

**SCHANZER:** Hi and thank you for joining us today. I'm Jonathan Schanzer, Senior Vice President for Research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. We're glad to have you tuning in to today's important and timely discussion.

We are going to be hosting a discussion to mark the release of a new FDD monograph called *Iran Is More Than Persia: Ethnic Politics in the Islamic Republic*. The report is authored by FDD's Brenda Shaffer with a foreword by Reuel Marc Gerecht. This monograph is part of a larger book project for Brenda. It's a rich and complex topic, and sprinkled with a bit of controversy, too. So, we thought it would be useful to bring together experts to discuss it in-depth.

But before I do introduce this conversation, a bit of background on FDD. We're a non-partisan policy institute, and a source for timely research, analysis, and policy options. We take no foreign government or foreign corporate funding and never will. Today's program is one of the many that FDD will host throughout the year. For more information on those events and the rest of our work, we encourage you to visit our website: [FDD.org](http://FDD.org). With that, I am pleased to introduce our panel today.

First, Brenda Shaffer. She is the Senior Advisor for Energy at FDD and author of FDD's new monograph on today's topic. We also have Reuel Marc Gerecht, a senior fellow at FDD. He previously served as a Middle Eastern specialist at the CIA's Directorate of Operations. We also have Ahmad Obali, who is the founder of the popular U.S.-based Azerbaijani-language television station Günaz TV. He has been called the Anderson Cooper of northern Iran. Finally, we have Norman Roule who served for 34-years in the Central Intelligence Agency, managing numerous programs relating to Iran and the Middle East. He also served as the National Intelligence Manager for Iran at the Office of the Directorate of National Intelligence. We are very grateful to have all of these experts with us making time today for this important discussion.

Brenda, congratulations on your new monograph, *Iran is more than Persia*. In writing this, you waded into a controversial issue, one that I think is surprisingly controversial, at least to a casual observer, and that is on the question of demographics and ethnic minorities in Iran. And one of the most contested questions, I think, related to the work that you've done, and I think the broader field is the question of numbers. So, let's start with the basics. Who are the main ethnic groups in Iran and what were your key findings?

**SHAFFER:** Thank you, Jonathan. You know, often Westerners refer to Iran as Persia and refer to people as Persians, just as it became quite popular to refer to people in the Soviet Union as the Russians, but actually Iran is at least 50% non-Persian minorities. And there's pretty much a demographic and geographic overlap. Most of them reside in Iran's border provinces, but the issue even of numbers for – even though it was clear to anyone looking at Iran that there are ethnic minorities, there's always been controversy about it, and with very few agreed-upon sources on the demographics. And most people actually, because there wasn't any consensus about the numbers, would refer to the CIA World FactBook on this question. And, and even though the FactBook stopped reporting numbers already in 2016, a sign that they probably don't have a firm handle on the minorities issue or want to at least publish about it.

So, I felt very lucky with this study to have had access to primary documents, including the Iran Value Survey. About twice a decade, the Iranian Ministry of Interior conducts internal surveys about language use, cultural identity, even religiosity, prayers, very interesting data to look at. A second study was the Council of Public Culture that also

did work on ethnic minorities, and some statements on the Ministry of Education about their problems with first graders coming to school and over half of them not being proficient in Persian when they arrive in Iranian schools.

So, some of the more, I think, fascinating aspects was the idea that over 40% of Iranians self-defined – they're not fluent in the Persian language. So, think about that. And that's self-defined, it might even be higher. As we know in surveys, people tend to compliment themselves– say that they have a proficiency. Overwhelming numbers, you know, most ethnic groups in the 70s, 80s, 90s, say they want to teach their children their mother tongue, even if they're living away from the ethnic-populated provinces.

And I think, really, with the huge differences in language capacity, let's say, in the border provinces, we took a look for instance at Azerbaijanis that live in East Azerbaijan province Zanjan, West Azerbaijan province, other areas that are heavily Azerbaijani populated versus those in Tehran. Huge differences in the Persian proficiency. So, I would say, part of my initial discussion is as a researcher, someone who goes just to Tehran and maybe Isfahan, it would be like a researcher coming to the United States and only going to New York and Los Angeles, not seeing the U.S. south, the Midwest, would have a very different picture of America than someone who made it to the provinces.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. Thank you for setting the table here. So, Norm, let me turn to you and just ask you this. I mean, you've got years of experience working in the intelligence community. Why does the ethnic issue matter in Iran?

