

Ethnic Dilemma in Iranian Azerbaijan during Post-Soviet Era: Impacts on Multilateral Trade under ECO

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Abstract:

Since the division of Azerbaijan region between Iran and Imperial Russia in 1828, Iranian Azerbaijan is experiencing different sorts of ethno-national movements. However, Post-Soviet era has triggered ethnic dilemma in the respective region. Historical rivalry among Azerbaijan and Armenia is the biggest cause of encouraging ethno-national movements in the region. As all ECO member states' markets including Turkey have been connected to European markets via this region, this study highlights all the threats to multilateral trade under ECO agreement that would be disconnected in case of succeeding any existing movement in the region. Similarly, policies during Rafsanjani, Khatmi, Ahmadinijad and Rouhani regimes regarding countering ethnic dilemma in the region are also examined in this study while, economic worth of the region is also assessed in the last.

Keywords: Ngorno-Karabakh, Turkmenchay, Talysh, Vilayat-e-Faqih, Talysh-Mughan, Iraqi Kurdistan

I. Introduction

The basic objective of establishing Economic Corporation Organization (ECO) is to facilitate each member state regarding linking its market with not only other member states' markets but also associate regional economy with other regions like Europe, Middle East, Eurasia, East Asia or Southeast Asia. However, ethnic dilemma in the member states is generating lot of disturbance in achieving its fundamental goal. Although, member states are suffering from different kinds of ethno-national movements but the movements existing in Azerbaijan region of Iran are being analyzed as the biggest threat to the future of this organization.

This study describes the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of Iranian Azerbaijan Region that facilitates not only the economic growth of Iran but also assists bilateral trade between ECO member states. Similarly, the political economy of respective region as a trade route between Asia and Europe, and, between Turkey and other ECO member states is also exhibited in this study. As the region geographically associates with the former Soviet republics, ethno-national movements in the Republic of Armenia and the

Republic of Azerbaijan are highly affecting and triggering ethno-national sentiments in Iranian Azerbaijan. Thus, this qualitative study based on secondary sources; is analyzing Iranian policies during different presidential regimes regarding tackling such imported ethno-national sentiments in Iranian Azerbaijan Region in Post-Soviet scenario.

II. Historical Background of Iranian Azerbaijan

Iranian Azerbaijan was formed by the second Qajar king; Fath Ali Shah after last Russo-Persian War (1826-1828). In fact, Azerbaijanis had been settled around the Aras River since centuries but, the entire Caucasian region¹ in the north of Aras River was occupied by Imperial Russia during last Russo-Persian War (1826-1828). Due to military weakness and Russian threats to occupy Tehran, Fath Ali Shah Qajar accepted Russian occupation through Treaty of Turkmenchay 1828, and as a result, Aras River became the border between Iran and Imperial Russia (Mirfendereski, 2001, PP.05-09, Daniel, 2006, PP.24-27). Moreover, remaining Azerbaijani-populated area of Northern and Northwestern Iran was called Azerbaijan Province by central government in Tehran that was further divided into East Azerbaijan Province and West Azerbaijan Province during Raza Shah Pahlavi Regime in 1937 (Yar-Shater, 1999, P.274). Post-Revolution Islamic Regime divided this region into four provinces: Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan and Zanjan.

III. Demography of Iranian Azerbaijan

Contemporary, Iranian Azerbaijan consists of four provinces; Ardabil Province, East Azerbaijan Province, West Azerbaijan Province and Zanjan Province. Region largely comprises of Iranian Azerbaijanis having mixed Iranian, Caucasian and Turkic origin where majority of the population speak Tabrizi dialectic of Turkish language. On the other hand, Kurds are the second largest community in the region; mainly live in West Azerbaijan Province. Moreover, there are several other communities like Persians, Talysh (Tat, Tati and Tatun), Armenians, Georgians and Gilan. Persian speaking people have been scattered in all over the region while, Talysh people primarily are settled in the Ardabil Province. Similarly, Armenians live in West Azerbaijan Province, East Azerbaijan Province and Ardabil whereas; somewhat Georgians families have been found in East Azerbaijan Province and West Azerbaijan Province (Mansoor, 2012, Population Census, 2016). Religiously, majority of population follow Shia Islam while, followers of Sunni Islam, Ismaili Islam, Armenian Catholic Church and Georgian Orthodox Church are also settled there (Mansoor, 2012, Population Census, 2016).

