Ethno-territorial conflict and coexistence in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Fereydan

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Chapter One

1 It Was a Summer Evening: Introduction

It was a summer evening, less than two months before the re-eruption of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts and the Russian invasion of Georgia. It was not very dark but the hot Georgian weather was cooling down as my train stopped in Sadakhlo, a town at the Georgian-Armenian border. Although it is located in southern Georgia, Sadakhlo is a predominantly Azeri town ethnically. The area in which Sadakhlo is located is overwhelmingly populated by Azeris. To the west is another area which is overwhelmingly populated by Armenians: Javakheti (called Javakhk by Armenians).

“Don’t worry. The train won’t go anywhere, unless I give the permission!” the railway man told me in the Azeri language, instead of using Georgian, the language in which I had addressed him. A man in mid-fifties, he had found willing ears and was very eager to tell me about his town of Sadakhlo, his life, and ethnic relations in Georgia. While I found it very interesting, I did not want my curiosity to cause any delays in the long, not very comfortable, train journey. Armenian passengers were buying fruit from the local female Azeri vendors, calling them sestra [“sister” in Russian].

“Armenians are not bad. They are vafadar, vafali [faithful]. They are good friends. There are not many in Sadakhlo—only a few. But not far from here live also Armenians in big numbers. They are a stubborn nation, for sure, but I have no bad experiences with them. Armenians are not bad”.

He continued: “I was born in Sadakhlo, my father was born here, my grandfather, my great grandfather…. Do you like my town?”

It could indeed be this man’s personal opinion and experience, but I had also been told earlier by many others that there is no animosity between Armenians and Azeris in Georgia, that they cooperate together in business, and that their discontent is towards Georgians. Georgians think they are a tolerant people, and they are proud of the cultural plurality of Georgia. Certainly there are stereotypes in Georgia, and Georgians and Armenians can say very unkind things to each other, but it is unfair to say
that they hate each other. Generally, minorities in Georgia dislike Georgians more than vice versa.

Attitudes towards the “Other”—in the republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia, Armenians and Azeris respectively—do indeed approach the hatred zone. Notably, Azeris talk aggrievedly about the “Other”. Nevertheless, one should not generalize, and note that the Karabakh conflict has led to the vilification of the “Other”, and not vice versa. The Karabakh conflict is not caused by the perception of the “Other” having a villainous character. In other words, hatred has followed the conflict and not vice versa. The same Azeris were not shy about telling me about their pleasant Armenian neighbors in the Soviet past.

According to many Armenians, they and Azeris are closer to each other culturally than they are to Georgians, despite both being Christians. Armenians have lately built up good business relations with Iranian Azeris, whose number in Armenia is rather significant. It is true that many Armenians despise Turks and, in general, Muslims. A very central issue in each conversation with Armenians is how Turks (and Kurds and, in general, Muslims) killed Armenians during the First World War. Not infrequently they accuse Azeris, being a Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic group, of hatred for Armenians. But there are also those who mention how many Armenians were saved by Turks and Kurds during the Armenian Genocide and that the Armenian diaspora in the Middle East lives peacefully with Muslims.

Talking in a balanced and rational way about Karabakh will most likely please neither Armenians nor Azeris. On the issue of land, you should either be with them or against them. Such was my observation in Armenia and Azerbaijan. While the issue of “Artskah [Karabakh] as an Armenian land” is not negotiable and is even untouchable for Armenians, their feelings toward their ethnic opponents—that is, Azeris—are not always very ill-tempered. It is not very uncommon to hear about Armenian-Azeri friendship in past Soviet times. “Also among Azeris are many good people. I know. I have lived with them. They came to Armenia and we went to Azerbaijan”, my taxi-driver in Yerevan told me.

Discussing Gorbachev and the legacy of perestroika and glasnost, he said further: “Do you see? This stupid capitalism and democracy has changed everything. Before it was nice, but see it now. Now Yerevan is such a…. No wonder that no one wants to live here”. He went on to tell me about the ethnic relations: “In every nation are good and bad people. These types are to be found among Azeris, Armenians, Turks—among every nation!” On the other hand, there were those who would show you a bad face if you asked them about the possibility of Armenian and Azeri coexistence in the future. Indeed, the Karabakh conflict was a very emotional issue in both republics. The Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over
Karabakh has been a very brutal one, which has cost many human lives and has caused large numbers of refugees and homeless. Nevertheless, Armenians and Azeris coexisted peacefully in Georgia.

I have always wondered why there are enduring ethno-territorial conflicts in some multi-ethnic parts of Central Eurasia and not in other parts. What are the conditions which make conflict in one area more likely than in others? Are these conflicts about land? Territorial factors seemingly play an important role in these conflicts. Starting from a political-geographic point of view, this study examines whether, aside from factors which are derived from existing social science theories, also the type of ethno-geographic configuration and other territorial factors contribute to ethnic conflict in selected parts of Central Eurasia: the former Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the region of Fereydan in central Iran (see Map 1.1).