**ROULE:** For Iran, its ability to control its sovereignty and its stability has always been a primary issue for the Islamic Republic, and the ethnic communities of Iran have been troublesome, although they have been containable by the regime. The regime also sees its ethnic communities as a lever by which some of its neighbors can undertake threats against the stability of the country, to include stability of key economic zones, such as the oil-rich area of the Ahvaz or the sensitive area with Iraq involving the Kurds.

It's important for the Iranians, they devote considerable resources to it, but I think it's useful also to note that this isn't something that the Iranians believe is a critical threat to the regime. Iran is a protest-rich country in which there are between 650 to 900 protests every year. Certainly, protests in the ethnic areas are significant in number, but I don't think there's any evidence that it's sufficiently so significant that you see this as a serious threat to the regime itself.

For the external world, I don't think we devote enough attention to this, and I'm not talking about government so much as the politics of Congress and so forth. You're seeing a country where there is organized discrimination, repression, environmental damage, cultural discrimination, to an extent that really doesn't exist in many other places. And it's pretty much ignored, and it touches millions of people in an adversary country to the United States.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. Reuel, I want to turn to you. You wrote, I think, an excellent foreword to this monograph, and you noted that there is some controversy, as we've already alluded to. Why is this issue so controversial? And maybe as a follow-up, how would the ethnic issue impact Iran if there were suddenly free elections or democracy in the country?

**GERECHT:** Yeah, I mean, I think first of all, I always have to start off with a hard truth and that everybody in the Middle East lies about their religious minorities, and they lie about ethnic minorities. And modern states, even the strongest of them say Turkey and Iran, in the Middle East, are fragile states. At least, they think of themselves

as ethically fragile. And so it is, I think it's fair to say that what Norm said is true. That is that the regime is capable of pounding successfully all day and all night upon the Ahwazi Arabs, the Turkmen, the Kurds, the Baluch, that's been true of the Islamic Republic. And it was true also of the Pahlavis. The wildcard would be the Azeris. They're the ones to look at, they're the most deeply integrated into Iran, the most deeply integrated in the Islamic Republic, but there are question marks about them. Certainly, since I was living in Istanbul in the 1980s and 1990s, those question marks got bigger, they didn't get smaller. And you don't know, at least I don't have a good feel for how successfully Persianisation of the Azeris has been. It was evident to me that certainly the use of language, if that's an indicator of ethnic loyalty, identity, the Turkish part of that seemed to be going up, not down. But again, it's very difficult to get an accurate grasp on this, but you could imagine this scenario where the Azeris, there were probably at least 25% of the population, maybe more and they're in very strategic locations.

If that group ever ignited, then the Islamic Republic would find itself, I think, in a pickle. And that would be true if it were Iran without the Islamic Republic. On the issue of democracy, I think what inevitably we see when people get a chance to vote, they do vote their identities, these identities are more important than many people think they are. And certainly, in the case of Iran, because of the overwhelming presence and power of Persian culture, it's centrifugal eminence, we tend to focus on that, and I think we downplay the ethnic passions that bubble under the surface. And I think if you did see a democratic vote, certainly in areas that geographically make some sense, you might get an outcome where the Persians, proper Iranians from the Iranian plateau actually aren't particularly popular, and you would see people try to vote with their feet, whether that would work, given the way the country is intermixed now, and the way you have proper Persians living everywhere, I don't know.

It could be a recipe for violence, it might not, but I do think you would see a lot of folks express themselves. You've seen them in national elections already. You see it perhaps by the rate they abstain from voting. Certainly, the Kurds have shown us clearly that they would really love to give the middle finger to the regime in Tehran. Again, the real question mark is how would the Azeris vote if they had the freedom to do so? And would they join with their northern cousins, brothers, however you want to put it? I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if it were a much more rambunctious outcome than a lot of people think, and certainly more than Iranians, proper Persians believe, they want to believe. And this is true of those in the Islamic Republic. It's certainly true of the expatriate population. They want to believe that basically it's one happy family and everybody's content with a Persian susantry. I don't know, it could turn out to be a hell of a lot more convulsive than that, which is why people just naturally don't want to go there.

