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

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Chapter Three

The Legacy of the Iranian and Soviet Ethno-Political Systems and Policies

According to the previous chapter, one of the most relevant conditions that can explain ethno-territorial conflict is the ethno-political system involved. To the regions in this study, two ethno-political systems in particular are relevant: the former Soviet Union’s ethno-political system is relevant to the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the Iranian ethno-political system is relevant to Fereydan.

After the Bolshevik revolution, the Soviet Union developed a nationalities policies which had territorial manifestations and the legacy of which is still present in its successor states. The Soviet nationalities policies showed sharp discontinuity with the former Tsarist policies on different ethnic and religious groups in the Russian Empire. Iran, on the other hand, has shown relative stability in its ethno-religious, and less so in its territorial-administrative, policies in the last centuries. Its ethno-religious policies are relatively unaltered since the establishment of the Safavid Empire in the 16th century.

This chapter will provide an analysis of both systems, with a focus on their conflict-generating or conflict-mitigating/preventing aspects. As a result, a further specification of ethno-political systems as an explaining condition for ethno-territorial conflict will be necessary.

The Soviet Union and Its Successor States

The Soviet Union (Figure 3.1), officially called the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), evolved from the dominions of the former Tsarist (Romanov) Russian Empire. The Soviet Union was gradually established after the October Revolution of 1918 until 1922. “The Soviet experiment”, as the historian Ronald Grigor Suny (1998) calls it, lasted

29 See also Suny (2003) for primary documents and important scholarly articles about 20th century Soviet history.
until 1991, when it ended by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Soviet legacy and the effects of its collapse and aftershocks are still prevalent and important in the explanation and understanding of ethno-territorial conflicts, and in general ethnic relations, in the Soviet successor states. The establishment of the Soviet Union was a dramatic break with the Tsarist Empire. Not only were the ideological orientations of the two states, or empires, different, but their state forms and the modes of ethnic relations in them were also very different.

By the establishment of the Soviet Union, the Bolsheviks broke radically with their Romanov Tsarist past and developed the new ethnic, religious, and territorial system of the Soviet Union. Unlike in the Tsarist empire, in the newly born Soviet Union, ethnicity, ethnic nation, and hence multinationality were institutionalized:

This institutionalized multinationality sharply distinguished the Soviet state from its Romanov predecessor, to which it is too often casually assimilated as a modernized but essentially similar “prison of nations”. The Romanov Empire was indeed for centuries a polyglot and polyreligious state.... But its multinationality, while increasingly (although far from universally) perceived as a central political fact by some peripheral and central elites, was never institutionalized. (Brubaker 1994: 74, note 12)

The Soviet Union was a federal territorial system based highly on ethnicity. The Soviet federal system constituted a territorial hierarchy, consisting of territorial units of different autonomous capabilities. The highest ranked were the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), also known as the “union republics”; then followed, respectively, the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics ASSRs, the Autonomous Oblasts (AOs) (also known as autonomous provinces), and the National Okrugs (NOs) (also known as national regions). There were also many peoples who had no autonomous homelands. As a rule, these autonomous homelands were designed and delimited as territories where the titular ethnic groups were concentrated, but this does not mean that the titular groups always comprised the majority of population there (Pokshishevsky 1974: 9-67).

This territorial division was the main outcome of the Soviet interpretation and realization of the right of national self-determination. The initiator of this policy was the first Soviet leader, Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov, better known as Lenin (1870–1924). The architect of this policy was the Georgian, Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili (Russian: Iosif Vissarionovich Jugashvili), better known as Stalin (1879–1953). The interpretation and implementation of the right of national self-determination began during the Lenin era, (1917–1924), but was consolidated during the Stalin era (1924–1953). The territorial divisions,
as they existed when the Soviet Union collapsed, were largely consolidated in the 1930s during the Stalin era. All autonomous territorial units in the Caucasus and Central Asia were formed no later than 1936. As the result of the conquest of territory the Soviet western international and internal borders changed. During and after the Second World War Stalin revised some of the earlier decisions, punished and deported a number of peoples, and redrew the map of the Soviet Union. After Stalin’s death, however, Khrushchev largely reinstated the ethno-territorial map of 1936.

Figure 3.1. Soviet ethno-territorial divisions

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the establishment of 15 independent states, the foundations of which had already been laid during the Soviet era as constitutionally recognized ethnic homelands, in the form of Soviet socialist republics (see Figure 3.1). The former Soviet socialist republics, as quasi states, resulted in the establishment of independent states when the binding mechanism of the Soviet Union’s center was dissolved. The establishment of independent republics caused many ethnic tensions, with (subordinated) ethnic groups disputing the borders and/or state forms of the newly independent states and their

30 These divisions are still largely preserved. Only in the Russian Federation have some autonomous units’ statuses, including those of Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Adygheya, been elevated to autonomous republics.
inclusion in states, which followed the pattern of ethnic domination of the Soviet era.

Further in this chapter will be discussed, firstly, the theoretical discourse of the Soviet nationalities policy, and secondly, the practical reasons why the Bolsheviks chose to offer the right of national self-determination to people at all. Following this, the general outcome of the implementation of the Soviet nationalities policy on the eve of Soviet Union’s collapse (1991) will be discussed.

The Soviet Nationalities Policy: Historical Underpinnings

When the Bolsheviks seized political power in the Soviet Union, they decided that the peoples of the former Soviet Union should have the opportunity to realize their right of national self-determination. According to the Bolsheviks, national self-determination was not only a formal right, but it positively contributed to the realization of socialism.

Lenin appointed Stalin as the “Commissioner of Nationalities” and gave him the task to investigate the national question in the Soviet Union, in order to be able to implement the appropriate policy. After Lenin’s death, Stalin himself was responsible for the implementation of his own program on the Soviet nationalities.

According to Stalin, in order to be a nation, a people should speak its own language, live in a certain territory, be involved in an economic life, and possess a psychological make-up:

A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture. It goes without saying that a nation, like every historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end. It must be emphasized that none of the above characteristics taken separately is sufficient to define a nation. More than that, it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be lacking and the nation ceases to be a nation.... It is only when all these characteristics are present together that we have a nation. (Stalin 1913) [Italicics in the original are omitted]


According to Stalin, language is the most important ethnic denominator. He regards race as irrelevant and does not point directly to religion as an ethnic denominator:

Thus, a nation is not a racial or tribal, but a historically constituted community of people…. Thus, a common language is one of the characteristic features of a nation. This, of course, does not mean that different nations always and everywhere speak different languages, or that all who speak one language necessarily constitute one nation. A common language for every nation, but not necessarily different languages for different nations. (Stalin 1913)

According to Stalin, having a common language is not sufficient if the people involved do not live in a common territory. He rejects the non-territorial option of cultural autonomy which was suggested by the Austrian Marxists, because it may replace the class struggle with national struggle:

We spoke above of the formal aspect of the Austrian national programme and of the methodological grounds which make it impossible for the Russian Marxists simply to adopt the example of Austrian Social-Democracy and make the latter’s programme their own…. It will be seen from the foregoing that cultural-national autonomy is no solution of the national question. Not only that, it serves to aggravate and confuse the question by creating a situation which favours the destruction of the unity of the labour movement, fosters the segregation of the workers according to nationality and intensifies friction among them. Such is the harvest of national autonomy. (Stalin 1913)

Whether Stalin’s latter claim was just or not, his stress on territoriality is undeniable. As we have seen, he also does not recognize a tribe as a nation. A relevant problem would be whether or not the (predominantly nomadic) ethnic groups that are divided into tribes and live in different territories should be regarded as one nation or not. Despite the fact that in the former Soviet Union many such ethnic groups lived, Stalin is not clear on this issue. I will come back to this issue later on.

Stalin’s third precondition is clearer. According to him, nations possess a psychological make-up. Indeed, nation-building does have psychological aspects. “The usual point of departure is to assume that people need to identify with some cause or group larger than themselves” (Breuilly 1993: 414). Stalin links the psychological make-up of a people to a national character and a common culture. Furthermore, he regards a nation as a historically constituted community of people. In other words, by national character he probably does not mean the culture in a narrow
sense only but also acknowledges national attributes such as collective memory.

Another precondition for being a nation, according to Stalin, is being involved in a common economic life. He gives Georgians as an example:

"The Georgians before the Reform inhabited a common territory and spoke one language. Nevertheless, they did not, strictly speaking, constitute one nation, for, being split up into a number of disconnected principalities, they could not share a common economic life; for centuries they waged war against each other and pillaged each other, each inciting the Persians and Turks against the other. The ephemeral and casual union of the principalities which some successful king sometimes managed to bring about embraced at best a superficial administrative sphere, and rapidly disintegrated owing to the caprices of the princes and the indifference of the peasants. Nor could it be otherwise in economically disunited Georgia.... Georgia came on the scene as a nation only in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the fall of serfdom and the growth of the economic life of the country, the development of means of communication and the rise of capitalism, introduced division of labour between the various districts of Georgia, completely shattered the economic isolation of the principalities and bound them together into a single whole." (Stalin 1913)

It is clear that by a common economic life Stalin means a highly integrated economic system. There lived many communities of self-subsistent farmers when the Bolsheviks took control over the territory of the Soviet Union. It is also undeniable that the members of large ethnic groups such as Russians, who lived in a vast territory, did not all share a highly integrated economic system. It is improbable that Russians of Far East shared the same economic sphere as the Russians of European Russia. On the other hand, there were nomadic tribal ethnic groups who did share an integrated economic system with other ethnic groups. In Central Asia many nomadic tribal groups lived who produced meat and dairy products for exchange with agricultural and industrial products of urban and rural dwellers. Their main economic dependency was on other ethnic groups, rather than on other tribes of their own ethnic group. According to Stalin’s logic, they did not constitute a nation, neither with their own co-ethnics who lived in other (far-away) areas nor with other ethnic groups in their proximity who spoke, nevertheless, different languages and had other ways of life. In practice, however, Stalin did have a solution in order to build a nation out of these ethnic groups. In general, Stalin proposed creating these conditions artificially when they were historically absent.

In his speech for the students of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East on 18 May 1925, he stated that these were the
Bolsheviks who have created existing nations out of peoples who could be regarded as potential nations. He stated that Bolsheviks by abolishing the former political territories in Central Asia and artificial division of the political boundaries of the newly established territories, in fact, have united ethno-national homelands or countries which were fragmented. To clarify his claim, he stated that while the Polish bourgeoisie needed several wars in order to unify Poland by abolishing the former political territories and creating new ones, Bolsheviks needed only a couple of months of enlightening propaganda in order to unify Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Stalin 1953: 10-11). Obviously, he regarded the former generally multi-ethnic political divisions in Central Asia as inappropriate and regarded the newly established territorial divisions as more appropriate.\(^{33}\) This is not very surprising because Stalin’s view of a nation was primarily an ethnic one. He regarded attempts at artificially creating ethnic homogenous territories as being processes of unifying peoples who had been disunited before.

This Soviet-style, ethno-territorial engineering shows an uneasy relationship with the right of national self-determination, because it was Moscow, the Soviet Center, and not the peoples, which freely decided about their fate. The establishment of the Soviet Union was a result of the conquest of the former Tsarist Russian Empire’s territory by Bolsheviks and the implantation of the right of national self determination. Despite the official propaganda, this process was not always welcomed by different groups. Moreover, the implementation of the right of national self-determination occurred in accordance with its interpretation by the Soviet leaders and policy makers of that time.

The question that should be asked here is whether Bolsheviks themselves believed in the right of national self-determination in an idealistic sense, or they chose to embrace this right only for practical reasons. The answer is probably both. The Soviet nationalities policy was formally based on the right of national self-determination from the outset. This policy was implemented officially during Lenin’s rule. One aspect of this policy was korenizatsiya in the 1920s. Korenizatsiya, which means “nativization”, can be seen as a pragmatic policy in order to strengthen effective Soviet rule over the subjects of the former Tsarist Russian Empire. Korenizatsiya is derived from the Russian koren, which means “root”. In fact, by koren is meant the ethnic roots. This terminology indeed suggests the ethnic view of the Bolsheviks on nations.

Below I will discuss the Soviet nationalities policy from its initial stages of formation and implementation during Lenin’s era until its final

\(^{33}\) Even these newly established territories were again divided and their boundaries underwent major changes and minor corrections until 1936.
consolidation in Stalin’s era, and thereafter I will also discuss the reasons
which led to the Bolsheviks’ acceptance and interpretation of the right of
national self-determination, as they did during the initial stages of the
Soviet Union in Lenin’s era.

First of all, it is important to realize that Lenin was not a
nationalist, and in his view nationalist ideas were considerably inferior to
communist ideals. Nevertheless, Lenin was an idealist who believed in the
ideas of anti-imperialism. It is very probable, therefore, that Lenin truly
and honestly believed in nationalism as an instrument of popular
liberation. Indeed, nationalism has an emancipatory effect because it can
weaken the importance of social classes and embraces an imagined
community regardless of social class.

Another reason was the international discourse on the right of
national self-determination after the First World War. At that time,
nationalism was flourishing, and many nation-states were built out of the
ruins of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. By supporting
the right of national self-determination, Lenin implicitly wished to transcend
the notion of the Soviet Union as a territorial political entity and create an
ideological organization which directed its subjects towards true
communism.