Moreover, According to the 2012 estimations published by General Cultural Council of Islamic Republic of Iran and the 2016 population census, average population of Iranian Azerbaijanis is being exhibited in table 1.

On the other hand, Azerbaijani nationalists claim that their population ratio is recorded as 98.2% in Ardabil Province, 97.8% in East Azerbaijan Province, 76.2% in West Azerbaijan Province and 98.4% in Zanjan Province (PLTC, Accessed on July 22, 2018).

Table 1

¹ Contemporarily, Caucasian region consists of Azerbaijan (including Nakhchivan and partially recognized Ngorno-Karabakh Republic), Armenia, Georgia (including Adjara and partially recognized Republic of Abkhazia and Republic of South Ossetia) and some parts of Southwest Russia (Adygea, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Krasnodar Krai, North Ossetia-Alania and Stavropol Krai).

Demography of Iranian Azerbaijan				
Ethnic Communities	Provinces			
	Ardabil	East Azerbaijan	West Azerbaijan	Zanjan
Azerbaijanis	89%	92%	76.2%	80%
Kurds	04%	03%	21.7%	07%
Persians	01%	0.2%	0.8%	02%
Talysh (Tat, Tati and Tatun)	09%	04%	-	10%
Armenians	01%	0.5%	0.2%	-
Georgians	-	0.01%	0.01%	-
Gilan	-	-	-	0.08%
Others	0.6%	0.29%	1.09%	0.92%

(Mansoor, 2012, Population Census, 2016)

IV. Issue in Geographical Demarcation of Iranian Azerbaijan

Academically, two perceptions are most common to define geographical demarcation of Iranian Azerbaijan. These are as follows;

A. Iranian Geographical Demarcation

Government of Iran and Iranian nationalists follow historical developments regarding demarcating Iranian Azerbaijan geographically. This demarcation indicates the region’s geographical association with the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey, Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan (including Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and the de-facto Republic of Ngorno-Karabakh). Historically, the term “Iranian Azerbaijan” was emerged after Treaty of Turkmenchay 1828 between Imperial Russia and Persia (contemporary Iran) (Abrahamian, 2008, PP.211-212, Cornell, 2015, P.236).

According to Croissant and Souleimanov, Iran (Persian Qajar Dynasty) had been forced to sign Treaty of Gulistan 1813 and Treaty of Turkmenchay 1828 because of observing expansionist orientations and military power of Imperial Russia. Through Treaty of Gulistan, Iran accepted Russian occupation in the areas; present-day Dagestan, Georgia, northern Azerbaijan and northern Armenia. Similarly, Treaty of Turkmenchay coerced Iran to withdraw from Erivan Khanate (major part of contemporary Republic of Armenia), Nakhchivan Khanate (contemporary Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan), Talysh Khanate (contemporary southeastern part of the Republic of Azerbaijan along the Caspian Sea), and, Igdirdir Province (currently, a Turkish Province). Such Russian occupations divided Azerbaijanis into two social groups. The group lived in southwestern Iran, called Azerbaijanis while, the group lived in southeastern Transcaucasia had not received any recognition before the collapse of Russian Empire in 1917. After 1917, formation of short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920) renamed the social group settled in the southeastern Transcaucasia as Azerbaijanis too” (Croissant, 1999, P.114, Souleimanov, Accessed on March 21, 2017).

On June 22, 2014, Interior Ministry of Iran converted 31 provinces of Iran into five regions². Although, Constitution of Iran does not allow central government to transform the provinces into new regions but the prime objective behind such engineering was to discuss local problems and their solutions in the regional capitals instead of look

² This division is just belonged to the functioning and affairs of Ministry of Interior’s Management, Development and Human Resource. Central government and other ministries consider geographical demarcation of provinces as defined in the constitution (Nasir, Accessed on May 05, 2018)

immediately towards Tehran. This was just because of unitary state system in Iran that forced Ministry of Interior's Management, Development and Human Resource Department to create five regions regarding regional development, information exchange and transfer of experience. Among these five regions, Region 3 consists of Iranian Azerbaijan along with Gilan Province and Kurdistan Province where Tabriz (the capital of East Azerbaijan Province) is also the capital of respective region. Moreover, this is 90 percent Azerbaijani-populated region (Cornell, 2015, PP.236-237, Nasir, Accessed on May 05, 2018).

