

The War of Kin-State and Ethnic Boundary Making: The Case of Iranian Azerbaijanis After
the Second Karabakh War

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to develop Andreas Wimmer's theory of ethnic boundary making by incorporating the literature on kin-state politics and the relationship between war and nationalism. Wimmer's theory, which focuses on the role of institutional frameworks, power distributions, and political alliances in ethnic boundary formation, is expanded to include the significant impact of external kin-state conflicts. Through a detailed analysis of the Second Karabakh War and its effects on Iranian Azerbaijanis, this research highlights how the war of a kin-state can transform minorities' perceptions of power, increase the salience of ethnic identity, and challenge nation-building efforts in host states. The study also reveals that the dissatisfaction of minorities with their host state's and ethnic majority's political stance regarding the war further exacerbates ethnic boundary formation. Additionally, the victory of the kin-state itself acts as a powerful catalyst, enhancing ethnic identity and expectations among minorities. By integrating qualitative findings from interviews with Iranian Azerbaijanis, the study provides empirical evidence that underscores the necessity of considering kin-state influences in the theory of ethnic boundary making. This theoretical advancement offers a more comprehensive understanding of how external conflicts involving kin-states can reshape ethnic boundaries and affect the stability of nation-building in ethnically diverse societies.

Key Words: ethnic boundaries, kin-state, ethnic minority, ethnic conflict, Iranian Azerbaijan, Second Karabakh War

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Could a nation, in any true sense of the word, really be born without war?” asked English military historian Michael Howard during a lecture at the University of Oxford (1978, 9). A year later, he answered his own question, asserting that no nation could establish itself without armed conflict (1979, 102). During wars, the idea of the nation becomes much more significant for most societies. Flags that once remained in homes are proudly waved in the streets, anthems are sung with greater emotions and more loudly, and feelings of love and hatred based on national and other primordial identities become more pronounced. The sense of solidarity among individuals increases, reaching a level that maintains and even forms national identities.

The exploration of the dynamics between war and nationalism, and their impact on each other has long captivated the interest of scholars. Previous research either analyzed the impact of nationalism on interstate and civil wars, or the role of violent conflicts on nation building by creating a sense of national unity within nation-states. Different from earlier research, my thesis analyses how war of kin-state can impact the identity of transborder ethnic kin. Specifically, my thesis delves into the impact of the Second Karabakh war on Iranian Azerbaijanis¹ to examine its role in challenging nation-building in Iran and strengthening ethnic nationalist

¹ Various terms are used to refer to this group, including Iranian Turks, Iranian Azeris, and Southern Azerbaijani. While "Iranian Turks" is commonly used, it can also refer to other ethnic groups in Iran, such as Turkmens, Gashgais and others. Additionally, the terms "Azeri" and "Southern Azerbaijani" are often linked to nationalist agendas promoted by Iran and Azerbaijan, respectively. Therefore, I prefer to use the term "Iranian Azerbaijani," which is largely accepted by both sides.

claims. It also aims to understand its role in increasing the salience of ethnic boundaries, particularly between Azerbaijani communities and other ethnic groups in Iran.

The impact of the two Karabakh wars on national identities has usually been discussed by analysing the case studies of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Furthermore, when the relationship between war and nationalism is discussed in the context of Iran, scholars mainly paid attention to Iran-Iraq war or Iran's proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. However, the nation-building within Iran was also challenged by the political developments in neighboring countries, especially, the second Karabakh War which is the focus of this thesis.

The incentive for examining this topic stems from the significant demonstrations and social media campaigns by Iranian Azerbaijanis during the Second Karabakh War, aiming at showing solidarity with their ethnic kin in the Republic of Azerbaijan and protesting Iran's political stance during the conflict. Despite being described by several authors as the most integrated minority group in Iran, their response to the war revealed a strong political sentiment rooted in ethnic identity. In the face of severe reactions by the Iranian government on pro-Azerbaijani rallies and efforts to promote a unified Iranian identity, the Azerbaijani minority continued to express their support for Azerbaijan through demonstrations and social media campaigns during the Second Karabakh War. Thus, assessing the role of the Second Karabakh War will be helpful to understand its role in challenging nation-building strategies of the Iranian state which were considered almost successful.