Despite having had, at times, different opinions and ideas, Lenin
was impressed by the anti-imperialist ideas of the German Marxists Rosa
Luxemburg (1871–1919) and Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), and he himself
was a main theoretician of anti-imperialism (Van der Pijl 1992: 66-74).
Therefore, it is very probable that he honestly believed in the right of the
Russian Empire’s peoples to national self-determination. Although it
remains speculation, as even psychologists cannot always know the real
intentions of a person very clearly, it is very probable that Lenin did
regard the realization of the right of national self-determination of the
peoples of the Russian Empire as a progressive phase towards the
complete communist phase of social and societal development.34

Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks took a pragmatic position on the
issue of the realization of the right of self-determination by the peoples of
the Russian Empire. Apparently they realized that they were not strong
enough, at that moment, to rule all the territories of the former Russian
Empire, without the consent of the local, more or less ethno-nationalist,
forces. The Bolsheviks did not have enough power to establish an
assimilatory rule over all their subjects. Therefore, a better strategy was to

34 Shaheen (1956) discusses the Bolsheviks’ and Lenin’s choice in his book, The Communist Theory
of National Self-Determination: Its Historical Evolution up to the October Revolution. A very well-
written and informative account on the Soviet nationalities policy and the different opinions on
national self-determination is Yuri Slezkine’s (1994) oft-cited article, “The USSR as a Communal
Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism”. See also Van der Pijl (1992: 75-
98).
co-opt some local elites in order to gain their support. The co-optation of local elites could be contradictory to the emancipatory aspect of nationalism, as these elites were in many cases those elites of the ancien régime who announced their loyalty to the Bolshevik rule. Bolsheviks, in a few cases, co-opted and made concessions to some local elites who, in reality, did not agree with many aspects of the Bolsheviks’ ideas. In other cases, however, they abolished the supremacy of the elites of the ancien régime. Co-optation of the local elites, therefore, should be seen in the light of a pragmatic strategy. This explanation does not exclude the former explanation about Lenin’s ideological beliefs, but it is an explanation which shows that the Bolsheviks were more or less also obliged to take this option. It is likely that if the Bolsheviks had possessed more power, they would not have implemented such a policy at all and would have justified their policies by another set of ideological reasonings.

Contrary to the ideas of the Austrian Marxists Karl Renner (1870–1950) and Otto Bauer (1882–1938), who proposed the non-territorial option of cultural autonomy without binding these cultural rights to a certain territory, the Bolsheviks chose the option of federalization. Federalization served as a territorial option for the realization of the right of self-determination.

The Bolsheviks’ preference for a territorial option, however, does not mean that there existed no cultural autonomy at all. Cultural autonomy existed at least in theory for the spatially dispersed peoples, until 1934 (Kolossov 1995: 242). Arguably, it existed in specific forms even after that date in certain cases. Cultural autonomy, however, was not the general rule in the former Soviet Union. In general, Soviet policies were especially assimilationist with regard to the non-titular ethnic groups (Bremmer 1997: 14). In short, it is fair to state that non-territorial cultural autonomy was more an exception than the rule in the former Soviet Union. The general rule was that ethno-cultural rights, in the realm of the Soviet ethno-federal system, were bound to the titular territorial units.

There are also a number of other reasons which can clarify why the Bolsheviks opted for the territorial option and not the non-territorial option as the Austrian Marxists Renner and Bauer did. First, most of the ethnic minorities were concentrated in the peripheries of the former Tsarist Russian Empire. This was in sharp contrast to the situation in the Austria-Hungarian Habsburg Empire, the large urban centers of which were very diverse in their ethnic compositions. The pattern in the former Tsars’ empire was that the ethnic minorities were concentrated in certain regions—in fact, in their native regions—and were absent, rare, or not

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35 See Karl Renner’s (1918) classic work on this issue, Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Nationen—In besonderer anwendung auf Österreich. Erster Teil: Nation und Staat.
very populous in any case in the major Russian urban centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Second, a non-territorial option regarding the cultural autonomy of the ethnic minorities was difficult if not totally unachievable in that period of time in such a vast territory as the former Tsar’s empire. This had to do with the stage of development in the transportation and communication industry at the beginning of the 20th century, together with the large territory of the empire. Today, a non-territorial option would indeed be a serious option, but we should remember that at the beginnings of the 20th century there were no such instruments as fast-speed airplanes and trains, mobile phones, satellite TVs, and Internet.

Third, the architect of the territorial system—Stalin, a Georgian—was himself from the periphery of the Russian Empire. Although it is debatable and more a psychological debate than our debate, it is very probable that Stalin, like most Caucasian people, had seen the Tsarist Russian Empire not as a unity but as a superficial political structure incorporating different non-Russian territories. Certainly, a Russian from the European Russian center of the empire would have had a more centralist view on the empire than someone from the periphery, who would tend more to define it as a non-voluntary incorporation of different peoples and regions into the “Russian” empire. For Stalin, indeed, the Tsar’s empire would have been a “prison of peoples” who were diverse in many aspects, but still under the rule of the same master. This view of his, of an incohesive, difficult-to-handle empire, possibly also contributed to the autocratic way Stalin ruled the Soviet Union. Although Stalin’s power during the leadership of Lenin should not be exaggerated, after Lenin’s death Stalin had the strongest influence on the Soviet nationalities policy.

The politicization of ethnicity in the Soviet Union was brought into effect directly after the establishment of the Soviet Union and was a result of the implementation of the right of national self-determination, as understood by the Soviet leaders and policy makers. The population of the Soviet Union was divided into officially recognized ethnic groups. Commissions were tasked with identifying different ethnic groups for the sake of censuses. The categories changed over time, in that many lesser ethnic groups were later on put together into the ethnic categories of the ethnic groups into which they were assimilating or stood in close affinity with (Hirsch 1997; 2005). The Soviet Union’s population, therefore, was a collection of different ethnic nations or natsional’nosti. Natsional’nosti is the plural of natsional’nost’ and is often translated as “nationality” in English. These nationalities, however, were not only subjects of census but determined also to a large extent people’s social positions:
Ethnic nationality (natsional’nost’) was not only a statistical category, a fundamental unit of social accounting, employed in censuses and other social surveys. It was, more distinctively, an obligatory and mainly ascriptive legal category, a key element of an individual’s legal status. As such, it was registered in internal passports and other personal documents, transmitted by descent, and recorded in almost all bureaucratic encounters and official transactions. In some contexts, notably admission to higher education and application for certain types of employment, legal nationality significantly shaped life chances, both negatively (especially for Jews) and positively (for “titular” nationalities in the non-Russian republics, who benefitted from mainly tacit “affirmative action” or preferential treatment policies). (Brubaker 1994: 53)

The ethnic nations or nationalities were important legal categories in Soviet policy-making. In the 1920s the Soviet authorities adopted the policy of nativization, korenizatsiya, which meant extending education among nationalities in their own national languages. Korenizatsiya was a means in the hands of Soviet leaders to spread and propagate effectively their official policy to the masses. This means that korenizatsiya was not aimed at the encouragement of ethno-nationalism and nationalization of different ethnic minorities, but as the masses did not know Russian very well it was merely a necessity. Korenizatsiya can be seen as a practical measure to spread the state’s ideology to the masses. In the localities, however, some activists tried to use this policy for nationalistic purposes. Paradoxically, the policy of korenizatsiya, which encouraged the use of local languages, went hand in hand with de-nativization of languages. The adjusted Perso-Arabic alphabets, used by many Muslim peoples, were replaced first by the Latin and then by the Cyrillic alphabets. On the other hand, the Georgian and Armenian alphabets, used by Armenians and Georgians, the two largest Christian peoples in the Caucasus, remained intact and in some cases were imposed on smaller Caucasian languages such as Abkhazian (Jones 1997: 507). Therefore, the meaning of the policy of korenizatsiya was ambivalent and its implementation was not at all consistent.

During Stalin’s rule in the 1930s, the Soviet nationalities policy was consolidated. However, one should not confuse this consolidation of the Soviet nationalities policy with Russification:

[T]he Soviet Union was never organized, in theory or in practice, as a Russian nation-state. Russians were indeed the dominant nationality, effectively controlling key party and state institutions [at the highest Soviet level]; and Russian was promoted by the state as its lingua franca. But this did not make the state a Russian nation-state, any more than the dominance of Germans and the use of German as a lingua franca made the Austrian half of the Habsburg empire a German nation-state. (Brubaker 1994: 51)
From the 1930s onwards Soviet “socialism”, or “state capitalism” as many prefer to call it, was mixed and flavored with nationalism. This, however, did not necessarily mean that a policy of Russification was established. A prejudiced view completely in accordance with Western anti-Soviet sentiments of the Cold War era is the view that Soviet nationalities policy aimed at Russification of non-Russian ethnic groups. Although this viewpoint is not entirely groundless, it is often presented in a simplistic way. It is true that many non-Russian smaller ethnic groups in the Soviet Union have been, more or less, linguistically Russified. Many other smaller ethnic groups tend to assimilate into the languages of another large ethnic group than Russian. They tend to speak the languages of the titular nation of the territory in which they lived. And, it is clear that larger nationalities have retained their national languages to a fairly high degree, especially in their own titular autonomous territories (Dostál & Knippenberg 1992; Knippenberg & Dostál 1979; Knippenberg & Dostál 1981; Shiokawa 1999; Strayer 1998: 80-78). This is clear evidence that Soviet federalization was a hierarchical territorial arrangement. At the same time, one should be aware of the fact that Russification is not necessarily linguistic Russification, but could also mean more widespread cultural Russification. As Russians were the largest ethnic group in the Soviet Union, and the greatest portion of the Soviet elite were Russians, cultural Russification of non-Russian populations was self-evident if not inevitable.

In reality, the official policy of the Soviet Union during that era was not Russification but nationalism. This official revitalization and salience of nationalism can be linked to the fact that in the interbellum, nationalism—especially among the counter-hegemonic powers—became the state’s official political discourse. Nationalism has always been connected to protectionism and mercantilism in the European states system. The Soviet Union, as a planned economy which attempted to reach economic self-sufficiency, was indeed a protectionist if not a mercantilist state. The embracing of nationalism, therefore, was absolutely in accordance with the economic policies and ambitions of the Soviet state during the interbellum.

Nationalism in the Soviet Union became salient from the 1930s onwards. Although there has been also repression against certain nationalist expressions in Stalin’s era, in general, and in the long run, ethnic nationalism was strengthened. Russian nationalism was not the only form of ethnic nationalism in the Soviet Union. In addition to it, Uzbek, Armenian, Georgian and some other kinds of nationalism were also revitalized, gained salience, or were in any case tolerated, although at relatively lower levels of hierarchy compared with Russian nationalism (see, for example, Shiokawa 1999).
After the late 1930s and the establishment of almost all ethnic homelands, Soviet nationalities policy was characterized by its ethno-territorial hierarchical structure. At the top of this hierarchical ethno-territorial system were the SSRs (union republics), which were elevated as independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union. SSRs could incorporate ASSRs and AOs. AOs possessed a lower level of autonomy compared with an ASSR. The lowest-ranked ethnic territories, the NOs, were found only in the Russian Federative SSR (the Russian FSSR).36 There existed many non-autonomous oblasts (provinces) in many union republics, but a few union republics were divided only into rayons (districts). Although Russians were at the top of the hierarchy in a cultural sense, they possessed a federative union republic, which did not possess its own political organs until the late 1980s. This situation suggested a kind of asymmetric federation consistent with the Soviet nationalities policy’s rationale. As a matter of fact, this situation suggested that the Soviet Union was Russia, out of which a number of ethnic homelands were given away as concessions to the smaller ethnic groups.

Next to Russians many other relatively large ethnic groups such as Georgians or Uzbeks possessed their own SSR (union republic). Then followed the second-, third-, and fourth-ranked ethnic groups, such as the Abkhazians, Khakass, and Chukchis, who possessed respectively their own ASSRs, AOs, or NOs. Then followed the ethnic groups, such as the Talysh, who were not awarded any autonomous homelands. At the bottom of the hierarchy stood the (minor ethnic) groups who, unlike the former groups, were not officially recognized as separate natsional’nosti, that is, ethnic nations or nationalities.37

After Stalin’s death, the next Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), corrected the extremes of the later Stalinist policies and returned more or less to the original situation of the Soviet nationalities policy in the 1920s. He rehabilitated a number of peoples, such as the Ingush and Chechens, who were deported in large numbers by Stalin. Khrushchev in general relaxed the attitude of the Center towards nationalities by taking some measures in order to decentralize the process of policy-making. Although he advocated and propagated the coming

36 Both nouns (name of a territory) and adjectives (designation of ethnic groups) can accompany the territorial units. For example, both “the Uzbekistan SSR” and “the Uzbek SSR”, both “the Abkhazia ASSR” and “the Abkhazian ASSR”, and both “the South Ossetia AO” and “the South Ossetian AO” can be used. The meanings remain the same, but the stresses are different; the usage of adjectives stresses ethnic entitlement, while the usage of nouns stresses the name of a territory. Both versions are used in this book.
37 The Karelo-Finnish SSR was established in 1940 and abolished in 1956. It became the Karelian ASSR inside the Russian FSSR. The reasons behind these changes in its status and name were probably the attitudes and intentions of the Soviet Union towards Finland. Similar cases were Moldovia and Azerbaijan, whose names and territorial borders were instruments that served Soviet geopolitical interest and intentions vis-à-vis Romania and Iran, respectively.