Although, this new division cannot change the history or demography of Iranian Azerbaijan but it can be helpful in resolving local administrative problems. As Iran is the multi-ethnic unitary state, it has no other solution except to deliver some central powers to regional capitals. Furthermore, there are almost 7.90 and 0.3 percent Azerbaijanis also in Gilan Province and Kurdistan Province respectively. So, nor the entrance of these two provinces in Region 3 can affect demographic situation in the historical Iranian Azerbaijan region neither Iranian Government has oppressing orientations against any state-centric ethnic community (Khajehpour, Accessed on March 21, 2017).

B. Demarcation Claim / Plan by Pro-Azerbaijani Ethno-Nationalists

Pro-Azerbaijani ethno-nationalists claim Iranian Azerbaijan as one of the fifth part of entire Azerbaijan populated region. Firstly, this idea was given by Piruz Dilenchi³ and then promoted by Farida Mammadova⁴ and Abulfaz Elchibey⁵. According to them, Iranian Azerbaijan is one of the fifth part of entire Azerbaijani-populated region; called "Whole Azerbaijan" or "United Azerbaijan". In 1991, Piruz Dilenchi initiated "South Azerbaijani National Liberation Movement" (also called SANLM). Similarly, he founded "Whole Azerbaijan Union" in 1997 (Atabaki, 2004, P.99). According to his claim, "borders of Azerbaijan are not only consisted upon current territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic but it includes Southern Azerbaijan (all the four provinces of Iranian Azerbaijan including Hamedan Province), Western Azerbaijan (current territory of the Republic of Armenia), Derbent (district of Russian federated Republic of Dagestan), Borchali (currently part of Kvemo Kartli Province in Georgia), and, Igdir Province (currently part of Eastern Anatolia Region of Turkey)" (Atabaki, 2004, P.99). He opposed the idea of independent Iranian Azerbaijan (proposed as the Republic of South Azerbaijan) (Atabaki, 2004, P.100).

However, Iranian nationalists do not accept the idea of "Whole Azerbaijan" and consider it as a myth. They do not trace any root of such movements in Iran (Sengupta, 2014, PP.15-16). Although, it can be prevailed in the Republic of Azerbaijan but, Iranian Constitution would never allow such kind of activities. Moreover, Iranian Constitution is based on the principles of equality and justice for all ethnic communities without any discrimination of religion, sect or language and would never allow such kind of integrated activities. Therefore, no one ethnic community can follow ethno-national separatism" (Sengupta, 2014, PP.15-16).

³ Iranian Azerbaijani ethno-national separatist and poet, currently a Canadian national.

⁴ Azerbaijani historian, head of the department of humanities in Western University, Baku.

⁵ 2nd President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (June 16, 1992 to September 01, 1993)

On the other hand, Elkhan Nuriyev⁶ perceives that the Armenian-Iranian cooperative relations on Ngorno-Karabakh issue⁷ have forced Azerbaijanis of both sides (Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran) to think about their unification. At the same time, direct or indirect threats from Iran to the Republic of Azerbaijan became the reason of developing warm Israeli-Azerbaijani relations. Thus, Iranian Azerbaijanis do not feel comfort in such a hostile environment and they are seeking either to be a part of United Azerbaijan or sovereign Republic of South Azerbaijan (Nuriyev, 2007, P.238).

Although, some other scholars like Thomas M. Leonard, Trudy Ring, Frederik Coene, J. P. Mallory, Jean Dercourt, R. B. Ter Haar Romeny, George Lane, Edwin Bryant, Babak Rezvani, Muriel Atkin, Touraj Atabaki, N. B. Anan'eva and M. Wesley Shoemaker defined geographical demarcation of Iranian Azerbaijan in different styles but their views have lost their academic worth during 21st century. Therefore, this study focuses upon just two geographical demarcations as briefly explained above.

C. Ethnic Dilemma in Iranian Azerbaijan in Post-Soviet Era

Iranian Azerbaijan is highly populated Azerbaijani ethno-linguistic segment but several other ethno-linguistic communities are also settled in the region like Kurds and Talysh. Similarly, numerous ethno-sectarian communities have also been traced in the respective region other than the Shia Muslims. As the region geographically connects Eurasia (via Armenia), Middle East (via Iraqi Kurdistan) and the Europe (via Turkey), several types of ethno-national separatisms transmitted from around that affect the minds of local inhabitants (Litvak, 2017, PP.238-241).