This thesis analyzes impact of the kin-state's war by addressing several key research questions: How does the war of a kin-state challenge the nation-building efforts in other countries where their ethnic brethren live? In what ways does the military victory of a kin-state heighten ethnic identifications among its coethnics? Lastly, how does a kin-state's war challenge nation-building in the host state, when the government and dominant ethnic group

have different political positions from the ethnic kin in that state? By addressing these questions, the thesis seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between war, kin-state and ethnic boundary making.

My thesis consists of five main chapters. First, I begin with a comparative analysis of literature on ethnicity and Andreas Wimmer's ethnic boundary formation theory. This chapter also explores the trilateral relationship between kin-states, host-states, and ethnic kin to explain the role of external factors in ethnic boundary making. Also, I utilize literature on the relationship between war and ethnic identity, and theories on diffusion of political events to understand the causal mechanisms between kin-state's war and ethnic boundary making of their brethren in host-states. Finally, after integrating these theories, the hypotheses of this thesis are mentioned in the last section of this chapter.

In the methodology chapter, I begin by discussing the value of the single case study method and the rationale behind selecting this particular case to answer my research questions. To support my case selection, I delve into the diverse and often opposing nationalisms and identity preferences of Iranian Azerbaijanis over the past two centuries, highlighting the unique characteristics of this case. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss the specific methodology used to address my research question, along with its strengths and limitations.

The following chapter gives contextual information about the two Karabakh Wars, and the reaction of Iranian Azerbaijanis and Iranian officials during the war. This chapter will be helpful to understand context of the answers given by the respondents.

Next, I present my findings gathered from online semi-structured interviews with Azerbaijanis residing in various Iranian cities. These responses will offer insights into how the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan's military achievements, and Iran's political stance have influenced the ethnic sentiments and identity of Iranian Azerbaijanis.

Finally, the analysis of my findings and theoretical contribution of the thesis will be discussed in the last chapter.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The effect of the wars on transborder ethnic kin's identity is not widely discussed in nationalism studies and conflict studies scholarship. In order to answer the research question of how the war of kin-state can challenge the nation-building strategies of host state and how it can impact on the ethnic boundary making process of transborder ethnic kin, I will look into three different theories that can shed on the light to this issue. First, I will look into the theories of ethnicity and ethnic boundary making process to understand the role of external factors in changing the identity preferences. Second, I will discuss how kin-state politics can explain the changes in ethnic boundary making. Finally, I will discuss the role of war in increasing ethnic sentiments within and outside nation-states.

2.1. Ethnicity and Ethnic Boundaries

The definition of ethnicity has long been a subject of debate between primordialist and constructivist schools of thoughts in nationalism studies. According to primordialists, ethnicity is fixed, stable, and rooted in common biological heritage, culture, history, language or any other objective factors that determine the ascription of individuals to the groups. This understanding of ethnicity perceives identity as historically eternal and resistant to changes. While the primordialist school was dominant until the first half of the 20th century, they failed to provide explanations for the unification and division of ethnic groups, and the transfer of personnel among them.

On the contrary, according to constructivist school of thought, ethnicity is not seen as biologically or culturally given, as they argue that it is subject to alterations through social interaction between individuals and groups. It emphasized acknowledgment of ethnic hybridity and the diversity of identity attachments, as political or social context changes, individuals and

groups can adopt new identities. As defined by Rogers Brubaker, ‘identity is multiple, unstable, in flux, contingent, fragmented, constructed, negotiated, and so on’ (2000, 11). This flexibility challenges the idea of fixed, stable, eternal, and unchangeable ethnic borders, highlighting the situational character of ethnic identities apparent in numerous cases.