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together (*sblizhenie*) and ultimately the merger (*sliyaniye*) of nationalities under communism, it was more just an ideal than reality. This was clearly in accordance with the original aims of Lenin, permitting nationalism in the realm of the right of national self-determination as a progressive process—a process which has its progressive effects at a certain time but will lose its utility at later stages of the establishment of a communist system. In reality, however, “nationality was an asset and there were no nationally defined entities above the union republic” (Slezkine 1994: 433). The Soviet nation, in reality, was an assemblage of different ethnic nations:

> Soviet rulers never elaborated the idea of a *Soviet* nation. To be sure, they did seek to inculcate a state-wide Soviet identity, and in the 1960s and 1970s they developed the doctrine of the “Soviet People” (*sovetskii narod*) as a “new historical community”. But this emergent entity was explicitly conceived as supra-national, not national. The supra-national Soviet People was consistently distinguished from the individual sub-state Soviet nations. Nationhood remained the prerogative of sub-state ethnonational groups; it was never predicated of the statewide citizenry. (Brubaker 1994: 54)

The Soviet ethno-territorial hierarchy was also reflected in Soviet education policy, which influenced the language situation of each nationality. Generally, education in the native language of large nationalities was enforced up to high levels of education, but education in languages of smaller ethnic groups was only enforced up to relatively low levels of education, if at all (see Dostál & Knippenberg 1992; Shiokawa 1999; Silver 1974). This is clear evidence of the fact that the lower an ethnic group was ranked in the hierarchy, the more strongly it underwent the tendency of assimilation. It is true that some nationalities were officially subject to assimilation into higher-ranked nationalities, but this did not mean necessarily assimilation into the Russian nation: it could have been into other high-ranked nationalities.

This situation was maintained until Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931, in office 1989–1991), implemented reforms named *perestroika* [restructuring] and *glasnost’* (*glasnost*) [openness] in the second half of the 1980s. The peak of *glasnost* and *perestroika* appeared after 1987, when he rehabilitated a number of dissidents and changed many officials. “In his striving for *perestroika*, democratization and a greater openness of the society, he initially underestimated the nationalist sentiments that would be evoked” (Knippenberg 1991: 43). From this time onwards the

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38 Pavlenko (2008) offers a concise overview of bilingual education in the Soviet Union.
39 Knippenberg (1991) in his article refers often to Gorbachev’s (1987b) book, *Perestroika: A New Vision for Our Country and the World*, an English translation of Gorbachev’s (1987a) *Perestroika i novoe myshlenie dlya nashei strany i dlya vsego mira*. It is notable that Gorbachev still referred to the Soviet Union as a country. This, however, ceased to be the case definitively and clearly when the
economically weakened and politically chaotic Soviet Union was struck by ethno-national strife. The national homelands demanded more autonomy or independence and, in addition, many ethnic conflicts erupted.

**The Soviet Union on the Eve of its Collapse and Beyond**

*Perestroika* and *glasnost* had brought about ample opportunity for the expression of dissatisfaction about social and political life in the Soviet Union. The Soviet economy was in very bad shape in the late 1980s. If the reforms of the *perestroika* era were not the reason for this poor economic situation, they did not help it either. *Perestroika*, in the word of Robert Strayer (1998: 116), “created a kind of limbo economy, in which neither the Plan nor the market worked effectively”. Such a poor economic situation, accompanied by political chaos caused not least by ethno-national and other cultural strife, drove the Soviet empire to its death.

A common Cold-War era misperception of the situation is that the Soviet system suppressed religion and ethnic and national cultures. This is not fully true. There were times in which the Soviet state took an overtly anti-religious position and destroyed many churches and mosques. In general, however, there was ample opportunity for religion to be practiced. Although bound to certain restrictions, certain expressions of religion were tolerated in the secular Soviet Union (see, for example, Abazov 2007: 64-77; Akbarzadeh 2001). Religion did survive as an ethno-cultural attribute in the secular Soviet Union. Shahram Akbarzadeh (2001: 453) describes the situation in the Soviet Union’s major Muslim region, Central Asia:

Soviet authorities could exercise control over the number of clerics trained to read (and to interpret) the Koran but could hardly destroy traditional practices and festivals. Even though the Soviet imposed national identity, that was designed to replace the sense of belonging to Islam and to create secular societies, it failed to eradicate the importance of Islamic traditions for Central Asians. The two parallel processes of a spreading national identity, introduced to the region under Soviet rule, and the unforeseen merger of folkoric and scriptural versions of Islam further entrenched Islam as an important pillar of identity within the incipient national context.

The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were often called “prison of nations”. Its prisoners, at least its largest one, however, did not suffer death but were fed and were stronger when they were released from it. To use Strayer’s (1998: 71) words, nations flourished in that “prison of

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Soviet Union collapsed soon thereafter.
nations”. The Soviet Union did not succeed in assimilating different ethnic groups into one whole. To speak in Yuri Slezkine’s (1994) terms, it was not a “communal apartment” of different peoples but had enhanced ethnic particularism. The Soviet nationalities policy and ethno-territorial federalism had brought about rivalry and competition among different ethnic groups. Ethnic conflict’s potential was already existent in the Soviet Union; with the Union’s demise and collapse, however, many latent ethnic conflicts became manifest and erupted, resulting often in cruel wars.

Although certainly authoritarian in nature, the Soviet Union was best described as an ethno-territorial federation of ethnic nations and not as a unitary nation state:

> [T]he Soviet Union was neither conceived in theory nor organized in practice as a nation-state. Yet while it did not define the state or citizenry as a whole in national terms, it did define component parts of the state and the citizenry in national terms. Herein lies the distinctiveness of the Soviet nationality regime—in its unprecedented displacement of nationhood and nationality, as organizing principles of the social and political order, from the state-wide to the sub-state level. No other state has gone so far in sponsoring, codifying, institutionalizing, even (in some cases) inventing nationhood and nationality on the sub-state level, while at the same time doing nothing to institutionalize them on the level of the state as a whole. (Brubaker 1994: 52)

In fact, the Soviet policy built many nation states under the realm of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union’s official name, “The Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics” (USSR), is a good reflection of the actual situation: it was a union of different SSRs, which were designed as ethnic homelands of various ethnic nations, functioned as quasi states, and had the right to secede from the Union. On the eve of the Soviet collapse, there existed fifteen union republics, in a number of which existed lower-ranked autonomous territories (see Table 3.1). The union republics had formally the right to secede from the Soviet Union.

While Articles 34, 35, and 36 of the Soviet Constitution40 (last modified version of 1977) claimed equal rights for all Soviet citizens, regardless of their “nationality”,41 race, and gender, Chapter Eight of that constitution (Articles 70 to 88) identified the Soviet Union as a hierarchical federal structure, within which the higher-ranked federal units enjoyed more privileges than the lower ones. Given the fact that these

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41 As the Soviet Union held an ethnic view on nation, the term nationality in this context means ethnicity.
territorial units were identified and created on ethno-national foundations, this meant that some ethnic groups enjoyed more privileges than others. Although in theory all subjects of the former Soviet Union were equal and enjoyed equally the right of self-determination, in practice the Soviet nationalities policy resulted in an unequal hierarchical federal system. The Soviet Union proclaimed that it offered the right of national self-determination to all peoples of the Soviet Union; but firstly, not all peoples had their titular homelands, and secondly, the autonomy of the different homelands varied in the federal hierarchy, in which the national and cultural rights, and even material and job-related privileges, were generally bound to certain territories. The result of this policy was a division of peoples into several ethnic nations and a hierarchical, ethno-territorial federal system (see, for example, Bremmer 1997; Martin 2001a; Martin 2001b).

The Soviet ethno-territorial federal system, in which cultural and “national” rights were bound to territorial autonomy, gave rise to ethno-territorial rivalry over the statuses of homelands. The introduction of a non-egalitarian hierarchical federal system on the basis of ethnicity resulted in ethnic competition. While different ethnic groups saw each other as potential rivals, they saw Moscow—the Soviet Center—both as a master and a protector at the same time. This made a paternalistic position possible for the Soviet Center. In this uneven distribution of power and ethnic status among ethnic groups, the lower-ranked ethnic groups naturally appealed to Moscow for protection against the observed and perceived injustice towards them by the higher-ranked ethnic groups. Bremmer (1997: 14) shows the ethnic relations in the former Soviet Union in an abstract table. I have represented that table and in addition have translated this ethnic competitive system into a schematic figure which shows the situation in a simplified fashion (see Table 3.2 and Figure 3.2). The ethno-political relations are displayed in Figure 3.2. Obviously, the subordinated ethnic groups sought protection and mediation from their ethnic kin in the neighboring territorial units against the excesses of their ethnic overlords in the host republics. Nevertheless, the tasks of protection of, and mediation between, ethnic groups, and the regulation of ethnic relations, were mainly the prerogative of the Soviet Center. Moscow was the most powerful “agent” in keeping together the Soviet Union’s ethnic groups and territorial units. With its demise, ethno-national strife manifested and gained salience in the former Soviet Union. The roots of these (latent) conflicts, however, were already laid, if not consciously engineered, in its ethno-territorial system. This system worked well as long as the Soviet Center was powerful and functioned properly. With the Soviet Union’s demise, however, ethnic fears manifested themselves. The lower-ranked titular ethnic groups could not enjoy the Soviet Center’s
protection and mediation any more. This fact alone was one of the main, if not the main, reason why many of those groups rebelled against the hosting republics and demanded independence. The openness created after glasnost and perestroika, as well as the emerging anarchy, offered ample chances to rebel. The emerging anarchy itself contributed to the awakening of ethnic fears and hence indirectly to ethnic rivalry and conflict.

The territorial division of Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus, especially in the South Caucasus, was very complex. Three SSRs existed in the South Caucasus: the Georgian SSR, the Azerbaijan SSR, and the Armenian SSR. They were also known respectively as the SSRs Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Inside the Georgian SSR existed two ASSRs and one AO: the Adjara ASSR, the Abkhazian ASSR, and the South Ossetian AO. There existed two lower-ranked autonomous territorial units inside the Azerbaijan SSR: the Nakhichevan ASSR and the Nagorno-Karabakh AO. All North Caucasian autonomous territories were part of the Russian Federative SSR. In the North Caucasus there were four ASSRs and two AOs: the Dagestan ASSR, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, the North Ossetian ASSR, the Kabardino-Balkarian ASSR, the Adygheyan (Adygeyan) AO and the Karacheyev-Cherkessian AO.

Five SSRs existed in Central Asia: the Kazakh SSR (Kazakhstan), the Kyrgyz SSR (Kirgiza or Kyrgyzstan), the Uzbek SSR (Uzbekistan), the Tajik SSR (Tajikistan), and the Turkmen SSR (Turkmenia or Turkmenistan).42 The Karakalpak ASSR and the Gorno-Badakhshan AO were situated respectively inside the Uzbek SSR and the Tajik SSR. Aside from these, there were no other lower-ranked territorial units in Central Asia. The locations of these autonomous territorial units are shown in Figure 3.3 (see also Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1).

In the Caucasus and Central Asia, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the names of the union republics and the lower-ranked territorial units generally reflected the names of the titular ethnic groups. There are, however, a few exceptions. Nagorno-Karabakh was in fact an Armenian autonomous territory inside Azerbaijan, and, therefore, Armenians could be regarded as the titular people there. In Nakhichevan, Azeris were titular. The Nakhichevan ASSR was a part of Azerbaijan SSR, disconnected from it by the Armenian SSR. Similarly in Adjara ASSR, the Georgians were the titular people. Adjara’s population consisted predominantly of Georgians, of whom a part were Muslims. All native ethnic groups in Dagestan ASSR were regarded as “official” peoples,

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42 Depending on the context and the language, the Kazakh SSR, the Uzbek SSR, and the Tajik SSR were also known as respectively the SSRs Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The Turkmen SSR was also known as the SSR Turkmenia or the SSR Turkmenistan. The Kyrgyzstan SSR was also known as the SSR Kirgizia or the SSR Kyrgyzstan.
which means *de facto* that they were titulars. These were Avars, Laks, Dargins, Lezgins, Tabasarans, Taskhurs, Rutuls, Aguls, Tats, Kumyks, Azeris, Russians, Nogays and Chechens.\textsuperscript{43} Gorno-Badakhshan AO was the homeland of the Pamiri or Badakhshani peoples. Although the later Soviet censuses have reclassified the Pamiri peoples as Tajiks, their existence in the Soviet Union could not be denied and, in fact, was strengthened after *perestroika* and the Tajikistani Civil War. The Pamiri people, who had a strong sense of linguistic and, more so, of religious particularism, were *de facto* the titular group in Gorno-Badakhshan (see also Chapter 5).

