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978-0-521-10473-9 - Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946

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Introduction

When the Germans attacked the USSR in the summer of 1941 and the Soviet government hastily forged an alliance with the Western allies, Iran, despite its declared neutrality, was quickly drawn into the Second World War. Apart from the country's strategic position which made it the obvious route for allied supplies to reach the USSR, Iran had, during the previous decade, developed a close and thriving economic relationship with Germany. This relationship, so valuable to Iran, provided the allies with an excellent reason to overrun the country and turn it over to the war effort. In the autumn of 1941, after the Shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi, had repeatedly procrastinated over the question of expelling the large numbers of Germans then present in the country, Soviet and British troops invaded. The two old rivals, in scenes reminiscent of earlier times when a spheres of influence agreement had been signed to mark out British and Russian interests in Persia, now proceeded to establish zones of occupation in the north and south of the country. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate, to be succeeded by his son, the young, inexperienced and initially pliant, Muhammad Reza. Iran's economy and communications network were soon harnessed to the allied war effort, the country becoming an artery through which millions of tons of goods and supplies were transported to the USSR.

The management of the supply line, and the provision of special assistance to Iran during the war, brought large numbers of American troops and advisers to Iran to add to the already considerable Soviet and British presence. The United States hoped that Iran would provide a model for allied cooperation in the war, and later a testing ground for the principles of the United Nations. Instead it became a battlefield of conflicting interests in which national pride, security considerations, the struggle for control of oil resources and the hearts and minds of the Iranian people all played a part. The war effort provided the pretext for the pursuit of the different national interests of the three great powers, and turned Iran into one of the earliest non-European theatres of the Cold War.

While the allied occupation thrust Iran onto the international stage and foreshadowed a major transformation in the country's external relations, it also opened the way for profound internal changes. The removal of an

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authoritarian ruler paved the way for a 'quasi-parliamentary regime',¹ but the limits of Iran's experiment in democracy were increasingly defined by external interests and pressures. While a new spectrum of political opportunities presented themselves during this period, giving rise to considerable popular expectations, the success or failure of the emerging political groupings was closely connected to the relations which they sustained with foreign powers. Both Britain and the Soviet Union tried to wield their influence to promote parties or individuals likely to favour their respective interests. The result was a polarisation of Iranian politics: on the right were the pro-British or pro-American groups, on the left those who associated with the USSR. There was, however, an important middle ground occupied by a group of independent politicians, their most famous representative being Muhammad Mussadiq, who advocated a non-aligned foreign policy.

This internal power struggle was thus conditioned by the parallel struggle for Persia that developed between Britain, the United States and the USSR. This conflict ranged not only East against West, but also West against West, as the three powers each sought to mark out their stake in postwar Iran. A succession of crises, in large part the product of foreign intervention, with which the Iranian government was ill equipped to deal, led to a final denouement in 1946. The USSR firstly promoted the creation of two autonomous regimes in Iran's northwest province of Azerbaijan, and then refused to withdraw its troops from Iran as stipulated under an agreement signed with Britain and Iran in 1942 until it had won some important concessions from the Iranian government. At this juncture the US government decided to intervene in Iran and teach the USSR an early lesson in containment. The Iranian crisis, which had been quietly simmering for nearly five years, had begun in earnest. The story of the crisis, and its significance both for Iran and for international relations, is the subject of this book.

Until quite recently the 'Iranian' or Azerbaijan crisis of 1946 has been assigned a rather modest place in Iran's political history, and an even more modest place in the annals of Cold War history. Most historians and political scientists, with a few notable exceptions, have dealt with the crisis in no more than a few pages, or at most a chapter, in a broader work on Iran² or the Cold War.³ Some more complete accounts are to be found in different histories of Iran's foreign relations, but many of these are now outdated.⁴ It is surprising that the Iranian crisis should have received relatively little scholarly treatment. On the one hand, the unfolding of events in Azerbaijan, the culmination of five years of allied wrangling over Persia, helped to shape the future course of the country's political development. On the other hand, they provided an excellent example of problems faced by the victorious wartime allies in redefining their own relationships, and in shaping the postwar world.

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The Iranian crisis displayed all the characteristics of a classical Cold War conflict.

