alter Iran's threat perception, it is unlikely to have dramatic effects on Iranian foreign policy. The Tehran-Moscow link has anchored itself relatively deeply in Iranian foreign policy, and is not solely dependent on America's policy of containment. Indeed, Russia and Iran are likely to continue to cooperate in areas where they share *national* interest: the containment of the Taliban, Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as military and nuclear cooperation. The stability of the relations, despite disagreements regarding the Caspian Sea (discussed below), was recently confirmed by a high-level delegation headed by Iranian President Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khaatami to Moscow in March 2001.

CHECHNYA AND THE IRANIAN 'COVER-UP OPERATION'

Russia's now decade-long conflict with Chechnya has been a thorn in the eye of the Russian-Iranian relationship. This was the case during the 1994-96 war and even more so during the current war, which erupted in September 1999. The conflict in Chechnya put Iran in a difficult position, given the Islamic ideology that lies as a basis of the Islamic Republic. Support for oppressed Muslims is enshrined in the Iranian constitution, whose third article stipulates that Iran has 'the duty of directing all its resources to the following goals: (…) framing the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the mustad'affun [freedom fighters]of the world'.[30] During its heyday of revolutionary zeal in the 1980s, Tehran supported numerous Islamic groups abroad, most famously *Hamas* and the Palestinian *Hizballah*. Yet in spite of dissenting opinions from hard-line clerics in the case of Chechnya, Tehran pursued a very quiet line in its relations with Russia. The issue was relatively low-key during the first Chechen war, where Iran was considerably more preoccupied by the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Moreover, the Islamic element was considerably toned down during first Chechen war. Not so in the second one: quite to the contrary, if the first war was waged with national rhetoric on the part of the Chechens, (Moscow anyway called the Chechens Islamic terrorists from day one) the second war is being fought with an increased Islamic rhetoric. Chechen leaders have proclaimed a *Jihad*, and their propaganda[31] is dominated by Islamic rhetoric and verses from the Holy Qur'an. Moreover, Tehran was this time the head of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which one the one hand put in a difficult position as it had the responsibility to respond to Moscow's actions on behalf of the Islamic world; but on the other hand, this gave Tehran the opportunity to use its position to effectively minimize the role of the OIC as a vehicle of criticism against Russia. At the outset of the conflict, foreign minister Kamal Kharrazzi clearly communicated to Moscow that Tehran considered the war Moscow's internal affair, but as the brutality of Moscow's war became increasingly clear, Tehran has increased its level of criticism, stressing the need for a political solution and the futility of Moscow's tactics.[32] Later Iranian statements deplored 'the continued armed operation by Russia troops' in Chechnya.[33] On behalf of the OIC, Kharrazi told a Russian deputy foreign minister that the continued catastrophe in Chechnya was 'unacceptable to the Muslim world'.[34] Iran was subsequently able to soften the OIC communiqués on the matter, as only a few Islamic countries took up an active interest in the conflict: Malaysia, Pakistan and Sa'udi Arabia are the countries in the Islamic world that have paid most

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[30] Article 3, § 16 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[31] See eg. http://www.kavkaz.org, ans http://www.qoqaz.net. (Sites loyal to field commanders Basayev and Khattab, respectively). The elected Chechen government of Aslan Maskhadov does refer to the fighters as Mujahideen, but has a less Islamic, more nationalist orientation. (http://www.chechengovernment.com).

[32] See A. William Samii, 'Iran and Chechnya: Realpolitik at Work', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 8 no. 1, March 2001, for an excellent overview of Iranian policy toward the Chechen conflict.

[33] *RIA-Novosti*, 6 October 1999, cited in *RFE/RL Iran Report*, vol. 2 no. 41, 18 October 1999.

[34] See Freedman, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s', op. cit,., p. 75, citing 'OIC calls for end to Chechen fighting: Muslim world concerned about loss of life in Chechnya,' *Ettela'at*, January 28, 2000.

attention to the Russian carnage in Chechnya.[35] Iran's policy was received by Chechens and by forces concerned with the brutality of Russia's war effort as a cover up of its Russian ally's dirty war. The London-based *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, close to Sa'udi Arabian ruling circles, in an editorial slammed Iran for being guilty of 'stabbing the Chechen Republic in the back'.[36] The Iranian regime's covering-up operation has certainly been appreciated in Moscow and may have brought it additional benefits in its dealings with Moscow in other issues. However, it is likely to have been costly domestically, perhaps alienating radical clerics already weary of excessive use of 'realpolitik' as opposed to a more principled foreign policy. Yet, it is conceivable that the Salafi'i (and thereby anti-Shi'a) leanings of certain Chechen field commanders, and the link between Chechnya and the anti-Iranian Taliban regime (which remains to date the single government to have recognized Chechnya's independence), have contributed to cooling pro-Chechen feelings in Iranian leading circles -- much in the same way as the increasingly Islamic character of the Chechen war has alienated Turkey from supporting the Chechens to the extent it tacitly or indirectly did in the 1996-99 war. In any case, Iran's attitude to the Chechen conflict has reaffirmed the predominance of realpolitik in Iranian foreign policy -- but to the cost of certain damage to Iran's image in the Islamic world as a defender of the faith.