All ethno-territorial wars discussed in this book emerged during the Soviet demise and shortly afterwards. Outside the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Transnistrian conflict in Moldavia has emerged, in which the Slavs (i.e. Russians and Ukrainians) separated the region to the east of the River Dniester from Moldavia (Moldova).

The Soviet-era divisions are still largely preserved. Only in the Russian Federation are many autonomous provinces (the former AOs), among which are Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Adygheya (Adygeya), elevated to autonomous republics. Ingueshetia and Chechenya have become separate republics after the former Chechen-Ingush ASSR split in two. The statuses of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are not yet clear. These regions have seceded respectively from Azerbaijan and Georgia. Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia have declared their independence. Armenia holds an ambiguous position with regard to Nagorno-Karabakh. Although Armenia does not officially recognize the independent republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, in practice it regards it as an independent Armenian state associated with the Republic of Armenia. Many Armenians, both politicians and ordinary people, regard it as part of Armenia. After a war with Georgia (August 2008), Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Only a few other states have recognized them as independent. In reality, however, Russia has violated Georgian territorial integrity and has incorporated these territories, although half-heartedly, into its own territory. Needless to say, the distribution of Russian passports among the population in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, initiated even before the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, as well as the Russian military presence there, suggests a *de facto* incorporation of these territories into the Russian Federation. In practice, Russia treats South Ossetia and Abkhazia as Russian protectorates or as republics *de facto* associated with the Russian

\textsuperscript{43} As the “multi-national” Dagestan has been an interesting case in the Russian federation, there are many written sources describing and discussing the ethno-political situation there. For a better understanding of the situation in Dagestan, see, amongst others, Belozerov (2005), Bugay & Gonov (2004), Ormrod (1997), Walker (2001), Ware & Kisriev (2001; 2009).
Table 3.1. Autonomous Territorial Units in the Soviet Union

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SSRs</th>
<th>ASSRs</th>
<th>AOs</th>
<th>NOs</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>Nakhichevan</td>
<td>Nagorno-Karabakh</td>
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<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Ajara, Abkhazia</td>
<td>South Ossetia</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Gorno-Badakhshan</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>Karakalpakstan</td>
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<td>Turkmenistan</td>
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<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
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<td>Kazakhstan</td>
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<td>Ukraine</td>
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<td>Belarus</td>
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<td>Moldavia (Moldova)</td>
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<td>Estonia</td>
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<td>Latvia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Dagestan, Chechen-Ingush, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Bashkiria (Bashkortostan), Buryatia, Kalmykia, Karelia, Komi, Mari, Mordovia, Tatarstan, Tuva, Udmurtia, Yakutia</td>
<td>Karachayevo-Cherkessia, Adygheya (Adygeya), Gorno-Altai, Jewish Birobijan, Khakassia</td>
<td>Agin-Buryat, Chukotka, Evenk, Khanty-Mansi, Nenets, Koryak, Taymyr, Komi-Permyak, Ust-Orda Buryat, Yamalo-Nenets,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

44 For background information and different views on and analysis of the August 2008 war, see e.g. Cornell & Starr 2009; Jones 2010.
Table 3.2. Patterns of inter-ethnic relations in the former Soviet Union

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A-CENTER</th>
<th>B-FIRST-ORDER TITULAR NATIONALITY</th>
<th>C-SECOND-ORDER TITULAR NATIONALITY</th>
<th>D-NON-TITULAR NATIONALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A- Center</td>
<td></td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Assimilation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B- First-order titular nationality</td>
<td>Liberation</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Domination</td>
<td>Domination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C- Second-order titular nationality</td>
<td>Collusion</td>
<td>Liberation</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Domination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D- Non-titular nationality</td>
<td>Collusion</td>
<td>Liberation</td>
<td>Liberation</td>
<td>Competition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.2. Patterns of inter-ethnic relations in the former Soviet Union
Figure 3.3. Autonomous territorial units in the Caucasus and Central Asia
Iran

Iran, like the former Soviet Union, is a multi-ethnic country. Unlike the situation in the former Soviet Union, however, Iranian statehood and nationhood have deep historical roots. Although all states are constructions, many are older than others. In addition, not all nations are as old; many nations are consolidated earlier than others. Although modern means facilitate and catalyze the process of nation-building, there are still many nations that were consolidated in pre-modern times. Iran is one of these nations. The Iranian liberation struggles against Arabs and Mongols indicate a sense of nationhood already in pre-modern times. Ferdowsi’s epic, *Shahnameh* (11th century AD), relates Iranian nationhood to an Iranian political entity. In this sense, *Shahnameh* is nationalist in nature.45 Notably, it uses the name Iran, which was in use since the Sasanid Empire (3rd–7th century) and was recovered as the name of a unified and independent state during the Safavid Empire (16th–18th century).

Unlike many other states, Iran has not been an ethnic state, since long ago. Unlike the Soviet Union, which evolved from a Russian state and offered autonomies to ethnic minorities, Iran has long been a multi-ethnic state, in the political center of which different ethnic groups have taken active part. Iranian culture has absorbed many newcomers, who in turn have put efforts into nourishing it. For example, the Saljuqid dynasty, like most other Turkic and non-Turkic dynasties, revived and nourished the Persian language (see, for example, Gronke 2003: 46). In the Islamic era, the Persian language has functioned as the literary language even though the Turkic-speaking Iranians have ruled Iran more often than other ethnic groups. Notably, “Azeris...have played major roles in every turning point of Iran’s modern history” (Tohidi 2006). Even some smaller ethnic groups have contributed to Iranian statehood: Allahverdi Khan Undiladze and his son, Emamgholi (Imamquli) Khan Undiladze, were Georgians; the late Safavid royal family was at least partially Georgian; and many diplomats and ambassadors were Christian Armenians.

45 According to the German Iranologist, Monika Gronke (2003: 38), Ferdowsi was discovered in the early 20th century by Iranian nationalists as a national awakener and his *Shahnameh* used as an icon of Iranian national identity: “Im frühen 20. Jahrhundert entdeckten iranische Nationalisten Ferdousî als den «Wiedererwecker» einer eigenen iranischen Identität (nach der Eroberung Irans durch die Araber im 7. Jahrhundert) und das Schâhnâmeh als literarisches Denkmal dieser Identität”. This is true, but there remain some questions: Why were many other literary works, in a country which is famous for its rich literature, not chosen by nationalists as an iconic symbol of Iranian national identity? How do we know that the use of *Shahnameh* in earlier times was not nationalist in nature? For example, *Shahnameh* was widely reproduced during the Safavid era, when Iran was reunited as an independent country. At that time, Iran was involved in wars with the Ottomans, who threatened Iranian unity and independence. Apparently, *Shahnameh* is of a nationalist nature.
The foundations of the first independent united Iranian state\textsuperscript{46} in the modern-day territory of Iran\textsuperscript{47} were laid by Medians in 728 BC (Dandamayev & Medvedevskaya 2006; Diakonov 2009 [1956]; Encyclopædia Britannica 2010; Frye 2002: 80-81).\textsuperscript{48} From the outset, Iran was a multi-ethnic political unit. Already in the pre-Islamic Iran different ethnic groups, such as Medians, Persians, and Parthians ruled Iran. Despite the loss of Iranian unity and independence after the Islamic conquest, the “idea” of Iran and the Iranian pre-Islamic imperial traditions lived on (see, for example, Gronke, especially pages 7-67).\textsuperscript{49}

After a period of subjugation and national struggle against Arabs, Mongols, and other invaders, the sovereignty over more or less the same territory as the Sasanid territory was restored under the Safavid Empire, “as a territorial entity stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf” (Atabaki 2005: 25-27). History does not know many examples in which old countries were rebuilt out of the ashes. The restoration of an independent, unified Iranian empire was, however, such an example. Although the Sasanid Iranian traditions and arts were not totally extinct after the Sasanid Empire’s collapse, they enjoyed a renaissance during the Safavid Empire, a time in which Iranian tradition in the arts and architecture flourished (Farrokh 2009: 277).\textsuperscript{50}

Like the Sasanids, the Safavids announced an official state religion. Unlike the Arab caliphates, however, the Iranian glory depended much on its national culture, and the Iranian identity was not primarily religious even though religion and politics cooperated with each other. “[R]eligion and state were considered as sisters but not the same organization” (Frye 2002: 83). The Sasanids had announced Zoroastrianism as the official religion of Iran, and at the time of the Safavids it was Shi’ite Islam.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{46} Although many, especially those with a Euro-centrist orientation, maintain that the state is a modern European phenomenon, history shows otherwise. In this current study, all sovereign territorial-political constellations are justly regarded as states.

\textsuperscript{47} There were earlier independent territorial-political constellations in the territory of modern-day Iran. The best example is the Elamite Kingdom (Elamite civilization: fourth–first millennium BC; the Anzanite dynasty ruled several centuries during the second and first millennium BC). These kingdoms, however, were local and stretched over only a relatively small part of Iran. There are not many reliable sources about many of these (small) kingdoms’ actual independence.

\textsuperscript{48} This refers to the short, and in many aspects vague, article entitled “Media” in Encyclopædia Britannica (Online), with which many Iranologists do not necessarily agree. Available online: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/372125/Media (Accessed 24 October 2010).

\textsuperscript{49} Gronke (2003: 9), for example, mentions the use of the name Iran as a territorial entity during the Mongol rule in the 13th century, even though there was no independent Iranian state at that time. However, as she correctly mentions, these were the Safavids (1501), who could establish a united independent Iran for the first time after Islam (Gronke 2003: 11).

\textsuperscript{50} Kaveh Farrokh’s book (2009: 277) depicts a pre-Islamic-style gilded lion from the Safavid era from Georgia. In that book (Farrokh 2009: 281), a Safavid-era dagger from Iran is also depicted, which is decorated in a manner reminiscent of Sasanid art. Similarly, it is well-known that Safavids recited the Shahnameh’s pre-Islamic epics to boost their troops’ morale in their wars against the Ottomans and other adversaries.

\textsuperscript{51} The Islamization of Iran and adjacent regions proceeded after the fall of the Sasanid empire (226–
Shi’ite Islam could give a distinct identity, different from the Sunni subjects of the Ottoman empire, and in that sense Shi’ism has been essential in the consolidation of the Iranian political identity:

The Safavid attempt to introduce greater political unity through centralization and institutionalization of Shi’ism created for the Iranians a new, defensive identity in relation to those who lived beyond their borders. For the subjects of Safavid Persia defined themselves not by their own “national” characteristics, but rather by local exclusion, i.e. through a negative definition, comparing themselves with their immediate Sunni Muslims neighbors. (Atabaki 2005: 26)

In many ways, the Safavid Empire was modeled on the Sasanid empire. The Safavid Empire claimed and ruled over roughly the same territory as the last pre-Islamic Sasanid Empire, and the first Safavid king, Ismail I, following the old pre-Islamic Iranian tradition, was crowned as the Shahanshah [King of Kings, the Great King] of Iran in 1501 in his capital of Tabriz (Gronke 2003: 69). The Safavids were also successful in creating an Iranian territorial identity for their and successive Iranian empires:

The emergence of Persia as a territorial entity stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf took on a more concrete shape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the production of the first semi-modern European maps of the country…. Indeed, it was with reference to such mapping that…[various Iranian rulers insisted] on the persistence of Iran’s legitimate frontiers…. The Safavids’ territorial Persia indeed turned out to become a standard reference for all following rulers. (Atabaki 2005: 27)

Iran’s territory was reduced approximately to its current borders during the Qajar era (1794–1925). The “Great Game” rivalry between Russia and

651 AD) in the 7th century AD. The city of Darband (Derbent) in the North Caucasus (in present-day Dagestan), which served as the northern Sasanid port, was conquered in 654 AD, and thence the first attempts at Islamization of the North Caucasus began. It took until the 18th century, however, to Islamize a number of North Caucasian peoples, for example the Karachay and Balkar tribes (see Ethnohistorical 1994: 80 and 339).

Fleeing eastwards, the last Sasanid Emperor Yazdegerd III was killed in Central Asia (in Mary, Merv, in present-day Turkmenistan) in 651 AD. Subsequently, the Muslim Arabs conquered Central Asia. Initially, for example, in 720–722, 728, and again in 776–778 AD, there were many instances of local resistance on the part of Zoroastrians and Shamanists against the invading Muslim Arabs, when “local populations mounted major insurgencies” (Abazov 2007: 67). The Sasanid elite who fled to China were allied with China (Farrokh 2009: 274; Wong 2000). A milestone in the Islamization of Central Asia was the battle of Talas between the Abbasid Islamic Caliphate and the Chinese Tang Empire, the main external rival claimant to Central Asia in 751 AD. As a result of the victory in the battle of Talas, the victorious Muslims were able to control Central Asia and the Islamization could proceed with more ease. Nevertheless, it took until the 17th century to finalize Islamization of a few nomadic peoples.

