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Tensions at the Border Between Pakistan and Afghanistan: An Analysis

Gabriele Massano*

Abstract in English

The return of the Taliban to Kabul in August 2021 has been repeatedly described as a strategic victory for the Pakistani government. However, the issue is much more complex and it may cause harmful implications for the domestic stability of Pakistan in the medium term. Actually, today, as during the first Taliban emirate, the movement of Quranic students is progressively proving to be a partial and highly problematic ally for Islamabad. The numerous terrorist attacks currently perpetrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the growing tensions at the disputed border, and the significant outflows of foreign currency are just some of the latest warning signs. The long-standing tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan have their roots in the redefining process of the common frontier promoted by the British Crown during the final stages of the “Great Game”. The current border, better known as the Durand Line, disrupted the territorial continuity of the Pashtun ethnic fabric, thereby undermining the already fragile regional balances and generating multiple disputes regarding the demarcation between the two countries. In order to mitigate the negative effects of this controversy on the stability of its domestic front, Pakistan has historically made a significant contribution to the radicalisation of the Afghan political scenario, believing that a shared extremist religious identity could have effectively suppressed the ethnic claims of the Pashtun community. However, this Pakistani strategy, which has been translated into constant support to the rise of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, has fatally mistaken as decisive what instead in human affairs has relatively less importance, i.e. ideology. The effects of this geopolitical misstep, therefore, are having an impact on Pakistan's trajectory today, with the risk of opening up a new season of violence across the Durand Line.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Taliban, security, border crisis, geopolitics

Abstract in Italiano

Il ritorno dei talebani a Kabul nell'Agosto del 2021 è stato più volte descritto come una vittoria strategica del governo pakistano. La questione, però, è molto più complessa e nel medio periodo potrebbe assumere connotazioni nefaste per la stabilità interna del Pakistan. Oggi, come negli anni del primo emirato talebano, infatti, il movimento degli studenti coranici si sta progressivamente dimostrando un alleato parziale ed assai problematico per Islamabad. Gli innumerevoli attentati terroristici perpetrati attualmente nei territori del Khyber Pakhtunkhwa e del Belucistan per mano del Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), le crescenti tensioni alla frontiera contesa e le enormi emorragie di liquidità estera, rappresentano soltanto alcuni degli ultimi campanelli di allarme. Le tensioni di lungo periodo tra Afghanistan e Pakistan traggono origine dal processo di ridefinizione della frontiera comune promosso dalla Corona britannica durante le ultime fasi del “Grande Gioco”. Il confine attuale, la cosiddetta Linea Durand, ha avuto l'effetto di spezzare la continuità territoriale del tessuto etnico pashtun, sovvertendo i già fragili equilibri regionali e generando molteplici contrasti in merito alla demarcazione fra i due Paesi. Per attutire gli effetti negativi di questa controversia

sulla stabilità del proprio fronte interno, il Pakistan ha storicamente fornito un contributo rilevante alla radicalizzazione dello scenario politico afgano, nella convinzione che una comune identità religiosa oltranzista avrebbe potuto sopire le rivendicazioni etniche della comunità pashtun. La tattica pakistana, tradottasi in un costante sostegno all'ascesa del movimento dei talebani in Afghanistan, ha però fatalmente scambiato per decisivo ciò che invece assume un peso relativo nelle vicende umane: l'ideologia. Gli effetti di questa sgrammaticatura geopolitica incidono oggi sulla traiettoria del Pakistan e rischiano di aprire ad una nuova stagione di violenze a cavallo della Linea Durand.

Parole chiave: Afghanistan, Pakistan, talebani, sicurezza, crisi delle frontiere, geopolitica.

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Introduction

The year 2023 is drawing to an end as one of the bloodiest periods in the contemporary history of Pakistan. For almost a decade, the Islamabad government has apparently proven to be successful in stemming the spiral of violence, which was dragging its northwestern provinces into the abyss. In 2014, as a matter of fact, Pakistani security forces conducted a successful large-scale military campaign to suppress numerous guerrilla hotspots flourished in the tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, managing to relegate the separatist threat into the mountains of neighbouring Afghanistan.

The primary objective of the operation was the neutralisation of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the so-called “Pakistani Taliban movement,” a heterogeneous organisation under whose umbrella a galaxy of fundamentalist groups had been coalesced along the Pashtun belt adjacent to the Afghan border. The latest takeover of Kabul by their allies and the implementation of a new centralised structure within the faction, however, have recently meant a decisive turning point for the TTP.¹ Since August 2021, in fact, the group has resurged with

¹ A. Sayed & T. Hamming, «The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover», CTC Sentinel (Combating Terrorism Center-West Point), vol.16, issue 5, May 2023.

great momentum in carrying out terrorist operations on Pakistani soil, attempting to reassert at the local level the political agenda and the successes of the movement originally founded by mullah Omar.

This development may appear logical to an external observer, except for the fact that the Islamabad government, now harmed by its own tactical decisions, has been the main supporter of the Taliban for decades despite the numerous repercussions on its internal stability. Is this irony of fate or a symptom of a much deeper-rooted disease?

Pakistan and Afghanistan are lands remote and culturally alien to us, which are impossible to analyse through Western lenses. Their peculiarity represents a luxury that has always been forgotten by our media's narrative, where these contexts are often categorically labelled as "black" or "white," thus overlooking the dominance of their distinctive shades of grey.

Not for nothing, allegedly influenced by the enthusiasm circulating in the corridors of the deep Pakistani state following the return of the Taliban to Kabul, a significant portion of international headlines declared Pakistan's strategic victory in August 2021, thereby complying with the Indo-centric paranoia of a country completely bent to the will of the army. By the way, it is worth to remember how the same sense of euphoria pervaded Washington's secret services back in February 1989, when the last Soviet tank crossed the Oxus River to escape from the rage of the mujahideen, at that time depicted by the Western press as brave "freedom fighters".² At the foot of the Hindu Kush, indeed, in a land inhabited by hospitable populations but strongly hostile to foreign interference, where ideologies always succumb under the overwhelming weight of ethnicities, the overseas triumphant that assumes imperialistic postures or behaves dazzled by propaganda often ends up getting burned. This is a lesson learned not only by the Americans, but also by the British and Russians long before them. One that the military intelligence agencies of Islamabad still cynically choose to overlook today.

The Pashtunistan issue

The tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have their roots in the redefining process of the common frontier promoted by the British Crown at the end of the nineteenth century, within the framework of its hegemonic competition with the Russian Empire, better known

² A. T. Sheikh, «Not the Whole Truth: Soviet and Western Media Coverage of the Afghan Conflict», *Strategic Studies* (Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad), vol.13, no.3, Spring 1990, pp. 35-63.

as the “Great Game”. In this geopolitical context, the territory roughly corresponding to present-day Afghanistan, then under the rule of the new-born Durrani Empire, became the major catalyst for colonial ambitions in the Central Asian region, due to its strategic position across a fault line between the two rival spheres of influence.

Driven by the need to defend its colonial possessions in the Indian subcontinent from the northern advance of Russian forces, the British Crown, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus initiated a series of conflicts to gain control of the Durrani monarchy. Afghanistan, even then, proved to be a territory relatively easy to conquer but impossible to tightly control through the direct imposition of foreign rule. The British, therefore, opted for a diplomatic solution, imposing the acceptance of new political borders on the Pashtun dynastic elite, in order to create an actual buffer zone between the British Raj and the Russian Empire.

The demarcation of the northern Afghan border essentially aimed to halt the Russian advance beyond the Oxus River and, therefore, faced no significant issues in its implementation phase, as it equally served the strategic interests of both London and Kabul. Conversely, the delineation of the southern border was highly contentious and caused an irreparable wound in the heart of the region, laying the groundwork for the conflicts that still afflict the area today.

From a British perspective, the reshaping of the southern border of the Kingdom of Afghanistan, later renamed as Durand Line, was intended to serve two crucial aims: on the one hand, to contain the periodic incursions of Afghan tribes into the plains of the Indus, thereby contributing to the stability of valuable colonial territories such as the Punjab; on the other hand, to weaken the demographic weight of the Pashtuns compared to other Afghan ethnic groups, thus undermining any future revanchism and compromising the growing Durrani state-building project based on the major ethnic element.

Therefore, the new drawing of the frontier splitted the geographic and cultural heart of the homeland of the largest Afghan ethnic group (Pashtunistan), separating with force entire tribes and assigning a substantial portion of them to the authority of the British Raj, especially those gravitating around the cities of Quetta and Peshawar. Consequently, since then, while the other borders were at least recognised as a fact by the indigenous population, that mountainous frontier line remained so porous and virtual that no subsequent Afghan government, regardless of ideological affiliation, had the will to acknowledge its authority. Strongly supported in this effort by the irredentism of cross-border Pashtun tribes.

The Pakistani search for strategic depth

From the western fringes of the Raj, in the mid-twentieth century emerged the independent state of Pakistan, which inherited from its colonial ancestor a disputed frontier with Kabul, but, at the same time, failed to emulate its Anglo-Saxon pragmatism. Assembled solely on the basis of a common religious confession, within which deeply fragmented ethno-linguistic identities attempted imperfect dissolution, the Pakistani mosaic was immediately overwhelmed by the paranoia of being dismembered by its neighbours. At the top of Islamabad's list of existential threats New Delhi was pinned, the sworn enemy the new-born Muslim state feared being incorporated into once again. Moreover, the insidious hegemonic aspirations of India were perceived by Pakistan as capable of extending even into the Afghan territory, based on the historical relationship that had previously tied Kabul to the British Raj.

Once understood the renewed regional scenario, on its side Afghanistan persisted in refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Durand Line, partly in response to the nationalist sentiments of its domestic Pashtun population and partly to secure transit advantages from the newly formed Pakistan, which, instead, could boast a commercial outlet to the sea. Islamabad, on the other hand, never attempted to bow to Kabul's pressures, as the relinquishment of its northwestern territories would have easily triggered a fatal process of wider fragmentation. As a result, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan deteriorated on several occasions between the 1950s and 1970s, eventually becoming entwined in the broader dynamics of the Cold War, when the entry of the Red Army into Kabul marked a pivotal turning point in the issue.

Actually, for quite a long time, Pakistani secret services were seeking for substantial foreign financing to develop their military capabilities and pursue Islamabad's geopolitical imperatives, which, with regard to the Afghan border, were identified in the crucial need to obtain a greater strategic depth. Starting from the premise that the peculiar narrow and elongated shape of its territory would have exposed it to a pincer attack directed at the core of the nation, Pakistan thereby saw in the possibility of establishing a client government in Kabul the effective solution for two vital concerns: the instability of its northern-western borders and the lack of a logistical background to fight India in Kashmir.³ Concretely, the Pakistani

³ A. Pande, «Explaining Pakistan's Foreign Policy», Routledge, New York, 2011, pp. 59-87.

Grand strategy was implemented through the dissemination of fundamentalist religious ideologies across the trans-border Pashtun provinces and through the logistic-military support to dissident Islamist groups in Afghanistan.

These decisions were mainly based on the assumption that a shared Islamic identity would have eventually downplayed the different ethnic affiliations, thus mitigating the Pakistani domestic irredentism and, consequently, projecting Islamabad's geopolitical influence onto Kabul. When the U.S. intelligence services therefore contracted General Zia-ul-Haq for the on-ground management of a substantial flow of weapons and money—tools intended to finance the training of anti-Soviet guerrilla fighters, the mujahideen, on the remote highlands of Pakistan—the Punjabi dictator's eyes filled with joy, having finally secured the funds needed to pursue more assertively the geopolitical imperatives associated with the Afghan border.

The project masterminded by the military apparatus of Islamabad initially focused on the selective support of exclusively Afghan Islamist factions of Pashtun ethnicity, making them the driving force behind the jihadist anti-Soviet insurgency in Kabul. This was made in the over-ambitious hope that, once in power, they would have immediately considered Pakistan's strategic priorities, owing to the solid ideological and patronage ties woven together over the time. However, in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the absence of a common enemy, the mujahideen front quickly disintegrated leading to a civil war, where localism and opportunism prevailed over any other "ism" (Islamism, nationalism, and socialism).

Suddenly lacking of reliable allies on the ground, Pakistani intelligence services sought to support the rise of another fundamentalist organisation composed only by Pashtuns, theoretically capable of representing Islamabad's geopolitical interests and meanwhile able to counter the prominence of the Tajik guerrilla forces, considered too close to the interests of India and Iran instead. The turning point for Pakistan came in the mid-1990s, when the Taliban movement quickly emerged on the Afghan political scene.



Figure 1 An ethnolinguistic map showing different language and cultural groups across Afghanistan and Pakistan. Source: The Choices Program, Brown University, www.choices.edu.

Pakistan's harmful support of the Taliban

Originating as a spontaneous mobilisation of former mujahideen gathered in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar, the Taliban movement quickly caught the attention of Pakistani officials: on the one hand, due to the exclusively clerical leadership of the organisation, and on the other hand, because of the distinctive social background of its younger followers. The war against the Soviets, in fact, had caused the exodus of millions of Afghans to neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan, where an entire generation of Pashtun youth had been galvanised by extremist messages provided by madrasas established within refugee camps managed by Pakistani political parties.⁴ Therefore, the sudden successes of these Quranic students and their religious ideals of well-known matrix convinced the intelligence services of Islamabad to provide them extensive economic and logistical support, which eventually proved decisive for their triumph over rival factions.

Despite the numerous efforts to finance and manage them, however, once they finally seized Kabul, the Taliban soon exhibited substantial decision-making autonomy and resisted the majority of manipulation attempts orchestrated by Pakistan. Contrary to the expectations of

⁴ A. Rashid, «Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia», Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2001.

Islamabad's intelligence services, indeed, the Mullah Omar, following the pattern of previous Afghan rulers, refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Durand Line and did not accept to abandon historical claims on the tribal territories beyond the disputed border. On the contrary, he strongly encouraged Pashtun communities' irredentism and extended his influence over Pakistani fundamentalists south of the frontier. The shared Islamic identity, therefore, even though it was elevated as a constitutive element of the new regime, was still unable to transcend or replace the far more deeply rooted ethnic affiliation. As a result, it was not the Taliban to provide strategic depth to Pakistan, but rather Islamabad's government, misguided by the erroneous analyses of its intelligence services, the one who gave it to the movement of Quranic students instead.

Hence, following the Western military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, there was a subsequent and rapid process of absorption of the Taliban militancy in the Pashtun tribal belt spanning from Baluchistan to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the Afghan fundamentalist organisation managed to enjoy a secure background for reorganisation. From this merging among Taliban guerrillas, Al Qaeda operatives, and the Pakistani social fabric later emerged the embryos of new indigenous extremist groups, including the aforementioned Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). By providing an ideological cover to the irredentist sentiments of the local community, these new-born organisations established small independent tribal emirates in their respective territories. Thus, the fundamentalist backflow from Afghanistan in the early 2000s fuelled political instability in Pakistan and had extremely deleterious consequences for the country's civil society.