**SCHANZER:** I want to come back to that in a little bit, but in the meantime, Ahmad, let me just ask you this, Reuel just alluded to the fact that maybe it's not all one big happy family. I think we can say that with some certainty. What are the main differences that you see among the ethnic minorities? Right now, when just thinking off the top of my head, the question of sanctions against the regime and perhaps ties to Israel, those are probably two things that I think are most obvious perhaps. But what would you describe those areas of friction among the Iranian ethnic minorities?

**OBALI:** Well, as Reuel, actually also Norman and also Brenda mentioned, the country needs to be, I think Iran needs to be restudied again. If any country wants to have a proper policy towards the country of Iran, they must understand the ethnic composition or makeup a bit of the nation altogether. When you have an over 50% of population that is called minority, there's a problem. And in all the countries in the Middle East, especially in Iran, when you're called the minority, it also comes with this undeclared reality that if you're a minority, you're lost, you don't have much rights. And in the case of Iran, as I am one of the so-called minority ethnic members as

an Azerbaijani, I am more involved with all the ethnic groups, their organizations, cultural organizations, political organizations I'm in touch with, and what I see the trend is towards more of a polarization rather than unification.

So, Arabs are becoming more Arab, Kurds, definitely are more Kurdish than 10, 15, 20 years ago, Baluchis we see all the uprising, all the problems in the Baluchistan area, Turkmens, the Northerners. Again, the Northerners have multiple, at least I know two organizations that are rooting for outright independence from Iran. Azerbaijanis, we have a majority, at least in six provinces, that includes from Qazvin, Zanjan, Hamadan, Ardabil, East and West Azerbaijan, from Tehran to the border of Turkey. So, the minorities think that they're lost in the view of Western powers, especially United States. So, they tend to have a different view of the so-called main opposition groups in Iran.

So, the problem that we have so far in the west, is the west is more focused on Tehran and Persia or Persians, where minorities think that they are part of the society, they need to be accounted for, they need to be dealt with as well. So, all along the past 40 years, especially the last 20 years after the satellite televisions, broadcasting satellite television into Iran, and also internet widespread availability of social media, people are becoming more aware of their human rights, ethnic rights and backgrounds and history and so forth. What Persian supremacy or Persian culture has done, thinking that over a period of time the country will become all united under Persian language or Persian culture has not worked really. It has worked to a certain degree, but it's going backwards now. So, now we have more young people becoming more of an ethnic identity activist rather than the older people.

So, this is one trend. The second thing is Iran is a country that has multiple problems. It has democracy problems, women's rights, environmental issues, the economy is in disarray, we have so much of addiction to drugs, unemployment, over 50% of college educated youngsters have no jobs. So, in order to deflect away the attention Iran tends to focus on other, let's say, problems in the region, or creates problems or crises to hide its own crisis. So, ethnic groups are well aware of this tactic. It doesn't work anymore. So, when it comes to, for instance let's say in the past 41 years, we've heard, "Down to Israel. Israel is our enemy." This slogan has been repeated many, many years, year after year, day after day, months, Quds Force Day, Quds Day, and so forth.

Well, recently, we had a show live show there we actually have call-ins directly from Iran. We had, I think if I'm not mistaken, 50 calls from Iran or 40 calls from Iran directly, 38 of them were from Iran. Every single person viewed Israel as a friendly country. And they went beyond calling Israel as friendly, they said they would kiss, some said, "I would kiss Israeli flag. They're my brothers. They're our allies. They're our strategic allies. They're our friends." So, this whole notion that the propaganda is going to work overtime, actually didn't work in Iran. As for sanctions, I'll give you one more example. We recently had a show about sanctions. The question was, should the sanctions be lifted or kept in place? And I was surprised that of 50 calls that we received, we could only receive 50 calls because of time restrictions, everyone except one, everyone asked for sanctions to stay rather than lifted.