Frederick Barth's propositions for studying ethnicity provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of ethnic groups. Firstly, he emphasizes that ethnic groups are not merely imposed categories but are actively constructed, and they are identified by the actors within them. This highlights the importance of self-perception and agency in defining ethnic identities. Secondly, Barth suggests moving away from a static typology approach towards examining the dynamic processes that shape and sustain ethnic groups. By focusing on these processes, researchers can gain insights into the fluid nature of ethnicity and its interactions. Finally, Barth advocates for a shift from studying the historical trajectories of ethnic groups to analyzing the boundaries that define them. This shift allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how ethnic identities are negotiated, maintained, and challenged over time (Barth, 1969, 11). In general, his main contribution to the study of ethnicity was focusing on the boundaries between groups, while their cultures can be indistinguishable or individuals might switch sides of the boundaries by time.

Later, Andreas Wimmer criticized both primordialist and constructivist authors for focusing too much on the definitions while failing to explain different degrees of social closure, cultural distinctiveness, political salience, and historical stability of ethnicity across cases. He advocated for comparative research and theory building by addressing to already existing literature to explain the varying character and consequences of ethnic boundaries. He came up with the multilevel process theory on how ethnic boundaries are established at both macro and micro levels, drawing insights from the theories of Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, and institutionalism. According to Wimmer, actors decide on their approach to create their own

ethnic boundaries based on factors like institutional framework, power distribution, and political connections. Because of institutional order of the modern nation-states, an ethnic division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is drawn, rather than boundaries between the people based of different genders, professions, etc. However, people will choose a specific ‘ethnic distinction that will best support their claims to prestige, moral worth, and political power’ (2008, 1007). Finally, the members of the culturally dominant ethnic-national group will be determined by the network of political alliance.

Andreas Wimmer presents five possible strategies regarding how ethnic boundaries can be adopted by actors: firstly, those seeking to establish a new boundary by *expanding* the range of people included; secondly, those aiming at reducing the range of the included by *contracting* boundaries; thirdly, those seeking to change the meaning of an existing boundary by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories, which is called *inversion*; fourthly, those attempting crossing a boundary by *repositioning* one’s own categorical membership; and finally, those aiming to overcome ethnic boundaries by emphasizing alternative, cross-ethnic social cleavages through what he calls strategies of *boundary blurring* (2008, 987).

Even after the completion of the boundary-making process, ethnic boundaries can still undergo changes influenced by three factors. First, there's the Exogenous shift, where major political events like imperial conquests or nation-state formations reshape institutional structures, prompting the adoption of new boundary-making strategies while discarding old ones. Second, there's the Endogenous shift, where boundaries change internally due to the cumulative effects of strategies pursued by actors. For instance, if members of one ethnic group consistently cross boundaries into another group, and members of the latter group expand their boundaries and assimilate the former, it leads to boundary alterations and former group disappears. Third, there's the Exogenous drift, where the system of ethnic boundaries changes due to the adoption of new strategies not previously part of the repertoire. Innovative actors

may invent these new strategies, or they may be adopted from external sources, leading to shifts in the ethnic boundary landscape.

2.2. Kin-states:

Andreas Wimmer's theory combines the role of both local and international conditions in the construction and maintaining of ethnic boundaries. Although he didn't explicitly mention the role of kin-states, his theory is valuable for not being limited within the borders of modern nation-states. He highlighted political developments within a large international environment and the innovative learning of local actors from changes in the superpowers among external variables. My thesis builds on this understanding of ethnic boundary making by emphasizing the role played by kin-states in challenging the nation-building efforts of host-states and increasing the salience of ethnic-kin boundaries is more significant than the role of outsiders who don't have any kinship or historical connections. This is evident in examples like the Albanians in Macedonia and Kosovo, the Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi and Rwanda, and the Toubou in Chad and Niger, demonstrating that a country's nation-building strategies are significantly vulnerable to the internal political dynamics of kin-states.