Nonetheless, the Pakistani military elite, once again obsessed with the possibility of India extending its influence over Kabul government, blindly persisted in repeating the old mistakes. During the two decades of NATO military intervention in Afghanistan, in fact, Pakistani intelligence services deliberately chose to play both sides: on one hand, collecting huge Western funds aimed at "fighting terrorism," and on the other, providing significant support and logistical aid to the Taliban resistance groups, contributing significantly to their surprising resurgence. Far from improving the situation, though, the further capture of Kabul by the Taliban has only worsened Islamabad's strategic quagmire. The recent shootings at the disputed border⁵, the outflows of foreign currency,⁶ and the terrorist attacks carried out by

⁵ «Main Afghanistan-Pakistan border crossing closed after guards exchange fire», Al Jazeera, 06/09/2023.

⁶ E. Najafizada & I. Dilawar, «Dollars Smuggled From Pakistan Provide Lifeline for the Taliban», Bloomberg, 06/02/2023.

Pashtun separatist groups (who now enjoy a safe haven in Afghanistan)⁷ are just the latest red flags. Actually, they are symptoms of a much deeper-rooted disease that has been continuously blurring the strategic framework of the Pakistani leadership for too many years now.

Pakistan-Taliban ties and the future instability of Pashtunistan

Were not the Pakistani intelligence services the ones who created Taliban, but without Islamabad's continuous support, the fundamentalist movement could not have survived for so long amid the several warring factions inside of Afghanistan. Pakista's blind obstinacy has its roots in a severe Indian-centric encirclement syndrome, in the existence of a highly disputed northwestern border and in the continuity of the Pashtun ethnic fabric that goes through it, and finally in the desire of gaining exclusive access to an energy corridor directly connected to Central Asia. These needs cannot be blamed on Islamabad: the Grand strategy represents whatever an international player needs to necessarily achieve, what it must pursue to avoid collapsing under external pressures or under the weight of its own structural inconsistencies. What has been highly debatable and detrimental, however, are the strategies devised by Pakistan's military apparatus to address these needs over time, as they often treated as decisive what in human affairs has always a relative weight: ideology.

In modern Afghanistan, the Pashtuns have been the dominant ethnic group since the first half of the eighteenth century and currently constitute approximately 40% of the country's total population. In part due to the legacy of British colonialism and partly due to the four decades of conflicts that have occurred in Kabul, an even larger number of Pashtuns reside today on the Pakistani side of the southern border, mainly concentrated in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the northern districts of Balochistan. In these areas, tribes often cross the Afghanistan-Pakistan border without proper documentation, proudly brandish their rifles, and harshly refuse to recognise the legitimacy of the Durand Line, thus displaying their emotional connection to ancient Pashtunistan. Although a significant part of this area has been outside of Kabul's jurisdiction for quite some time, indeed, Afghan Pashtuns still feel the pain of this amputation and meanwhile their relatives across the border proudly reject assimilation into the Pakistani community. Therefore, like any Afghan government, Taliban could never accept to relinquish this formidable leveraging tool over Islamabad. On the one hand, since it allows them to rally a significant portion of their Pashtun citizens and

⁷ M. Ahmed, «What's behind the Pakistani Taliban's insurgency?», Associated Press, 31/01/2023.

hold them tight to the heart of the nation. On the other hand, because the cyclical pressure on cross-border irredentism often serves as a powerful tool to reduce Pakistan's pervasive interference in Afghan affairs.

Aware of the unfavourable juncture, the Islamabad government is currently threatening the forced repatriation of nearly two million Afghan refugees to try to bring back the movement of Quranic students into its fold.⁸ Far from being a monolithic organisation, however, Taliban at the moment appear deeply divided on the degree of interference to grant to such requests, thus highlighting the various tribal and contentious elements coexisting within their power structure.

While it is undeniable that the Pakistani intelligence services still hold greater influence over the Taliban than any other international actor is capable of exercising today, during peacetime and in the absence of steady foreign funding, this situation is not destined to remain unchanged. Although any external actor ever succeeded in fully manipulating Afghan tribes, in fact, the Pakistani military leadership seems to have remained stuck in the 1980s, when a significant influx of weapons and money gave it the power to manage the course of the Afghan jihad. However, the Taliban, unlike the mujahideen guerrillas who fought against the Soviets, mostly grew up in refugee camps set up in Pakistani territory or were educated in local madrasas, where they forged strong ties with various Pakistani power groups, sharing with them a homeland and even some family relationships. This peculiarity allows the movement not to feel necessarily bound to a single Pakistani lobby but to enjoy privileged access, especially in the absence of the needs imposed by an ongoing military conflict, to numerous pressure groups that have emerged from the gradual erosion of the Pakistani state's power, eventually pitting them against each other to extend its influence over the neighbouring country.

Moreover, in order to balance Pakistani interference, the "historic" wing of the Kandahari Taliban is currently courting with extreme caution other regional actors (primarily China, Iran, India, Russia, and Turkey). Thus, giving credence to the ancient adage stating that, to rule Afghanistan steadily, it is advisable to convince Afghans not to be bound to any foreign power, while persuading those same foreigners to finance the state machinery and army of the country. Last but not least, the development of the Chabahar port in southeastern Iran,

⁸ Z. Rehman & C. Goldbaum, «Pakistan Orders More Than a Million Afghans Out of the Country», The New York Times, 08/10/2023.

cleverly funded by Indian investments, could soon end Pakistan's monopoly on sea transit trade to Afghanistan, thus depriving Islamabad of another leveraging tool over Kabul.⁹

Far from willing to reformulate Islamabad's tactical approach towards Afghanistan, however, Pakistani military leadership will likely prefer to fuel its domestic chaos to the point of paroxysm, then exploiting the classic threat of the nuclear weapons in the hands of jihadist groups to attract new foreign investments in a parasitic manner. This time, the most probable victim of the Pakistani trap will not be United States but rather China, which is increasingly engaging in Pakistan through significant urban-infrastructure projects aimed at bypassing the Strait of Malacca, which is the Beijing's energy jugular in the waters of the Indian Ocean, currently under the full control of the American rival.

In conclusion, being enslaved by the blurred vision of the military elite, the Islamabad government today appears trapped in a vicious circle of erroneous assumptions and sectarian violence, which, in the medium term, may easily lead to the complete detonation of its north-western borders. Unlike the past, though, this renewed instability in Beijing's backyard could prove extremely functional to U.S. hegemonic plans projected into the Indo-Pacific.

⁹ A. Law, «Chabahar port: India speeds up work on long-term contract details», The Hindu Business Line, 04/09/2023.

Analysing Ethnic Minorities and Identity in Contemporary Iran

Silvia Boltuc*

Abstract in English

Iran is a richly diverse nation, woven from a multitude of ethnicities, each contributing to its vibrant cultural landscape. Although Persians form the majority, Iran's societal tapestry thrives on the invaluable contributions of diverse minorities and indigenous communities. Beyond ethnic diversity, the nation is further enriched by small religious minorities, collectively enhancing the depth and richness of Iranian traditions. To comprehend Iran's political landscape and the factors guiding its policies, a profound grasp of the intricate sociocultural fabric of Iranian society is essential. Despite historical interest from orientalists and modern researchers and academics, there remains a notable dearth of information concerning these communities and their distinctive characteristics. This paper endeavours to offer a concise overview of the principal ethnic groups existing in contemporary Iran, shedding light on their religious backgrounds and historical trajectories.

Keywords: Iran, ethnic groups, society, religion, geopolitics.

Abstract in Italiano

Il profilo antropologico dell'Iran presenta una moltitudine di etnie, ciascuna delle quali contribuisce al ricco panorama culturale del Paese. Sebbene i persiani costituiscano la maggioranza, il tessuto sociale dell'Iran prospera grazie al contributo inestimabile di diverse minoranze e comunità indigene. Al di là della diversità etnica, ad accrescere ulteriormente la complessità del suo tessuto sociale ci sono diverse minoranze religiose, che coesistono con la maggioranza sciita all'interno della Repubblica Islamica dell'Iran. Per comprendere il panorama politico del Paese e i fattori che influenzano le sue politiche, è essenziale una profonda conoscenza dell'intricato tessuto socioculturale della società iraniana. Nonostante l'interesse storico da parte degli orientalisti, e quello dei ricercatori e accademici moderni, rimane una notevole carenza di informazioni riguardanti queste comunità e i loro caratteri distintivi. Questo paper si propone di offrire una panoramica concisa dei principali gruppi etnici esistenti nell'Iran contemporaneo, facendo luce sulla loro configurazione storico-religiosa.

Parole chiave: Iran, minoranze etniche, società, religione, geopolitica

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Introduction

Iran is a tapestry of remarkable diversity, comprising a myriad of ethnic groups that enrich its cultural texture.

While Persians make up most of the population, the Iranian society thrives with the contributions of various minorities and indigenous peoples. Azeris, Kurds, Lurs, and smaller but significant groups like Baluch, Arabs, Gilaks, Mazanis, Turkmen, and other Turkic tribes, as well as nomadic communities, collectively add to the intricate mosaic of Iranian society.¹ Furthermore, minorities such as Armenians, Assyrians, and the Afro-Iranian community bring unique cultural elements, augmenting the nation's multifaceted heritage.

This diversity isn't just evident in the demographics but also in the rich linguistic landscape, encompassing diverse Indo-Iranian, Semitic, Armenian, and Turkic languages, including Persian, Azeri, Kurdish, Gilaki, Talysh, Qashqai, Mazandarani, Luri, Baluchi, Arabic, and various other non-Turkic languages, underscoring the vibrant Iranian culture.

In addition, religious beliefs paint a mosaic of diversity within an Islamic Republic setting. While Islam is the predominant faith, with around 90% practicing Shia Islam primarily following the Twelver Jafari School, the country also embraces a multifaceted substrate of religious minorities. This includes Sunni Muslims, Ismaili Muslims, and Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsanism), offering a spectrum of Islamic beliefs. Beyond Islam, Iran is the house of significant religious communities like the Bahai, Christians from various denominations, Zoroastrians (Mazdayasnie), Jews, and Sabeen Mandaean, each adding their unique hue to the nation's spiritual landscape. The coexistence of diverse religious beliefs not only emphasises the integration of religious minorities within the Iranian context but also makes a significant contribution to the richness and allure of its cultural heritage.

An analyst typically utilises information reported by journalists, researchers, economists, and the academic community collectively to generate reports highlighting the dynamics of a country and attempting to forecast future trends. However, due to the extensive presence of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in Iran, in addition to its incredible geographic diversity and equally rich history, simply collecting data isn't enough to gain a profound understanding of Iranian society needed to uncover its transformations.

¹ Alessandro Bausani, «The Persians, from the Earliest Days to the Twentieth Century», London, 1972.

This research, while not exhaustive in its research, serves as a compendium aiming to explore some of the most significant ethnic minorities within Iran.²

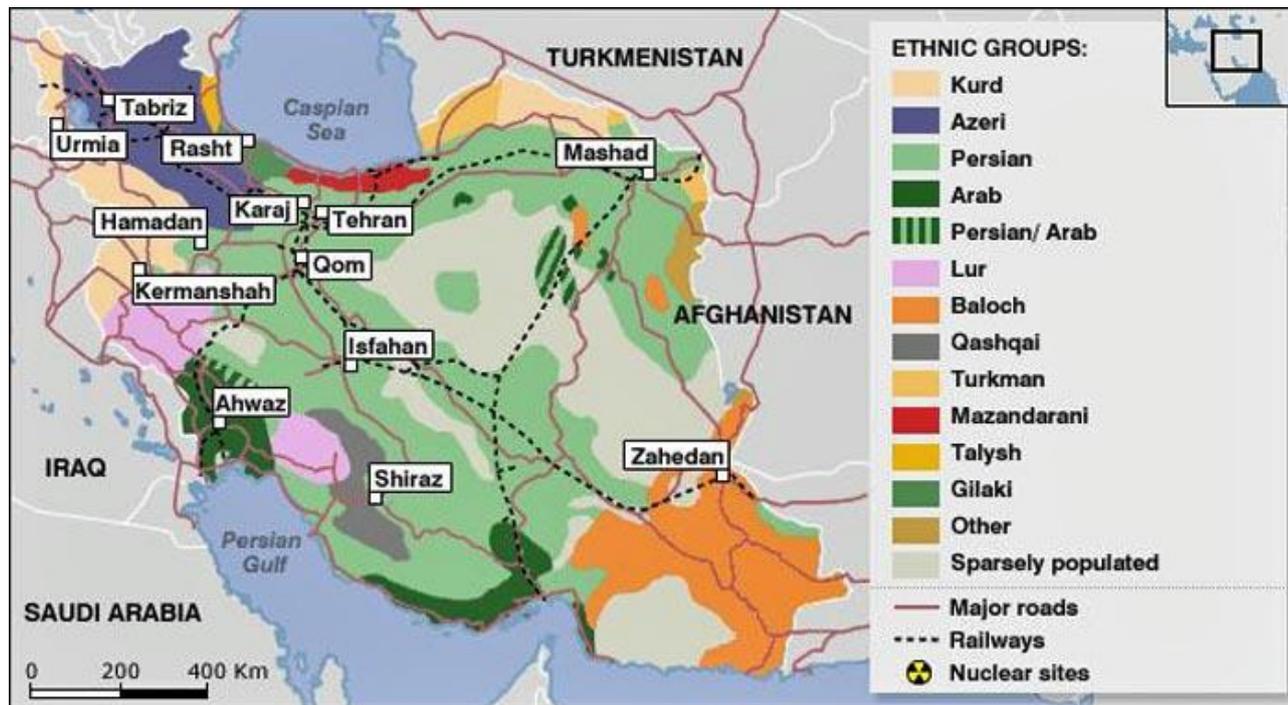


Figure 2 The map of the different ethnic groups in Iran. Source: Iranpoliticsclub, «Iran Ethnic, Population and Attractions Maps», <https://iranpoliticsclub.net/maps/maps15/index.htm>

Discovering Iranian ethnic minorities

Azerbaijanis

This paragraph refers to the Azerbaijanis who speak the language known as Azerbaijani Turkish or Azeri. With a population exceeding 18 million, the Azeri-speaking community constitutes Iran's largest ethnic minority. Almost all Turkish-speaking Azerbaijanis are Shi'ite Muslims, like the large majority of Iranians. Primarily Shi'ite and predominantly residing in the northwest regions bordering Azerbaijan, they differ from their more secular counterparts across the border.