And why? Because they think Iranian government is getting weaker with the sanctions. They think the access to cash to the government is crucial to support proxies, terrorist groups, Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic jihad, Houthis, these are all people's money that government uses to spend on. So, people thought that in order to have a real change with this government, or maybe actually end of this regime, the sanctions should stay in place. It takes time for sanctions to work. And I was surprised how knowledgeable they were that they thought in the long term, although we suffer in the short-term, but in the long term sanctions is the people's benefit. This, to me, was surprised how people were knowledgeable on looking to the long-term effect of sanctions. And I think Kurds are in

the same fashion, in support of sanctions. I know a lot of Arab groups are in support of sanctions. Baluchis are in support of sanctions. I think most of Persians are in support of sanctions, but somehow sanctions –

**SCHANZER:** There's a question, of course, of whether the U.S. government is in support of sanctions. But we can address that perhaps a little later on in the discussion. Norm, let me turn back to you for a moment and just ask, is it possible that the influence of these minority groups, these ethnic minorities are going to grow in the coming years? I think you've made the argument that they're contained by the regime at least for now, but what are the areas that you would watch as someone that's been in the intel world? What are the trend lines that you would say would be more concerning for this regime?

**ROULE:** That's a good question. Over recent years, the polarization of the groups has been attenuated by the rise of social media and the ability of these groups to aggregate their views and feelings and to feed off of each other, in essence, through a reliable stream of social media commentary, it's going to be important to their ongoing evolution. The Iranian government will continue to devote a significant and probably sufficient amount of security resources to the area and likely continue with its current role of underinvestment and environmental degradation and cultural exploitation. What I think is important also would be whether or not the groups are able to overcome their intragroup and intergroup animus and rivalry to coalesce in some sort of a multiethnic element that is able then to bring about political support in various governments.

European governments, and the United States tend to look, as you correctly stated, at Iran is a Persian centric country, and it's often about Tehran and the ethnic areas don't get a lot of political voice in Congress or in the European Union. I think their ability to use social media, pull together, survive the onslaught of the government, and then coalesce, that would make them more impactful.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. Brenda, sticking to trend lines and what to watch, you noted in your report that there have been a number of protests among the various ethnic minorities in the provinces. You noted of course, that some of them were non-violent, but some of them were in fact, violent protests. We've seen something akin to insurgencies in a few places. What are the trendlines here to watch? Should the regime be concerned? Is this something that you see increasing over time?

**SHAFFER:** For most of the history of the Islamic Republic, Tehran hasn't had full security or control in the Baluch populated areas, the Arab populated areas, the Kurdish areas. And by and large, the regime could deal with that because these attacks were taking place in places that mainly Persians didn't live. It wasn't affecting the economic activity of the regime, but there's been a couple changes and acceleration. So, basically with the rise of more and more attacks in the Khuzestan region and this is the nexus of the Iranian oil and gas industry. It's important ports, it's important pipelines. If you look back actually historically, the U.S. government used to do a lot of reports that were declassified, on Khuzestan. It was really always a center of analysis. And it seems really to be a hotspot again.

And then, as Reuel pointed out that the exception of what could really be problematic for the regime would be, if there was a change in the attitudes of most of the Azerbaijanis, because they are, on one hand, the largest minority group there because they are the most integrated of all the non-Persian groups. If they were to depart, let's say similar to what happened with Ukraine losing support for the USSR, this would be crucial because other groups, most of the groups rarely had any support for the regime. And I think that there's been really a watershed this past year with this war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And Azerbaijanis in Iran seeing, in real time, their government,



seeing trucks rushing through provinces they live in and seeing the supplies physically go into the battle zone areas and really, in live time, going to the battle zone and seeing these arms of their own government trucked in and killing people that they see as their co-ethnics. As Reuel pointed out, ethnicity, blood, it matters and even people looking more historically at the Islamic Republic, and with the rise, as Norm pointed out, rise of social media, foreign television. I hardly hear of anyone in Iran that watches Iranian television broadcast from the regime, but certainly the ethnic minorities are watching foreign television, mostly Turkish television, television from the Republic of Azerbaijan, even Ahmad's channel broadcasting Gunaz from Chicago and social media. So, can we imagine, we can't even think that someone would think, "Wow, that social media doesn't affect ethnic identity politics in the United States and Europe. So, why do we think somehow it's not affecting Iran?"

So of course, it's having a huge impact there. And so, things that might've been true, even in that 80s and 90s, they've changed dramatically, just as they've changed dramatically in the West as well.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. Ahmad, let me turn to you. I also want to hear about your thoughts about the Azerbaijani population in particular, after the war last year with Armenia. But also, if you would, let's talk a little bit about soccer or as some might call it football. But soccer matches, in Brenda's monograph, we talk a lot about how soccer matches are a place where Azerbaijanis in particular are able to voice their dissent, that this is sort of an acceptable place, or at least the regime doesn't put up as much of a security presence in order to challenge the things that are voiced in soccer matches. So, perhaps just your thoughts about what we saw after the war and also the soccer match phenomenon.