52 Jeremey Black, in Maps and History: Constructing Images of the Past (1997) and Maps and Politics (2000), reviews and discusses the role of maps as sources of legitimization of political behavior and as reflections of political reality.
Great Britain over Central Asia had resulted in a loss of territory and regional influence by a relatively weak Qajar Iran. In the 19th century, Iran lost its Caucasian territories, as well as some adjacent areas in contemporary Turkmenistan, to Russia. The city of Herat, which was ultimately adjoined to Afghanistan, was lost to the British. The contemporary Iranian territory has been stable from that time onwards. Only the Island of Bahrain was formally separated in 1971 from Iran. There were also a number of cases of “border corrections”, notably when Iran ceded a piece of land to Turkey (1932), which gave the latter a short borderline with Nakhichevan (see, for example, Hunter 1997: 444 and 459, note 18; United States of America Department of State International Boundary 1964).

Formally, the religious, ethnic, and territorial policies of the modern Iranian state are three separate ones. Nevertheless, the former two overlap to a great extent. From the Safavid era onwards, the religious and ethnic policies of the Iranian state have manifested a great deal of continuity. The Iranian territorial administrative policy, on the other hand, has shown many changes. In general, there has been an increasing tendency towards administrative territorial fragmentation and political centralization. There are, however, a number of milestones in Iranian political history which have shaped the ethnic, religious, and territorial administrative policy, and the legacies of which still affect the contemporary situation: these were the establishment of the Shi’ite state during the Safavid Empire, the Constitutional Revolution in the late Qajar era (1905 and 1911), the modernization and centralization era of Reza Shah, and the Islamic revolution of 1979. Events such as the CIA-led coup (1953) against the democratic national(ist) government of Mosaddegh and the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988), even though very essential in Iranian political history, did not have a major impact on the contemporary ethnic, religious, and territorial administrative policies of Iran.

53 Naser Takmil Homayun (2001) discusses these treaties in his *Marzha-ye Iran dar Dowre-ye Moaser* [Contemporary Borders of Iran]. English articles about them can be found in the Columbia University-based *Encyclopædia Iranica* and many more non-Iranian sources, particularly those that were published before the 1979 revolution.

54 It is, nevertheless, possible that if Dr. Mossadegh’s government had not been toppled, it and its successors might have given the population more democratic rights, improved the position of religious minorities, and provided more facilities for peripheral regions, all of which could mitigate many grievances among the Iranian population.
Ethnic and Religious Policies in Iran: Historical Underpinnings

Unlike the situation in the Soviet Union, the ethnic, religious, and to a lesser extent territorial administrative, policies of Iran in the period of concern to this study display continuity with the past.\(^{55}\) These policies in the Islamic Republic of Iran are, in fact, a continuation of the previous political regimes and are developed and evolved from them. Therefore, as the legacy of the past lives on in contemporary Iran, it is useful in this chapter to first discuss the historical underpinnings of the present (and the period of concern to this study) before the contemporary situation is discussed.

Shi’ite Islam has been the official state religion of Iran since the Safavid era. Even during the periods of attempted secularization by Reza Shah (and to a lesser extent, Mohammad-Reza Shah) Pahlavi, the Shi’ite background of the Iranian state was not questioned. In order to consolidate his reign, Reza Shah pledged loyalty to Islam and initially sought alliance, or in any case understanding, with the Shi’ite clergy (Gill & Keshavarzian 1999: 432 and 441-445). Although “[in] the course of Reza Shah’s reign, the [Shi’ite] clergy’s judicial powers were increasingly reduced…[and the] clergy’s position was certainly injured by Reza Shah’s secularizing policies…” (Ghods 1991b: 225-226), the legal code approved in 1928 during the reign of Reza Shah “made many concessions to the Sharia, or the religious law” (Ghods 1991b: 225). That “code was not exceedingly controversial for it overwhelmingly followed the prevailing Shi’ite law. In fact the civil code remains mostly intact today following the Islamic revolution” (Gill & Keshavarzian 1999: 448). After the Islamic revolution (1979) the Shi’ite clergy’s position was recovered and strengthened enormously, more than ever before.

Despite concessions to the clergy in legal matters, Reza Shah’s period was characterized by strong tendencies towards secularization and anti-religious policies, such as the prohibition of the Islamic headdress for women (hijab), even though the Shi’ite underpinnings of the Iranian state were respected. The Iranian state in the period of Reza Shah, as a polar opposite to the Islamic Republic after 1979, can best be described as a secular Shi’ite state, that is, a state in which secularization was proceeding but had still preserved its Shi’ite character.

The establishment of a Shi’ite Islamic Republic with theocratic tendencies may have evoked fears in many religious minorities, to various degrees. Nevertheless, the communal cultural autonomy of the non-

\(^{55}\) The ethnic, religious, and territorial policies in the Soviet Union constituted a break with the pre-revolutionary, Tsarist period.
Islamic religious minorities and their reserved seats in the Iranian parliament, legacies of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906), were respected in the Islamic Republic era.

The policy of the Iranian state towards ethnic rights and privileges, with the minor—somewhat ambiguous—but notable exception of Reza Shah’s era, is characterized by indifference. This does not mean that the Iranian state has been indifferent towards the actions of feudal lords or regional elites. It means only that ethnicity was regarded traditionally as something belonging to the cultural realm, and the Iranian state was tolerant towards ethnic diversity, separately from religion. Traditionally, ethnicity as such—that is, separated from its religious layer—has not been a politicized and important issue in Iranian politics. During the Reza Shah-era centralization and homogenization policy, however, many tribal chiefs and local feudal elites were dispossessed of their power. The educational policy of Reza Shah’s era favored (cultural) homogenization of society in Iran. Despite the fact that Persian already had a stronger position in Iranian literature and was historically the most dominant language in Iran, some might argue that these policies were anti-ethnic in nature. Although it should not be exaggerated, there exists some truth in that Pahlavis’ (particularly Reza Shah’s) reign affected ethnic groups and in general the peripheries (see Ghods 1991a; Ghods 1991b; Samii 2000). According to Beck (1980: 16):

Tribal populations, as well as all ethnic minorities in Iran, were denied many national rights under the Pahlavis and were victims of Persian chauvinism. National education, in which all students were required to read and write in Persian and in which Persian culture and civilization were stressed to the almost complete neglect of the contributions of other population segments, was culturally destructive.

Reza Shah aimed at modernization of social and economic life and centralization of power in Iran by authoritarian methods (see, for example, Atabaki 2005; Atabaki & Zürcher 2004; Ghods 1991a; Ghods 1991b; Katouzian 2004). Therefore, he was a natural opponent to the autonomously acting tribal (semi-)nomadic ethnic chiefs, such as those of the Bakhtiari and the Qashqai tribes. During Reza Shah’s era, a policy was formulated, called “Takhteh Qapu”, which aimed at the de-structuring of tribal organization and forced sedentarization of nomads (Ahmadi 2005: 209-219; Katouzian 2004: 31-32; Keddie 1986: 163-164). This policy

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56 It is fair to say that Reza Shah, himself a Mazandarani married into an Azeri family, was not much interested in ethnicity, as long as one accepted his authoritarian rule. Nevertheless, his attempts at centralization and modernization of political and social life were undeniably accompanied by some degree of homogenization.
was, in many aspects, similar to the Soviet policy on nomadic populations in Central Asia and elsewhere.

Reza Shah-era policies of modernization of Iranian society and centralization of political power also had many homogenizing effects. These policies were in certain ways Reza Shah’s positive reactions to the voices of certain circles of Iranian intelligentsia:

The setback that the Iranian constitutional movement (1906–11) suffered in the years before the outbreak of the First World War, the political disintegration and partial occupation of Persia during the war, all of these left the middle classes and the intelligentsia in Iran no other option than to look for a man of order, who, as an agent of the nation would install a centralized, powerful (though not necessarily despotic) government capable of solving the country’s growing economic as well as political problems, while at the same time safeguarding the nation’s unity and sovereignty. Where social egalitarianism, liberalism and romantic territorial nationalism had inspired the earlier generations of intellectuals in their efforts to initiate change and reform throughout the country, for the post-war intelligentsia more preoccupied with the ideas of modern and centralized state building, political authoritarianism and linguistic and cultural nationalism became the indispensable driving forces for accomplishing their aspirations. (Atabaki 2005: 29)

Reza Shah’s anti-feudal and anti-nomadic policies were not necessarily detrimental to the members of these populations themselves. Although it disoriented their way of life in the short term, it enabled the authorities to provide the former nomads with better health care and educational facilities (Ahmadi 2005: 215). While Reza Shah’s policies liberated the population from the yoke of the (petty) tribal chiefs, it was by no means anti-ethnic, in the sense that it did not disfavor persons only because of their ethnic or tribal background. For example, “Sardar Assad Bakhtiari, a prominent Bakhtiari khan who had fought for the Constitutional Revolution and helped in the deposition of the Qajar ruler Mohammed Ali Shah, became Minister of War. Reza Shah trusted these men ... [who] made important contributions to the formation of internal and foreign policies in [the early period of his reign]” (Ghods 1991b: 220). Many former nomads were settled as oil workers in Khuzestan. In general these nomadic ethnic groups were not a “bad thing” for the consolidation of central power in Iran. Although their chiefs were disadvantaged by Reza Shah’s policies and, therefore, were natural opponents to Reza Shah, these nomadic ethnic groups were not necessarily detrimental to Reza Shah’s centralization policies, because they had a positive effect on Iranian territorial integrity. As they identified themselves with Iranian culture and

57 Although the source spells his name as Assad Bakhtiari, its spelling as As’ad Bakhtiari is more appropriate.
the Iranian nation, the presence of such groups in Khuzestan, for example, was a natural guarantee against the disloyal and separatist Arab sheikhs, who did not identify with the Iranian nation. The services of many nomadic tribal groups to the Iranian nation and state were already evident in earlier history. For example, the Safavid Empire was consolidated by the Qizilbash tribes; Nader shah, who defeated the invading Afghans, was from the Afshar tribe; in Fereydan particularly, the Bakhtiari’s attack on the invading Afghans seems to have been important for the final defeat of the Afghans by Georgians (Rahimi 2000: 27).

In 1941 Soviet and British troops occupied Iran in the course of the Second World War and put an end to Reza Shah’s regime, which was deemed to be sympathetic to Nazi Germany. Despite the fact that after his abdication the weakened tribal forces once again began uprising, and despite his relatively short reign, Reza Shah’s policies have had a lasting effect on Center vs. periphery relations, in that they had dealt a lasting blow to feudal forces. Earlier, the Iranian Center had tried many times to restrict the power of regional and feudal forces with mixed success. Notably, Shah Abbas I (reigned 1587–1629) was successful in his reforms of restricting the power of hereditary regional governors by replacing them, or controlling them, by administrators from the Center. Even though the feudal (tribal) forces could recover and reorganize themselves at moments when the Center was weak, they could not recover fully after Reza Shah’s reign and in the context of ongoing modernization of social and economic life. Reza Shah succeeded in destroying the feudal lords’ and tribal chiefs’ power, but he did not succeed in doing so to an equal extent all over Iran; in some less urbanized peripheries, especially in the Sunni areas, the old feudal lords could retain their power to a certain, but decreasing, extent. Even within these Sunni peripheries, some areas were cleansed of the feudal lords and structures to a larger extent than others were. For example, in Baluchistan, which was less urbanized and modernized in comparison with most other Sunni regions of Iran—Kurdistan, for example—the feudal and tribal structures remained better preserved after Reza Shah’s reign (Ahmadi 2005: 235).

Although the agency of the masses in modernity should not be neglected (Atabaki [ed.] 2007; Atabaki [ed.] 2010; Atabaki & Van der Linden 2003), the role of the elite in the process of modernization is evident. Reza Shah’s authoritarian reform was supported by, and in

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58 Reza Shah suppressed the separatist Sheikh Khaz’al in Khuzestan, who was supported by Great Britain.
59 Generally a trend is visible that at the time when the central authorities gained more power, they centralized the political decision making, while local political forces gained momentum again when the Center was weakened. In the long term, however, it meant that in the 20th century, and particularly during and after Reza Shah’s reign, the Center had consolidated its supremacy in an enduring way. These policies are succinctly described and discussed by Bahram Amir Ahmadian (2004).
certain sense was a welcoming response to, the voices of mainly leftist and progressive intelligentsia:

Reza Shah’s policy of centralizing government power and implementing modernization was in a sense a reaction to this widely felt need for authoritarian reform. The process of political and cultural centralization, flavored with secularism, westernism and meritocratism, generally enjoyed the support of many members of the intelligentsia, especially those with progressive and left-wing leanings. (Atabaki 2005: 30-31)

History might have proven that modernization usually leads to homogenization, but for many members of the Iranian intelligentsia at that time, it was the other way around. Although they recognized the relationship between modernization and homogenization, they set the course of action vice versa. They believed that in order to reach modernization, it was necessary to homogenize the society, and, therefore, a strong central and authoritarian regime was necessary. Consequently, the mainly leftish and progressive intelligentsia proposed authoritarian modernization, centralization, and homogenization on idealistic grounds:

They were convinced that only a strong centralized government would be capable of implementing reform, while preserving the nation’s territorial integrity. Likewise they believed that modernization and modern state building in Iran would require a low degree of cultural diversity and a high degree of ethnic homogeneity. Along with ethnic and linguistic diversity, the existence of classes, too, was rejected. (Atabaki 2005: 30)

Ironically, Reza Shah’s modernization policies proved to work against his own (as well as his son’s and the Islamic Republic’s) regime’s stability, policies, and ideals. A result of Reza Shah’s policies of modernization was the formation of a new modern intellectual elite that opposed the authoritarianism which had enabled its own formation. Reza Shah’s policies resulted in the creation of a well-educated elite, intellectually attracted to Western liberal democratic ideas, while having an Iranian nationalist orientation. These intellectuals, who could not be absorbed into Reza (and Mohammad-Reza) Shah’s regime, were attracted to the newly democratic (and leftist) opposition. Notably, they were absorbed by the National Front of Mosaddegh.60

After World War II, this new middle class, in an effort to attain political power that would not be dominated by any foreign country, became the main social base of Mosaddegh’s national front…. While the [Reza] Shah’s policies created a new middle class which could theoretically have

60 Dr. M. Mosaddegh, who opposed the Pahlavis and established the first democratic government in Iran, was toppled by the CIA. In 2000 Madeline Albright, the American Secretary of State at that time, admitted this fact.
played a major role in Iran’s modernization, he was too insecure to permit this class to play a role in Iran’s government. The resentment and frustrated ambitions of this modern middle class dominated Iran’s political history for over a decade after his abdication in 1941, reaching its height in Mosaddegh’s National Front. (Ghods 1991b: 227-228)

Similarly, the sons and daughters of the former feudal lords, who were attracted to, and recruited by, the leftist movements and opposed the Pahlavi regime (and the Islamic Republic for that matter) had very often enjoyed modern and Western or Western-style education (Beck 1980: 20, in Ahmadi 2005: 171).