The 'rediscovery' of the international significance of events in Iran in the 1941–7 period can be ascribed to two main factors. The first is the heightened interest in Iran generally as a result of the events surrounding the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The second is the move away from orthodox and revisionist theories of the origins of the Cold War. The so-called 'post-revisionist' school, by extending the scope of its enquiry from the two major actors in the Cold War to a range of lesser, yet nonetheless significant actors in the conflict, have opened the way for a reassessment of a whole range of Cold War issues.⁵ These two developments, together with the publication of a number of works based on recently released archival materials,⁶ have resulted in a spate of new publications on all subjects relating to Iran, not least on the turbulent decade of the 1940s.⁷

It is not therefore the task of this book to rescue the Iranian crisis from obscurity, for that job has already been done. However, recent literature on Iran or the Cold War has not, as yet, made the crisis its only, or principal focus. Indeed, with very few exceptions, most of the existing works on the subject are over twenty-five years old.⁸ In short, we now know that what happened in Iran during and after the Second World War was somehow important, but the picture that most of us have is at best a hazy and incomplete one. This book sets out to fill in the gaps, and in describing the events surrounding the Iranian crisis of 1946 to demonstrate its importance in both an Iranian and international context.

The book is divided into two parts dealing respectively with the internal and external dimensions of the crisis. The division, it could be argued, is a somewhat artificial one, given the close interplay of domestic and external factors, a constant of Iran's modern history, and especially of the period under discussion. Yet it is nonetheless helpful, both in finding out what really happened in Azerbaijan, and in establishing the role played by the Iranians themselves in the unfolding of events. The first three chapters thus examine the causes, course and consequences of the Azerbaijan crisis, viewed, as far as possible, from an Iranian perspective. They assess the extent to which events in Azerbaijan were the product of local conditions as opposed to external intervention, as well as examining the strategies adopted by the central government to deal with the situation. There is a short chapter on the Azerbaijan Democratic party which effectively ruled Azerbaijan for one year (December 1945 to December 1946). This focuses in particular on the personalities involved in the party while also examining its relationship with the communist Tudeh party, the subject of some controversy.

The second part of the book, comprising the last three chapters, looks at Soviet, American and British policy in Iran during and immediately after the

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Second World War. It analyses the policies of the three powers in Iran and assesses the impact of these policies, not only on Iran, but also on the relationship between the three wartime allies. While not neglecting the traditional East–West perspective on the early origins of the Cold War, this book argues that the Iranian crisis was in reality a far more complex affair, bringing into play the competitive and often conflicting relationship between not only the United States and the USSR, but between Britain and both the USSR and the United States.

This attempt to go beyond existing stereotypes places this work within the so-called post-revisionist literature on the origins of the Cold War. Certainly the Iranian crisis does not fit comfortably into either orthodox or revisionist interpretations previously on offer, which attribute the ‘blame’ for the Cold War to the Soviet Union and the United States.⁹ Both approaches suffer from two failings: they underplay or even ignore not only the Iranian contribution to events, but, less explicity, that of Britain. The Iranians, as discussed in the early chapters of this book played a far more important role in directing their own affairs than is generally allowed. Britain, for its part, as the most important international actor in Iran, both before and during the war, had a hand in virtually every major wartime development in Iran, including that of turning the country into an early Cold War theatre. Any account that places responsibility for the latter development solely on American or Soviet shoulders (or both) falls far short of the mark.¹⁰

While sharing some of the general conclusions of the post-revisionist school on the origins of the Cold War, this book does not attempt to slot itself into any special pigeon-hole. The reader will find no models or formulas designed to assist our understanding of what happened in Iran in the period under study. Iran’s past, like its present, stubbornly refuses to fit into a neat package. The approach is unashamedly historical. It attempts to describe the events of the period in a lucid and scholarly way and secure for the Azerbaijan crisis of 1946 its proper place in Iranian and international history.

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I The roots of the Azerbaijan crisis

A number of explanations have so far been offered as to the origins of the Azerbaijan crisis. These may be divided crudely into four categories. The first, favoured by conservative Iranians, particularly the Shah and his supporters, but also some Western writers, holds that the whole Azerbaijan affair was the product of Soviet intervention and was without historical or indigenous roots.¹ A larger group of Western and Iranian writers, while not neglecting the Soviet factor, do recognise the existence of a popular element in the Azerbaijan rebellion, which is explained in terms of the distinctiveness of the province and the feeling of injustice on the part of the local population at its unfair treatment by the central government.² Yet another group of Iranians, mostly of left-wing political persuasion, have underplayed the Soviet element, and emphasised the Azerbaijan revolt as part of a broader, nationwide movement demanding fundamental changes.³ Finally, the Soviet version of events, as yet unexposed to the winds of *glasnost*, holds that Azerbaijan's history was part of a national liberation struggle, of which Azerbaijani nationalism was just part of a general reaction against the tyranny of the government in Tehran.⁴