The triadic nexus framework by Rogers Brubaker can be a good starting point for the analysis of relationships between nationalizing states, national minorities, and external national homelands². He defined national minorities as groups within a state that identify with a distinct ethnic or national identity and may seek different variation of claims from cultural autonomy to secession. Nationalizing states are those trying to create homogenized language and culture

² Brubaker's concepts of nationalizing states and external national homelands correspond to host states and kin-states, respectively. I will use these terms interchangeably.

to shape a national identity, which is perceived as oppressive by national minorities and kin-states. Finally, external national homelands are the countries ‘to which they belong, or can be construed as belonging, by ethnocultural affinity, though not by legal citizenship’ (Brubaker, 1995, 108), and they feel responsible for their coethnics living outside the country. The most significant characteristic of triangular relationship is close and continuous monitoring of relations and actions of two other fields. This selective monitoring and the representations of external two fields are related to the stances within field. For instance, nationalizing state policies can be regarded as oppressive, minority mobilization can be perceived as sign of disloyalty to the state, and national ‘homeland’s policies regarding ethnic kin can be called offensive if there are already existing national stances towards each other (Brubaker, 1995, 118-119).

Although his research focused on the cases of new nationalizing states that try to promote the position of state bearing nations, old states can also experience the effect by kin-states and national minorities, especially when national identity is not consolidated there. Cederman et al. found that, more borders divide ethnic groups, it’s much more likely that rebellion for ethnic cause will happen. He further argued that, ethnic settlement areas can lead to potential homeland claims which can increase the risk of interstate disputes. According to him, the main driver of the conflict behavior is ethnic nationalism of those fragmented groups who believe that ‘ethnic and political boundaries should be congruent’ according to the description of Gellner. However, not for all minority groups ethnic identity plays central role and nationalist claims out of grievances don’t appear always. Cederman et al. emphasized the role of ideological and material support from coethnics in kin-state. They that it is ‘often in the interest of homeland state to support the separatism of their co-ethnics as way to weaken the host state’ and it’s usual for minorities to gladly accept the support from kin-states (2022, 29).

However, it is not always the case. Although ethnic minorities, especially nationalists of these minorities expect their kin-states to directly intervene, Saideman in his comparative analysis of Somalian and Serbian cases found that, homeland countries don't support their ethnic brethren consistently. Cost of intervention and internal politics determine their foreign policy behavior regarding minorities (1998). Also, the support from kin-states are not always in the form of explicit military intervention, but they can also grant citizenship and immigration privileges for their ethnic kin or pressure on other states to change their policies towards their ethnic brethren. Moreover, ideological support can be given to national minorities to support their mobilization. While discussing the authoritarian countries' use of digital tools, Lilia Sablina argued that, they can include their population abroad 'as clients to be co-opted, or as patriots to be discursively manipulated' (2023, 5). Although she focused on the media power of Russia on its diaspora in Europe, the same logic can help to explain nationalist movements encouraged by kin-states in other parts of the world.

Finally, kin-states might affect the political behavior of ethnic kin even without deliberately targeting them neither by military intervention, nor by soft power tools. The positive or negative changes in homeland, significant political events might have impact on ethnic kin. The statistical analysis of ethnic conflicts between 1946 and 2009 found that, if there is an ethnic conflict and 'any of the warring groups has a kin group in a nearby states, the probability of ethnic conflict onset in the nearby state is increased' and this probability rises if minority is territorially concentrated, relatively large, and discriminated against (Forsberg, 2014, 150). Also, Ayres and Saideman (2000, 108) found that probability of group's separatism is increased consistently if there is active separatism among its kin. Thus, ethnic groups tend to learn from their kin.