The National Front was a democratic nationalist movement. It aimed at democratization of Iran, and although not disrespectful to ethnic identities, it believed in an integral, unitary Iranian nationalism. The democratic and leftist movements also believed very much in Iranian unity. The reason is simple and seems logical. A central-oriented regime can most effectively be opposed by centralized methods. Reza Shah’s (and to some extent Mohammad-Reza Shah’s and the Islamic Republic’s) regimes were centralized, and as long as they acted indiscriminately towards the opposition, unity was the most effective strategy for the opposition. Moreover, the underpinnings of their leftist and liberal democratic ideologies did not support the ideals of ethnic and regional particularism. In addition, the Shi’ite Islamic supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini, who assumed power after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, did not regard ethnicity as something politically relevant and important. For them, religion was a more important issue.

For opposition groups who struggle against and oppose the center of political power, appealing to the whole Iranian nation is the most effective strategy as long as there are no foreign funders and supporters. As a result of such a strategy the grievances in the peripheries do not automatically result in inter-ethnic tensions and violence but direct themselves towards the political center, demanding improvement of their social, cultural, and economic situation. Indeed, as Tohidi (2006) states: “an uneven and over-centralised (mostly Tehran-centered) strategy of development in Iran has resulted in a wide socio-economic gap between the centre and the peripheries. A great part of the grievances of ethnic minorities in the provinces is due to the uneven distribution of power, socio-economic resources, and socio-cultural status”. Although many are accused of, and in reality have, ties with foreign countries and movements (Tohidi 2006), the “overwhelming majority of the ethnic-rights activists

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61 It is remarkable that Nayereh Tohidi, who is accused by many Iranians, mostly nationalists, of showing sympathy towards the pan-Turkist-minded activists, maintains that the regional dynamics such as a Kurdish autonomous government in Iraq and an independent Republic of Azerbaijan may provoke and/or support ethnic movements in Iran. She also states that Mahmud-Ali Chehregani, the
in Iran declare themselves to be against secessionism” (Tohidi 2006). As history shows, even persons with undeniably strong ties with, and support from, foreign governments have initially announced their allegiance to Iranian national unity and territorial integrity. Such a person was Seyed Jafar Pishevari, who became the head of local government in the Iranian Azerbaijan under the Soviet occupation (November 1945 – November 1946). On numerous occasions, Pishevari, in Iran and the Soviet Union, praised the Iranian nation as a great and historic nation and announced his loyalty and allegiance to Iranian territorial integrity (Ahmadi 2005: 286-287). According to Tohidi (2006), an enhancement of ethnic rights will not “threaten Iran’s territorial integrity and national unity”.

Nevertheless, it is appropriate to distinguish between the dissent among Azeri, Bakhtiari, and other Shi’ite ethnic groups and that of Sunni ethnic groups. Although the Iranian Constitution does discriminate between Shi’ite Muslims and other confessional groups, and although the Sunni peripheries of Iran are at a lower level of economic development and have many grievances, their secessionist character should not be exaggerated. As long as these movements are not the remnants of old feudal forces and are not supported by foreign forces, they seek legitimacy and support for their cause among all Iranians, notably the democratic opposition, which is traditionally populated by better-educated people from the Center. Remarkably, the leftist movements in notably Sunni peripheries often enjoyed support and leadership from Shi’ite (Persian-speaking) leaders (Ahmadi 2005: 173).

In such a context, in which the centralized Iranian state is the ultimate authority and in which there exists no superseding authority above it, the struggle against the Center requires either internal popular support and widespread resonance among the Iranian population—most of whom are ideologically in favor of Iranian territorial integrity—or substantial funding and support from foreign forces. Oddly enough, an intermingling of interests among the traditionalist dissident Sunni clergy, feudal, and tribal lords as well as certain modernist (apparently) leftist and (allegedly) human rights activist forces collide in their struggle against the Center. In addition, as Bayat (2005: 44) puts it:

[An] inadvertent consequence of the Islamic Republic’s promotion of an ardent Shi‘i identity was a backlash in the Sunni areas of Iran. In

main leader of the pan-Turkist-minded movement in the Iranian Azerbaijan Iran (although in exile), has ties with Baku and the USA (Tohidi 2006). It is remarkable that she discusses in no less than three quarters of her article the situation of Azerbaijani (pan-Turkist) activists, while this is a minor phenomenon compared with the rather violent and well-organized ethnic dissent in Iranian Kurdistan and Baluchistan. It is also remarkable that she calls the Ostan-e Golestan in northern Iran the province of “Turkmenistan”. Ostan-e Golestan is a region, which is mainly inhabited by Mazandaraní and Turkmen ethnic groups.
Azerbaijan, and among Shi’i Arabs of Khuzestan and the Shi’i Kurds of Kermanshah, Bijar and Qorveh, this new emphasis did serve to strengthen a sense of communal unity, but at the same time it alienated the Sunni Kurds, Baluch and Turkmen. Alongside the increasing pull toward Iraqi Kurdistan among the Sunni Kurds, in regions such as Baluchistan, this resentment has provided a breeding ground for Sunni fundamentalism with clear links to the “Wahhabi” madrasas of Pakistan.

Sunni grievances in the Shi’ite state are a fact. Many of their grievances, however, are not religiously or ethnically based but are due to the lack of facilities and the economic neglect of their peripheral regions. On the other hand, the role played by external forces should not be neglected. Traditionally, the Soviet Union has been the main source of propagation of politicization of ethnicity in Iran and the instigation of ethnic strife under the label of the right to national self-determination (Bayat 2005: 44). Similarly, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a few Western and regional states and organizations have announced their desire to provide—or actually do provide—support to some “ethnic” movements, a number of which resort to terrorist activities (see, for example, Ahmadi 2005; Asia Times 3 November 2005; Bayat 2005: 43-45; Eurasianet.org 27 February 2010; Farrokh 2005a; Farrokh 2005b; Goldberg 2008; The Guardian 23 February 2010; Harrison 2007; Hunter 2006: 122; The Jerusalem Post 29 November 2010; Reuters 23 February 2010; Tohidi 2006).

The effectiveness and success of such separatist movements, however, remain obscure and generally weak, mainly because of the lack of large-scale popular support, as well as a strong Iranian state. As Bayat (2005: 42-43) puts it, even though ethnic politics do exist in Iran, still it is clear that in comparison with other multi-ethnic countries in the region “Iran’s national identity has been coherent and stable. Through British and Russian occupation, the Shah’s authoritarian rule and the tumult of the 1979 revolution, there have been revolts organized along ethnic lines, but these have not bedeviled the state as much as their counterparts in Turkey and Iraq”.

In conclusion, the foundations of Iranian statehood and nationhood have deep roots in history. The Iranian policy regarding ethnic and religious groups shows a considerable degree of continuity since early-modern

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62 Tabriz News (http://tabriznews.ir and http://www.tabriznews.com), a news website from Tabriz (the regional center of Iranian Azerbaijan) offers good coverage of news, as well as pictorials and analytical articles on these issues. It is remarkable that pan-Turkists, ethnic supremacists, and separatist movements often accuse the Iranian authorities of distorting news. They regard sources of news, such as Tabriz News, which broadcast news that they do not like, as instruments of the Iranian authorities. In reality, Tabriz News is an independent, non-governmental, news site, which has even been subject to governmental censorship.

63 Ahmadi (2005) and Farrokh (2005a; 2005b) provide many non-Iranian sources that speak about foreign involvement with ethno-nationalist and separatist movements.
times. In particular, Reza Shah’s policies in the 20th century were essential in the lasting extermination of the centrifugal forces in the largest part of the country. These policies resulted in the creation of a middle-class elite who believed in an integral Iranian nationalism. In fact, ethnic identities were de-politicized even more if they had not been so already. These policies with regard to integration of religious minorities into mainstream society were less successful. Although largely secularized, Iran remained a Shi’ite country, and the Shi’ites hold the better positions in society. This situation endured and gained new meaning and force after the Islamic Revolution. Foreign support to certain movements, as well as various degrees of popular grievances, in the predominantly Sunni areas still provide some challenges to the Iranian Center and may result in ethnic unrest, despite the fact that ethnicity as such (separate from religion) in Iran is generally void of much political meaning and is relegated to the cultural sphere.

**Territorial Administrative Policies in Iran: Historical Underpinnings**

The territorial administrative system of Iran has no ethnic or religious underpinnings. Both the Constitutional Revolution (1906) and Reza Shah’s policies have had lasting effects on the contemporary Iranian territorial administrative system.

The first-order administrative units in Iran are called *ostan*. These are the largest administrative units in Iran and are governed from the offices of *ostandaris*. Many *ostans* are ethnically heterogeneous and, in addition, almost all ethnic groups and religious communities are divided into more than one *ostan*. Each *ostan* is divided into many *shahrestans*, which are governed from the offices of *farmandaris* (see Figure 3.4). All *ostans* contain many *shahrestans*, except Ostan-e Qom, which contains only one. *Bakhshes* are the territorial administrative divisions below the level of *shahrestans*, and are governed by offices of *bakhshdaris*. All *shahrestans* contain at least one *bakhsh*, called the central *bakhsh*, which has the same administrative center as the corresponding *shahrestan*. Many *shahrestans*, however, contain one or more additional *bakhshes* with their own (lower-level) administrative centers.

*Ostan* and *shahrestan*, as administrative units, correspond respectively to *ayalat* and *velayat* prior to 1925 (Kuchakian Fard 1999: 9-10). To give an indication of what an *ostan* or *ayalat* might mean, I would say that the American *states* and the German *Länder* are both still called

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64 In fact, the constitutionalist revolutionaries struggled against the absolutist monarchy and were active over a longer time period (1905–1911).
ayalat in Persian. Although they do not always represent the historical regions, and the representation in the Parliament (Majles) proceeds roughly on the basis of each shahrestan, ostans are important territorial units. Ostans receive an allocated budget from Tehran. They have branches of many ministries as well as radio and TV stations. They have also offices of the Organization of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handcraft, which have as tasks, amongst others, the protection of local material and immaterial culture. The Iranian Constitution offers provisions for local councils at all administrative levels (Articles 7 and 100). However, the most important body of legislative power is the Parliament, members of which are elected roughly at shahrestan level. Some shahrestans have more than one representative, but most have only one representative in the Parliament. A (relatively small) number of shahrestans, however, have one representative for more than one shahrestans.

Before the Constitutional Revolution the territorial administrative divisions were based on tradition and power relations and not on rational and technocratic grounds. The Constitutional Revolution curbed the power of king, princes, and feudal nobility in internal affairs. It also revised somewhat the territorial administrative divisions, but the asymmetric character of the system was retained to a certain extent. After the Constitutional Revolution, a law was included in the Constitution, which defined the territorial administrative units and prohibited alterations in their borders except by law. According to this law, known as Qanun-e Ayalat va Velayat, Iran was divided into four ayalats and 12 velayats, plus the capital Tehran. Velayats were either directly under the central government or under ayalats. Below the level of velayat was the administrative level called boluk, the borders and territory of which could be modified only by law. Below the level of boluk was mahal (Amir Ahmadian 2004: 82-83).65

During the Pahlevi era, under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, thirty-one years after the ratification of the law Qanun-e Ayalat va Velayat, a new law was passed which cancelled the former law. According to this law (1937), the territorial administrative units were named in the descending order ostan, shahrestan, bakhsh and dehestan. These names somewhat resemble the Sasanid-era administrative units. Accordingly, Iran was divided into six ostans and 50 shahrestans. Shahrestans were below ostans and bakhshs were below shahrestans. At the bottom stood dehestans, rural areas which stood under bakhshes. This new law gave the cabinet of ministers the power to change the borders of territorial

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administrative divisions. The appointment of the heads of these territorial administrative divisions were made by the Ministry of Interior Affairs (Amir Ahmadian 2004: 83-84).