In addition to presenting specific facts and general insights on the conflicts in these region, this study also intends to re-evaluate and improve the existing theories on the emergence of ethnic and ethno-territorial conflict and to formulate new ones.

A main hypothesis of this study is that a so-called mosaic type of ethno-geographic configuration (in combination with other factors) is an important condition in explaining the occurrence of ethno-territorial conflicts. Regions with an ethno-geographic configuration of a mosaic type display relatively highly homogeneous pockets of ethnic concentration. These are regions with a high density of different religious and ethnic concentrations, in which relatively small ethnic groups live in their own relatively homogeneous ethnic living area, bordering on or in close proximity to each other’s ethnic living areas. The logic behind this hypothesis lies in the fact that when ethnic groups are highly concentrated in a small and highly ethnically homogeneous area they can be mobilized more easily. The relative homogeneity of the inhabited area may contribute to ethnic cohesion and feelings of belonging to, and ownership of, that area, and in addition it may make the target, that is, the ethnic opponent, more easily identifiable. Also because of the proximity and number of ethnic groups in an ethnically heterogeneous region, there are more potential encounters between these groups. In addition, conflicts may spread more easily in such a configuration: one conflict may (indirectly) induce another one. This epidemic mechanism does not necessarily indicate a domino-effect—that is, a direct contamination of conflicts from one case to the other—but most likely indicates a neighborhood effect.

In order to test the mosaic hypothesis and, in general, explain the occurrence of ethno-territorial conflicts, a dataset of ethno-territorial
encounters in the aforementioned regions will be analyzed systematically. These encounters may remain peaceful or become afflicted by conflict. These encounters will be characterized by a series of features which are derived from social science theory and which, in combination with the geographic features, are supposed to explain the occurrence of conflict. Special attention is given to the different ethno-political policies of Iran and the Soviet Union in the past. The analysis in this current study covers the period from the late 1980s onwards. This period is chosen because it coincides with the period of perestroika and glasnost, after which ethno-nationalism in the former Soviet Union was awakened and caused the chaos which ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The main research question of this study is as follows: Which (combinations of) conditions can explain the occurrence of ethno-territorial conflict in (post-)Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Fereydan (Iran), from the late 1980s onwards?

The above question also includes the following question: To what extent is the ethno-geographic configuration an explanation for the occurrence of ethno-territorial conflict in (post-)Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Fereydan (in Iran) from the late 1980s onwards?

The Regions

The Caucasus, Central Asia, and Fereydan are part of the macro-region called Central Eurasia. Central Eurasia is at the heart of the Eurasian continent around the Caspian Sea. Most of it consists of the post-Soviet space, but it also covers parts of China, Afghanistan, Iran, etc.

The Caucasus, Central Asia, and Fereydan are ethnically, linguistically, and religiously very heterogeneous. Both Central Asia and the Caucasus belong to the southern periphery of the former Soviet Union. In these regions non-Russians predominated. They both, unlike Fereydan, have a legacy of Soviet nationalities policy. Fereydan, on the other hand, is ethnically similar to the Caucasus. The contemporary Fereydan’s ethnic map was formed in the 17th century when large numbers of Armenians and Georgians were settled in this region. Since that time Fereydan has its own Armenian name: “Peria”. A symbol, or better said metaphor, which gives Fereydan a sense of identity is the metaphor of Fereydan as the “Little Georgia”, the “Little Caucasus” or the “Iranian Caucasus”. Perhaps it is better to call Fereydan the Iranian Switzerland, thanks to the lack of ethnic conflict and the presence of beautiful natural scenery there.

In Fereydan, Georgians and Armenians live next to the Khwansaris, Persian-speakers, and Turkic-speakers. The latter are linguistically and religiously very similar to the Turkic-speakers in the
Republic of Azerbaijan and its adjacent areas, as they speak a closely related Turkic language and are Shi’ite Muslims. Fereydani Armenians are Orthodox Christians (Gregorian) similar to Armenians in the South Caucasus, the rest of Iran, and elsewhere. In addition, the predominance of the Bakhtiari tribes in the highlands of Zagros in Fereydan, similar to the predominance of mountain tribes in the North Caucasian mountains, adds to the image of Fereydan as the Iranian Caucasus. The variation in the cultural, political, and geographic attributes of ethno-territorial encounters in these regions offers a fair basis for sound analyses. The various sizes of these regions are not very important in the analysis because it is not the regions but the ethno-territorial encounters which are the units of analysis in this study.