Neither the first nor last explanations stand up to rigorous analysis. Soviet intervention is not a sufficient single explanation of the Azerbaijan crisis, but nor can it be excluded altogether. For the same reason, authors in the third category have often failed to provide a comprehensive picture of the Azerbaijan rebellion. The search for internal rather than external causes of the crisis is a useful corrective to the 'Soviet intervention explains all' school but it tends to go too far the other way. While a version of the truth seems to lie between the second and third categories, both also suffer from the weakness that in explaining the roots of the Azerbaijan crisis, they pay undue attention to the peculiarities of the province's history. Azerbaijan is identified as having special problems and grievances, radical tendencies, which at times led the province on the road towards provincial autonomy and even secessionism. In Azerbaijan radicalism and separatism have been seen as synonymous.

This chapter questions the above assumptions, and will try to demonstrate

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that while Azerbaijanis are quite rightly seen to have been part of the mainstream of Iran's twentieth-century radical movement, their manifestations of separatism and autonomy were neither typical nor representative of the majority of the population. Rather they were the product of particular circumstances and conditions, of which outside intervention was one important factor and the chronic weakness of the central government another. Despite the province's distinctiveness in terms of racial descent and language – differences that are shared with a number of other provinces – Azerbaijan's contemporary history has demonstrated an attachment to a strictly Iranian nationalism.⁵ This attachment was reinforced, not weakened by the centralising and modernising trends that took place during the first half of the twentieth century.

Before reviewing the early twentieth-century history of Azerbaijan, a few general observations about the province should be made.

Firstly, any understanding of Azerbaijan's history must take into account the geographical location of the province. Straddled by Turkey to the west and the Caspian Sea to the east, Azerbaijan's northern border is shared exclusively with the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan was a frontline victim of successive Turkish and Russian invasions of Iran: after the second Mongul invasion in the thirteenth century, Tabriz had briefly been the capital of the Mongul Empire; five centuries later, during the period of Ottoman decline, the Russians stripped Persia of her Caucasian territories.⁶

Despite the impact of Turkey and Russia on Azerbaijan and the close cultural links that exist between the Iranians of Azerbaijan and the Turks and Russians who live around their borders, the idea of a greater Azerbaijan, under either Turkish or Russian auspices has held little appeal. Azerbaijanis shared the general feeling of hostility and mistrust felt by all Persians towards their neighbours' pretensions. The existence of trading and commercial links did not change this picture. When the first stirrings of Persian nationalism were felt at the end of the nineteenth century, Azerbaijanis were among the movement's most prominent adherents. The ties that bound Azerbaijan to Iran were always stronger than the forces working against national unity.

Religion was an important factor in this picture. Islam was a major unifying force in Iran, the spiritual centre of the Shi'ite faith. The Turks are Sunnis, and while the USSR contains significant Shi'ite and Sunni minorities, Islam had never been the official state religion and following the 1917 Revolution was seriously proscribed. While Iran's holy places achieved widespread fame among Russian Muslims, Russia held no similar appeal for Iran's faithful.⁷

Apart from the uniting force of religion, Azerbaijanis were conscious of their province's integral and often glorious role in Persian history. They were prominent actors in the major political developments leading to the Constitutional Revolution, and present in all important walks of Iranian life.

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Their own sense of belonging to Iran was wholly shared by the rest of the country which never doubted that Azerbaijanis owed their allegiance to Iran. Aside from the government's perennial concern about maintaining Iran's territorial integrity against both internal and external threats, Azerbaijan was an important trade centre and source of agricultural products. In 1938–9, when Azerbaijan's population was estimated to represent about 20 per cent of the national total, the province supplied about one-quarter of the country's needs in items such as wheat, barley, lentils and wool; held the same proportion of the country's total number of sheep and goats, and produced about one-third of its tobacco, almonds and cooking fat.⁸

Azerbaijan was also significant in industrial terms. In 1941 the town had eighteen factories, including five textile mills.⁹ Its relatively high urban population stimulated a migratory movement to other major towns. Azerbaijanis were thus to be found throughout the country. Demographic changes and industrial growth assisted the province's integration with the rest of Iran and diminished the sense of provincial distinctiveness. This did not mean that Azerbaijanis lost their affection for their own language and culture, but simply that they also owed allegiance to a broader national consciousness, which they themselves had helped to create.