After the invasion of Iran by British and Soviet troops during the Second World War, Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi was enthroned as the new shah [king]. Although during his reign the former symmetric and centralized system was preserved, the number of ostans increased as a result of a process of territorial-administrative fragmentation which continues to the present day (Amir Ahmadian 2004: 86-7).

The same administrative territorial system was preserved after the Islamic Revolution (1979) and the fragmentation (at all administrative levels) proceeded further. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, in 2006 there existed 30 ostans, 336 shahrestans, and 889 bakhshes, and there were 1016 shahrs (urban centers) and 2400 dehestans (rural areas). Although dehestan is still a formal territorial unit, it is in fact nothing more than a designation of rural areas. The modern shahrs should not be confused with the archaic Sasanid-era shahrs, an appropriate translation of the latter being “country” or “large region”. Shah, in the formal Iranian territorial administrative system, means city or town and is simply a designation of urban areas as opposed to rural areas (dehestans). On 23 June 2010 the decision to split Ostan-e Tehran into two was ratified by the parliament and hence a new ostan, called Alborz, was created with Karaj as its administrative center (Tehran Times 24 June 2010). Consequently, the number of ostans in Iran rose to 31 (see Figure 3.4).

In contrast to the situation in the Soviet Union and its successor states, the Iranian territorial administrative system has no explicit ethnic basis, is flexible, and is not fixed by the Constitution. Although ratification by the parliament is required, the delimitation of territorial administrative divisions is not fixed by the Iranian Constitution, and hence further administrative fragmentation is very likely.

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Figure 3.4. The Iranian territorial administrative divisions: ostans and shahrestans. Colored areas are ostans; the lines indicate the delimitations of shahrestans.
Ethnic, Religious, and Territorial Administrative Policies in Iran: The Contemporary Situation

Article 12 of the Iranian Constitution stipulates that the official religion of Iran is Islam of the Shi’ite Twelver Ja’fari School. The same article offers a number of other Islamic schools, without referring specifically to Sunnis, the freedom to practice their religion, enjoy religious education, and observe and implement their religious rules, laws and rites within their communities in regions of the country where Muslims following any one of these schools constitute the majority. Article 13 recognizes Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as recognized religious minorities and offers them the above-mentioned rights, without any specification about their numbers in certain regions or localities. Article 14 prohibits the maltreatment of the above-mentioned non-Islamic religious groups. At the national level, the non-Islamic religious minorities enjoy guaranteed, special seats in the Parliament. Jews and Zoroastrians each possess one seat; Christians have three seats (Assyrians one and Armenians two). The representation of minorities in the parliament is a legacy of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911). Although Iran moved again afterwards towards authoritarianism, the legacy of, and the many reforms brought about by, the Constitutional Revolution and its constitution (1906) are still preserved in the Iranian Constitution.

On the one hand, the non-Muslim religious minorities are too few to be able to pose any danger to the Shi’ite character of the Iranian state; and on the other hand, the Iranian Islamic system after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 needed such a structure, because it is in accordance with the traditional Islamic policy towards the dhimmi communities (see Sanasarian 2000). Dhimmi is a term used in Islamic law and is used to refer to the “people of the book”—that is, the Abrahamic religions and (only in Iran) Zoroastrians—who live under an Islamic political system, are loyal to it, and in exchange are awarded with intra-communal autonomy and protection by the Muslim authorities (see e.g. Bosworth 1982). Bahais, on the other hand, are not recognized as a religious minority. Their strategies vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic’s laws have been either exodus from Iran, conversion (to Shi’ite Islam), or hiding their identity. Mandaeans are another religious community in Iran that is not recognized constitutionally, but nevertheless enjoys relative religious liberty. Unlike the case of Bahais, the reason for their non-recognition is seemingly not based on theological grounds. Most probably it is due to the fact that Mandaeans, who live in close-knit communities in Ostan-e

Khuzestan in southwestern Iran, are unknown to a great extent in the rest of Iran and even in Khuzestan. Many view them as Christians, while they themselves, as the followers of John the Baptist, resent such a denomination.

Generally, there exists a hierarchy of political and civil rights in Iran with regard to religious affiliation. At the top are the Shi’ite Muslims. Shi’ite Islam is recognized as the Iranian state religion and many political positions such as the Vali-ye Faqih [Supreme leadership] (Article 5) and presidency (Article 15) are constitutionally reserved for Shi’ites. In practice, all important political and societal positions are occupied by Shi’ites. At the next level are the constitutionally recognized, non-Muslim religious groups and the non-Shi’ite Muslims, both with different modes of social and political rights in the Iranian state. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the non-Islamic, recognized minority religious communities fare better than the Sunnis.

The constitutionally recognized non-Muslim religious communities are indeed excluded from many important positions; nevertheless, they enjoy cultural autonomy in their communal affairs throughout Iran and a relatively large degree of tolerance from the Iranian political establishment. For example, they are allowed to consume alcohol, which is severely punished in cases of Muslim citizens. They also have reserved seats in the parliament, for their representatives who seek to protect their constituencies’ interests. Their communal affairs and intra-community disputes proceed according to their own religious laws, although when they come into conflict with Muslims, they take an inferior position. Until relatively recently (2003), blood money, the compensation for the death of someone, was for a non-Muslim only half that of a Muslim.

As A. William Samii (2001: 130) notes, the Sunni minorities are discriminated against in Iran, and, as is the case with the non-Muslim minorities, they are also excluded from important political and societal positions. In addition, many Sunni mosques in Iran have been destroyed or closed, and in the Iranian capital Tehran, with its many churches and synagogues, there are no Sunni mosques at all (Samii 2000: 130; Tohidi 2006). According to a report by La Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme [International Federation for Human Rights], published during Khatami’s presidency (known as the period of reforms), the authorities refused to allow Sunni Muslims to build a Sunni mosque in Tehran (FIDH 2003: 6). Even though the way the relevant article in the Iranian Constitution is formulated makes it somewhat ambiguous, it is not

68 Ibid.
69 The equality between the blood money of males and that of females, in the Islamic Republic’s penal laws, was about to be realized in 2009.
a clear violation of the Iranian Constitution. The Iranian Constitution clearly states that “other Islamic schools” enjoy communal freedom to practice their religious rites in personal affairs. Public (religious) affairs, however, accord with the Muslim religious minorities’ rules and traditions, in the regions where they constitute a majority of the population, and only when they do not infringe upon the rights of the followers of other schools. This latter regional provision is not made with respect to the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities. In contrast to the non-Muslim recognized minorities, they have no reserved seats in the Iranian Parliament, but their concentration in some shahrestans (especially those in the ostan of Kurdistan and the ostan of Sistan and Baluchistan) means that there are always Sunni members of Parliament. In fact, Sunni affairs tend to be territorialized, while those of non-Muslim minorities can best be described as existing in cultural autonomy throughout Iran.

At the bottom of this hierarchy are the non-recognized religious communities. These include, first and foremost, the Bahais; but Christian sects not native to Iran can also be counted in this group. The Muslim authorities prohibit the conversion of Muslims to these sects, and the Christian communities’ authorities in Iran are very hostile towards them for they fear losing constituency (see Afshari 2001; Sanasarian 2000).

The situation with regard to languages and, in general, ethnicity (separated from its religious layer) is very different and more or less egalitarian. According to Article 15 of Iran’s Constitution, the official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian, but the use of regional and ethnic languages in the press and mass media, as well as education about their literature in schools, is permitted. In addition, Article 19 stipulates that “all people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege”.

Similar to the position of the Russian language in the former Soviet Union, the Persian language is regarded as the lingua franca of Iran; but in contrast to the Soviet case, no other languages are the subject of politicization, legalization, privileges, prohibition, or even denial. In fact, unlike the Soviet Union, in which languages and education in those languages were subject to a hierarchical ethnic and ethno-territorial system, Iran identifies itself as a flexible multilingual country without any territorial bias. No ethnic language enjoys any especial status in any territorial division. The constitutional law regarding languages deals with them with regard to the whole Iranian territory. The Iranian policy with regard to ethnic and regional languages can best be described as indifferent. It neither protects, nourishes, or cultivates any local languages
or dialects, nor does it prohibit their usage. In such an environment, Standard Persian and the Tehrani colloquial Persian dialect (broadcast by TV and radio all over Iran) have a dominant position in comparison with other languages. Other languages, nevertheless, are not totally neglected by private, NGO, or state initiatives (see also Rezvani 2009b: 199). Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) has programs in Persian, Azeri, Kurdish, Turkmen, Baluchi, and Arabic (Samii 2000: 131). The Swedish scholar Carina Jahani (2005: 156), an expert on Baluchis, provides many examples from Iran with regard to (the role of the state in bringing about) cultural and ethnic realities in Iran: 70

TV programmes showing regional variations in e.g. lifestyle, dress, dance etc. are frequently broadcast. Permission has been given to arrange ‘poetry evenings’ with recital of Balochi traditional and modern poetry e.g. in Chabahar where many culturally active Baloch live. The bilingual magazines in Persian–Balochi…are also a positive feature. There is, in fact, a considerable publication (books, newspapers etc.) taking place in the two largest minority languages Azeraijani and Kurdish, and in the academic year 2004-05 B.A. programmes in the Azeraijani language and literature (in Tabriz) and in the Kurdish language and literature (in Sanandaj) are offered in Iran for the very first time. There is also a Department of Gilan Studies at the University of Rasht.

As education is an important factor in the spheres of national and ethnic identity, and as the Iranian educational policy with regard to different ethnic and regional languages is criticized, it is appropriate to say a few words also in this regard. There is no clear and uniform national policy on education in, and in general the statuses of, different languages of Iran. In practice, the statuses of different languages are not equal. For example, after Persian—the lingua franca throughout Iran—Azeri and Kurdish are high-status languages, with TV and radio broadcasts and many publications in them. Some other languages or dialects, such as Bakhtiar and Qashqai, are relegated more to the folkloristic spheres, while languages such as Gilaki, Mazandarani, and Baluchi take an intermediate position. The fact is, however, that the Constitution provides enough opportunity to educate and cultivate all languages, and there is no legally based hierarchy.

The Iranian Constitution and ethnic policies in general do not legally categorize and rank ethnic groups, nor prohibit education in ethnic languages; on the contrary, it permits education in them. Nevertheless, in

70 She does this in her contribution to an edited volume by Annika Rabo and Bo Utas, entitled The Role of the State in West Asia, published by The Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul and distributed by I. B. Tauris (London). Bo Utas is an Emeritus Professor of Iranian languages at the Swedish Uppsala University, and Annika Rabo is affiliated to the Center for Research on International Migration and Ethnic Relations (CEIFO) Stockholm.
practice there is no national or regional policy with regard to education in different ethnic and regional languages. The possibilities, however, are present. A good example is the communal effort of the Fereydani Georgians, who aim to educate their children in the Georgian language and alphabet, an effort which is supported by the local authorities. Moreover, the choice for education in native languages is dependent on many factors, amongst which are the possibilities of organization and demand from the population. It is not automatically beneficial for ethnic groups to opt for non-Persian education when children are fluent in Persian. Some may see education in the native language as unnecessary and redundant when their children are already fluent in their own native language. Moreover, if different languages are introduced into the educational system, this may lead to a situation in which the holders of certificates from schools of certain languages are restricted from participation in higher education in another language. Since the main higher educational centers of Iran are located in Tehran and other Persian-speaking cities, such as Esfahan, Shiraz, and Mashhad, this latter situation is especially detrimental to the careers of students from non-Persian-speaking, economically underdeveloped peripheral and predominantly rural regions such as Kurdistan and Baluchistan. Certain small but somewhat significant circles regard linguistic pluralism as detrimental to Iranian unity. Such fears, however, seem to be unfounded. Education in ethnic languages and literature, even if regarded as unnecessary by its native speakers, is not detrimental to Iranian national unity. “Most Iranians who speak these languages perceive their ethnic identity as a complement to their national identity. Indeed, it has long been understood and widely accepted that this diversity is an asset to one of the world’s oldest continuous civilizations” (Tohidi 2006).

Although Standard Persian as the official language of the state and the lingua franca enjoys a dominant position, its speakers are not legally nor even de facto superior to others. The supremacy of the Persian language in Iran does not mean that the ethnic Persian-speakers are superior to others. Persian is a lingua franca for all Iranians and is a supra-ethnic language, as most ethnic groups inside Iran and many of those outside Iran have written their literature in this language and contributed to its development (Asaturian [Asatrian] 2011: 19; Frye 2006). In reality, no ethnic group in Iran enjoys any favorable position in comparison to others, as long as they belong to the Shi’ite (titular) majority or adhere to the same religion in general. Obviously, it is the language that enjoys special status and not certain ethnic groups. This

71 According to the traditional Persian spelling of his name, Asatrian is written as Asaturian in this publication (2011).
situation is similar to the situation in USA, where English is the lingua franca, but no privilege is bestowed on Americans of British descent. Americans of British descent clearly have no more privileges (and obligations) compared with Americans of German, Swedish, or French descent, for example.