**OBALI:** As Brenda mentioned, during the war, or even after the war, there has been a tremendous uptick in the movement, the Azerbaijani movement. The South Azerbaijanis, as we referred to south of the Araz River, to differentiate from the northern part, we call them South Azerbaijanis in Iran. The movement is basically a non-violent movement that focuses on 100% equality, secular democracy, and protection of the entire environment, human rights, woman's rights in particular, cultural and economic and political equality. And we don't believe in violence. So, our people look for avenues, opportunities to express their opinion, and soccer matches are one. And events like the Karabakh war was another one where on social media from September 27 onward, I think perhaps almost half of the social media activities in Iran was related to the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

And Azerbaijanis were the most active one, not only on social media, they would travel to the border right across from the river, they would go to the top of the hills and actually go watch Azerbaijani soldiers go forward, liberate village after village, and we were airing some of those videos. So, there was this one man, young enough, I think that maybe 35, 40 years old, that probably didn't see liberated parts that before it was occupied by Armenians. So, when he was looking at this liberated part of Azerbaijan right across from the border, he was talking to himself thanking God. And then all that happened is he just broke down and cried that the land is liberated. So, of course the Iranian authorities were taking notes of things like this.

There was another older lady said, sitting, looking at the destroyed village of Khudafarin, right near the famous Khudafarin crossing, it's an old bridge. And she was going back and forth like this and talking to herself on the video saying, "I'm glad your land has been liberated. I hope you come home soon. I hope your lights will be lit forever. I will bake some cookies and throw them over the river to welcome you back home. Please may God help you to come back home soon." And these are people that think that it is the same people. They believe in the same people that their land was liberated. When we asked our people to send us videos, people's reactions to the war, we were

overwhelmed by hundreds of videos that people were celebrating as Azerbaijan was getting the lands liberated day by day, every day.

And also, the slogans that they were using, the fact that they thought, "Oh, our president has ordered our army to go forward." And here Azerbaijanis in the south in Iran are calling Aliyev as their own President. The Azerbaijani army becomes their army. So, this was definitely eye opening for, not only for the world if they saw it, but definitely for Iran, they became nervous and they have to change their policy after a couple of demonstrations towards Azerbaijan.

**SCHANZER:** Ahmad, let me let Reuel weigh in here for a little bit and I promise we'll be able to get back to you. But Reuel, we're hearing this from Ahmad, and I guess my question really is a straightforward one. So, you hear these sentiments being relayed by the Azerbaijani population or other ethnic minorities, and those sentiments are clear. And then you have the regime itself mocking these ethnic minorities in the official media. Is this the right strategy for the regime? Is it going to backfire? Is it working? How would you assess what's going on here?

**GERECHT:** Well, I think that the main point that you always have to be aware of is that Persianisation works hand in hand with Islamization and Islamic Republic, that to this extent, the polity efforts to Iranise, Persianise the entire population, have to some extent been successful in that is the Islamists who run the Islamic Republic are also overwhelmingly Iranian, and also overwhelmingly try to advance the identity that they have, which is a very Persian identity. So, theoretically, you could have thought that once upon a time at the beginning of the Islamic Republic, that the clerics would bring about greater brotherhood, that you would downplay ethnic identities in favor of the religious one. I don't think that's been the case. And so, it's not surprising that amongst the young, in particular, that you've seen an accentuation of ethnic identity, if you wish to call it even national passion, because as the Islamic Republic has grown out of favor, clerics have become figures of contempt.

