

Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity,
Brenda Shaffer. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, ISBN 0-262-69277-5, (paper),
xiii+248 pp., one map, bibliography, index.

The book under review discusses the relationship between Iranian Azerbaijanis and Iran in the context of the rise of the Islamic Republic on the one hand and the (re)establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Caucasus on the other. The author “challenges the view of the mainstream [sic] of contemporary Iranian studies, which contend [sic] that Azerbaijanis in Iran are a ‘well-integrated minority,’ harbor little ‘sense of separate identity,’ and have assimilated into Iranian identity.” (p. 5) The resulting work, however, seems more driven by pan-Azerbaijanist politics.

Thus, in the first chapter, which takes us from the dawn of history to 1920 and the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty, the author declares that the regions on the two banks of the Aras “often interacted culturally as one” and that these territories “were administered together within most of the various empires that ruled the area.” (p. 17) But the articles she cites state exactly the opposite and her claim seems more driven by an urge to prove a primordial unity of this region.

Similarly, in line with the pan-Azerbaijanist dogma that the Safavid dynasty was an “Azerbaijani” dynasty, Shaffer uses a mistranslation by E. Denison Ross of an Iranian chronicle to “prove” that “Shah Isma`il reportedly only learned Persian as a young adult;” in fact the original states that he “enthusiastically studied [or learned lessons from] the Koran and Persian and Arabic books.” The fact that Isma`il wrote in an Iranian dialect, which is mentioned in another of her sources, is overlooked by the author as well.

Moving to modern times, Shaffer has adopted the policy popular among a species of pan-Azerbaijanist scholarship of bashing Ahmad Kasravi, a Tabrizi who became famous as a spokesman for Iranian integral nationalism. She claims that his “ideological convictions and political goals tainted his research on Azerbaijan,” although no examples of this are forthcoming, and regrets that “many researchers base their claims” on his works, although no examples are given. (p. 17) This is a particularly jarring statement in light of her admiring reports from the wilder shores of the nationalist ethnography of the Azerbaijani SSR during the heady years of glasnost. (e.g., pp. 122-123)

The author has much to say about the Caucasian Azerbaijani renaissance of the late nineteenth century, but all of it is from secondary sources by scholars with their own agendas. Thus, Shaffer claims that the journal *Ákinchi* (1875-1878) “caused much controversy on both sides of the Araz.” If this is so, it was not reflected in the journal. It is simply not true that “*Ákinchi* was forced to close down by the Russian authorities, on the premise [sic] that a Turkic-language newspaper should not be published in Russia during the Russian-Ottoman War.” In fact, the journal was forced to close down due to a lack of funds and Caucasian Muslim apathy, something constantly decried by the editor. Moreover, the journal took every opportunity to protest its loyalty to the Tsar and, like much of the Muslim intelligentsia, earnestly supported the Tsarist armies in the fighting.

Of Sattar Khan, who rose up and led Tabriz in a desperate eleven-month battle to save the Iranian constitution, she writes, "Sattar Khan's troops captured Tabriz in the name of the Tabriz Anjuman [Anjoman], and replaced the Iranian flag with the flag of the Tabriz Anjuman. Sattar Khan declared that the 'nation of Azerbaijan' refused to recognize the sovereignty of Mohammad `Ali Shah, and declared Tabriz the temporary capital of Iran." (pp. 40-41)

Sattar Khan's troops did not capture Tabriz in the name of the Anjoman. He led a band of followers within the city to resist coming under Russian "protection" and eventually forced the constitution's enemies to surrender control over the parts of Tabriz they occupied. This was done in the name of the Iranian constitution. There was no "flag of the Tabriz Anjuman" raised in this affair. It is unclear what word Shaffer has in mind when she talks about the "nation of Azerbaijan." If she means "*mellat*," this word was generally used at the time to mean "the people;" thus, *mellat-e Esfahan* meant "the people of Isfahan." History does not record that Sattar Khan publicly "refused to recognize the sovereignty of Mohammad `Ali Shah;" on the contrary, it records him as denying that he was a rebel against the government at all. Nor did he ever declare "Tabriz the temporary capital of Iran."

Shaffer portrays the 1920 revolt of Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani along the political lines of scholarship emanating from Caucasian Azerbaijani academia, although with less control of the facts. For instance, she claims that the sheikh's journal, *Tajaddod*, was bilingual. It was actually in Persian only. She mentions that the sheikh's party had a branch in Baku, but does not mention its paper's full title (as mentioned in two of her sources)—"Azerbaijan, an Inseparable Part of Iran." Along the same lines, she mentions that the sheikh changed the name of the province he now ran to Azadistan, but neglects to provide the context that both friend and foe give: the Caucasian Azerbaijanis had declared their republic to be the republic of Azerbaijan, and the sheikh was thereby repudiating their northern neighbor's invitation to join them. There is no record that "Khiabani decreed the right to use the Azerbaijani language in the province." Such a decree would have been met with incomprehension, since the language had never been banned there. She claims that the sheikh's "insistence on protecting journalists who wrote in Azerbaijani led to an open split with Ahmad Kasravi, who was deported from the province because he criticized the use of the Azerbaijani language in the province." The issues in the split between Kasravi and the sheikh are well-documented and have nothing to do with any language issue; indeed, the sheikh was for Persianizing Azerbaijan. Moreover, Kasravi soon after the time of the sheikh's uprising wrote an article which Shaffer herself cites, in which he called for the revival of Azerbaijani Turkish in Iran. Finally, the author has Reza Khan's forces quelling the sheikh's uprising. The uprising collapsed with the intervention of Mokhber os-Saltaneh with a minimum of force, largely because, by that time, the sheikh popularity had greatly declined.