The language question is often seen as proof of Azerbaijan's distinctiveness and as a cause of the province's resentment against Tehran. The inhabitants of Azerbaijan speak Azeri, a Turkish dialect which distinguishes them from the Farsi-speaking majority, and some had resented Reza Shah's efforts to 'Persianise' the country and suppress the use of local languages. In addition, Persian speakers tended to disparage Azeri, regarding it as a language imposed by Mongul barbarians.¹⁰ As one British historian writing at the end of the nineteenth century noted, there was 'no love lost' between the northern and southern races.¹¹ Nevertheless, the old antipathy had been overcome to some extent by the forces of modernisation and national integration, and it would be wrong to assume that Reza Shah's demise gave way to a resurgence of provincial feeling such as to inspire revolt against Tehran. Azeri was, after all, but one of many minority languages in a country where Farsi was the first language for less than half the population. Iran had long been obliged to accommodate to its linguistic differences, and while Reza Shah's policies were provocative to some, educated Azerbaijanis were prominent among those who believed that a common language was essential to the country's future progress and development.

Another factor making for the unity of Azerbaijan with the rest of Iran is that the majority of its inhabitants are not tribally organised. This is in contrast with other linguistic minorities such as the Kurds, Baluchis and Qashqa'is, whose cultural and kinship bonds made them particularly resistant to centralist tendencies.¹² While both tribal and provincial unrest in twentieth-century Iran were linked to periods of internal instability and external intervention, the two

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had little else in common. This was one of the reasons why the Kurdish rebellion of 1946 was quite different from that of Azerbaijan. Although both were subject to a high degree of foreign interference, there was more Kurdish sentiment behind the Mahabad republic than there was Azerbaijani sentiment in the Tabriz national assembly. Significantly the former also proved to be less amenable to Soviet influence. The Kurds are Sunni Muslims and their members are distributed throughout Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Unlike the Azerbaijanis, their links to the Iranian state are relatively weak, as demonstrated by continuing Kurdish support for the creation of a greater Kurdistan.¹³

The purpose of these introductory comments has been to stress the ties that bind Azerbaijan to Iran. That the province possessed certain distinctive characteristics is clear, but these do not, in themselves, provide the key to the 1946 rebellion. Part of the answer lies in Azerbaijan's radical tradition, but this radicalism was by no means exclusive to Azerbaijan. What gave Azerbaijani radicalism its particular colouring was the province's susceptibility to Russian influence. The story of the Azerbaijan rebellion of 1946 is that of the forward march of Iran's radical and nationalist movement which was, more than once, diverted from its tracks by the exigencies of Soviet policy, and by the belief that the USSR would assist its cause.

Azerbaijan: from the last Qajars to the Second World War

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the first signs of organised dissent to the century-old Qajar dynasty were observed, Azerbaijanis were prominent among the protestors. Qajar decadence and corruption, which had brought the state to near bankruptcy, were important factors in the mobilisation of opposition, but so too was the influence of Western movements and thinkers.

Ultimately the Qajars lacked the internal dynamic, financial means or the efficient army which were needed to sustain their dynasty and to achieve reform and resurgence in a period of internal upheaval. Gradually they lost control of the slim consensus on which their power was based. The last Qajar monarch, Ahmad Shah, left for Europe in 1923, although it was not until 1926 that Reza Shah was crowned as head of the new Pahlavi dynasty.¹⁴

One of the Qajars' efforts to gain finance, the awarding of concessions to foreigners, caused major public protests in 1872, and again in 1891–2 when two Europeans were awarded major economic concessions, the latter being a total monopoly over the exploitation and distribution of tobacco. The 'Tobacco Regie' provoked a national outcry in which Tabriz citizens played a dominant role in the popular movement against the 'bartering of rights to foreigners and unbelievers', which led to the concession's repeal in 1892.¹⁵

This demonstration of early 'nationalist' sentiment, culminated in a period

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of popular protest and political unrest from 1906 to 1911, known as the Constitutional Revolution because the protestors obliged the Shah, Muzaffar al-Din, to grant the country's first constitution and convoke its first national assembly or majlis. During the revolution, and the civil war which followed, the country was divided into groups which fought for the retention of the constitution or for its removal.¹⁶