The other side, Islamization is the obverse side now of Persianisation. It's not at all surprising that the Persian identity has also declined amongst the minorities that the notion of a greater brotherhood achieved through some type of expansive Iranian identity, I think has taken a severe hit. So, it's not at all surprising that amongst the young, you're beginning to see, more than just beginning to see, a rising passion for their roots and their mother tongue. And I think that's also an important factor is that, with the mother tongue goes national identity, and I think in the modern age, nationalism goes with it. And there has been one overwhelmingly successful Western export everywhere. And that is the idea of nationalism. And I think it's taking hold in the Middle East in the way that we saw it take hold in Europe, say in the late 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

So, I don't see this problem going away. The clerics don't seem capable of handling it and because they aren't really, it's not just religion that motivates them, they also have a national identity, and I think they realize it's fragile. And again, I just want to emphasize, that's not unique to the Persians. It is true throughout the Middle East, that the dominant, if you have mixed states, the majority, or the dominant minority, in Iran's case, is always very sensitive to the fact that their country is a matrix, it's a patchwork. So, I'll never forget, being on the Bosphorus bridge and having a Kurdish waiter and I just started talking to him about Kurdish issues and lo and behold, two Turkish gentlemen overheard that conversation and they moved to throw him off the bridge.

And it was only my intercession that prevented that from happening. That's an extreme case, but I think it is representative in Turkey of this Kurdish-Turkish fragility. And I think something similar to that exists in the Islamic

Republic with many of these ethnic identities. And for me, the big question is as always is where are the Azeris? And I don't have a good answer to that, but I suspect the answer is not one that the clerics are terribly cracked up about.

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. And I think that exactly gets to the point of why this monograph figures to be somewhat controversial among Persian nationalists. But moving away from Azerbaijanis for a minute, Norm over to you, what about the Baluch, the Ahwazis, and some of these other minorities, they don't get a lot of attention relative to the Kurds or the Azerbaijanis, but in the recent past, as we were discussing before this event, there was even the possibility of a new Gulf Emirate that might've taken over some of Iran's oil resources, maybe just speak a little bit about these dynamics.

**ROULE:** Iran's borders are somewhat messy. The borders with Pakistan have seen an ongoing Baluchi insurgency for decades, indeed, Qasem Soleimani the former commander of the Quds force cut his teeth as a division commander, working that area. The current commander worked to the north on Afghan issues. And both at one time in their past had worked against what they believed to be Kurdish insurgencies in their earlier IRGC days. I think when people talk about the Baluch or the Ahwaz issues today, they tend to focus on two elements, terrorist attacks, extensively terrorist attacks associated with external actors. There's been some press reporting that Ahwaz organizations in Denmark had been supported by Gulf Arabs. But in the end of the day, these actions have been bloody. The organization, Jundullah, the old Baluch insurgency group was quite violent, but they haven't really changed the political dynamic in their areas. And regional actors note this.

It is possible to see the violence by these groups as a pain for the regime, but overall, Iran's opposition remains leaderless, rudderless, lacks cohesive tissue between political and labor elements, as well as the various ethnic elements. And as long as the situation remains, the best you're going to get out of these areas are these intermittent acts of violence, which grab a lot of press, but don't really transform the political stability, the regime in a way that shifts the power dynamics in the region.

**SCHANZER:** Brenda, let me actually just scope out for just a minute here and go beyond Iran's borders. You talked a little bit about how Iran tries to manage its ethnic minority challenges externally. I'm thinking about Azerbaijan and Turkey in particular, it's an interesting dynamic and probably worth just explaining for a minute or two, how Iran tries to contain its ethnic minority challenges with the help, and sometimes the challenge of some of these external countries.

**SHAFFER:** Right, so as Norm pointed out, Iran has basically long-term insurgencies on several of its borders. One is Iran's borders with Pakistan. The second is Iran's borders with Turkey and Iraq. So completely unsafe areas for Iranian soldiers, for IRGC, for government officials. We've even had in the Baluchistan areas, when Ahmadinejad was president, his motorcade attacked, you've had soldiers kidnapped brought into Pakistan and have to be ransomed and released, and Iranian soldiers heading into Pakistan. So, clearly first thing, anyone analyzing bilateral relations between Iran with any of its neighbors has to factor in the ethnic factors. It's one of the major elements in the bilateral relations and everyone should think that Iran as a country that on several of its borders does not have complete security or control. It's a constant factor of a problem.