THE CASPIAN SEA

The issue of the legal status of the Caspian Sea could be considered one of the issues that pulled Moscow and Tehran closer together in the early 1990s. Russia and Iran at that time both passionately opposed the sectoral delimitation of the Caspian Sea. With little oil in their would-be sectors of the Caspian, Russia and Iran argued the Law of the Sea is not applicable in the Caspian since it is in fact not a sea but a giant lake. Hence, the resources of the sea should be exploited in a condominium, ideally through joint exploitation and equal sharing of the revenues. However, this view was rejected most vehemently by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, who retaliated that the Caspian Sea's lack of outlets to the oceans in no way interdicts the application of the Law of the Sea there. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan hence claimed Exclusive Economic Zones of up to 200 nautical miles or median lines, and the division of the Caspian Sea into national sectors. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan initially demanded the division into national sectors of both the bottom and its resources, and the waters themselves. Turkmenistan's position has been shifting repeatedly according to political criteria (Turkmenistan in any case has most of its resources under its shores, thereby less vulnerable to the legal regime of the Caspian), and is therefore difficult to ascertain. Whereas Russia and Iran pressed for the condominium, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan unilaterally began exploiting seabed resources in consortia with mainly western oil multinationals. Tehran and Moscow both called these deals, including a 1994 $7 billion Azerbaijani oil deal dubbed the 'Contract of the Century', null and void as they lacked legal basis. Yet oil multinationals seemed less than disturbed by Moscow's and Tehran's stances, and moved on with the exploitation projects. Of course, the participation of the Russian state-owned company Lukoil in a consortium the Russian foreign ministry deemed illegal played a role in attenuating the fears of

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[35] Malaysia is home to one of Chechen President Maskhadov's sons; (*Agence France Presse*, 7 May 2000) See also 'Malaysia Concerned over Russian Action in Chechnya', *Reuters*, 13 April 2000; Pakistan has voiced strong protests against Russia's conduct (Press Release by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan on the military action in Chechnya, 15 November 1999, http://www.un.int/pakistan/14991115.html) allowed former Chechen president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev to visit Pakistan (*The Hindu*, 6 February 2000); is blamed by Russia (and, predictably, India) of training Chechen rebels. 'Russia Slams Pakistan over Chechnya', *Indian Reporter*, 26 November 1999; Also the two highly polemical pieces: Yossef Bodansky, 'Chechnya: The Mujahideen Factor', http://www.freeman.org/m_online/bodansky/chechnya.htm; Vinod Anand, 'Export of Holy Terror from Pakistan and Afghanistan', *Strategic Analysis* (New Delhi) vol. 24 no. 3, June 2000.

[36] *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 27 January 2000, cited in *RFE/RL Iran Report*, vol. 3 no. 6, 7 February 2000.

oil multinationals.[37] Iranian companies have also, to a lesser extent, participated in international consortia in the Caspian, including the large Shah-Deniz gas project in Azerbaijan. However, Moscow's position on the Caspian Sea gradually weakened and in mid-1998, Moscow accepted the division of the bottom and subsoil of the Caspian sea, in a separate agreement with Kazakhstan.[38] In sum, Moscow made a U-turn on an issue which it had been pressing with significant enthusiasm for the better part of a decade. In a sense, Moscow implicitly recognized it had lost one round in the game on Caspian oil. This naturally angered Iran, as it was left alone defending the principle of 'proportional exploitation' and 'fair shares' of the wealth, a principle Iran reiterated as recently as late March 2001.[39]