Social scientists and political analyst like Zardusht Alizade, Patricia Carley, Jeffery Cole and Oleh Protsyk investigate five major ethno-national movements; having aim to get independence from Iran during 21st century. As the movements are triggering by the political environment of Caucasus region and the Middle East, Iran has been forced to take several crucial steps regarding countering them since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (German, 2016, PP.131-135). These movements are;

- i. United Azerbaijan Movement,
- ii. United or Greater Kurdistan Movement,
- iii. Movement for Sovereign South Azerbaijan,
- iv. Movement for Sovereign Eastern Kurdistan, and,
- v. Movement for the Restoration of Talysh-Mughan Republic as a Sovereign State (German, 2016, PP.131-135).

Among these movements, United Azerbaijan Movement is getting strength from the Baku while, United or Greater Kurdistan Movement is getting back from Erbil. On the other hand, Movement for Sovereign South Azerbaijan and Movement for Sovereign Eastern Kurdistan belong to domestic Azerbaijani and Kurd ethno-national separatists in Iranian Azerbaijan while, Movement for the Restroation of Talysh-Mughan Republic as a Sovereign State is being triggered by the Talysh (Tat, Tati and Tatun) ethno-national

⁶ Political Scientist, Global Energy Associate at Brussels Energy Club

⁷ Armenian populated region in the Republic of Azerbaijan that is currently controlled by de-facto Ngorno-Karabakh Republic's government.

separatists in Southeastern parts of the Republic of Azerbaijan (German, 2016, PP.131-135).

In fact, historical rivalry among Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the Caucasus region is leaving lot of impacts on all the kinds of kinds of ethno-national separatisms in the Iranian Azerbaijan Region. Historically, the Movement for united Armenia or Greater Armenia was started in the second half of 19th century in a reaction of the concept about “United Azerbaijan” presented by Iranian Azerbaijani poet and writer Jalil Muhammad Guluzadeh (1866-1932). His poetry and writings encouraged Azerbaijani ethnic community to be united under one historical homeland containing the Russian occupied Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Dagestan, Iranian Azerbaijan region, Gilan Province of Iran and some parts of Ottoman Empire. Such motivations were considered to be dangerous for national cohesion of Armenian community. So, the idea of United Armenia or Greater Armenia became highlighted by the Armenian ethno-nationalists (Habib, 2004, P.16).

On the other hand, sentiments for sovereign South Azerbaijan and sovereign Eastern Kurdistan are being triggered by the Movement for Establishment of Five Sovereign Armenian States (based on historical Armenian highland). Since when the Yerevan-based Heritage Party⁸ seeks the five sovereign Armenian states within the territory belonged to Kingdom of Armenia or historical Armenian highland, ethnic communities in Iranian Azerbaijan like Azerbaijanis, Kurds and Talysh are also seeking their separate identity (Panossian, 2013, P.109, Demirdjian, 2015, P.189, Geukjian, 2016, PP.130-132).

Besides all the movements described above, a major portion of ethno-nationalists also demands regional autonomy and federal structure in Iran. They claim that Islamic regime has promised all the ethnic communities to deliver regional autonomy under the condition of getting support at the time of pre-revolution Islamic movement but that promised was not fulfilled. On the other hand, several Pro-Iranian scholars like Dr. Fida Hussain, Dr. Abdul Hayi, Dr. Qiswar Hussain and Dr. Mukhtar Hussain Qumi argue that Iranian constitution gives regional autonomy to all the ethnic communities in Iran. (Litvak, 2017, P.20, Hayi, June 11, 2016, Hussain, June 15, 2016, Qumi, June 17, 2016, Hussain, June 19, 2016, Constitution of Iran, 1979). Thus, they discard the demand for regional autonomy by ethnic communities is as baseless. They also claim that Islamic regime has delivered regional autonomy to all towns, tehsils, districts and provinces as it was promised. They refer to the article 100 of Iranian constitution which form the domestic councils at towns, tehsils, districts and provinces level containing domestic representatives elected by the domestic people regarding resolving social, economic, constructive, health, cultural, educational and welfare-based problems. Similarly, Article 101 establishes a council of provinces that ensure co-operation among provinces regarding completing national level projects. Likewise, Article 102 delivers the right to council of provinces to design national or intra-provinces based projects and present them in the parliament. At the same time, Article 103 of the constitution bounds officials of towns, tehsils, districts and provinces to obey the orders of domestic councils at each level. In the same way, Article 104 designs special councils for different professions like farmers, labors, teachers, etc.