The role of kin-states is not limited by causing secessionist wars and rebellions within host-states, but they can also challenge nation-building projects in other countries. Situational

nationalism theory by Erin K. Jenne and Florian Bieber explains how ‘conflicts, actions, or ideas that extend beyond the borders of the nationalizing territory may, in other words, limit – or alternatively, enhance – the effectiveness of a campaign of national identification’ (Jenne and Bieber, 2014, 439). They argued that, ‘the most significant identity shifts are likely to place in early stages of nation-building, and during times of ethnic conflict, or political upheaval, and in borderland regions’ (2014, 441). Their research focused on the case of Montenegrin national identity that experienced decline despite the presence of local institutional settings which were expected to play significant role in nation-building. They criticized dominant theories of nation building for invoking role of external factors (diasporas, kin-states, diffusion of ideas, transnational network) as secondary variables, while exaggerating and relying only on the role played by domestic level variables such as ethnic myths, institutions, elites struggles, economic change and political institutions. Individuals can hold different alternative, quasi-national and competing identities, and international identity landscape can mobilize them around alternative cleavages.

Many authors agreed that the political changes, rebellion, and conflict in neighboring states, especially the ones that are related with kinship ties have an impact on the political behavior and identity preferences of minorities. However, there is not a comprehensive discussion about the causal mechanism explaining how the war in the homeland affect ethnic identity of minorities.

Ayres and Saideman argued that, spatial diffusion of the political events can happen by learning from the outside actors (2000, 93). Such events may simply increase salience of one’s ethnic identity, which might lead to political mobilization and separatism. However, by analyzing spread of attempted revolutions in 1848 after fall of French monarchy in March of the same year, Kurt Weyland found that, diffusion of political contention can be best explained by cognitive heuristics. Contrary to explanations like external pressure, normative promotion

by great powers, or rational learning from experiences of others as Ayres and Saideman (2000) believed, he argued that, both masses and opinion leaders can deviate from rational calculations during the learning process from neighboring countries. A successful war by kin-states can be seen as an opportunity for support and a perfect moment to initiate action. They might "draw improperly firm conclusions from limited data" by ignoring relevant information, or events in neighboring countries can "turn people more risk acceptant" by triggering emotions such as euphoria, anger, and indignation (Weyland, 2009, 401). This concept of irrational learning from neighbors can be applied to many failed revolutions and separatist attempts, including his example of the revolutions of 1848, where masses believed it was their time to bring change without considering differences in structural conditions and state ideologies. Additionally, according to Erin Jenne's ethnic bargaining theory, the miscalculations by minorities about the capacity and incentives of kin-states might lead to conflicts when they start to demand more from central government (2007, 43). According to the theory, if they access to greater power vis-à-vis their governments due to strong kin-state, their claims will get much more extreme. On the other hand, if they don't receive or don't have hopes to receive help from external actors, especially kin-states or diaspora, they will accommodate to the repressive policies implemented by their state.

2.3. War and Nationalism

In addition to the diffusion theories, the literature on the relationship between war and nationalism can be relevant to understand the causal mechanism. Some authors focused on the institutional role of wars in making of national identities (Centeno, 2002), however, these cannot be relevant to the discussion on ethnic kin and kin-state relations. Because institutional factors such as conscription, media, war economy, nationalist political parties, and nationalist

education rarely affect people living outside the state borders. However, even in the absence of strong state institutions, war plays role in solidifying ethnic identities.

Anthony D. Smith argued that, during the wartime ‘old divisions are laid aside, and the nationalist dream of ethnic fraternity becomes a momentary reality’ (Smith, 1981, 389). In his study of war and ethnicity, Smith refers to Simmel’s ‘cohesion’ hypothesis by claiming that war not only emphasizes the cohesion of an existing ethnic unit, but also contributes to mobilization by bringing together people who would not otherwise unite. He didn’t claim that, war was responsible for creating ethnic categories, but there should be some visible cultural differences to have well defined-groupings (Smith, 1986, 378). However, it was warfare that made people conscious of these categories by creating ethnic-self imagery and stereotypes about others. Later, Smith argued that warfare helps to maintain and ignite ethnic sentiments in different ways. He argued that, myths that were created about the wars, victories, defeats, special battles, tragedies, or heroes are ‘far more effective in the shaping of subsequent generations of ethnically conscious families’ than what happened in reality (1987, 39). The role of past events and myths created around them are significant for connecting past to the future as remarked by Ernest Renan (1882).