During 2000 and the early months of 2001, the quest for an agreement among the five littoral states regarding the legal regime of the Caspian Sea gathered speed. In particular, Russian diplomacy was very active in trying to achieve a settlement. Russia now advocated the division of the subsoil into national sectors; 12-mile territorial waters; and joint use of the water and its surface -- significantly enabling Russia, the sole naval power in the Caspian, to rule the waves; and various mechanisms for dispute resolution, including a 50-50 division of deposits claimed by two countries, as is the case between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. At first, Russia had little success in promoting this solution, nevertheless, separate diplomatic efforts succeeded in having Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan commit to the principles of an upcoming agreement. And indeed, by late 2000, diplomacy moved into a higher gear with Turkmenistan and Iran moving into the discussions.[40] President Khatami called for a speedy resolution of the Caspian Sea issues, and Russia and Iran signed a joint communiqué in January.[41] Several rounds of negotiations ate the deputy-minister level were inaugurated, and Turkmenistan's President Saparmuead Niyazov offered to host a five-way Presidential summit in early March to finalize the elements and if possible reach an agreement on the Caspian, including energy resources, shipping, fishing, and ecological conservation. Negotiations in Tehran led to agreement among the five states on a set of issues, with Turkmenistan moving closer to the close positions of Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.[42] However, Iran remained committed to the condominium principle. This led to a postponement of the planned March meeting until April at Tehran's request.[43] but following President Khatami's trip to Moscow, Iran announced it would not attend the April summit, leading to its postponement until Fall.

Obviously, Iran is feeling increasingly isolated in issues related to the Caspian legal regime. It is clear that a common position is achievable among the four remaining littoral states, with only Iran refusing some of its basic principles. However, it seems that Iran has realized that a condominium solution is no longer realistic. Instead, Iran has decided to make the best of the situation. Since no legitimate agreement can be signed without Tehran's participation, Iran has a leverage on the other states, who hope to settle the issue so that disputed oilfields can be

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[37] Russia's influential ministry of fuel and energy has constantly pushed for a 'more realistic' approach to the Caspian Sea, in order to ensure the participation of Russian companies in oil deals that would, anyway, be implemented unilaterally. See Robert Barylski, 'Russia, the West, and the Caspian Energy Hub', in *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 49 no. 2, Spring 1995. For an analysis of Russian policy and Caspian oil, see Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers--A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001, pp. 359-361.

[38] 'Kazakhstan, Russia Sign agreements on Caspian, "Eternal Friendship"', *NIS Observed*, vol. 3 no. 11, 3 August 1998; *Jamestown Monitor*, 30 June 1998.

[39] *Xinhua News Agency*, 28 March 2001.

[40] 'Turkmenistan, Iran Say They Share Close Views on Caspian Sovereignty Issue', *Interfax*, 27 November 2000.

[41] 'Russia, Iran Begin to Prepare Joint Declaration on Caspian - Kalyuzhny', *Interfax*, 15 January 2001; 'Iran Calls for Speedy Resolution of Caspian sea Status', *Xinhua*, 10 January 2001.

[42] Robert Cutler, 'Five States (Still) in Search for a Caspian Sea Legal Regime', *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 25 April 2001.

[43] 'Iran Delays Caspian Summit as Oil Search Dispute Brews', *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 28 February 2001.

explored. In this context, the geography of the Caspian acquires importance. According to standard modes of median line delimitation, Iran would receive the smallest sector of the Caspian sea, which would amount to ca. 13% of the sea. Moreover, the Iranian sector would mostly consist of deep-sea waters, where exploration and drilling are costly. Hence, Iran seems to be hedging its bets on achieving a larger share of the sea, and has hinted it would consider an 'equitable' division granting it 20% of the Caspian.[44] Moreover, Iran is showing an increased level of activism. Whereas it has for economic and principal reasons not attempted to exploit its Caspian waters until recently, Iran is now unilaterally exploring areas of the Caspian for oil and gas -- areas that would not necessarily fall within Iran's sector of the Caspian, depending on what percentage the Iranian sector would consist of. The rationale for Iran's recent activity is decidedly political -- Iran can drill for oil in the Gulf at a fraction of the cost it would incur in the deep-water southern Caspian.[45] In fact, Iranian policy seems to replicate the stance successfully taken by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in the early 1990s: exploring and drilling for oil unilaterally in what they considered their sector of the Caspian. Iran's Oil minister Bijan Namdar-Zanganeh recently stated that Iran would not 'wait for other littoral states to find a legal status and start exploring for oil and gas itself'.[46] And indeed, Iran has concluded an agreement with the Swedish firm GVA through the Iranian company Sadra for the construction of an oil platform to be placed in an unspecified location in the southwestern Caspian Sea.[47] This first Caspian drilling on the part of Iran is likely to take place on territory Azerbaijan claims within its sector; sources informed of the project note that Azerbaijan is planning to drill for oil with Royal Dutch Shell at a location less than a kilometer from the planned Iranian site.[48] Given the lack of delimitation between the Azerbaijani and Iranian sectors of the Caspian, this issue may come to constitute yet another apple of discord between Tehran and Baku. All in all, Iran now seems to be acting unilaterally, hoping to extract concessions on the size of its eventual sector of the Caspian sea. This is likely to cause friction with Azerbaijan, and possible also Turkmenistan, who are less than enthusiastic to cede territory to Iran. In this context, an imminent resolution of the legal status of the Caspian Sea is not to be expected.