⁸ It was the first political party in Armenia which introduced the bills for recognition of the sovereign Ngorno-Karabakh during 2007, 2010 and 2012. Furthermore, in 2013, its leader Raffi Hovannisian has also expressed party's orientations for seeking five sovereign Armenian republics instead of getting only one state based on historical Armenia highland; called United Armenia.

These councils try to resolve problems of each community under its jurisdiction. Article 105 ensures that decision or order of any council at any level should not be against teachings of Islam and Iranian laws while, Article 106 defines the procedure of dismissing domestic councils if it does not follow Article 105” (Hayi, June 11, 2016, Hussain, June 15, 2016, Qumi, June 17, 2016, Hussain, June 19, 2016, Constitution of Iran, 1979).

D. Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) under Ethnic Dilemma

With replacing Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD)⁹, Economic Cooperation Organization found in 1985 between Pakistan, Iran and Turkey for economic liberalization, sustainable economic growth and regional cooperation. Moreover, its basic objective is to establish single market for goods and service, almost similar to the European Union. Currently, its membership has expanded up to 07 more states; Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. As one of the principles of cooperation is “progressive removal of trade barriers, promotion of intra-regional trade, contribution of ECO region in the growth of world trade, and, gradual integration of member states’ economies with the world economy”, geographical routes between Pakistan-Iran-Turkey, Afghanistan-Iran-Turkey, Azerbaijan-Iran-Turkey and Turkmenistan-Iran-Turkey are considered to be more significant regarding fulfilling this principle (Berman, 2007, PP.83-85, Ashraf, 2017, PP.311-312).

However, a careful analyze indicates that the border areas within described economic routes are experiences different ethno-national movements. Pakistan-Iran border is experiencing Baloch resistance while, Iran-Afghanistan route is under Taliban threat. Similarly, Iranian Turkmen community settled near the Iran-Turkmenistan border is seeking either regional autonomy within current political system of Iran or amalgamation with Turkmenistan. Moreover, Iran-Azerbaijan border area is experiencing Azerbaijani ethno-national separatism either for establishing United Azerbaijan or for sovereign South Azerbaijan whereas; Talysh ethno-nationalists in the respective area are also seeking their separate identity. They are either looking for the restoration of Talysh-Mughan Republic as a sovereign state or desiring the restoration of former Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran/Gilan as a sovereign state. On the other hand, Iran-Turkey border is facing Kurd ethno-national separatism; either for getting United Kurdistan or for establishing Iranian Kurdistan as a sovereign Eastern Kurdistan. Although, ECO connects South Asia, Central Asia and Eurasia to other European countries via Greece and Bulgaria, and, having potential to emerge as a fastest growing economy but, such ethnic dilemmas at the nodes of member states’ connective areas are the biggest hurdles in achieving its goals and objectives (Berman, 2007, PP.83-85, Ashraf, 2017, PP.311-312).

E. Threats to Multilateral Trade

ECO facilitates each member state to get access towards Europe via Iranian Azerbaijan Region and Turkey. Therefore, it is investigated that intensity in the ethnic dilemma in Iranian Azerbaijan Region would be more crucial for the survival of this organization in near future. Besides Iranian Azerbaijan Region, to look on other regional connecting routes, it is observed that;

- i. Baloch militancy in Pakistan and Iran has almost countered by the continuously military operation by Pakistani and Iranian Armies in the Baloch populated region

⁹ Established in July 1964 between Pakistan, Iran and Turkey.

of Pakistan and Iran respectively. Since the elimination of Abdul Malik Rigi network in Seestan-o-Balochistan with the help of Pakistan Army, Baloch militancy in Iran has almost been wiped out. Similarly, military operation against Baloch Liberation Army by Pakistan Army converted a highly disturbed Balochistan province into almost a peaceful land. However, it does not mean that Baloch militancy is completely removed from the region. Pakistan is still experiencing little bit insurgency from the Baloch ethno-national separatists that has also coerced Pakistan Railway to stop goods and passenger train services for Iran (Chima, 2015, P.131, Munoz, 2012, P.140).