In contrast to the case in the Soviet Union, the Iranian *ostans*, the first-order territorial administrative divisions, are not based on and demarcated rigidly along ethnic lines. Iranian *ostans* are primarily territorial administrative entities and not ethno-territorial ones. Although many ethnic groups inhabit these *ostans*, they are not primarily designed along ethnic lines. The cultural infrastructures—such as the provincial radio and television stations and the provincial headquarters of the Iranian “Organization of Cultural Heritage, Handcrafts and Tourism” (formerly three separate organizations)—which aim at the protection and exploitation of the cultural landscape of their corresponding *ostan*, accentuate the identity of each *ostan* and additionally provide their diverse ethnic groups some instruments for protection and cultivation of their ethnic and regional cultures and identities. As their territory is inhabited by concentrations of certain ethnic groups, many Iranian *ostans* have radio and television broadcasts in more than one local language or dialect. Although these are usually the most widely spoken languages, no ethnic groups retain any constitutional privileges in any *ostan*. This means that immigrants from other parts of Iran can function and participate without any legal (and often social) obstacles in the political, social, and economic life of their new place of residence. This situation is in sharp contrast to other political systems, such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, in which ethnicity was politicized and “territorially privileged”.

The Iranian Constitution offers provisions for councils and consultative bodies at different administrative levels (Articles 7 and 100). Nevertheless, the Constitution does not identify these administrative units nor prescribe any guidelines on how these administrative levels should be demarcated. This is in sharp contrast to the situation shortly after the Constitutional Revolution, a provision which was later abolished by Reza Shah’s constitution. The effect of Shah’s constitution still prevails, in the form of a flexible (rationalized) administrative territorial system (Amir Ahmadian 2004: 83).  

Furthermore, the Iranian Constitution formally proclaims the equal status of all *ostans*. According to Article 48, “there must be no

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72 In that period the Iranian territorial administrative units were recognized and demarcated in the Constitution. That situation changed, however, after Reza Shah’s constitution (1927), which relegated the demarcation (and creation and abolition) of the *ostans* to the central government. This situation prevails and has resulted in a flexible administrative territorial system.
discrimination among the various *ostans* with regards to the exploitation of natural resources, utilization of public revenues, and distribution of economic activities among the various provinces and regions of the country, thereby ensuring that every region has access to the necessary capital and facilities in accordance with its needs and capacity for growth”. The practice, however, is different. Although *ostans* are equal legal subjects, they do not have an equal level of development. Especially the mainly Sunni-inhabited *ostans* such as Kordestan (Kurdistan) and Sistan & Baluchestan (especially its Sunni part, Baluchistan) are poorer and enjoy fewer facilities.

The fact that Tehran—the Center—allocates the economic means and facilities, justly creates the impression that the Sunni-inhabited and, generally, the peripheral areas are discriminated against. The centralized system of Iran also means that local elites in some localities always try to elevate the administrative level of their locality, in order to secure more economic means and facilities. The higher the level in the administrative territorial hierarchy, the greater is the extent of facilities and economic means. Holding the status of an *ostan* is especially advantageous for it provides direct funding by Tehran. This leads to a process whereby an aspirant capital lobbies Tehran against the desires of the hosting *ostan*’s capital in order to get “liberated” from the latter’s tutelage and hence receive its own budget. This process has resulted in lobbying by local elites for the creation of new *ostans*. Splitting up an already existing *ostan* usually means the division of one (or more) ethnic concentration(s) into more territorial administrative levels. The best example was the creation of Ostan-e Ardabil due to local elites and popular demand, which resulted in the division of the former (almost homogenous ethnically) Azeri Ostan-e Azerbaijan-e Sharqi (East Azerbaijan) into two *ostans* (Chehabi 1997).

Although the Iranian political system shows some federal characteristics, it is still a centralized system in a unitary state. If it was a strict federal system and if ethnicity was heavily politicized in Iran, many ethnically divided *ostans* would have been subject to ethnic competition and tensions. A federal structure, whether in a democratic environment or not, may function well without causing major ethnic tensions, but it is its combination with politicized ethnicity that causes ethnic competition and potentially also ethnic and ethno-territorial conflict. An ethno-territorial federal system would give the separatist leaders more opportunity to effectively rebel against the central state when the central state is weak. Although Iran has not been free of ethnic strife, this has less to do with its territorial arrangements. The ethnic strife in Iran is most serious in its peripheral Sunni areas, and these are still less violent in comparison with most other states in the region. In general, the lack of ethno-territorial federalism, absence of politicized ethnicity, and the (quasi) civic nature of
the Iranian nation mitigate the probability of ethnic and ethno-territorial conflict.

Fereydan, whether the historic Fereydan or the Greater Fereydan, is a modal Iranian region in the western part of Ostan-e Esfahan. It is average in many aspects: urbanization, population, size of area, and welfare. It is, nevertheless, exceptional in the ethnic and religious sense. It is one of the very few regions in Iran traditionally inhabited by a rural Christian community. Its ethnic heterogeneity is also larger than most other areas in Iran. Therefore, Iranian policies on ethnic and religious groups are very important in Fereydan compared with most other Iranian regions.

Fereydan, owing to its ethnic similarity to the Caucasus, is often colloquially called the Iranian Caucasus. However, because its inhabitants coexist peacefully, it is also called the Iranian Switzerland. Although it should not be exaggerated, Fereydan has not always been a peaceful environment in the past. A good portion of the Fereyndani population are the descendants of (semi-)nomads who were sedentarized either voluntarily or by force. A large portion are also the descendants of the Georgians and Armenians who were moved there in the early 17th century. One rationale behind the Georgian settlement in Fereydan was that Shah Abbas I regarded their martial skill as very desirable in countering (semi-)nomadic, notably Bakhtiari, feudal lords (Rezvani 2008a: 599-560). Finally, in Reza Shah’s era, a lasting blow was dealt to the troublesome Bakhtiari feudal lords, who had caused much insecurity in Fereydan and adjacent areas (Rahimi 2000: 57-67).

The territorial administrative tendency towards fragmentation is also clearly visible in Fereydan. Historical Fereydan was originally one shahrestan in Ostan-e Esfahan. First Fereydunshahr and then Chadegan became separate shahrestans. In addition, in the latter shahrestan, a new bakhsh was established. Today the historical Fereydan and Khwansar, a region which we call the Greater Fereydan, contains four shahrestans: Fereydan proper, Fereydunshahr, Chadegan, and Khwansar. In addition to the central bakhshes, Fereydan proper and Chadegan contain other bakhshes in their territories. These are respectively the bakhshes Buin-Miandasht and Chenar-Rud (see Figure 3.5).

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73 Although (semi-)nomadic tribes could be troublesome at times, they had generally good and peaceful relationships with the sedentary population. The Bakhtiari tribe’s attack on Afghans, for example, preceded the Georgian victory over the invading Afghans during the late Safavid era.

74 The Iranian administrative units very often bear the administrative center’s name. This is not the case in Fereydan. Daran is the capital of Fereydan proper. In contrast to popular belief, the town of Daran has never been called Fereydan, and there is, or was, no other town with that name. Owrgan is the administrative center of Bakhsh-e Chenar-Rud. The other administrative units’ names correspond to their administrative centers.
Conclusion: Ethno-Political Systems and Ethno-Territorial Conflict

The ethno-political system of the Soviet Union, unlike that of Iran, politicized ethnicity, enhanced—in many cases even created—ethnic nationalism, and promoted ethnic competition and conflict. The hierarchical ethno-political system in the Soviet Union subordinated some ethnic groups to others; many ethnic groups were awarded higher degrees of territorial autonomy than others; many others were not awarded any territorial autonomy at all. In addition, many ethnic groups in the Soviet Union have experienced traumatic peak experiences such as genocide and deportation, which are likely to influence their political behavior and hence may contribute to the emergence of ethno-territorial conflict, especially regarding the fact that these experiences have often had territorial consequences.

Although politically subordinated to the Soviet Center (Moscow), the SSRs, or union republics, were in fact quasi-states. They even had the formal right of secession from the Soviet Union. More importantly, they possessed most attributes of nation states. In fact, the Soviet nationalities
policy and ethno-national delimitation of the Soviet territory laid the foundations of the independent Soviet successor states.

By politicizing ethnicity and offering territorial autonomies to a number of ethnic groups, the Soviet ethno-political system, in fact, combined cultural aspects with political-territorial ones. One of this system’s results was ethno-political subordination. In this system, ethnically based political grievances stemmed from ethno-political subordination. In many cases an ethnic group that was a subordinated group somewhere was the titular population in a neighboring territorial autonomous unit. Therefore, territorial contiguity to an ethnic kin, especially when it possessed territorial autonomy within, or was the titular group in, a neighboring republic, could have an effect on ethnic relations and competition in neighboring republics.

The mode of nationhood determines to a large extent the ethno-political subordination and privileges of ethnic groups. In a (systematic) analysis, therefore, one must pay attention to factors such as ethno-political subordination, possession of territorial autonomy, and traumatic peak experiences, in addition to cultural factors such as linguistic or religious difference. Geographical contiguity may be combined with other factors and consequently more concrete factors may be formulated. Contiguity to the titular territories of their kinfolk is one such factor.

The possession of territorial autonomy by an ethnic group is an important condition because it serves as an opportunity structure. It helps to mobilize people for a cause, among which an ethno-territorial conflict is not a very strange one, because such a conflict is usually depicted as a just cause. Although the autonomous capabilities of these territories may be shallow in the formal legal sense, ethnic groups effectively possessing such autonomous capabilities have an edge over all other ethnic groups who do not have such autonomies, especially in a time of political instability when the power structures are disturbed and the political centers’ power is in disarray. The possession of autonomous territories also has a symbolic value. Especially in such hierarchical ethno-political systems, possession of autonomous territory means that that ethnic group is “special” and more important than many others.

Regarding the fact that ethnic competition in the Soviet Union made ethnic groups dependent on the Center, bi- or multi-titular autonomous territories were less likely to wage a separatist war. It was also not very likely that their co-titular ethnic groups would come to large-scale warfare with each other when none had a demographic majority. If one of the co-titulars had demographic dominance in an autonomous territorial unit, it was likely that it controlled the autonomous apparatus entirely and had it at its service for mobilization for a conflict. Therefore, the demography matters in this context. Ethnic groups with a demographic
dominance within their titular autonomous territory are more likely to take advantage of their autonomous apparatus for mobilization for an ethno-territorial conflict.

Regarding the fact that the ethnic groups in the former Soviet Union differed in size, demographic dominance is also important in combination with contiguity. One ethnic group can be a minority in one location while being a majority in the broader region. One ethnic group may be ethno-politically subordinated in one union republic but may be titular in a neighboring, usually larger, republic. There were a few rather large ethnic groups in the Soviet Union, such as Russians or Uzbeks. They may have been subordinated minorities in a republic but were a dominant titular majority in a neighboring republic. This condition, called trans-border dominance in this study, may compensate for the subordinate position of their co-ethnic kin in contiguous republics.

The differences between Iran and the Soviet Union are paramount. Nevertheless, there are also many differences between different cases in the (post-)Soviet space. It is true that the Iranian ethno-political system did not display many features of the Soviet one. At the same time, however, these features, such as a dominant demographic weight in a territorial autonomy, contiguity to ethnic kinfolk, or trans-border dominance are not equally present everywhere and among all ethnic groups in the (post-)Soviet space. Therefore, it is appropriate to take these features into the systematic analysis in order to explore the causal conditions which have led to ethno-territorial conflicts. Moreover, the Soviet Union in the late 1980s was a state in disarray; nevertheless, only a few ethnic groups came into conflict with each other. In other words, while all conflicts emerged in a state in disarray, not all ethnic encounters in that state were afflicted by conflict. This is yet another reason for not explaining ethno-territorial conflicts simply by the factor of “a state in disarray” (or political instability in general), but rather including many different factors in the analysis.

Figure 3.6 depicts the factors which can be taken as specifications of ethno-political systems and ethnic kinship, in interplay with each other and with demographic and geographic properties such as geographic contiguity and demographic dominance. The resulting factors (in bold letters) will be included in the analysis. Ethnic kinship and linguistic similarity overlap nearly perfectly in this study (not least owing to the Soviet nationalities policy). In the Soviet system, economic grievances were very often related to ethno-political subordination. Figure 3.7 presents a refined model for the explanation of ethno-territorial conflicts. This model is more detailed and concrete than the one in the previous chapter (Figure 2.3).
Figure 3.6. Derivative factors from ethno-political systems and their interrelationship with other factors. (The italic text in the lighter colored boxes represent not theory-driven factors but geographic properties. Factors in bold letters are included in the refined model.)
Figure 3.7. Factors explaining ethno-territorial conflict: A refined model. (Empty gray lines indicate an ambiguous relationship.)