After Smith, another prominent member of the ethno-symbolist school, John Hutchinson identified the four mechanisms that warfare can contribute to the creation of the nation as a sacred community of sacrifice. The first one is its power of creating raw materials for myths and being reference points for the common past which was already mentioned earlier by Smith and Renan. Second is intensification of the ‘we–they stereotype that serve in the process of collective self-differentiation’ (Hutchinson, 2009, 407). Especially warring societies create stereotypes about others and their own self-images by support of the state’s propaganda in education and media. Third, during the wars people develop rituals which reinforce

collective identities and foster solidarity. Forth, the outcomes of war, defeat or victory, can create long-term social and political missions (Hutchinson, 2017, 63).

Both Hutchinson and Smith acknowledged that long-lasting wars can also undermine solidarity in multinational states. However, wars involving other countries have similar strength to heighten ethnic sentiments, especially, if there are shared characteristics between minorities inside countries and warring states. Martin Sökefeld in his research on diasporic identity of Alevis in Germany and South Asian diasporas emphasized the importance of critical events in creation of imagination as one community (2006, 272). Also, Yossi Shain's research on Armenian and Jewish diasporas showed that, how these communities asserted unique perspectives on their ethnic identity, when their kin-state was confronted with conflict. He even claimed that, in the absence of these conflicts, many members of Jewish and Armenian diasporas would allow 'their ethnic identity to fade to the level of mere folkways' (Shain, 2002, 129) and the resolutions of these conflicts can be threat to their diasporic identities. The war in their homeland does not only create unique political perspectives among diaspora members, but also formed their everyday behavior and visions of family, homeland, and the future according to qualitative research on Armenians living in Russia, France, and the United States by Chernobrov and Wilmer (2019, 929).

2.4. Integration of theories and hypotheses

The war of a kin-state can heighten the political and social significance of ethnic boundaries among ethnic brethren and challenge nation-building strategies of host-state in five distinct ways. These hypotheses can be categorized into three groups:

1. When the war itself directly impacts ethnic identity:

Both constructivist and primordialist schools of thought acknowledged the role of belief in shared history and myth about past events for creation of ethnic identity. Warfare plays special role as mythonoteur about heroes, battles, defeats, and victories. They are commemorated through rituals, ceremonies, and monuments, embedding themselves in the collective memory and identity of the people. In this context, the war of the kin-state plays a special role in heightening ethnic identity. Such wars not only evoke memories of past conflicts but also generate new narratives that reinforce a shared historical narrative.

Hypothesis 1: The war of the kin-state heightens ethnic identity among ethnic kin through the commemoration of past events and the creation of powerful myths, which reinforce a shared historical narrative.

2. When the victory of the kin-state has an effect:

Wimmer argued that, ‘actors will choose that level of ethnic distinction that will best support their claims to prestige, moral worth, and political power’ (2008, 1007). The prestige and moral worth of communities can also be determined by the outcome of war they or their ethnic kin participate. In the presence of many alternative identities, preference for ethnic identity will increase as it promises more prestige.

Hypothesis 2: The victory of the kin-state increases ethnic identification among ethnic kin due to the enhanced attractiveness of their ethnic identity as a source of power and prestige following the victory.

Ethnic kin can derive rational and irrational lessons from the successful war of their kin-states. First, there can be the idea that, kin-state has solved one of its internal or inter-state

problems, and now can focus on supporting their brethren abroad. Second, there can be exaggeration about the military and political strength of kin-states to put more pressure on their host states. Third, victory of their kin in the war may increase self-confidence about the capability of minority to achieve similar successes. All these factors can lead to increased demands on the central government due to perceptions of greater power, thereby making ethnic boundaries more politically salient.

Hypothesis 3a: The victory of the kin-state challenges the nation-building efforts of the host country as ethnic kin escalate their political and cultural claims, driven by heightened expectations of external support.