- ii. Taliban are still considered as the biggest threat for peace and stability in Afghanistan but several analysts observe that the trade from Mashhad to Herat has no threat from Talibans. It may be because the region has been under influence of former governor Ismail Khan¹⁰ who was an intellectual leader, had good relations with local bureaucracy. Therefore, his income generating initiatives facilitated the region to be grown than the other parts of Afghanistan. However, his long-term vision of “Herat as the Dubai of Afghanistan” is somewhat being undermined by the new governorship of Syed Muhammad Khairkhan (Beall, 2005, P.02 & P.14). Moreover, the pending railway track construction project from Mashhad (Iran) to Herat and then to Serhetabat (Turkmenistan) for trade would not only facilitate Afghanistan to be economically developed but it would also assist different Afghan segments of the society for ensuring peace and stability in the country (Grantham, Accessed on May 09, 2018). On the other hand, freight train service has been started between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan since December 2010 (Railway Gazette, Accessed on May 09, 2018).
- iii. Different demographic surveys exhibit total population of Iranian Turkmen people in different numbers live in North Khorasan Province, Razavi Khorasan Province and Gulistan Province. For example, according to World Population Review (January 24, 2018), they are almost 1,637,781 (02%) whereas; Joshua Project counts them 735,000 (0.89%) in numbers (Iran Population 2018, accessed on May 09, 2018, Turkmen in Iran, Accessed on May 09, 2018). On the other hand, Country Study of Iran published by Library of Congress, Washington D.C. describes 01% share of Turkmen people in demographic structure of Iran¹¹ (Curtis, 2008, P.xxvi, P.55, P.98 & P.295). Besides such differences, their low population ratio in entire demographic structure of Iran would not facilitate them regarding acquiring regional autonomy on ethnic bases or amalgamation of their populated region into Turkmenistan in near future. Moreover, a large segment of Iranian Turkmens never think to cut off or disturb Iran-Turkmenistan railway or road links, and, remain peaceful in highlighting their demands (Hunter, 2010, P.181).

On the other hand, ethnic dilemma in Iranian Azerbaijan Region is generating threats about cutting off almost 90% ECO trade towards Turkey and Europe in case of any disturbance. In fact, the respective region is economically a rich region, consider as a bridge in between Asia and Europe. Ethnically, it is highly Azerbaijani-populated region where Armenians, Assyrians, Georgian, Kurds, Persians and Talysh (also Tat and Tatum) are minorities (Elling, 2013, PP.01-10).

¹⁰ A warlord and commander during Afghan Jihad and Cold War, belongs to Jamiat-e-Islami political party, also served as a minister of water and energy from 2004 to 2013.

¹¹ Estimated population of Iranian Turkmen is almost 50,000.

During pre-revolution Islamic Movement, Imam Khumeni promised ethnic communities of Iran to deliver ethnic-based regional autonomy if revolution could be successful and if he could take over the government. However, post-revolution regime shows a series of events regarding suppressing ethnic communities for ensuring the concept of “One Nation”. Khumeni regime also launched Cultural Revolution (1980-1988) for installing ethnic unification which censored and stamped out types of ethno-national sentiments; especially in Iranian Azerbaijan. Such break-up of promise and the policy of ethnic suppression forced ethnic segments in Iranian Azerbaijan to convert their demand of ethnic-based regional autonomy into the demand for getting sovereign identity (Sreberny, 2013, PP.01-12).

In the meanwhile, disintegration of USSR triggered ethno-national sentiments in Iranian Azerbaijan. Because of geographical linkage, ethno-national movements in the Caucasus region; especially in Armenia highly affected and are being affected Iranian Azerbaijan. Therefore, Azerbaijani, Kurd and Talysh ethnic communities now desire to follow same paradigm as Armenian ethno-nationalists are practicing for getting United Armenia or five sovereign Armenian states in the historical Armenian highland. Moreover, former Soviet territories within contemporary Iran like Gilan Province, East Azerbaijan Province, West Azerbaijan Province, Ardabil Province, Zanjan Province, Kermanshah Province, Ilam Province and Hamadan Province are also affecting by “Neo-Sovietism or Putinism”¹² (Bowker, 2014, PP.246-247).