CONCLUSION

Ten years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Tehran still struggles with defining its policy toward the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is torn between the ideological nature of its regime, and the necessities of pragmatic pursuit of short-term national interests. More often than not, these two determinants of Iranian foreign policy have clashed as concerns the formulation of its northern policy. In the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, ideology and public opinion would have dictated support for Azerbaijan; Realpolitik would have demanded support for Armenia for the sole purpose of undermining the potential Azerbaijani threat. In the Russian-Chechen war, public opinion and ideology would equally emphatically have tilted Iranian policy to the Chechen side; however national interests dictated support for Moscow. At each instance of conflict between ideology and public opinion on the one hand and Realpolitik on the other, the latter has come out victorious.

Tehran's policy toward the Caucasus and Central Asia hence support the assessment of Iran as a 'normal' actor in international politics. The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is much less determined by the revolutionary zeal of an Islamic revolution than by the pragmatic interest as perceived by the present ruling élite. Hence, much like other actors in world politics, Iran is pursuing a largely reactive policy toward the Caucasus and Central Asia - as one observer put it, Iran is condemned to react, but unable to truly influence the

[44] Ibid.; 'Iran Reiterates Stance on Legal Regime of Caspian Sea, *Xinhua*, 28 March 2001.

[45] 'Iran's Caspian Oil Finds Will Require Deep Drilling', *Middle east Economic Digest*, 1 September 2001.

[46] 'Iran Against Caspian Summit until Clarification of Legal Regime', *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 18 March 2001.

[47] 'Iran, Sweden to Cooperate in Caspian Oil Exploration', *Xinhua*, 10 March 2001.

[48] Personal Communication, Washington D.C., March 2001.

developments to its North.[49] As a result Tehran is continuously pursuing short-term tactical interests, and is allowing them to form its strategy in the region. Whereas this certainly dispels prejudices of Iran's 'fundamentalist' and destabilizing role in international politics, it is another question whether these policies actually promote stability either in Iran or in the region as a whole in the longer term. The foreign policy of Iran toward the Caucasus is largely determined by the Persian-dominated ruling élite's seeks to maintain its hegemony within the Iranian borders and to containing threats to its rule emanating from abroad. The containment of Azerbaijan is a logical result of this policy; whereas it does indeed suit Iran's short-term interests to prevent a strong and attractive Azerbaijani republic from developing, this policy betrays a certain myopia on the part of the ruling circles in Tehran. In the long run, Iran cannot afford to ignore the growing sense of ethnonational identity among its large Azerbaijani population. Whereas this issue would be relatively easy to accommodate within the framework of a liberalized and participatory Iranian state, the regime's obvious unwillingness to conduct serious reform impairs a reassessment or the center's policies toward its Azerbaijani minority, which has been allowed to determine much of its policy toward the north. In the long run, Tehran's present policies are likely to accentuate rather than attenuate the Azerbaijan question in Iran, in the worst case turning it into a large-scale conflagration that will undermine Iranian statehood as well as regional stability.

As concerns Iran's relationship with Russia, this is an obvious consequence of the international ostracism and consequent vulnerability that Iran has been subjected to by Washington. Tehran's support for various forms of international terrorism may be beyond doubt; yet as in the case of Cuba, Washington's containment policies are likely to deepen the intransigence of the current regime rather than to lead to significant reform. As long as American policy toward Iran, and the region as a whole, is devoid of a clear aim or strategy, Iran is likely to continue to actively strengthen its ties not only to Russia but to other Asian powers including China and India.

In the Caucasus and Caspian, Iran is significantly embroiled in all regional discords: the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, the Caspian Sea issue, and, less so, the Russian-Chechen conflict. In these issues, Iran is relatively unable to exert a positive influence on events, but finds itself forced to act in a manner that may harm its international standing, its image in the region, or even its future interests. Iran remains a major player in the Caucasus and the Caspian. It is capable of preventing a given development from taking place, but mostly unable to bring forward a positive momentum, partly because of its imposed isolation, but also due to its own policy priorities. Yet Iran's role in the region may change drastically in the near future. Its relations with Washington, Moscow, Islamabad, and New Delhi all being in a state of flux, the future of Iranian foreign policy is all but clear. Tehran has the capacity of being a stabilizing factor in the Caucasus and the Caspian region, but has yet to utilize this capacity.

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[49] Fred Halliday, 'Condemned to React, Unable to Influence: Iran and Transcaucasia', in *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, John Wright et. al., eds., London: UCL Press, 1996.

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