The next chapter discusses Azerbaijanis under the Pahlavis. Here, the author cites a source as saying that “Reza Shah singled out the Azerbaijanis for special discrimination and economic disadvantages, and cultural repression, possibly to punish them for their part in the Khyabani-led rebellion in 1920.” (p. 48) But her source does not mention Khiabani in this context.

The author appears to argue that the 1946 autonomous government of Azerbaijan was not “a Soviet puppet-state” but “a local phenomenon.” This is a vexed question and more than a declaration by the author was needed here. On the other hand, her claim that “Initially, local support for the provincial government was quite extensive and at first, most of the population supported the measures taken” by the autonomous government is admitted even by its bitterest enemies.

The chapter dealing with Azerbaijan during and after the Islamic Revolution, where it is documented, is documented almost entirely from Russian-language sources. (pp. 80-84). It Muslim People’s Republican Party led by followers of the late Ayatollah Shari’atmadari objected to the way the Islamic revolutionaries in the center were reorganizing the country, calling for a more decentralized system in which the clergy would exercise less control. (p. 90 ff) Shaffer’s is the only sustained analysis of this movement that has appeared in a Western language. But by focusing almost exclusively on the ethnic issue she misses the broader political context in which it unfolded and collapsed. The author’s portrayal of Ayatollah Shari’atmadari is simplistic where it is not just plain wrong. Of his politics, all we learn is that he had some positive feelings about the 1946 autonomous government and that he supported Mosaddeq. In fact, according to Mashallah Razmi’s memoirs of the movement (reviewed elsewhere in the journal), he was prominent in welcoming the Shah’s forces into Azerbaijan to crush the movement, and only gave passive support to Mosaddeq. Moreover, when rioting broke out in Tabriz in the months leading up to the Islamic Revolution, Shari’atmadari used his considerable influence to disperse the movement. He did not object when the army’s APCs and tanks sent to put down the anti-government rioting were festooned with his picture. In closing her discussion of Ayatollah Shari’atmadari, Shaffer discusses a coup plot in which he was allegedly involved. Here, the author reasons, “[T]he idea that Shari’atmadari would actively attempt to take power from Khomeini was completely inconsistent with his strong guiding belief that clerics should not fill political positions, but should guide politicians.” (p. 100) But there is considerable evidence that he was indeed involved in this conspiracy.

The book’s next chapter is on the Republic of Azerbaijan under glasnost, the rise of nationalist ferment there and the Iranian response. The chapter’s strong point is its documentation of the perception in the Republic of Azerbaijan of the situation of Iranian Azerbaijanis and a rise of interest in Azerbaijani Turkish among some Iranian Azerbaijanis, in part in response to the rise of this sentiment on the other side of the Aras River. The discussion of the conflicting identity politics of the Republic of Azerbaijan under Abulfazl Elchibey—characterized by

pan-Turkism—and under Heidar Aliyev—much less ideological—and the politics of the various factions on this subject are helpful, although generally well known. Much more interesting is her section on the Azerbaijani literary revival in Iran during this period, nourished on the one hand by the rise of the Republic of Azerbaijan and on the other by Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's relatively permissive policies. The author also documents the resistance to the limitations on the Azerbaijani language, which were all too present. One interesting observation along these lines is how the proliferation of satellite dishes in Iran led to an increasing audience for television from the Republic of Turkey and a consequent sense of dignity for Iranian Azerbaijanis. (p. 174) She also makes a convincing argument that the re-division of Iranian Azerbaijan proposed in 1992 was motivated by ethno-politics. (p. 174) Also of interest is the discussion of the harassment and detention of Mohammad Chehragani, the supporter of Azerbaijani cultural rights, although it does not go much beyond what can be read in *Human Rights Watch*.

Azerbaijani nationalist ideologues, mainly groups of unknown provenance who are presented here as authorities on the situation in Iranian Azerbaijan, get the last word in this chapter. Does it matter what an unpublished manifesto by The South Azerbaijani Front for Independence or The Azerbaijani Feda'iyin Organization or The South Azerbaijan National Front for Independence has to say? What does the Azerbaijan Liberation Organization represent?

The book concludes with a general discussion about Iran and the politics of identity which are none too startling.

All in all, *Brethren and Borders* makes occasionally plausible generalizations that are however either poorly documented or not documented at all. It is a highly political book on an emotional subject that needs careful, dispassionate analysis. Its chapters on the historical background are full of inaccuracies. Its chapters on current events and trends include a few interesting observations which do not appear in the literature, but most of them are readily available elsewhere.

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