F. Iranian Strategies for Countering Ethnic Dilemma in Iranian Azerbaijan

In such scenario, the prime motive of all the presidential regimes in Iran has to ensure its territorial integrity since 1991. As post-1991 Iran has experienced four presidential regimes, their domestic and foreign policy is being analyzed as the four stages of Iranian strategy regarding countering ethnic dilemma in Iranian Azerbaijan. These are as follows;

First Stage

First stage refers the Rafsanjani regime when Kurds, Azerbaijani, Talysh ethnic communities in Iranian Azerbaijan had thought to become beneficiary from Caucasian chaos. In this situation, Rafsanjani government had no other option but to use force against all those ethno-nationalists who were projecting their separate identity instead of accepting pro-revolutionary concept of “One Nation”. Similarly, Rafsanjani government tried to export revolutionary sentiments and elements in neighboring Shia countries like Azerbaijan and Iraq. However, this plan was fully exposed, and, became the reason of deteriorating Iran-Azerbaijan and Iran-Iraq relations. Leadership of Azerbaijan and Iraq considered that Iran is trying to promote pro-revolutionary and pro-vilayat-e-faqih ideology for getting influential political space in their respective countries. Therefore, Iraqi government started a military operation against pro-Iranian elements in Shia majority areas whereas; Azerbaijan coerced to establish bilateral relations with Israel (Parker, 2009, P.131, Roberson, 2005, P.55).

¹² The term “Neo-Sovietism” is also defined as the policies of Russian President Vladimir Putin regarding getting strategic space in the former Soviet territories. Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the sovereign states and, Russian support to Community for Democracy and rights of Nation is counted as the part of “Neo-Sovietism” (also called Putinism) (Beichelt, 2016, PP.20-35).

Second Stage

Second stage belongs to Syed Muhammad Khatmi Regime that exhibits the practical implementation of his own ideology about “Dialogue among Civilizations”. Therefore, ethno-national movements in Post-Soviet Eurasian region; especially in South Caucasian region could not highly affect, motivate or boost ethno-national movements in Iranian Azerbaijan. In fact, Khatmi regime purely endorsed pro-revolutionary concept of “One Nation” in Iran through his ideology. Although, his ideology was criticized as an effort of fake unification among non-Persian communities and Persian-speaking people by some ethno-nationalists but, several international analysts appreciated his ideology because of promoting ethnically harmonious culture within Iran and enhancing co-operation with other Persian-speaking, Shia-Muslim populated or neighboring states (Warkotsch, 2010, PP.183-184).

Third Stage

Third Stage denotes Ahmadinijad Regime that was the quite opposite reflection of Syed Muhammad Khatmi Regime. This regime not only started a new wave of suppressing ethnic communities in entire Iran but also supported Armenian ethno-nationalists against the Republic of Azerbaijan (Jane, Accessed on January 11, 2017). Likewise, this regime fully tried to promote pro-vilayat-e-faqih and pro-revolutionary elements in Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and Iraq but could not gain success (Jane, Accessed on January 11, 2017). However, Iranian Georgians and Iranian Armenians were not faced any kind of restriction from this regime because of warm Iran-Georgia and Iran-Armenia relations. Both ethnic communities also left their demand for regional autonomy within Iran during this regime. However, other ethnic communities in entire Iran; especially Iranian Azerbaijan were coerced to re-arise their movements for the sake of sovereignty against the anti-ethnic brutal attitude of Supreme Leader, Revolutionary Guards and Ahmadinijad government (Pirsevedi, 2012, PP.170-173).

Forth Stage

Stage four represents Hassan Rouhani regime who, unlike Rafsanjani and Ahmadinijad regimes, introduced the policy of status-quo within and around Iran. Nor he supports any ethno-national movement in Eurasia including Caucasian region neither he accepts tension with any neighboring, Persian-speaking or Shia-Muslim populated country. His silence upon ethno-national movements within or outside Iran facilitates strengthening of the pro-revolutionary concept of “One Nation” more than Khatmi regime. While, his focus upon economic and industrial development of the Iranian Azerbaijan satisfies Iranian Azerbaijanis, Iranian Kurds, Iranian Talysh, Iranian Armenians and Iranian Georgians very much than before. But, it never means that ethno-national separatisms have totally been eliminated from Iranian Azerbaijan. Efforts of Syrian Kurds for regional autonomy within the Syria and the determination of Iraqi Kurds for independence from Iraq are motivating Iranian Kurds in West Azerbaijan Province, Kurdistan Province, Kermanshah Province, Hamadan Province and Ilam Province to re-organize their ethno-national movement with the support of some anti-Iranian elements.