² Within the scholarly discourse on ethnic groups and religious minorities in Iran, an array of perspectives has been meticulously examined by researchers and regional experts, yielding a rich and diverse literature in various languages. In alignment with the objective of this research to elucidate and disseminate information regarding this matter, the author judiciously curated sources that are poised to enhance the reader's comprehension. It is noteworthy, however, that the interested reader may find it beneficial to explore additional sources and contributions from the academic community to deepen their understanding of this complex and multifaceted topic. Cf. Kameel Ahmady, «From Border to Border. Research Study on Identity and Ethnicity in Iran», Avaye Buf Publisher, 2023; Brenda Shaffer, «Iran is More Than Persia. Ethnic Politics in Iran», Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2022; Rasmus Christian Elling, «Minorities in Iran. Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini», Ney York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013; Hussein D. Hassan, «Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities», Washington D.C., Congressional Research Service, 2008; Massoume Price, «Iran's Diverse Peoples. A Reference Sourcebook», Santa Barbara, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005.

A significant presence of this group also thrives in Tehran and are well-integrated into Iranian societal and political structures.

Azerbaijanis are commonly categorized into three groups based on their language: *Türk* for Turkish speakers, *Kürt* for Kurdish speakers, and *Fārs/Pārs* for Persian speakers. According to the Russian orientalist Vladimir Minorsky, the Turkification of Azerbaijan has been relatively superficial, citing as evidence both the persistence of Tati dialects and the “bastardisation” of the Turkish language, notably the loss of vowel harmony characteristic of Tabrizi speech.³

There are some sub-ethnic groups of the Azerbaijanis living in Iran, such as:

- 1. The Shahsevan:** the Shia Muslims who speak Azerbaijani Turkish and identify as Shahsevan possess a rich and intricate tribal structure rooted in their nomadic past. The term «Shahsevan», as noted by Minorsky, translates to ‘those who love the shah’ in Turkic, reflecting their historical association. Their tribal system encompasses various hierarchical institutions, with the ethnic group constituting the largest unit, followed by the tribe, clan, *gubak*, *ube*, and family. Despite uncertainties about their origins, the Shahsevans are believed to have formed from multiple tribes coming together, including Kurdish influences among them.⁴
- 2. The Qarapapaqs (Karapapakhs or Terekeme):** After the signing of the Treaty of Turkmenchay between Iran and Russia in 1828, they relocated to Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Initially belonging to a Turkoman group, the Karapapakhs are identified in the Encyclopaedia of Islam as “Turkicised Kazakhs.” They should not be confused with Karakalpaks, a Turkic ethnic group native to Karakalpakstan in North-western Uzbekistan.⁵
- 3. The Bayat:** The Bayat, an Oghuz tribe, initially embarked on migration from the Aral steppes. Their initial stop was the city of Nishapur in the southern region of Khorasan, situated in the northeastern part of Iran. Following assaults by Mongol forces in the 13th century, the Bayat clan dispersed, relocating to three different regions. This

³ Vladimir Fëdorovič Minorskiĭ, «Turkish-Persian Demarcation», *Izvestiya of the Imp. Russian Geographical Society*. Vol. LII, iss. V, Petrograd, 1916.

⁴ Eckart Ehlers, Fred Scholz, Günther Schweizer, «Nordost-Azerbaidŝan und Shah Sevan-Nomaden. Strukturwandel einer nordwestiranischen Landschaft und ihrer Bevölkerung», *Beihefte zur Geographischen Zeitschrift*, Vol.6 Heft 26, 1970.

⁵ Vasily Barthold & Ronald Wixman, «*Qarapapakħ*». In van Donzel, E.; Lewis, B.; Pellat, Ch. & Bosworth, C. E. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Volume IV: Iran–Kha* (2nd ed.), Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1978.

Oghuz tribe is prevalent in various countries such as Turkmenistan, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, where the surname Bayat holds significant prevalence, often appearing in diverse variations.

4. **The Qajars:** The Qajars, originally a Turkic tribe, initially resided in Armenia before their emergence and expansion in Asia Minor during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Within the Safavid state, many individuals from the Qajar tribe held influential positions, contributing to its authority. In 1794, Agha Mohammed, a chieftain of the Qajars, established the Qajar dynasty, displacing the Zand dynasty and assuming control in Iran.
5. **The Ayrums:** Historically, they have been linked to the vicinity near Gyumri, Armenia. In 1828, following the Treaty of Turkmenchay, Iran ceded the khanates of Erivan and Nakhchivan to the Russian Empire. To prevent Turkic tribes from falling under Russian rule, Iranian Crown Prince Abbas Mirza invited many of them to settle within Iran's newly defined boundaries. Notable among the Ayrums is Tadj ol-Molouk Ayromlou, who became the Queen Consort of Iran, the wife of Reza Pahlavi, and the mother of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.
6. **The Qaradaghis:** a Turkic sub-ethnic group of Azerbaijanis mainly living in the Southern Aras River. Qaradagh encompasses an expansive mountainous region situated in the northern part of Iran's East Azerbaijan Province. Within this area lived many Turkic tribes, including the Qaradaghis. Although these tribes have transitioned to a sedentary lifestyle, remnants of their culture, rooted in nomadic pastoralism, continue to endure through the ages.⁶

Kurds

The Kurdistan region serves as the primary home for Kurds, spanning across southeastern Turkey, northeastern Iraq, northwestern Iran, and parts of Syria and Armenia. Historically, the Kurds and their land were divided among Persia, the Russian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire.

Following a 1921 treaty between the Soviet Union and Turkey, the Kurdish-populated Caucasus region joined the Ottoman Empire, and later, parts of Kurdistan fell under Iraqi and Syrian authority with the annexation of the Mosul region.

⁶ Karl Foy, «Azerbajĝanische Studien mit einer Charakteristik des Sd-trkischen», Mitteilungen des Seminars fr Orientalische Sprachen zu Berlin, *Westasiatische Studien*, Vol.6, 1903.

In Iran, Kurdish settlements primarily exist in the Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam and southern part of the West Azerbaijan provinces. In addition, there are Kurds residing in the North Khorasan Province.

Kurds trace their roots to Iranian origins and speak a northwestern Iranian language, encompassing various dialects such as Gorani, Zaza, Laki, Sorani and Kormanji. Certain dialects, such as the Sorani dialect, have undergone further division into distinct variations.⁷

Kurds have different clans, the most significant of which are the Mokri, Bani-Ardalan, Jaaf, and Kalhor.

- 1. Mokri:** According to tribal lore, a Kurdish tribe from western Iranian Azerbaijan, the Mokri tribe traces its lineage back to the princes of Baban, and its name originates from one of its notable leaders, Mekkar. Tribal legends suggest that several Persian rulers, including Shah Abbas I, sought assistance from the Mokri tribe during wars, resulting in a victory against the Turks. However, historical records depict the Mokri as an exceptionally turbulent tribe, renowned more for their raids than for their military achievements. They are recognised for speaking a remarkably pure form of the Kurdish language. It is believed that Shah Abbas I resettled the ancestors of the Mokri in the region around 1600, coinciding with the relocation of most Kurdish tribes to Khorasan during the same period.
- 2. Bani-Ardalan:** a Kurdish tribe of northwestern Iran, now dispersed in Sanandaj and surrounding villages. Russian orientalist Minorsky believed that the name Ardalan was derived from a Turkish rank. The ruling family of this tribe claimed descent from Saladin. The Ardalan state was completely independent until it was incorporated into Safavid Iran as a semiautonomous frontier province by the name of Ardalan. Minorsky reported that during the Safavid period, the Ardalans were deeply involved in the struggles between the Persian and Ottoman empires and, whenever it suited them, they shifted their allegiance to the Ottoman government.⁸
- 3. Jaaf:** The Jaaf, a nomadic Kurdish confederation, resides in southern Iraqi Kurdistan within the Sulaymaniyah region and extends into the Sanandaj area of Iranian Kurdistan. As the largest Kurdish tribe in the Middle East, they share cultural ties

⁷ Nikitine Basile, «Les Kurdes: étude sociologique et historique», Paris, 1956.

⁸ M. Mardūk Kordestānī, «Tārīḵ-e Kord wa Kordestān (History of the Kurds and Kurdistan)», Tehran, 1358 Š./1979.

with other central Kurdish inhabitants, such as the Mokri, Baban, and Soran. Embracing Sunni Islam of the Shafiite *madhhab* (a school of thought within the Islamic jurisprudence), a significant number of Jaaf members follow the Qaderi and Naqshbandiyya Sufi orders. The earliest mention of this tribe dates back to the Perso-Ottoman peace treaty of May 1639. According to oral traditions within the Taayshai branch, its members originally hailed from Armenia and were Christians. The Jaaf dialect, part of the Sorani Kurdish dialects, has integrated various elements from Gurani and south Kurdish languages. Notable figures from this tribe include Dawood Fattah al-Jaff, renowned as 'The Lion of Kurdistan', appointed as the leader of the Jaff tribe and served as a Royal Minister in Iran. While most Kurds adhere to Sunni Islam following the Shafii school, others follow Yazidism, Yarsanism (or Ahl-e Haqq), Qadiriyyah Order and the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya brotherhood. The Kurdish population in Iran is estimated to be approximately 8.1 million.⁹

Arabs

Arabians have preserved their Arabic language and numerous traditional practices, though they have experienced a reduction in some of their distinctive ethnological traits. The most recent population census conducted in 1976 estimated the Arabian tribal population to be approximately 300,000. This scarcity of updated information stems partly from the considerable migration of people from Khuzestan to different regions of Iran after the Iraqi invasion in 1980. The initial Arabian tribes made their way to Iran from the Arabian Peninsula and primarily settled in the Khuzestan and Hormozgan provinces.¹⁰

- 1. Khuzestan Province:** Arab tribes' distribution in Khuzestan spans between the Arvand Roud (Shatt al-Arab) river, which separates the southern borders of Iraq and Iran, and the southern regions extending towards the Persian Gulf, reaching from Shush in the north. Their territory lies to the west of the Bakhtiyari territory, inhabited by the Lur tribe across Eastern Khuzestan, Lorestan, Bushehr, and Isfahan provinces. Among the significant Arabian tribes in Khuzestan, the Bani Kaab stands as the largest, originating from Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

The Arabs living in Khuzestan are known as Ahwazi Arabs, as in Arabic the area is called 'al-Ahwaz'. Under the Safavids this area was referred to as 'Arabistan'. It was

⁹ Amir Šaraf-al-Din Bedlisi, «Šaraf-nāma: tāriḳ-e mofaššal-e kordestān (A detailed history of Kurdistan) », Tehran, 1988.

¹⁰ 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Zarrīnkūb, «The Arab Conquests in Iran», *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. IV, 1985.

renamed under the Pahlavis with a Persian name. The prevalent Arabic dialect in the province is known as Khuzestani Arabic, a Mesopotamian variant commonly used by Arabs residing across the borders of Iraq and Kuwait. This dialect holds similarities with the Basrah (Basrawi) accent and is easily comprehensible to other Arabic speakers. Notably, both the Ahwazi and Basrawi accents exhibit substantial influence from Farsi (Persian language). The majority of Ahwazi Arabs adhere to the Shia branch of Islam.

- 2. Bushehr and Hormozgan:** In the coastal areas of Iran, particularly in Bushehr and Hormozgan, there is a relatively small Arab population, numbering in the few hundred thousand. With the arrival of Islam, a significant influx of influential tribes from the Arabian Peninsula migrated to Iran's southern shores, with certain groups aspiring to establish their independent emirates.¹¹ The predominant Sunnis in the southern regions still are native Persian Sunnis (Achomi or Lari), predominantly following the Shafii school.

The Lari/Achomi represent an Iranian sub-ethnic community within the Persian demographic, primarily dwelling in the southern regions of Iran, historically recognised as *Irahistan*. This ethnic subgroup communicates through the Achomi language, an older linguistic variant predating modern Persian and bearing a closer resemblance to ancient Persian.

- 3. Khorassani Arabs:** The Arabs settled in Khorasan Province, Iran, during the era of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1513). Significant populations of Khorasan Arabs live in cities such as Birjand, Mashhad, and Nishapur. This community comprises both Sunni and Shia Muslims. While identified as Khorasan Arabs, they predominantly speak Persian, with only a small fraction speaking Arabic as their native language.
- 4. Khamseh Arabs:** The Khamseh, located in Fars province in southwestern Iran, is a tribal confederation that was established between 1861 and 1862 during the reign of Shah Naser ed-Din. It comprises a mix of Turks, Lurs, and Arabs, who eventually came to be collectively recognised as Arabs, distinguishing themselves from the Turkic Qashqai community. Shah Naser ed-Din brought together five nomadic tribes (Arab, Nafar, Baharlu, Inalu, and Basseri) placing them under the authority of the Qavam ol-Molk family.¹² This act of forcibly uniting tribes was a recurring strategy

¹¹ Leone Caetani, «Annali dell'islam (Annals of Islam) », 1905, Milano.

¹² Fredrik Barth, «Nomads of South Persia: The Basseri Tribe of the Khamseh Confederacy», Oslo, 1961.

used by various Persian dynasties to counter the increasing influence of other groups in the region.¹³

Baluch

The Baluch, the indigenous tribes of Baluchistan, reside across Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Despite debates over their origins, Baluchi legends suggest they migrated from Aleppo (modern Syria) during the Arab conquests of the ninth century in search of pastureland and water. They are a nomadic, pastoral ethnic group that speaks the Western Iranian Baluch language.

By the 9th century, Arab writers noted the Baluch living in the region between Kerman, Khorasan, Sistan, and Makran in present-day eastern Iran. However, their involvement in plundering travellers along desert routes led to conflicts with the Buyids, followed by clashes with the Ghaznavids and the Seljuqs. After their defeat, they were compelled to migrate eastward to what is presently the Baluchistan province in Pakistan. As of today, they constitute approximately 2% of the Iranian population.¹⁴

The majority of Baluch follow the Hanafi *madhhab* with smaller numbers adhering to Qarmatian, Zikri, and Shia beliefs. Consequently, Sharia law and Sunni Islamic institutions (as the Maki Religious School of Zahedan) hold significant sway in Baluchi society, with Molavis or Sunni religious leaders serving as key figures that Baluch turn to in case of disputes between families or tribes.¹⁵

In Baluchi society, both tribal and religious authorities regulate internal dynamics. Contrasting Pakistan, where violent competition among tribes and militant separatist movements, each loyal to its own tribal leader, pose threats to regional security and political stability, Iran's social structure unites Baluchis under the leadership of tribes and religious figures.¹⁶

Turkmen

The Turkmen represents a smaller group of Iranian Turks. Although some of them are located in Mazandaran and Khorasan, they mainly live in the Golestan Province, south of the Turkmenistan border. The land they live is referred to as *Turkmen-Sahra*, the Turkoman

¹³ G. F. Magee, «The Tribes of Fars», Simla, 1945.

¹⁴ Mansel Longworth Dames, «The Baloch Race», *Asiatic Society Monographs*, Vol.4, London, 1904.