Once again Tabriz was at the centre of the confrontation. Azerbaijan deputies were predominant in the first assembly, and when the new Shah, Muhammad Ali, attempted to undo the constitutionalists' work, and crushed the assembly by force, Tabriz formed the core of provincial opposition. The town was besieged by the Shah's forces from June 1908 to April 1909. Its resistance was a testimony to the strength of feeling that the constitutional movement had aroused in Azerbaijan, and demonstrated the province's attachment to the ideals of the Iranian nationalists. The siege threw up local heroes, whose names are still revered: Sattar Khan, the illiterate horse dealer, and Baqir Khan, a bricklayer who performed heroic acts and mobilised popular support for the defence of the town.¹⁷

The siege finally ended with the arrival of Russian troops. Nevertheless, developments in Tabriz had kept the nationalist movement alive. By July 1909 Tehran was in nationalist hands once more. Muhammad Ali was deposed, and in August the second national assembly was convened.

The nationalist struggle in Iran was closely linked to the revolutionary developments taking place in neighbouring Russia. In Tabriz, certain political societies affiliated themselves with the Baku Social Democrats, a party consisting mainly of exiled Persians and Russian Azerbaijanis. It was this offshoot of the nationalist movement, a precursor to the Persian communist party, which would later try to wrest the initiative from the leaders of the Gilan and Azerbaijan rebellions; its members were also to predominate in the later creation of the Azerbaijan Democratic party.¹⁸ It was perhaps inevitable that the constitutional movement in Iran should be coloured by events in Russia. In Tabriz in particular the association between the Social Democrats and the nationalists gave the province the appearance of greater radicalism. The more extreme demands of the Russian Social Democrats were, to some degree, superimposed on Iran's broad-based popular movement.

In the second assembly Azerbaijanis predominated among the radical deputies and came into increasing conflict with the conservatives and moderates. The fragile alliance that had sustained the unity of the nationalist movement was soon eroded as divisions in the assembly increased. Meanwhile, foreign intervention further helped to hinder the efforts of the constitutionalists. The signing of the Anglo-Russian convention in 1907 dismissed hopes that either power would lend its support to the nationalist cause. If Persian nationalism stood for anything it was the rejection of external interference in the country's affairs. Yet the convention provided the precedent for further

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intervention, both in the prewar years when Iran's internal condition deteriorated, and during the war itself when military conditions dictated it. In 1915 Ottoman troops had also invaded Iran, turning the country into a battlefield of conflicting internal and external pressures.¹⁹

Although the Iranian provinces, and in particular Azerbaijan, had played an important role in the constitutional movement, there was no real distinction between the local struggle and the national one. It was assumed that a 'genuine' constitutional government would pay due consideration to the special needs of the provinces and recognise the regional diversity which characterised Iran. Provincial autonomy was not, therefore, a demand to be associated with the Constitutional Revolution.

This picture changed somewhat with the experience of foreign occupation, war and finally the Russian Revolution. During the Russian occupation, most Tabriz citizens, but especially the intelligentsia, increased their dislike of the Russian forces, who had been in evidence since 1909. A series of incidents between Russian troops and the local population increased the tension.²⁰ By the time of the October Revolution, hostility towards Russia, and frustration with central government policy produced a potentially volatile mixture of ingredients. Provincial groups prepared to take independent action to satisfy their grievances. Many were as much against the central government and the occupation as they were for anything else, but all were influenced by events in neighbouring Russia. Such was the case with a small guerrilla force, known as the Jangalis, formed in Gilan under the leadership of Mirza Kuchik Khan.

Because of the countrywide state of discontent, the potential for such manifestation had existed before the October Revolution. The Gilani movement, for example, preceded it.²¹ Nevertheless the revolution was important in supplying encouragement, and sometimes practical assistance, to local rebels. In general it was welcomed by Iranians who saw it as the means to end the occupation and establish a more egalitarian relationship with their northern neighbour. Britain was now perceived as the main obstacle to the nationalist dream of an Iran independent of foreign influence.²²

In the northern provinces, the revolution had a special impact. Russian troops in Azerbaijan rebelled and were subsequently recalled. Meanwhile the Bolsheviks gave encouragement to nationalist forces by renouncing both the Anglo-Russian Agreement and 'all tsarist claims on Persia'.²³ A number of provinces declared open rebellion against Tehran. In Gilan, Kuchik Khan's movement gather momentum.

The Gilan rebellion was directed against Tehran and its capitulation to foreign pressures. The Jangalis demanded the cancellation of unequal treaties, the evacuation of British forces, administrative autonomy for Gilan and the defence of Islamic principles. Initially the movement was neither separatist nor communist but its focus shifted during the civil war in Russia, which brought