Though, Iran is not suffering from any high level ethno-national based disturbance now but the ethno-national sentiments still persists in these areas which may be triggered by any national or foreign incident including ethnic suppression or human rights violation (Berman, 2016, PP.23-24, Raszewski, 2017, PP.183-184).

V. Conclusion

Geo-economic worth of Iranian Azerbaijan exhibits importance of respective region for Iranian national growth and ECO. Statistics given by World Bank, Central Intelligence Agency of United States and Iranian Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare illustrates that the disintegration of claiming territories by ethno-national separatists in the region would be a great shock for Iranian economy. Moreover, such statistics also assists in investigating future economic worth of the region that is predicted as;

- i. Entire Iranian Azerbaijan Region would have initial capacity to get exports up to \$6.0032 billion, consume imports up to \$5.3678 billion, generate revenue and collect taxes up to \$4.2644 billion, require expenditures and investment up to \$5.3292 billion, and, acquire foreign reserves up to \$9.5684 billion¹³.
- ii. An overwhelming Kurd population considers almost half territory of West Azerbaijan Province as a part of Iranian Kurdistan. Similarly, the region claimed by the Kurd ethno-national separatists either as a part of Greater Kurdistan or a sovereign Eastern Kurdistan is covering current Kurdistan Province, Kermanshah Province, Hamadan Province, Ilam Province and almost half territory of West Azerbaijan Province. Moreover, the statistical calculations tell that initially the respective region would have the capacity to get exports up to \$4.3246 billion, consume imports up to \$3.867 billion, generate revenue and collect taxes up to \$3.0721 billion, require expenditures and investment up to \$3.839 billion, and, acquire foreign reserves up to \$6.893 billion¹⁴.
- iii. On the other hand, as current territories of Ardabil and Gilan Provinces are claimed by the supporters of the movements regarding restoring Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic as a sovereign state and the restoration of former Soviet Socialist republic of Iran/Gilan as a sovereign republic, statistical calculations indicate that both provinces would have initial capability to get exports up to \$2.6857 billion, consume imports up to \$2.4014 billion, generate revenue and collect taxes up to \$1.9077 billion, require expenditures and investment up to \$2.3841 billion, and, acquire foreign reserves up to \$4.2806 billion¹⁵.

Although, all the ethno-national movements in Iranian Azerbaijan Region as described above are not on the surface because of accommodating policies of President Hassan Rouhani but the statistics about geo-economic worth of the region indicate that the success of any existing ethno-national separatism in the respective region would be a great shock for Iranian economy. Likewise, it would also destruct ECO trade. Moreover, Iran would lose its exports capability up to approximately \$13.0135 billion. Similarly, revenue generation capacity and the potential of tax collection would be reduced down to almost \$9.2442 billion. Similarly, the country would vanish its foreign reserves up to about

¹³ The data is collected from the official websites of the World Bank and the Central Intelligence Agency of United States, compiled by the author through statistical evaluations (The World Fact Book, Accessed on September 14, 2016, Countries Statistics, Accessed on September 13, 2016)

¹⁴ The data is collected from the official websites of the World Bank and the Central Intelligence Agency of United States, compiled by the author through statistical evaluations (The World Fact Book, Accessed on September 14, 2016, Countries Statistics, Accessed on September 13, 2016)

¹⁵ The data is collected from the official websites of the World Bank and the Central Intelligence Agency of United States, compiled by the author through statistical evaluations (The World Fact Book, Accessed on September 14, 2016, Countries Statistics, Accessed on September 13, 2016)

\$20.742 billion. At the same time, revenue generation by facilitating ECO trade would also be eliminated for Iran. Therefore, to assist Iran regarding tackling ethnic dilemma in the respective region regarding strengthening ECO's objectives has also become an interest of other ECO member states like Turkey, Pakistan and Turkmenistan. However, the role of the Republic of Azerbaijan is under question mark in this scenario. Even it is clear that Azerbaijan is no more in position to accept its official support to the Movement for United Azerbaijan or sovereign South Azerbaijan but its sympathies for ethno-nationalists in Iranian Azerbaijan can generate serious threats to the goals and objectives of ECO.

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