¹⁵ Firuz Mirza Farmanfarma, «Safar-nama-ye Kerman o Baluchestan (Kerman and Baluchistan travel book) », ed. M. Nezam Mafi, Tehran, 1342 Š./1963.

¹⁶ Denis Bray, «The Jat of Baluchistan», *Indian Antiquary*, Vol.54, 1925.

Desert. Turkmens came first to the region at the time of their forefathers, the Seljuk Turks. Although in Iran they have given up a nomadic lifestyle, they have kept most of their tribal Turkmen customs.¹⁷

As a proof of the significant contribution that the rich ethnic mosaic of the Iranian society gave to the country, it is possible to cite the Iranian spiritual leader, philosophical poet, Sufi and traveller Magtymguly Pyragy. He was Turkmen and is considered to be the most famous figure in Turkmen literary history. The central Iranian authorities celebrated him erecting a mausoleum over his grave. A second example to cite is Agha Mohammed Khan, founder of the Qajar dynasty of Iran. Turkmens are Muslim, but still mysticism and other past religious traditions are present.

Qashqai

The Qashqai is not properly an ethnic group. Indeed, it is a conglomeration of clans of different ethnic origins: Lori, Kurdish, Arab and Turkic. But most of the Qashqai are of Turkic origin, and almost all of them speak a Western Ghuz Turkic dialect, which they call Turki.

Qashqai are known for their pastoral nomadic lifestyle, moving seasonally with their herds across the Zagros Mountains and surrounding regions. They are furthermore renowned for their intricately woven carpets and textiles, which are highly valued both within Iran and internationally. In terms of social structure, the Qashqai traditionally organised themselves into tribal units, led by chiefs or khans, and maintained a strong sense of community and identity. Their society traditionally had a patriarchal structure. In recent years, due to various factors, including modernisation, government policies, and socio-economic changes, some Qashqai groups have gradually transitioned away from nomadic life to settled or semi-settled lifestyles.¹⁸

Lurs

Historically, Lurs were originally Kurds who formed their distinct Lur ethnic identity about a millennium ago. There are four primary tribes among the Lurs: Bakhtiari, Mamasani, Kohgiluyeh, and the Lur proper. During the Seljuq dynasty, the region inhabited by the Lurs was

¹⁷ Gerhard Doerfer, «Das Chorasantürkische (The Khorasan Turkish)», *Türk Dili Araştırmaları Yıllığı Belleten*, 1978.

¹⁸ Oliver Garrod, «The Qashqai Tribe of Fars», *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol.33, 1946.

divided into two parts: Big Lor (comprising Kohgiluyeh and Buyer-Ahmad) and Small Lor (encompassing Ilam and what is now Lorestan).¹⁹

Presently, Lurs are divided into two groups: one leading a settled life, and the Bakhtiari People who maintain a nomadic lifestyle. Their current territories span three provinces: Lorestan (the land of Lurs), Bakhtiari, and Kuhgiluyeh-Boyer-Ahmad. Moreover, Lurs make up a substantial portion of the population in various provinces such as Khuzestan, Fars, Ilam, Hamadan, and Bushehr. The majority of Lurs speak an Iranian dialect called Luri, which is the closest living language to Archaic and Middle Persian. Southern Lurs (Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Mamasani, Sepidan, Bandar Ganaveh, Bandar Deylam) speak Luri, while in the Chaharmahal-o-Bakhtiari region, Lurs speak the Bakhtiari dialect (Central Luri). Almost half of the Lurs in Lorestan province speak Laki, a dialect closer to Kurdish than Luri, which is more similar to Persian. Following the Islamisation of Iran, the majority of Lurs embraced Shia Islam, although some follow Yarsanism. Despite their conversion, remnants of their Zoroastrian past persist in their folklore.²⁰

Armenians

Armenians have a notable presence in almost all major cities across Iran. Traditionally, the Azerbaijan region and the Isfahan area were their main hubs dating back to the 11th century, but Tehran has now taken precedence as their central location. The Iranian Azerbaijan holds the oldest history of Armenian settlement in Iran, having been part of historical Armenia. Towns like Tabriz, Koy, Urmia, and Maraga historically had significant Armenian populations.

The Iranian Armenian community historically recognised the authority of the catholicos of Lebanon, previously the catholicos of Echmiadzin until the 1950s, with some Iranians still acknowledging this authority. Most Iranian Armenians follow the Gregorian church of Armenia, but there are also Catholics, Carmelites, Protestants, and Sabbatarians. In the Iranian Azerbaijan region, a small number follow the Eastern Orthodox church. The Armenian presence was so strong in the Azerbaijan region that Persians referred to two neighbourhoods, Gala and Lilava, as *Armenestan*. Additionally, there are Armenian sites linked to significant events in Iranian history, such as the St. Thaddeus church, known for the Armenians'

¹⁹ P. Anastase, «Luristan, or Land of the Luri», *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society (JGLS)*, Vol.7, 1913-14.

²⁰ Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Aria, «Safar-nama-ye Lorestan wa Kuzestan (Lorestan and Kuzestan travel book) », Tehran, 1992.

resistance against the invading Ottoman army in 1917-18, resulting in a decimation of the Armenian population in the region.²¹

Julfa, an emblematic city, once a small township adjacent to Isfahan, now integrated into the city, is another significant centre. It traditionally served as the seat of the Armenian diocese of southern Iran and India. Despite once being entirely occupied by a Christian community in Iran, a substantial emigration to Russia occurred in the late 1940s after the catholicos of Soviet Armenia urged the faithful to repopulate the ancestral homeland, which had suffered devastation due to World War II, famine, and post-revolutionary atrocities in Russia. This led to a significant reduction in the Armenian population.

Despite the integration of Julfa into Isfahan and modernisation efforts that have destroyed many of its old buildings, efforts to preserve its historical and cultural significance were evident. The University of Isfahan began offering undergraduate courses in Armenian history, language, and literature in the early 1960s, while the University of Tehran established an Armenian section in its Graduate Faculty in 1970, recognising the ethnic group's importance within Iran. The Armenian community has made significant cultural and economic contributions to 20th-century Iranian society.²²

Mazandarani People (also called Mazani or Tabari)

They primarily inhabit the Mazandaran, Gilan, and Golestan provinces in Iran, although they can also be found in other regions of the country. Their major settlements lie in the northern areas along the Caspian Sea, and their traditional lifestyle is intricately linked to this region's geography.

Mazandarani language is closely related to the Gilaki (or Gilani) language (spoken in the Gilan province, west of Mazandaran), which falls under the northwestern Iranian language group within the larger Iranian language family. Many Mazandarani speakers (even in the heart of Mazandaran province) refer to their own language as Gilaki, a term used by Persian speakers and linguists worldwide solely to refer to the language spoken in Gilan province. Historically, the Mazandarani speaking people have primarily thrived in agriculture. Practically all of them adhere to Shia Islam. As of 2019, the Mazandarani population numbered around 4,480,000.

²¹ Iradž Afšar, «Aramena-ye Iran (Armenians of Iran) », *Ettela'at-e mahana III/9*, Iran, 1339 Š./1960.

²² Varhan A. Bayburdyan, «Nor-Julayi galut'ə kat'olik misionerleri kazmakerput'yunnerə (The colony of New Julfa and Catholic missionary organizations) », *Telekagir (Bulletin of the Acad. Sci. Arm. S.S.R.)*, Vol.9, 1964.

The Mazandarani people trace their origins back to the Tapuri and Amaldi tribes. Their territory was referred to as Tapria or Taplestan, meaning the Land of Taprith. They share close ties with neighbouring Gilaks and South Caucasian peoples. Throughout the Safavid, Afshar, and Qajar dynasties, Mazandaran was home to various other ethnic groups, such as Georgians, Circassians, Armenians, and other Caucasian communities. Descendants of these groups still inhabit different parts of Mazandaran today.²³

Gilaks: (or Gils)

Their primary settlements are along the southwestern shores of the Caspian Sea within the Gilan region, establishing them as one of the principal ethnic groups in Iran's northern territories. The Gilaks share close kinship with neighbouring Mazandarani people and other ethnic groups of Caucasian lineages. They communicate using the Gilaki language, which falls under the northwestern branch of Iranian languages.²⁴

Talyshis

Native to the Talish region, which spans across Azerbaijan and Iran, covering the South Caucasus and the southwestern coast of the Caspian Sea. Their language, Talysh, belongs to the northwestern Iranian languages and is spoken in the northern areas of the Iranian provinces Gilan and Ardabil. Belonging to the Tatic language family, the Talysh language, although lacking older texts, is believed to have evolved from Old Azeri, the indigenous Iranian language of Iranian Azerbaijan. In the Iranian section of Talish, the majority of Talyshis follow Sunni Islam and adhere to the Naqshbandi order.

Tat

The Tat people in Iran are an Iranian ethnic group living primarily in northern Iran, particularly in the Qazvin Province. The term 'Tat' originates from Turkish and was historically used by Turkic-speaking people to describe settled non-Turkic populations. Iranian Tats speak the Tati language, which comprises a cluster of northwestern Iranian dialects closely linked to the Talysh language, spoken in Iranian Azerbaijan and southward into the provinces of Qazvin and Zanjan. Within the Tati-speaking community, there are Muslims, Christians, and Judaists. In Iran, the majority of Tats adhere to Shia Islam.

²³ Jacques de Morgan, «Mission scientifique en Perse», Vol.V, Paris, 1904.

²⁴ Marcel Bazin, «Ethnies et groupes socio-professionnels dans le nord de l'Iran», *Le fait ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan*, Paris, 1988.

Assyrian/Chaldean

The Assyrian/Chaldean community in Iran refers to an ethnic and religious minority primarily composed of Assyrians and Chaldeans, who are ethnically and culturally linked to ancient Mesopotamia. They belong to the larger Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac ethnic group, which also includes Syriac-speaking Christians. The Assyrians of Iran are divided into two main churches: the Ancient Church of the East (Nestorian) and the Catholic Chaldean Church, as well as a minor Protestant Church or Syriac Orthodox Church (Jacobite Church). Although this research is not meant to delve into this specific topic, it is essential to mention that several ethnic groups divided into different confessions recognised the standard name “Assyrians” after this term had already been accepted, for practical reasons, by their neighbours in the Near East and in Russia, Europe, and America.²⁵

Still, the topic is way more complicated. Just to give a brief example, the Catholic part of these people prefers the appellation of Chaldean. Moreover, there are ethnically nameless Aramean population in these regions which had been satisfied to identify itself by religious denominations. In Iran, Assyrians and Chaldeans mainly live in specific regions, such as Urmia, Tehran, and other parts of western Iran.²⁶

From the 1830s to the end of World War I, Urmia was the spiritual capital of the Assyrians. In 1915-17 the missionary stations in Urmia were able to offer refuge to thousands of Assyrians from the Turkish territory escaping from the persecution of the Turkish government determined to exterminate all Christians. Assyrians and Chaldeans have kept their distinct language, culture, and traditions throughout their history in Iran. Historical event led to the urban Assyrian population diminishing in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, and its increase in Tehran and, to some extent, in the larger cities of Khuzestan. Assyrian communities can be found also in Hamadan, Kermanshah, Ahvaz, Abadan, and other Iranian cities. The Assyrians of Iran speak Assyrian Neo-Aramaic, a neo-Aramaic language descended from Classical Syriac and elements of Akkadian.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, ratified in 1979, recognises Assyrians as a religious minority and ethnic minority and reserves for them one seat in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the Iranian Parliament. Notably, there are five reserved seats in the Iranian

²⁵ Pierre Rondot, «Les chrétiens d’Orient», Paris, 1955.

²⁶ Robin E. Waterfield, «Christians in Persia: Assyrians, Armenians, Roman Catholics and Protestants», London, 1973.

Parliament for the religious minorities: two seats for Armenians and one for each other minority, Assyrians, Jews and Zoroastrians.

Dom

The Dom people, also known as the Romani or Gypsy community, trace their origins back to the Indian sub-continent and migrated as early as the sixth century. They speak various dialects of the Domari language. Within Iran, the Dom community maintains a unique cultural identity, language, and lifestyle. The Dom people consist of two distinct groups. Both groups speak a dialect of the language known as Romany, which has ties to the North Indo-Aryan language in India. Their specific dialect, Domari, incorporates many Arabic words. The Romani term themselves as *Rom*, derived from the Indian word *Dom*, signifying ‘a man of low caste who earns a living through singing and dancing’. Traditionally, the Dom people lead a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, moving frequently from place to place. They are recognised for their distinctive cultural practices, including traditional crafts, music, dance, and storytelling. Dom communities often maintain tight-knit social structures within their groups.²⁷

Despite their distinct cultural heritage, the Dom people in Iran encounter challenges related to social integration because of their nomadic lifestyle, which sometimes hinders their access to education and healthcare. In recent years, efforts have been initiated to address these challenges and preserve the cultural heritage of the Dom community. It’s important to note that the Middle East Romani are often followers of Islam, and within their group, the passing down of social status and technical expertise typically occurs through the male lineage. The Dom should not be confused with the Ghorbati (also known as Mugat or Hadurgar), originally nomadic, an ethnic group found in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia (in Central Asia they are part of the various communities termed Lyuli).²⁸

The Ghorbati derive their name from the Arabic word *gurbet*, meaning ‘stranger’. In the Arab world, the Romani are referred to as Nauar, hence the Nawari Romani. The Ghorbati have their own dialect often referred to as *Persian Romani*, or as *Mogadi* (in Shiraz), *Magadi* (in Herat), and *Qazulagi* (in Kabul). They are sometimes labelled as *Persian Gypsies* or *Central Asian Gypsies*. In general, gypsies in Iran can be divided into three branches: Roma, Dom and Lom, who speak European Romani, Asiatic or Middle Eastern Domari or

²⁷ F. C. Bailey, «Tribe and Caste in India», *Indian Sociology*, Vol.5, Paris and The Hague, 1961.

²⁸ A. von Gobineau, «Die Wanderstämme Persiens (The wandering tribes of Persia)», *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft (ZDMG)*, Vol.11, 1857.

Armenian Lomavren, respectively. These migrants entered the Persian and Arabic territories no later than the 7th century.

Religious minorities

As noted in this research, various Iranian ethnic groups adhere to different religious beliefs. While this study does not delve deeply into this subject, it's important to consider Iranian laws concerning religious minorities to comprehend their potential impact on Iranian society.²⁹

Generally, the primary concern for authorities lies in the conversion of individuals to other faiths, as it contradicts Islamic principles. Non-Muslim religious communities are thus expected, in accordance with Islamic law, to refrain from proselytising Muslims to adopt different beliefs.

Additionally, religious faith should not be used to criticise or undermine the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in its 13th article states that:

*'Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognised religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.'*³⁰

Article 14 further affirms that:

'in accordance with the sacred verse, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights. This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.'