Former Soviet Central Asia covers the post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. This is also the definition of Central Asia in this book. The wider region of Central Asia, however, also includes Afghanistan, East Turkistan, or Xinjiang (a province in western China), and the Khorasan region (in the northwestern part of Iran), whose history and cultures are interwoven with those of the rest of Central Asia.1

By the Caucasus in this study is meant both the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus. The Caucasus mountain ridge runs roughly along the borderline between the North and South Caucasus. The North Caucasus covers the current Russian autonomous territories of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, Adygheya, and Kabardino-Balkaria. The North Caucasus is a peripheral region with a large majority of Muslim non-Russians. This is the region which Russia has had historically much difficulty in keeping under its firm control. The macro-regionalization of Putin-era Russia placed all the North Caucasian republics, except Adygheya, into the macro-district (okrug) of the North Caucasus, while adding to it Krasnodar Krai, in which the macro-district’s administrative center, Krasnodar, is located. Krasnodar Krai is a territory inhabited by an overwhelming majority of Russians and has traditionally not been part of the Caucasus. Although the functionality of these federal macro-regions is disputed, it is obviously a Russian attempt to keep this area under closer Russian observation. By the South Caucasus (or Transcaucasia) is meant the republics of Georgia (including Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Armenia, and Azerbaijan (including Nagorno-Karabakh).

Fereydan is a region in central Iran in the western part of Ostan2-e Esfahan. By Fereydan in this book is meant the historical region of

1 For a discussion of these issues, see Rezvani (2008c: 100-102).
2 Ostan, shahrestan, and bakhsh are respectively the first-order, second-order, and third-order territorial divisions in Iran. For a more elaborate description and discussion, see Chapter 3 of this book.
Fereydan plus shahrestan-e Khwansar (Khansar), which together are called Greater Fereydan. Aside from Shahrestan-e Fereydan proper, historical Fereydan also comprises the shahrestans of Fereydunshahr and Chadegan. Fereydunshahr is constituted of only one central bakhsh (subunit), but the other two are each constituted of two bakhshes. Aside from the central bakhshes, these are the bakhshes of Buin-Miandasht in Fereydan proper and Chenar-Rud in Chadegan. Historical Fereydan has an ancient history, as along with its own myths and symbols. The constituent parts of historical Fereydan are connected to each other by a dense network of transportation and interaction. This is also the case with Khwansar, though to a lesser extent. Nowadays the Shahrestan-e Khwansar is integrated to a great extent into Fereydan and can be regarded, more or less, as a part of Greater Fereydan; aside from geographical proximity and climatological and physical-geographical similarities between them, there exists also a relatively high degree of human interaction between Khwansar and Fereydan. Many people from Khwansar and Fereydan have migrated in both directions and there have been intermarriages.

The ethnic distributions in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Fereydan are presented respectively in Figures 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4. Many
ethnic groups of various sizes inhabit these regions. Among the larger ones are Russians and Uzbeks; among the medium-sized ones are Georgians and Tajiks; and finally, among the smaller ones are Dagestani ethnic groups such as Laks and Dargins.

**The Book’s Structure**

Chapter 2 offers the theoretical framework of this study. For a definition of the concept ethno-territorial conflict it will be necessary to discuss concepts such as ethnicity, nation, state, territoriality, and conflict in their mutual relationships. This chapter also provides a theoretical review of the factors which are deemed to contribute to the occurrence of ethno-territorial conflict.

One of the most important factors that can explain ethno-territorial conflict is the ethno-political system involved. Therefore, Chapter 3 analyses the relevant ethno-territorial systems and policies of the former Soviet Union and Iran.

Chapter 4 concerns the methodology of this study. The units of analysis (ethno-territorial encounters) will be defined and the explaining factors which are derived from the discussions in the previous chapters will be operationalized with special attention to the measurement of the ethno-geographic mosaic configuration. Furthermore, the data and methods of analysis used in this study will be discussed. These methods concern case studies of the ethno-territorial conflicts involved and qualitative comparative and statistical analyses of all ethno-territorial encounters.

In order to identify the ethno-territorial encounters, Chapter 5 provides an overview of the ethno-territorial groups in each region in addition to their main linguistic and religious affiliations. The complete list of ethno-territorial encounters is provided in Appendix 5.

Chapter 6 presents the results of the case studies of ethno-territorial conflict: the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts in Georgia; the North Ossetian-Ingush conflict over Prigorodny and the Chechen conflicts in Russia; the Armenian-Azeri conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan; the Osh conflict between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan; and finally, the Tajikistani Civil War, with the participation also of Uzbeks and Pamiris, in alliance with and against Tajiks. There are no ethno-territorial conflicts in Fereydan.

Chapter 7 presents the results of the qualitative comparative and statistical analyses of all ethno-territorial encounters.
Finally, Chapter 8 offers the conclusions of this study and confronts the results with the existing literature.

Figure 1.1: Location of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Fereydan
Figure 1.2: Ethnic distribution in Fereydan
Figure 1.3: Ethnic distribution in the Caucasus
Figure 1.4: Ethnic distribution in Central Asia