And I agree with Norm that because these are mostly in border areas and doesn't disrupt the main vectors of activity of the country, they haven't up until now posed an existential threat. The question of Iran policies really from the demise of the Soviet Union, from the minute of the breakup towards the Muslim majority republics next door, is an incredible case study for understanding the role of Islam in the Islamic Republic. Because for some reason we



think when Iran supports Hezbollah or Hamas or something, that it's something about Islamic solidarity. But then we see any time that they have to pay a price with any of their, whether it's the security of the regime or any other major material interests, for instance, in the midst of Chinese suppression of Uyghurs, you have the Islamic Republic signing a 25 year major trade agreement with China, what could be more cynical, right? But we've seen this from the beginning on their borders. Right after the Soviet break-up, a conflict breaks out between Christian populated Armenia, Shia Muslim populated Azerbaijan, and immediately Iran pivots towards Armenia. All the Russian aid during the war, during the previous war in the nineties, during this round the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan war, goes through Iran. And you have absolutely no problems with that because their idea of a secular, relatively open country that's based on Azerbaijani culture, they saw the major danger to Iran. So, I think it's fascinating how much you could learn about the Islamic Republic by looking their cynical use of the relations. So, they might cry about Palestinian refugees and this, but couldn't care at all about a million Azerbaijani refugees that are Shia that were created.

So, I think it teaches us a lot about Iran and that cynicism that you can't really convince people in Iran that this is really this Islamic solidarity, if you see these kind of relations now that are very much in the open. And I think also that foreign television, again from neighboring countries being watched primarily by the citizens of Iran, so even those broadcasts become an issue of contention in the bilateral relations. For instance, Iran's relations with Turkey, for instance, Azerbaijanis are watching Turkish television.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. We're heading into our last round of questions here. So, I'm going to ask everybody to just keep our answers fairly short, two or three minutes a piece. Ahmad, I want to turn to you, just piggy backing right off of one of Brenda's last comments, you've got this terrific TV channel that hosts interactive discussions with ethnic minorities in Iran. What are the major trend lines that you're watching? What are the things that our viewers right now should be aware of in terms of what these ethnic minorities are voicing on your network?

**OBALI:** Well, the trend right now, Jonathan, among Azerbaijanis is looking forward. What needs to be done in the future. Past is past, the war is over, the confidence is back to Azerbaijanis as well, in the north and the south. Self-confidence and the pride are back. We have turned the page of losing the battle to winning the battle. So, now they want to continue this forward. As I said, our movement is very civil, nonviolence. The trend right now among the activists are we either need to have a federal system in Iran in the future, or some think that confederalism is the way. And some even think outright independence and reunification with the north. So, that's what people are thinking right now, nothing else. So, I think the main opposition, as they call main opposition group outside the country, the Persian nationalists should realize that as they move away from giving any rights for ethnic groups first of all, the regime will stay in power for so many years, long time to come.

Second, it will backfire on ethnic groups as well. They will, instead of rooting for maybe federalism or confederalism. They will probably give up and root for outright independence. This is true with Kurds, this is true with Arabs, and it's definitely true with the other groups. Otherwise known as Turkmens, and Northerners, and Balochis. So, I think overall, we are looking at a very unstable Iran for years to come. And we'll never be as stable as they wish. And all the blames should be squarely put on the groups that are not willing to give any rights, even in theory, to ethnic minorities. The ethnic minorities want to have 100% equality culturally, politically, linguistically, everything. If Persian is official, so should the other languages, including Azerbaijani. That's what they want.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. So, based on what you've just said, which I think is a rather striking remark. Reuel, to you, you have been a proponent of regime change in Iran. Are minorities a factor to consider here? Should the U.S. government, or academics, should they be focusing more on the trends in these provinces? Have we been too

focused on Persians? How would you sum up your perspective on this with the full understanding that this is a controversial issue among Iranian nationalists? But for those of us watching from abroad, for those of us that have been opposed to the regime in Iran, I think it's a fair question. Is this an approach that we should be looking at more seriously?

**GERECHT:** I doubt it. I think the United States should keep its focus on the clerical regime on what it does to everybody, which is its reflex for the truncheon. I don't think playing the ethnic card in the Islamic Republic makes much sense. I don't know mechanically how that works. I do think it's a good idea for the United States to have a vigorous, for example, Azeri service. I mean, these are small things, they're not without value. And anyone who's had experience, for example, with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty knows that the Persian service and the Azeri service, they're not exactly friendly. You have the battles in those countries play out amongst the ex-patriots. But I think the message the United States should send is that we are in favor of a democracy inside of Iran.