Based on article 64 of the Constitution, religious minorities have 5 representatives in the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran (Parliament).

²⁹ Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Poland, «Minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran», Link: <https://poland.mfa.gov.ir/en/generalcategoryservices/11562/minorities-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran>.

³⁰ Jean Duchesne-Guillemin, «La religion de l'Iran ancien», Paris, 1962.

The only creed that encounters a dogmatic problem is the Bahai religion. Religiously, Bahais are considered *koffar* (unbelievers) in that they claim a book and prophet chronologically posterior to the Koran and Mohammad, regard the Islamic canonical law as abrogated and replaced by that of their own faith, and seek to convert Muslims to their beliefs.

According to open sources, more recently, it has become customary to condemn Bahais precisely because it is “not a religion” but a political movement working in conjunction with royalist, Zionist, American, British, or other agencies for the subversion of Islam and the Iranian nation.

Conclusion

Geopolitics mainly focuses on how a nation’s geography shapes its politics. However, when examining Iran’s modern history and its prospective paths, it’s crucial not to disregard the significance of anthropology and ethnology in the country.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, akin to other states inheriting legacies from great empires, faces the challenge of harmonising the needs of extremely diverse peoples and cultures, while still upholding the shared Iranian identity.

Many ethnic minority groups have ancient histories and unique cultural heritage. Consequently, their presence helps preserve and promote historical sites, rituals, folklore, and traditions that contribute to Iran’s overall historical narrative.

These ethnic minorities actively preserve their native languages, which hold a crucial place in their identities. Language serves as a vital tool for transmitting cultural heritage, literature, folklore, and historical knowledge.

However, it’s essential to note that all Iranian ethnic minorities also speak Farsi alongside their ethnic languages and have been firmly established in Iranian society and geography for centuries.

Indeed, while Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, and other minorities maintain their distinct identities, they also identify themselves as Iranian. Many of these groups or tribes have historically defended the empire and, in more recent times, contributed to the defence of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war and took part in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This underscores their significant contributions to Iranian history.

Apart from the laws safeguarding Iranian ethnic and religious minorities within the nation and ensuring their representation in the Parliament, it’s evident that many individuals of

descent from these ethnic groups have occupied significant positions in the government or positions of authority, although they might not officially represent their specific ethnic community.

These indigenous populations have produced Iranian/Persian poets, athletes, singers, academics, writers, politicians, and more. Institutions that take pride in celebrating Persian cultural heritage and the creative output in the Farsi language recognise their contributions.

Ultimately, embracing ethnic diversity promotes social cohesion and tolerance within Iran. It fosters an environment where different ethnic groups interact, share experiences, and learn from each other, contributing to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Analisi delle relazioni bilaterali tra Afghanistan e Turkmenistan

Carlo Parissi*

Abstract in English

Because of the 744-kilometer-long common border and Ashgabat's neutrality, since its independence, Turkmenistan has faced a situation which it urged to adopt a pragmatic policy to avoid possible consequences of Afghanistan's decade-long instability. Such a choice resulted in cooperation with every government in the 'Graveyard of Empires', regardless of the ideology, aimed to reach some specific goals, first and foremost, diversification in energy export routes. This paper wants to investigate the history of Afghan-Turkmen bilateral relations, economic ties, joint efforts in the energy field as well as explain possible threat fort Ashgabat coming from the volatile Afghan territory.

Keywords: Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, TAPI, bilateral relations, Taliban

Abstract in Italiano

Il Turkmenistan, condividendo un confine lungo 744 chilometri e non essendo membro di nessuna alleanza militare, fin dalla sua indipendenza si è trovato nella situazione di dover adottare una politica pragmatica per evitare possibili conseguenze dell'instabilità pluridecennale che caratterizza l'Afghanistan. Tale scelta si è tradotta nella cooperazione con ogni esecutivo del *Cimitero degli Imperi*, a prescindere dall'ideologia degli inquilini dell'Arg, volta anche a raggiungere determinati obiettivi strategici della dirigenza turkmena, non ultima la diversificazione delle rotte di esportazione degli idrocarburi. Nel presente saggio, verranno illustrati la storia delle relazioni bilaterali, i rapporti economici tra i due Paesi, gli sforzi congiunti in campo energetico e alcune problematiche derivanti dalla situazione afghana.

Parole chiave: Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, TAPI, relazioni bilaterali, talebani.

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Introduzione

La fine della Guerra Fredda e il successivo collasso dell'URSS hanno cambiato radicalmente la geografia politica dello spazio eurasiatico. In tale scenario, mentre alcuni Stati ripristinavano la propria indipendenza (come l'Estonia, la Lituania o la Lettonia), Kazakistan, Kirghizistan, Tagikistan, Turkmenistan e Uzbekistan si configuravano come i "nuovi arrivati" della comunità internazionale. Le classi dirigenti di queste cinque repubbliche hanno dovuto confrontarsi con problematiche di rilevante importanza, sia a livello interno che estero. Tra queste, certamente l'Afghanistan desta enormi preoccupazioni, a causa della sua instabilità pluridecennale e della presenza di gruppi armati di matrice jihadista. A differenza di Tagikistan

e Uzbekistan, Ašgabat ha prediletto una linea politica più amichevole con il suo turbolento vicino sud-orientale, elemento che è stato preso in esame in questa ricerca.

Storia delle relazioni bilaterali

L'Afghanistan è stato il secondo paese confinante, dopo la Repubblica Islamica dell'Iran, ad aver instaurato relazioni diplomatiche ufficiali con il neonato Turkmenistan, a seguito della firma di un protocollo il 21 febbraio 1992,¹ durante una visita di Abdul Rahim Hatif, allora vicepresidente di Mohammad Najibullah. L'anno seguente sono stati aperti due consolati, uno a Mazar-e Sharif, l'altro ad Herat.²

I rapporti diplomatici sono stati caratterizzati fin dall'inizio dalla volontà da parte di Ašgabat di mantenere una politica di buon vicinato con il *Cimitero degli Imperi*, indipendentemente dal governo in carica o dal sistema politico. La ragione di tale orientamento può essere rintracciata in una tendenza simile a quella delle relazioni tra il Paese post-sovietico e Teheran: la mancanza di alternative.³ Negli anni '90, da una parte, il presidente Saparmyrat Nyýazow aveva promosso una politica estera totalmente svincolata da ogni iniziativa d'integrazione;⁴ dall'altra, la nuova classe dirigente capeggiata da Burhanuddin Rabbani era in cerca di attori nell'arena internazionale disponibili ad aiutare il neonato Stato Islamico dell'Afghanistan⁵ nella lotta contro i talebani e gli altri schieramenti avversari. Tuttavia, nel 1995, il Turkmenistan proclamò la propria neutralità permanente (*Baky Bitaraplyk*), riconosciuta successivamente con una risoluzione dell'Assemblea Generale delle Nazioni Unite il 12 dicembre del medesimo anno.⁶ Ciò permise al presidente turkmeno di organizzare nel proprio Paese incontri tra i rappresentanti di Rabbani e dei guerriglieri fondamentalisti,⁷ come aveva precedentemente fatto con i belligeranti della guerra civile in Tagikistan.⁸ La conquista di Kabul da parte del movimento del Mullah Omar, avvenuta il 27 settembre del 1996, fu accolta con

¹ Ministero degli Affari Esteri del Turkmenistan, «States With Which Turkmenistan Established Diplomatic Relations», 25 gennaio 2017. <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/en/articles/55?breadcrumbs=no>

² Horák S., Šír J., «Turkmenistan's Afghan Border Conundrum», a cura di Helena Rytövuori-Apunen, Opladen, Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2016, p. 112.

³ Mesamed V., «Irano-turkmenskie otnošenija v epohu peremen», *Central'naja Azija i Kavkaz. Žurnal social'no-političeskijh issledovanij*, vol. 4, pub. 52, 2007, p. 141.

⁴ Giannotti, A., «Fra Europa ed Asia. La politica russa nello spazio post-sovietico», Torino, Giappichelli Editore, 2016, p. 111.

⁵ Fondato nel 1992 in seguito alla caduta della Repubblica Afghana (1987-1992; creata nel 1978) e scomparso di fatto nel 1996, con la conquista talebana di Kabul.

⁶ Organizzazione delle Nazioni Unite, «Risoluzione dell'Assemblea delle Nazioni Unite A/RES/50/80», 12 dicembre 1995. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N96/761/23/PDF/N9676123.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁷ Džamieva, G., «Vnešnjanja Politika Turkmenistana v konce XX – načale XXI vekov», *Litres*, 2021, pp. 59-60

⁸ Mesamed, V., «Irano-turkmenskie otnošenija v epohu peremen», op. cit., p. 144.

molta preoccupazione in Asia Centrale. Una settimana dopo, il 4 ottobre, ad Almaty, l'allora primo ministro russo Černomyrdin e i presidenti delle repubbliche centroasiatiche si riunirono per discutere degli ultimi avvenimenti accaduti in Afghanistan.⁹ Il capo di Stato turkmeno fu l'unico a disertare il vertice, perché non voleva inimicarsi i nuovi governanti afgani, evitando possibili infiltrazioni jihadiste nel proprio Paese, né incrinare i rapporti col Pakistan;¹⁰ *in secundis*, i talebani erano considerati un elemento stabilizzante che, secondo *Türkmenbaşy*, avrebbe permesso di superare le varie fratture etniche in seno alla società afgana. Oltre a ciò, meritevole di menzione è il progetto del gasdotto trans-afghano, più volte rifiutato dalla dirigenza politica precedente e ben accolto invece da quella nuova, come dimostrato anche dalla formazione di una commissione trilaterale composta da rappresentanti di Kabul, Ašgabat e Islamabad nel 1998.¹¹ Eppure, ciò non si tradusse in un riconoscimento formale nei confronti della teocrazia deobandi. Nello stesso periodo, infatti, il Turkmenistan era parte del *Gruppo di contatto 6+2*, una coalizione informale fondata nel 1997 e comprendente anche l'Iran, la Repubblica Popolare Cinese, il Pakistan, l'Uzbekistan, il Tagikistan, la Russia e gli Stati Uniti d'America. Il 19 luglio 1999, nella capitale uzbeka, gli otto viceministri degli esteri e Lakhdar Brahimi, l'Inviato speciale del Segretario Generale dell'ONU per l'Afghanistan, adottarono la *Dichiarazione di Tashkent sui principi fondamentali per una risoluzione pacifica del conflitto in Afghanistan*, in base alla quale le parti si impegnavano a non fornire supporto militare ai belligeranti, invitando questi ultimi a sedersi al tavolo dei negoziati.¹² Nei mesi seguenti, ad Ašgabat si tennero in tre occasioni colloqui di pace tra gli inviati talebani e quelli dell'Alleanza del Nord, risoltisi tutti in un nulla di fatto.¹³

Gli attentati dell'11 settembre 2001 e la conseguente reazione della coalizione a guida statunitense aprirono scenari imprevedibili per la dirigenza turkmena, specialmente per i suoi progetti in Afghanistan. Il 24 settembre, Nyýazow, in seguito a una conversazione telefonica col Segretario di Stato Colin Powell, dichiarò che, in caso di un'eventuale ritorsione militare,

⁹ Afghanistan.ru, «Zahvat dvizeniem Taliban Kabula», 1° maggio 2003. <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/1323.html>

¹⁰ Giordana E., «L'Afghanistan Visto Dall'asia Centrale», *Il Politico*, vol. 81, pub. 3, p. 143. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45426842>.

¹¹ Mesamed, V., «Irano-turkmenskije otnošenija v epohu peremen», op. cit., p. 145.

¹² Organizzazione delle Nazioni Unite, «Dichiarazione di Tashkent sui principi fondamentali per una risoluzione pacifica del conflitto in Afghanistan», 19 luglio 1999. https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/AF_990719_TashkentDeclaration%28en%29.pdf.

¹³ Reliefweb, «Taliban, Northern Alliance hold talks in Turkmenistan», 12 dicembre 2000. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/taliban-northern-alliance-hold-talks-turkmenistan>.

le forze armate di Paesi terzi non sarebbero entrate nella repubblica post-sovietica, autorizzando di fatto solamente il transito di aiuti umanitari.¹⁴ Nonostante il rovesciamento dell'Emirato Islamico, nei primi mesi del 2002 si verificarono due eventi rilevanti: l'apertura dell'ambasciata turkmena a Kabul e la visita ad Aşgabat di Hamid Karzai, presidente dell'amministrazione di transizione afghana, avvenuta il 7 marzo.¹⁵ Durante i colloqui, le due parti discussero di vari aspetti della cooperazione bilaterale, vertendo soprattutto sulla sfera economica, e firmarono accordi intergovernativi sulla fornitura di energia elettrica nelle province settentrionali e nordoccidentali, nonché sull'assistenza sanitaria nelle aree di confine.

Il 21 dicembre 2006, *Türkmenbaşy* morì improvvisamente e, tre giorni dopo, ai funerali di Stato prese parte anche Karzai¹⁶. Questi, il 4 aprile del 2008, a latere del vertice dell'Alleanza Atlantica tenutosi a Bucarest, incontrò il suo nuovo omologo, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, con cui trattò la questione della realizzazione del gasdotto TAPI (Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India) e della cooperazione in ambito energetico e logistico.¹⁷ Alla fine del medesimo mese, i due capi di Stato siglarono diversi memorandum d'intesa nelle sfere dei trasporti e scientifico-culturale¹⁸

Il 21 gennaio 2015, quattro mesi dopo la sua elezione, Ashraf Ghani si recò ad Aşgabat. Nella capitale turkmena i due presidenti firmarono diversi documenti relativi sia all'implementazione delle forniture energetiche che allo sviluppo della collaborazione reciproca tra i dicasteri per gli affari esteri.¹⁹ Tale evento fu ben accolto a Kabul, poiché l'approfondimento dei rapporti con il vicino nord-occidentale era fondamentale per ridurre la propria dipendenza dal Pakistan, come sottolineato dai dirigenti della Camera di Commercio e delle Industrie Afghana.²⁰ Guardando invece agli anni recenti, una pietra miliare nei rapporti tra i due Paesi è rappresentata dalla firma di un partenariato strategico, avvenuta il 21 febbraio del 2019. I

¹⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, «Turkmenistan Will Not Allow U.S. Troops On Its Territory», 25 settembre 2001. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1347103.html>.

¹⁵ Atayew A., «Hamid Karzaj posetil Aşhabad», Deutsche Welle, 7 marzo 2002.

¹⁶ IRNA, «First VP leaves Turkmenistan», 24 dicembre 2004. <https://web.archive.org/web/20070112154346/http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/menu-236/0612243756180712.html>.

¹⁷ Afghanistan.ru, «Karzaj i Berdymuhamedov obsudili proekt transafganskogo gazoprovoda», 4 aprile 2008. <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/11720.html>.

¹⁸ ASIA-Plus, «Prezident Turkmenistana posetil s gosudarstvennym vizitom Afghanistan», 29 aprile 2008. <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/20080429/prezident-turkmenistana-posetil-s-gosudarstvennym-vizitom-afganistan>.

¹⁹ Nurmuradov A., «Turkmenija i Afganistan dogovorilis' o sotrudnichestve», Ria Novosti, 21 gennaio 2015. <https://ria.ru/20150121/1043617049.html#ixzz3PU4f7Rym>.

²⁰ TOLONews, «Ghani Looks to Strengthen Trade Ties With Turkmenistan», 22 gennaio 2015. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-looks-strengthen-trade-ties-turkmenistan>.

documenti intergovernativi riguardavano i settori doganale, del traffico aereo e di quello degli idrocarburi, oltre a due memorandum d'intesa sull'aumento delle forniture elettriche alla provincia di Herat e sulla cooperazione tra gli archivi nazionali dell'Afghanistan e l'Istituto Nazionale "Magtymguly" di lingua, letteratura e manoscritti dell'Accademia delle scienze del Turkmenistan.²¹

Il 1° maggio 2021, in seguito all'annuncio del ritiro della NATO dal Paese, i talebani iniziarono una potente offensiva contro le posizioni governative, cambiando di conseguenza i rapporti di forza nel paese, culminata nella cattura dei rimanenti distretti e nella conseguente vittoria, raggiunta ad agosto dello stesso anno. Pur avendo incrementato la presenza militare lungo il confine per evitare possibili infiltrazioni nel proprio territorio, il Turkmenistan, già a gennaio, aveva iniziato a organizzare incontri non ufficiali coi rappresentanti dei guerriglieri per affrontare varie questioni.²² Tale politica di dialogo è proseguita in seguito alla restaurazione dell'Emirato Islamico, tant'è che il personale diplomatico a Kabul non è stato evacuato. Inoltre, la collaborazione non è venuta meno. Il 14 e 15 gennaio 2022, una delegazione afghana guidata dal Ministro degli esteri Amir Khan Mottaqi si è recata nella capitale turkmena, dove si è tenuta una discussione con i membri del governo, capitanati da Raşit Meredov, primo vicepresidente e capo della diplomazia dello Stato centrasiano. Durante i colloqui, le due parti hanno sottolineato l'importanza dei progetti infrastrutturali congiunti nonché la necessità di aumentare gli sforzi comuni per cercare di raggiungere la stabilità regionale. Da parte sua, Meredov ha affermato che il Turkmenistan è interessato alla stabilità politica ed economica del vicino sudorientale, oltre al benessere e all'unità della sua popolazione. A tal proposito, ha aggiunto che Aşgabat avrebbe continuato con l'assistenza umanitaria nel Paese.²³

Due mesi dopo, il 17 marzo, l'ex repubblica sovietica ha accettato Mohammad Fazel Saber come nuovo ambasciatore afghano, divenendo così il primo Stato nell'area ad ospitare un diplomatico nominato dal nuovo esecutivo dei talebani.²⁴

²¹ Kaspijskij Vestnik, «O čem dogovorilis' prezidenty Turkmenistana i Afganistana», 1° marzo 2019. <http://casp-geo.ru/o-chyom-dogovorilis-prezidenty-turkmenistana-i-afganistana/>.

²² Indeo F., «Turkmenistan's ambivalent foreign policy towards Afghanistan», Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 29 luglio 2021. <https://cabar.asia/en/turkmenistan-s-ambivalent-foreign-policy-towards-afghanistan-taliban-advance-and-rising-instability-along-the-shared-border>.

²³ SpecialEurasia, «Taliban and Turkmenistan discussed the TAPI pipeline project», 17 gennaio 2022. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/01/17/taliban-turkmenistan-tapi/>.

²⁴ Majumdar A., «Turkmenistan Becomes 1st Central Asian Nation To Accept Taliban-appointed Afghan Envoy», Republicworld.com, 22 marzo 2022. <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/turkmenistan-becomes-1st-central-asian-nation-to-accept-taliban-appointed-afghan-envoy-articleshow.html>.

I rapporti economici tra Afghanistan e Turkmenistan

Commercio afgano-turkmeno (in milioni di dollari statunitensi)²⁵

Anno	Esportazioni turkmene	Esportazioni afgane	Interscambio totale
1999	75,1	2,05	77,15
2000	64,5	1,04	65,54
2008	74,6	10,0	84,60
2015	543	0,245	543,2
2016	279	0,518	279,5
2017	332	1,03	333,0
2018	311	0,220	311,2
2019	568	1,11	569,1

Stando agli ultimi dati disponibili, nel 2019 l'interscambio ha raggiunto il valore più alto, con le entrate turkmene che hanno superato il record registrato nel 2015. Il surplus commerciale è sempre stato positivo per il Paese caspico. Le esportazioni afgane comprendevano in primo luogo prodotti agroalimentari (zucchero grezzo, cipolle e manioca), che costituivano il 96% delle vendite. Al contrario, le importazioni di Kabul sono più variegata e, tra queste, spiccano torba e idrocarburi (GPL, petrolio grezzo e raffinato).²⁶ Nell'ultimo anno preso in esame, il Turkmenistan rappresentava il quinto Paese d'origine dell'import afgano, dopo Iran, Cina, Pakistan e Stati Uniti d'America²⁷.

La cooperazione in ambito energetico

Il settore dell'energia il perno della cooperazione bilaterale, nonché il più prolifico. Infatti, Aşgabat è uno dei maggiori fornitori di energia elettrica dell'Afghanistan, la cui produzione è insufficiente per soddisfare la domanda interna.²⁸ Nonostante ciò, il progetto più rilevante è certamente rappresentato dal TAPI, un gasdotto che, stando ai piani, dovrebbe estendersi dal giacimento di Galkynyş, collocato nel *welaját* di Mary, a Fazilka, in Punjab. Ideato in un primo momento per trasportare "l'oro azzurro" nella macroarea dell'AfPak, Nuova Delhi è

²⁵ The Observatory of Economic Complexity, «Turkmenistan (TKM) and Afghanistan (AFG) Trade». <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/afg/partner/tkm>.

²⁶ Ibidem

²⁷ World Integrated Trade Solution, «Afghanistan Trade». <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/AFG/textview>.

²⁸ Ahady S., Dev N., Mandal A., «An overview of the opportunities and challenges in sustaining the energy industry in Afghanistan», E3S Web of Conferences, vol. 173, pub. 03006, giugno 2020, p.2. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202017303006>.

stata più tardi inclusa nel programma. La necessità di creare una nuova rotta energetica deriva parzialmente dalla crescente domanda degli Stati dell'Asia meridionale e dalla volontà del Turkmenistan di diversificare la propria clientela.²⁹ Nel primo ventennio d'indipendenza, infatti, Aşgabat dipendeva fortemente da Mosca per l'esportazione delle sue risorse, una situazione che si traduceva sia nell'uso delle infrastrutture presenti sul territorio russo sia nella cessione a prezzo molto basso del proprio gas naturale, che veniva in seguito venduto sul mercato a un costo maggiore. Oltre a ciò, un'ipotetica condotta transcaspica non ha mai visto la luce, per via dell'ostruzionismo iraniano e russo. Pertanto, il TAPI è stato a lungo considerato una soluzione adatta a tale problematica. Tale progetto, fortemente sostenuto da Washington in opposizione alla realizzazione del gasdotto Iran – Pakistan – India (IPI), è stato concepito nel 1995 e il suo costo si aggirerebbe attorno ai dieci miliardi di dollari, coperti principalmente dalla Banca Asiatica di Sviluppo (BAS/ADB).³⁰

Il 12 dicembre 2010 si tenne un vertice nella capitale turkmena sulla realizzazione dell'opera a cui parteciparono, oltre all'*Arkadag*, Hamid Karzai, il presidente pakistano Asif Ali Zardari e Murli Deora, il ministro del petrolio e del gas naturale indiano. Successivamente, le parti firmarono un accordo quadro e uno intergovernativo per l'implementazione del piano.³¹ Nonostante i vari incontri negli anni a seguire, solo il 15 dicembre 2015 è iniziata la costruzione del tratto nello Stato post-sovietico (lungo circa 215 chilometri). La ragione principale dello scarso progresso nei lavori può essere ricondotta alle continue tensioni tra gli Stati più orientali e alla persistente instabilità in Afghanistan. Qui, nel medesimo periodo, stando a fonti filogovernative, più di tremila guerriglieri appartenenti a circa 264 gruppi armati in cinque province (Herat, Farah, Nimroz, Helmand e Kandahar) erano stati individuati come una minaccia per le operazioni,³² iniziate effettivamente poco più di due anni dopo.³³ Nel caso in cui il TAPI dovesse entrare in funzione, su trentatré miliardi di metri cubi annui, cinque spetterebbero a Kabul, mentre i rimanenti sarebbero equamente ripartiti tra Pakistan e India.³⁴ Nonostante l'ostilità durante il conflitto nei primi vent'anni di questo secolo, una volta

²⁹ Valigi M., «Il Caspio. Sicurezza, conflitti e risorse energetiche», Bari, Editori Laterza, 2014, p. 162.

³⁰ Rajpoot A. R., Naeem S., «Geopolitics of Energy Pipelines: Case Study of TAPI and IP gas Pipelines», *International Journal on Integrated Education*, Volume 3, Issue 8, August 2020, p. 18. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e3dd/83c565dda99018ea739fbbea2e8812202e03.pdf>.

³¹ Regnum, «V Aşhabade podpisany soglašenija o realizacii proekta gazoprovoda TAPI», 12 dicembre 2010. <https://regnum.ru/news/1355741>.

³² TOLONews, «264 Armed Groups Pose Threat To TAPI In Five Provinces», 21 dicembre 2015. <https://tolonews.com/business/264-armed-groups-pose-threat-tapi-five-provinces>.

³³ Tyab I., «Afghanistan: Work on Asia gas pipeline begins», Al-Jazeera, 24 febbraio 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/videos/2018/2/24/afghanistan-work-on-asia-gas-pipeline-begins>.

³⁴ Tanchum M., «A Fillip for the TAPI Pipeline», *The Diplomat*, 3 dicembre 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/a-fillip-for-the-tapi-pipeline/>.

ripreso il potere, i talebani hanno espresso immediatamente il proprio interesse nella prosecuzione e nella conclusione dell'infrastruttura. In attesa della ripresa dei lavori, il 29 aprile 2023 il Turkmenistan ha iniziato a fornire GPL a Islamabad attraverso l'emirato. Stando a una dichiarazione rilasciata dalla Camera di Commercio e delle Industrie Afghana, il combustibile sarebbe stato spedito da Turghundi a Spin Boldak, una località attigua alla Linea Durand.³⁵ La consegna sarebbe stata effettuata dalla compagnia internazionale pakistana "Yasir Basir".³⁶ Considerando che la *Terra dei Puri* (Pakistan) ha sofferto una carenza di carburante nell'inverno precedente, in futuro le spedizioni potrebbero registrare un incremento.

Un altro progetto congiunto e finanziato dalla BAS è la linea elettrica TAP (Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan). Il 23 febbraio 2018, a Serhetabat, il ministro dell'energia turkmeno Çarymyrat Purçekow, quello degli esteri afghano Salahuddin Rabbani e quello pakistano del petrolio Jam Kamal Khan hanno firmato un accordo quadro per la creazione di tale rete transnazionale. Questa dovrebbe estendersi per 500 km e trasportare ogni anno circa 4.000 MW nell'AfPak.³⁷ Il primo segmento (che si estende da Mary ad Herat) è stato completato a maggio del 2021, come dichiarato dalla turca TAPP-500 Power Transmission Line FZE, una sussidiaria della Çalik Holding A.Ş, un'azienda del settore a cui era stata affidata la costruzione un anno prima³⁸.

Tensioni lungo il confine, problemi di sicurezza e la situazione dei turkmeni afghani: l'attitudine di Aşgabat

Nonostante i rapporti proficui tra le due parti le tensioni lungo la frontiera comune non sono mancate. A febbraio e maggio del 2014 le forze di sicurezza turkmene hanno subito perdite in seguito a scontri armati in due occasioni diverse. Nel primo caso, si sarebbe trattato di una ritorsione successiva all'uccisione di un combattente e all'arresto di altri due che avevano tentato di attraversare illegalmente il confine; nella seconda circostanza, ignoti hanno aperto il fuoco contro soldati dello Stato caspico, uccidendone tre. Il numero totale delle

³⁵ SpecialEurasia, «Turkmenistan Began Supplying Natural Gas To Pakistan Through Afghanistan», 2 maggio 2023. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/05/02/natural-gas-turkmenistan-afpak/>.

³⁶ Turkmengaz, «Liquefied gas from Turkmenistan began to be transported to Pakistan through the territory of Afghanistan», 1° Maggio 2023. <https://turkmengaz.gov.tm/en/news/77>.

³⁷ Banca Asiatica di Sviluppo, «Power Interconnection Project to Strengthen Power Trade Between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan», 28 febbraio 2018. <https://www.adb.org/news/power-interconnection-project-strengthen-power-trade-between-afghanistan-turkmenistan-pakistan>.

³⁸ Reglobal, «Afghanistan's Power Sector Update: Outlook remains uncertain», 22 maggio 2022. <https://reglobal.co/afghanistans-power-sector-update-outlook-remains-uncertain/>.

vittime tra i membri delle forze armate sarebbe ammontato a sei.³⁹ Più recentemente, il 3 gennaio 2022, si è verificato uno scambio a fuoco tra le guardie di frontiera e i talebani nel distretto di Khamyab. Stando al racconto dei secondi, i primi avrebbero ucciso un locale della stessa etnia e ne avrebbero malmenato un altro. Quando gli esponenti afghani sono giunti sulla scena per investigare, sarebbe cominciata la sparatoria. Le autorità di Ašgabat, invece, non hanno rilasciato alcuna dichiarazione sull'incidente.⁴⁰

Riguardo ai problemi di sicurezza, la maggior preoccupazione è rappresentata dagli estremisti islamici, primo tra tutti lo Stato Islamico del Khorasan (ISIS-K). Se il nuovo esecutivo afghano cerca di stabilizzare i territori sotto il proprio controllo anche per ottenere il riconoscimento dal resto della comunità internazionale, i vari gruppi jihadisti cercano di indebolire i nuovi governanti e di estendere i propri tentacoli negli stati confinanti. Un esempio eminente è stato il lancio di razzi verso una base militare uzbeca a Termez ad aprile 2022, rivendicato dai miliziani del Califfato.⁴¹ In seguito a questo attacco, nella seconda metà del medesimo anno, i canali legati a questa organizzazione terroristica avrebbero aumentato la diffusione di contenuti propagandistici negli Stati dell'Asia Centrale. Il ramo afghano dello Stato Islamico avrebbe cercato di delegittimare il governo di Serdar Berdimuhamedov e tentato di fomentare divisioni interetniche tra le varie di tribù turkмене a detrimento dei Teke, clan a cui appartengono l'attuale presidente, suo padre e diversi esponenti al potere. Oltre a ciò, la presenza sul territorio di questi combattenti potrebbe mettere a repentaglio la costruzione del TAPI.