And it's not for us to decide where democracy takes the country, but we do believe that they have a right to vote. The Iranians, and that includes even the minorities, and certainly includes the Azeris, quite powerfully have been striving for limitations on the central government for over a hundred years. So, the traditions of trying to achieve some type of constitutional order in Iran are well-founded, and we should support those attempts to bring constitutional democratic government to Iran. But I probably would stay away from accentuating any particular ethnic preferences and ethnic aspiration. I would keep the focus writ large.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. Norm, over to you. Is this something that you think the intelligence community is going to start looking at more? Given the unrest that we've seen in the provinces, given some of the trend lines, do you foresee other countries trying to stoke unrest among the ethnic minorities? What are some things that we should be watching here as we look to the future?

**ROULE:** Well, let me answer this two ways, but first I'd like to thank FDD for the opportunities provided me today to join such an august group. And to compliment Brenda, on an exceptionally unique study that is long overdue. And although we all follow her work routinely; we want to see more from her because this is a valuable product, and it doesn't seem like there's enough people out there doing this. Next, without commenting on what the intelligence community does or doesn't do, I can say that having a strong understanding of a situation doesn't necessarily mean it translates into actual policy. Unless policy makers are willing to assign resources that they take from somewhere else to undertake something. You want to increase the Ahwaz service, the Azeri service, that money will have to come from somewhere. And there's a conversation inside as to whether or not what that value might be.

The U.S. government, I think understands well the ethnic issue, but I don't think that we have approached Iran in a way that goes beyond the Persian heartland. And I would like to see a Congressional hearing, for example, on the ethnic issue or a little more activity there. But as we move forward, this is something that requires Iran's external ethnic diaspora to pull itself together. The idea that countries can stoke action, hypothetically, a terrorist action is possible. But meaningful political change requires meaningful political unity outside of the country. And that's got to begin with the diaspora ethnicities themselves. Thank you.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. Thank you, Norm. Brenda, parting thoughts. You've just finished a monograph. I know it was a labor of love. It took a while to get you past the finish line. What do you hope to see? What kinds of discussions would you like to see sparked by this? What should we be looking for?

**SHAFFER:** Thank you. First of all, this past hour with this dream team, people that I've admired for decades, Norm, Reuel, Ahmad. Their readings and writings, and it's really an honor to be a part of this panel. I would say that one, this is a fundamental human rights issue. For some reason, it's always been sort of casted as an issue of territorial unification or something. But what I think everyone can agree about, doesn't matter how they see the future of Iran or its borders, that it's a fundamental human right for people to be able to teach their mother tongue to their children and to send their children to school in their native languages.

So, I think there's a lot of – Even though the regime tries to project that this is not a challenge to it, and again, even though it shouldn't have, if it's an Islamic society, maybe it shouldn't have preference for one language over the other. It does deprive these rights to the peoples in Iran. And the ethnic minorities have the highest execution rates, highest incarceration rates, and this is well documented.

So, if there really wasn't an ethnic challenge, they really wouldn't need to execute and incarcerate so many people. So obviously, Tehran itself sees itself as a having a problem. And then I would also reinforce the point that what we hear abroad about how different foreign policies are viewed internally in Iran, is fundamentally different. So, I think the great point was the issue of the sanctions, where we're constantly hearing that we need to remove sanctions on a humanitarian basis for the people. But what you're hearing from inside Iran, at least from the ethnic groups and maybe larger, that they want the sanctions to continue because they don't want this regime to get more power through the release of that. And this is not surprising. For instance, if we look at the history of South Africa, where also people wanted the continuation of sanctions and not them to be removed.

So, I think even on every foreign policy issue, we have to start looking at how the people of Iran see these issues and not just the people connected to the regime in Tehran.

**SCHANZER:** Okay. Well, Brenda, I want to congratulate you on the release of your monograph, *Iran is more than Persia*. It really is a terrific read. And I recommend it to all of our viewers. I want to thank our panelists Norman Roule, Ahmad Obali, and Reuel Mark Gerecht from FDD. Thank you very much for joining us for today's conversation. And for those of you tuning in, if you are not already receiving updates from FDD, please do visit [fdd.org](http://fdd.org) to subscribe to our work. Thank you for joining us today. And we hope to see you at another event soon.

**OBALI:** Thank you, Jon.

**GERECHT:** Thank you.

**SHAFFER:** Thank you.

**ROULE:** Thank you.