Infine, c'è la questione dei turkmeni afghani, la cui popolazione ammonterebbe a un milione di individui, concentrata soprattutto lungo la frontiera. Diversamente da Tashkent e Dušanbe, la dirigenza di Ašgabat non ha mai sostenuto i signori della guerra appartenenti al proprio gruppo etnico.

³⁹ Pannier B., Tahir M., «More Turkmen Troops Killed Along Afghan Border», *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 27 maggio 2014. <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-turkmen-troops-killed-afghan-border/25400833.html>.

⁴⁰ SpecialEurasia, «Taliban involved in clashes at the Afghanistan-Turkmenistan border», 4 gennaio 2022. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/01/04/clashes-afghanistan-turkmenistan/>.

⁴¹ Gul A., «Islamic State Khorasan Claims Rocket Attack on Uzbekistan», *VOA News*, 18 aprile 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-khorasan-claims-rocket-attack-on-uzbekistan-/6534866.html>.

Ad esempio, nel 2014, quando i talebani attaccarono i territori nordoccidentali, i locali si organizzarono per difendersi. Nella provincia di Jowzjan fu creata una milizia forte di un'ottantina di uomini.⁴² Tre anni dopo, nella circoscrizione di Balkh, se n'è formata un'altra composta da trecento persone. Uno dei membri dichiarò che, non ricevendo alcun aiuto dai governi turkmeno, afghano o uzbeko, erano stati costretti a vendere i propri appezzamenti e il bestiame per acquistare le armi e difendere le aree di confine in cui vivevano.⁴³

Se il Turkmenistan si è astenuto dal sostegno militare, certamente non si può dire lo stesso per l'assistenza umanitaria che si protrae almeno dal 2001 ad oggi.⁴⁴ A maggio del 2023, 125 tonnellate di aiuti (tra medicine, generi alimentari e prodotti tessili) sono state consegnate in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Inoltre, le autorità turkmene hanno ristrutturato una clinica ostetrica da loro costruita nel 2016 a Turghundi,⁴⁶ dove, nella seconda metà di quel mese, tre medici del Paese caspico hanno fornito assistenza medica a 473 donne e 276 bambini⁴⁷. Più di recente, a seguito del terribile terremoto nella provincia di Herat a ottobre, è stato spedito un altro lotto di beni di prima necessità nelle aree colpite.⁴⁸

Conclusioni

Nonostante le problematiche analizzate poc'anzi, Ašgabat e Kabul mantengono relazioni tiepide. Se i talebani riusciranno a stabilizzare la situazione interna a un livello "accettabile", i rapporti diplomatici potrebbero subire un'accelerazione portando, per esempio, alla conclusione della costruzione del TAPI o di altri progetti congiunti che, momentaneamente, rimangono bloccati. Se l'Afghanistan è strategico per la diversificazione delle rotte di esportazione

⁴² Bugayev, T., Pannier, B., «More Warnings South Of The Afghan-Turkmen Border», *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14 agosto 2014. <https://www.rferl.org/a/quishloq-ovozi-afghanistan-turkmen-turmoil/26530471.html>.

⁴³ Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, «Ethnic Turkmen Battle Migrants In Northern Afghanistan», YouTube, 19 maggio 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUWT4UNU3HY>.

⁴⁴ RBK, «Afganistan: novaja gumpomošč vopreki opasenjam», 22 ottobre 2001. <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/22/10/2001/5703be599a7947afa08cc8db>.

⁴⁵ Turkmenportal, «Turkmenistan sends about 125 tons of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan», 11 maggio 2023. <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/61745/turkmenistan-sends-about-125-tons-of-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan>.

⁴⁶ Orient, «Turkmenistan otremoniroval postroennyj im v Afganistane roddom i peredal», 5 maggio 2023. <https://orient.tm/ru/post/52491/turkmenistan-otremontiroval-postroennyj-im-v-afganistane-roddom-i-peredal-gumpomoshch>.

⁴⁷ Turkmenportal, «Turkmen doctors assisted 473 women during humanitarian mission in Afghanistan», 3 giugno 2023. <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/62839/turkmen-doctors-assisted-473-women-during-humanitarian-mission-in-afghanistan#:~:text=Turkmen%20doctors%2C%20who%20arrived%20on,473%20women%20and%20276%20children>.

⁴⁸ Hronika Turkmenistana, «Turkmenistan otpravil gumpomošč' postradavšemu ot zemletrjasenija Afganistanu», 11 ottobre 2023. <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/10/af-earthquake-humanitarian-aid/>.

di gas e petrolio, il Turkmenistan può rivelarsi prezioso per il *Cimitero degli Imperi* nel trovare o sfruttare vie commerciali alternative (prima fra tutte il *Corridoio dei Lapislazzuli*), diminuendo di conseguenza la propria dipendenza dal Pakistan. Se tale collaborazione divenisse ulteriormente proficua per entrambe le parti, potrebbe indurre altri Stati più diffidenti a emulare le stesse dinamiche nei confronti di Kabul e, di conseguenza, si potrebbe assistere a una normalizzazione e stabilizzazione dell'area e maggiore cooperazione regionale.

Geopolitics of the North Caucasus: An Analysis of Local Ethnic Minorities and Indigenous Peoples

Giuliano Bifulchi*

Abstract in English

This paper critically examines the intricate dynamics between the Kremlin's internal stabilisation strategy and the diverse ethnic landscape of the North Caucasus, a region of paramount geopolitical significance in the Russian Federation. Against the backdrop of heightened Western pressure following the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, the Kremlin faces the imperative to uphold national internal stability and cohesion. Within this context, the paper delves into the multifaceted approach undertaken by the Russian government in managing the diverse ethnic groups and indigenous populations residing in the North Caucasus. Indeed, the region, situated at the southern periphery of Russia and acting as a vital link between Europe and Asia, emerges as a focal point in Moscow's domestic and foreign policy calculus. This study scrutinises the strategic importance of the region and the Kremlin's concerted efforts to stabilise it, recognising the region's pivotal role in shaping both regional and international dynamics. Furthermore, the study aims to elucidate the extent to which cooperation with local communities aligns with the Kremlin's overarching goals and contributes to the realisation of its strategic objectives.

Keywords: North Caucasus, ethnic minorities, indigenous people, Russia, geopolitics.

Abstract in Italiano

Questo paper si pone come obiettivo quello di esaminare criticamente le intricate dinamiche tra la strategia di stabilizzazione interna del Cremlino e il variegato panorama etnico del Caucaso settentrionale, una regione di fondamentale importanza geopolitica nella Federazione Russa. Sullo sfondo dell'accresciuta pressione occidentale in seguito all'inizio del conflitto in Ucraina, il Cremlino si trova di fronte all'imperativo di sostenere la stabilità interna e la coesione nazionale. In questo contesto, tale ricerca approfondisce l'approccio multiforme intrapreso dal governo russo nella gestione dei diversi gruppi etnici e delle popolazioni indigene residenti nel Caucaso del Nord. In effetti, la regione, situata nella periferia meridionale della Russia e che funge da collegamento vitale tra Europa e Asia, emerge come un punto focale nei calcoli di politica interna ed estera di Mosca. Questo studio esamina l'importanza strategica della regione e gli sforzi concertati del Cremlino per stabilizzarla, riconoscendo il ruolo centrale della regione nel plasmare le dinamiche sia regionali che internazionali. Inoltre, tale paper mira a chiarire in che misura la cooperazione con le comunità locali è in linea con gli obiettivi generali del Cremlino e contribuisce alla realizzazione dei suoi obiettivi strategici.

Parole chiave: Caucaso del Nord, minoranze etniche, popolazioni indigene, Russia, geopolitica.

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Introduction

With over 160 officially recognised ethnic groups, Russia's population is extremely multi-ethnic. Although the main ethnicity remains that of Russians, academic researchers underlined a decrease in the ethnic Russian population since the collapse of the Soviet Union and a significant increase in the number of ethnic minorities, especially those of the Muslim faith.¹

Recent statistics show ethnic Russians account for just over 77% of the total population, followed by Tatars (3.72%), Ukrainians (1.35%), Bashkirs (1.11%), Chuvash (1.01%), Chechens (1%), Armenians (0.83%) and other ethnic groups.² In addition, the Russian Government officially recognises 40 indigenous peoples who live inside the territory of the Russian Federation. The indigenous people are minority groups that exhibit significant diversity, despite some of them sharing common characteristics like the practice of animism and lifestyles centred around hunting, gathering, fishing, and herding. For instance, indigenous peoples with the fewest members include the Enet (350 people) and the Orok (450 people), while the largest are the Nenets and the Evenki, both of which have nearly 30,000 members.

Although the Russian legislation does not recognise indigenous peoples as such, Article 67 of the Russian Constitution guarantees the rights of "small-scale indigenous peoples".³ The 1999 Federal Law "On the Guarantee of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples with a Low Number of Inhabitants of the Russian Federation" specifies that such peoples are groups of less than 50,000 members who preserve some of their traditional ways of life.⁴

¹ Foxall, *Ethnic Relations in Post-Soviet Russia: Russians and Non-Russians in the North Caucasus*, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, <https://www.routledge.com/Ethnic-Relations-in-Post-Soviet-Russia-Russians-and-Non-Russians-in-the/Foxall/p/book/9781138576971>.

² «Nacional'nyj sostav Rossii 2023 (perepis' 2020)», *statdata.ru*, 2023, <https://www.statdata.ru/nacionalnyj-sostav-rossii>.

³ Stat'ja 67, 'Konstitucija Rossijskoj Federacii' (prinjata vsenarodnym golosovaniem 12.12.1993 s izmenenijami, odobrennymi v hode obshherossijskogo golosovanija 01.07.2020), 1993, https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_28399/8c6502533e28841baf74c1068f88b162a5e9b4ea/.

⁴ *Federalny zakon «O garantijah prav korennyh malochislennyh narodov Rossijskoj Federacii»*, vol. N 82-F3, 1999, https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_22928/.

The presence of diverse ethnicities in Russia has resulted in a culturally diverse fusion, where influences intermingle and blend. Metropolises like Moscow and Saint Petersburg are frequently regarded as symbols of multiculturalism, featuring communities that mirror the ethnic diversity of the nation. National holidays are frequently observed in an all-encompassing manner, integrating customs from diverse communities, aiming to foster a sense of national unity while honouring the unique characteristics of each ethnic group and indigenous population.

However, despite this cultural richness, Russia has also faced challenges related to managing diversity. The nation persistently endeavours to uphold equality and reverence for all of its ethnicities, striving to foster integration and comprehension among the diverse groups comprising its multi-ethnic and multi-faith populace. For instance, several Western studies highlighted that the Russian Federation has not been immune to phenomena such as xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia, especially directed towards the North Caucasian ethnic groups.⁵ By contrast, Russian scientific literature and official statements from Moscow draw attention to the divergence in Western views on the North Caucasus and the allegations of xenophobia and Islamophobia within the country. From the Russian standpoint, these studies merely signify an attempt to undermine the Russian national model and propagate internal turmoil.⁶

In this context, this research focuses the attention on the ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus since the strategic importance of this region. Indeed, this area occupies a pivotal position on the Eurasian geopolitical chessboard, embodying a complex amalgamation of roles that define its significance. Functioning as a 'bridge' connecting Europe and Asia, the region serves as a critical junction for cultural, economic, and geopolitical exchanges. Simultaneously, it operates as a 'frontier' delineating the boundaries between the Muslim and Christian worlds, contributing to the intricate interplay of diverse ethnicities

⁵ International Crisis Group, *The North Caucasus_ the Challenge of Integration (II) Islam, the Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency*, Europe Report N. 221, Bruxelles, ottobre 19, 2012, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/russianorth-caucasus/north-caucasus-challenges-integration-ii-islam-insurgency-and-counter-insurgency>; Foxall, *op.cit.*; Iskander Abbasi, «Russian Islamophobia: From Medieval Tsardom to the Post-Soviet Man», *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, vol. 8, settembre 2023, pp. 141–158; Sahar F. Aziz, Sarah Calderone, «Islamophobia in Russia: Ethnicity, Migration, and National Security», SSRN Scholarly Paper, Rochester, NY, aprile 17, 2023, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=4421692>.

⁶ Madomed-emi Shamsuev, «Informazionnaya Bezopasnost' Rossiy na Severnom Kavkaze: Problemy i Mekanizmy Resheniya», *Zentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz*, vol. 15, fasc. 4, 2012, pp. 108–121; Vladimir Kolosov, Alexander Sebentsov, «Severniy Kavkaz v Rossiyskom Geopoliticheskom Diskurse», *Polis. Politicheskie Issledovaniya*, fasc. 2, 2014, pp. 146–163; Giuliano Bifulchi, «The North Caucasus in the Russian political discourse», Dejana M Vukasović, Petar Matic (a cura di), *DISKURS i politika [Elektronski izvor] = Discourse and Politics*, International Thematic Collection Papers 8, Belgrade, Institute for Political Studies, 2019, pp. 337–350.

and religions.⁷ Moscow strategically regards the North Caucasus as a 'buffer zone' in the south, playing a crucial role in extending Russian influence over the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea area, the Black Sea, Central Asia, and the Middle East. This dual nature of the North Caucasus underscores its strategic importance in shaping Russia's domestic stability and its broader geopolitical manoeuvres.⁸

In the early 21st century, academic scholars and international media's focus on the North Caucasus primarily centred around its perceived instability and the looming terrorist threat.⁹ Some scholars defined the region as Kremlin's 'inner abroad', describing the North Caucasus as a foreign entity inside the territory of the Russian Federation. If the post-Soviet space is Russia's *blizhnee zarubezhe* (near abroad),¹⁰ the definition of the North Caucasus as the *inner abroad* underlined the vast difference between Russia and ethnic-Russians with North Caucasian people and local dynamics.¹¹

However, at the present time, the region exhibits a state of relative stability that has facilitated the emergence of greater economic possibilities, thanks to implementing the Strategy 2025 based on substantial financial support from Moscow to local governments and several counter-terrorism operations towards local militancy and terrorist groups.¹² The North Cau-

⁷ Abdurachman G. Avtorchanov, Marie Bennigsen Broxup, Marie B. Broxup (a cura di), *The North Caucasus barrier: the Russian advance towards the Muslim world*, London, Hurst, 1996.

⁸ Giuliano Bifulchi, «Panorama Geopolitico del Mundo Actual: Geopolítica del Cáucaso del Norte en clave rusa», *Didácticas Específicas*, vol. 19, 2018, pp. 112–119; Giuliano Bifulchi, *Geopolítica del Cáucaso ruso. Gli interessi e l'influenza del Cremlino e degli attori stranieri nelle dinamiche locali nord caucasiche*, Roma, Sandro Teti Editore, 2020.

⁹ Valery Dzutsati, «Seven Years After Attack on Nalchik, Trial of Alleged Perpetrators Grinds On», *North Caucasus Weekly*, vol. 13, fasc. 20, ottobre 2012, <https://jamestown.org/program/seven-years-after-attack-on-nalchik-trial-of-alleged-perpetrators-grinds-on/>; Elena Pokalova, *Chechnya's terrorist network: the evolution of terrorism in Russia's North Caucasus*, Praeger security international, Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2015.

¹⁰ Xuashen Zhao, «Rossija i ejo blizhnee zarubezh'e: vyzovy i perspektivy», *Rossija v global'noj politike*, s.d., <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/rossiya-i-blizhnee-zarubezhe/>.

¹¹ Fiona Hill, «"Russia's Tinderbox". Conflict in the North Caucasus And its Implications for The Future of the Russian Federation», Cambridge, Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, 1995, https://ia801508.us.archive.org/2/items/DTIC_ADA301536/DTIC_ADA301536.pdf; Anna Matveeva, «The North Caucasus: The Russian Inner Abroad», in N. Petrov, *Bordeland in Transition*, Moscow, Moscow Carnegie Centre, 2000; Alexey Malashenko, *The North Caucasus: Russia's Internal Abroad?*, Briefing Vol. 13 (3), Moscow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, novembre 2011, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/MalashenkoBriefing_November2011_ENG_web.pdf; International Crisis Group, *The North Caucasus: The Challenge of Integration (I) Ethnicity and Conflict*, Europe Report N. 220, Brussels, Belgium, International Crisis Group, ottobre 19, 2012, <https://d2071andvipowj.cloudfront.net/220-the-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-i-ethnicity-and-conflict.pdf>; Janusz Bugajski, *Conflict zones: North Caucasus and Western Balkans compared*, Washington, D. C., The Jamestown Foundation, 2014.

¹² «Strategija SKFO do 2025 goda», *Northern Caucasus Resort*, 2010, <http://krskfo.ru/44>; Vladimir Kolosov et al., *Local Modernisation Initiatives in the North Caucasus*, Institute of Geography RAS, 2016, <http://www.cascade-caucasus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/D4.2-Local-Modernisation-Initiatives-in-the-Caucasus.pdf>; Alexey Gunya, *Building the Institutional Capacity of Local Communities in the Northern Caucasus: Opportunities to Improve "Good" Communal Governance*, ISSICEU Policy Brief 2016, aprile 23,

casus Federal District has witnessed a noteworthy improvement in its economic performance, marking a departure from the volatility that once defined the region. This positive trend resulted also into a substantial reduction in violent attacks against both civilian and military personnel, underscoring the developing dynamics in the North Caucasus.¹³

This research adopts a comprehensive and multidimensional method to investigate the intricate dynamics between the Kremlin's internal stabilisation strategy and the diverse ethnic landscape of the North Caucasus. The foundation of this study lies in a literature review, encompassing academic works, government publications, and expert analyses, to establish a robust understanding of the geopolitical context of the North Caucasus.

In a unique approach, this paper integrates findings from both open sources and the researcher's direct experience in the North Caucasus. The author draws upon their extensive expertise in geopolitics and a recent field visit to the city of Cherkessk in Karachay-Cherkessia, conducted in July 2023, during the Forum of the Indigenous People of the Russian Federation. This visit provided invaluable first-hand insights into the ground realities of the region, allowing for a nuanced analysis that complements and enriches information gathered from open sources. By amalgamating data from scholarly literature, government documents, and on-the-ground observations, this research aims to present an examination of the role that ethnic minorities and indigenous people have in the region, capturing both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical implications of the Kremlin's stabilisation efforts.

The Forum of the Indigenous People and the role of North Caucasian ethnic minorities

Last July 2023, the city of Cherkessk in the Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia hosted the Forum of the Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation. The Ekzekov Foundation, the International Association for the Promotion of the Development of the Abaza-Abkhaz Ethnic Nation "Alashara", the St. Petersburg Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Kunstkamera), as well as by the local government organised

2016, http://www.issiceu.eu/files/assets/research_and_publications/ISSICEU%20Policy%20Brief%20D1.5.pdf, pp. 1–8.

¹³ Kavkaz Uzel, «V I kvartale 2023 goda v hode vooruzhennogo konflikta na Severnom Kavkaze pogibli 7 chelovek», *Kavkaz Uzel*, aprile 5, 2023, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/387466>; Kavkaz Uzel, «V hode vooruzhennogo konflikta na Severnom Kavkaze vo II kvartale 2023 goda ubito 6 chelovek», *Kavkaz Uzel*, giugno 5, 2023, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/390298>; Kavkaz Uzel, «V III kvartale 2023 goda v hode vooruzhennogo konflikta na Severnom Kavkaze zhertv zafiksirovano ne bylo», *Кавказский Узел*, ottobre 4, 2023, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/393113>.

the event which gathered experts and media representatives. The forum emphasised the importance of recognising the role played by both indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in contemporary Russia, given their significant contributions to politics, economics, society, and the military.¹⁴

Organising such event in the city of Cherkessk was functional to the forum's goals. Indeed, the Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia serves as the most accurate reflection of the demographic and ethnic landscape within the Russian Federation. Its population is highly diverse, comprising Russians (33.6%), Circassians (11.3%), Abazins (7.4%), Nogai (3.4%), as well as Ossetians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Tatars, Chechens, Greeks, and Azerbaijanis.¹⁵

The participants highlighted the importance of the central government prioritising the preservation of indigenous peoples and their traditions. They contended these communities are integral to the history and socio-cultural evolution of the Russian Federation. Their presence reinforces the country's multicultural and multi-confessional essence, qualities that Moscow consistently stresses as a testament to successfully managing a heterogeneous nation, unlike the recent difficulties experienced in Europe.

Within this specific socio-cultural context, it is pertinent to draw attention to the establishment of federal national-cultural autonomy. This concept underscores the cultural and political autonomy of diverse national or ethnic groups within the Russian state. With the support of government funding, thanks to the federal national-cultural autonomy, these groups can operate their cultural and educational institutions independently, to a certain extent. As stated by Mussa Khabalevich Ekzekov, Deputy Chairman of the People's Assembly (Parliament) of the Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia, Chairman of the Higher Council of the Abaza-Abkhazian World Congress and President of "Alashara", in the North Caucasus, the Abazins or Abaza are registering a federal national-cultural autonomy and are engaged in systematic work to preserve local traditions, culture and language.¹⁶

These words hold significance when compared to the geopolitical context of North Caucasus, as previously described. Since the 1990s, the region has witnessed its initial regional crises, as well as the confrontation between the Russian central authority and local autonomies,

¹⁴ SpecialEurasia, «SpecialEurasia Visits the Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia», *SpecialEurasia*, July 21, 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/07/21/visits-karachay-cherkessia/>.

¹⁵ 'Karachaevo-Cherkesskaya Respublika', *Oficial'nyj sajt polnomochnogo predstavitelja Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii v Severo-Kavkazskom federal'nom okruge*, s.d., <http://skfo.gov.ru/district/kchr/>.

¹⁶ Giuliano Bifulchi, «North Caucasus Today: an Interview with Mussa Ekzekov», *Kavkaz Files ISSN 2975-0474*, vol. 20, fasc. 2, November 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/11/10/north-caucasus-mussa-ekzekov/>.

which culminated in the First Chechen War (1994-1996) and the Second Chechen War (1999-2009).¹⁷ Consequently, the initial state of local instability progressed into the emergence of armed militancy and local terrorism exemplified by *Imarat Kavkaz* (Caucasus Emirate) and *Vilayat Kavkaz* (Caucasus province) of the Islamic State.¹⁸

However, in recent years, there has been a discernible positive shift in the North Caucasus, marked by improvements in both local security and socio-economic development. This transformation represents a significant departure from the security challenges that characterised the region in the early 21st century, as well as in 2010 when the Kremlin established the North Caucasus Federal District (DFCN), distinct from the Russian Southern District (DMS). Notably, this district restructuring coincided with the hosting of the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014, underlining the Kremlin's commitment to addressing and managing the challenges prevalent in the North Caucasus.¹⁹

We can ascribe the significant enhancement in the region to Moscow's regional strategy, which integrates Russian and local special forces operations with extensive infrastructural and socio-economic development initiatives. A flagship initiative is the *Kurorti Severnogo Kavkaza* project, focusing on the development of tourist resorts in the North Caucasus. This project shows Moscow's effective governance of a region characterised by ethnic diversity, indigenous populations, and various religious denominations. Throughout history, these factors have led to challenges like the emergence of political Islam, ethnonationalist movements, and economic underperformance compared to national norms.²⁰

¹⁷ Ekaterina Sokirianskaya, «Ideology and conflict: Chechen political nationalism prior to, and during, ten years of war», Moshe Gammer (a cura di), *Ethno-nationalism, Islam and the state in the Caucasus: post-Soviet disorder*, London ; New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 111–124; Aristidis Tsatsos, *Second Chechen War: Causes, Dynamics and Termination - A Civil War between Risk and Opportunity?*, SSRN Scholarly Paper, Rochester, NY, Social Science Research Network, novembre 3, 2014, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2518687>; E. Pokalova, Chechnya's terrorist networkcit.

¹⁸ Alexander Knysh, «Islam and Arabic as the Rhetoric of Insurgency: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate», *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 35, aprile 2012, pp. 315–337; Elena Pokalova, «The North Caucasus: from mass mobilization to international terrorism», *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 28, fasc. 3, maggio 2017, pp. 609–628.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, *Too Far, Too Fast: Sochi, Tourism and Conflict in the Caucasus*, Bruxelles, International Crisis Group, gennaio 30, 2014, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1317686/1002_1391196745_228-too-far-too-fast-sochi-tourism-and-conflict-in-the-caucasus.pdf; Michael A. Reynolds, «The Geopolitics of Sochi», Foreign Policy Research Institute, gennaio 2014, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/01/the-geopolitics-of-sochi/>.

²⁰ Giuliano Bifulchi, «Tourism and counterterrorism in Russia: the case of Kurorti Severnovo Kavkaza», presentato al International Symposium of Advancements in Tourism, Recreation and Sport Sciences, Podgorica, 2018, pp. 27–37.

Conclusion

Looking at the North Caucasus, it is necessary to relate this region to the events in Ukraine. Since the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, and particularly following the eruption of the conflict in February 2022, the presence and growth of North Caucasian combatants within Kiev's volunteer battalions and the International Legion has been notable.²¹

Considering the international pressure against the Russian Federation represented by both economic sanctions and cultural events that aim to influence the internal Russian population, such as the Forum of Free Nations in PostRussia whose purpose is the discussion of how to promote the disintegration of the Russian state and the creation of several independent states ethnically,²² in the Russian geopolitical framework, both indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities become fundamental. Moscow must strive to achieve the dual objectives of safeguarding the autonomy and cultural preservation of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, while also preventing the proliferation of ethnonationalism and the ideology of self-determination.

In the intricate interplay of the Eurasian geopolitical chessboard and regional security, it becomes imperative to closely monitor the activities of both Russia and external actors seeking to influence North Caucasian ethnic minorities and indigenous populations. The Kremlin, cognisant of the region's significance, has adopted measures such as organising events like the Forum of Indigenous People and establishing federal national-cultural autonomy. These initiatives are strategically designed to enhance relations with local populations in the North Caucasus, fostering a sense of connection to the central government. This approach reflects Moscow's commitment to mitigating historical challenges and integrating the diverse ethnic and indigenous communities into the broader fabric of the Russian Federation. Conversely, foreign entities, by supporting ethnonationalism and promoting events that advocate for self-determination within Russian territory, can exert pressure on Moscow and potentially contribute to internal instability. The spectre of disintegration, reminiscent of the events of 1991 that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, looms as a potential consequence. The external promotion of ethnonationalist sentiments in the North Caucasus poses a risk of exacerbating existing tensions and could lead to a fracturing of the Russian

²¹ Giuliano Bifulchi, "Ukraine: foreign fighters and terrorist threat", *Geopolitical Report* ISSN 2785-2598, vol. 28, fasc. 1, February 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/02/05/ucraina-foreign-fighters/>; Giuliano Bifulchi, «Dagestan National Centre and the Battalion 'Imam Shamil'», *Kavkaz Files* ISSN 2975-0474, vol. 18, fasc. 5, September 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/09/19/dagestan-national-centre/>.

²² Free Nations of Postrussia Forum, s.d., <https://www.freenationsrf.org/>.

Federation. This duality underscores the delicate balance between internal cohesion and external influence, with the North Caucasus positioned as a focal point where these dynamics unfold.

In the current geopolitical landscape, a thorough and vigilant examination of the strategies employed by both the Kremlin and external actors becomes of paramount importance. This analytical scrutiny is crucial for comprehending the multifaceted impact of events like the Forum of Indigenous People and initiatives promoting self-determination, thereby providing nuanced insights into the evolving dynamics within the North Caucasus. This process causes a meticulous exploration of the potential consequences associated with these strategies, ranging from the prospect of reinforced integration into the Russian Federation to the potential emergence of destabilising forces that could pose a challenge to the territorial integrity of the nation. The intricate interplay of these factors underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the delicate balance between internal cohesion and external influences in the region.

Within this intricate regional context, it is imperative to delve into prospective developments, considering that a potential dissolution of the Russian Federation could give rise to many independent state entities. This scenario poses significant challenges, particularly as entities that once relied on Moscow's financial support must grapple with economic, geographical, and natural resource constraints in the absence of such help. The historical precedent set by the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, where a failed state experience led to popular discontent, civil unrest, and the propagation of criminal activities and jihadist propaganda, particularly in Muslim-majority regions like the North Caucasus, serves as a cautionary tale. Hence, a comprehensive understanding of potential future trajectories is indispensable for anticipating and mitigating the repercussions of such geopolitical shifts.

Furthermore, an exploration of the Russian model and initiatives such as Alashara or the Abaza-Abkhazian World Congress becomes essential in understanding efforts aimed at preserving the historical and cultural peculiarities of indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities within the structured state system of Russia. The possible success of this model not only holds the promise of ensuring greater stability within Russia but also emerges as a potential key in Moscow's cultural diplomacy in Europe. Particularly in those European countries grappling with challenges related to the coexistence of diverse ethnic and religious groups, the Russian model could offer insights and strategies for fostering harmony and integration.

This underscores the broader significance of studying these initiatives in the context of global cultural and diplomatic relations.



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