Hypothesis 3b: The victory of the kin-state challenges the nation-building efforts of the host country as ethnic kin escalate their political and cultural claims, driven by heightened expectations of minority's capability.

3. When different political reactions by host-state and majority play role:

The role of wars in creating solidarity among ethnic kin is discussed in the examples of Armenian and Jewish diaspora. While ethnic kinship ties alone or possibility of an access to kin-state's media can formulate networks of alliances along ethnic lines across state borders, the political stances of the host state and majority can be different by being moderately supportive, neutral, or opposing due to lack of such ties. While Wimmer argued that network of alliances plays significant role during political events, his examples were limited by the political events within nation-states. However, lack of such networks during the times of significant events in kin-states, can challenge nation-building project of host states if they don't show expected support.

Hypothesis 4: If the political stances of the host state and majority during the war differ from those of the ethnic kin, the war of the kin-state heightens ethnic identity among ethnic kin due to the perceived lack of network of alliances.

While different identities of can be hold by same people simultaneously and they are not always mutually exclusive, Jenne and Bieber argued that during times of political upheaval, there can be marked identity shifts and contradictions within these identities (2014, 439). While all the ethnic groups in host states hold both same and different identities, ‘us versus them’ divide between them can increase due to opposing political stances. Following ‘my enemy’s friend is my enemy’ logic, national identity uniting different ethnic groups can be challenged due to opposing political stances or perceptions about opposing political stances during the war.

Hypothesis 5: If there is a perception that, other ethnic groups hold opposing views during the war to those of the ethnic kin, the war of the kin-state exacerbates the 'us versus them' divide, leading to a heightened sense of ethnic identity among the ethnic kin.

These five hypotheses about the effect of kin-state’s war in identity of ethnic kin are not alternative to each other and they can work either separately or together for different members of minority group.

3. METHODOLOGY

To develop Andreas Wimmer's theory of ethnic boundaries, the single case study of Iranian Azerbaijanis will be employed. The single case study approach is particularly valuable when a case meets the theoretical scope conditions but fails to fully confirm the theory's predictions. Arend Lijphart highlighted the importance of analyzing the deviance of these kind of cases 'to uncover relevant additional variables that were not considered previously, or to refine the (operational) definitions of some or all of the variable' (692, 1971). Additionally, Rohlfing argued that, deviant cases are significant to find whether an expected causal mechanism is not in place (2012, 95). The case of Iranian Azerbaijanis aligns more closely with the "passed least likely" scenario (as defined by Rohlfing) according to Wimmer's theory of ethnic boundary-making, which primarily emphasizes the role of internal variables. The following section of this chapter will explore why relying solely on internal variables cannot adequately explain the salience or resistance of ethnic identity among Iranian Azerbaijanis.

3.1. Case Selection: Iranian Azerbaijanis

Andreas Wimmer argued that when making strategies of ethnic boundaries out of five options, actors are not free to choose and they are constrained by the institutional environments, distribution of power, and network of political alliances (2008, 990).

First, institutions in modern nation-state give central importance to defining the ethnic boundaries of the nation which will make a majority and minority within its territories. The political elites of the state may either reinforce boundaries toward minorities by discrimination or promote assimilation. This can involve strategies of passing and assimilation to overcome exclusion and discrimination, or efforts to blur boundaries by emphasizing broader identities

such as the village, continent, or humanity to divert stigma. In Iran state institutions both during Pahlavi dynasty and Islamic Republic emphasized Persian culture and languages. Iranian nationalism became institutionalized after Pahlavi dynasty came to power. During the reign of Reza Shah, centralization of the political regime started, more resources were allocated to state's capital, and nomadic people among whom were Azerbaijani Turks were forced to settle. He promoted Iranian nationalism by merging state and ethnic Persian identities together by aggressively assimilating ethnic groups. Change of place names from Azerbaijani into Persian, banning of minority languages in schools and media, and glorification of pre-Islamic past of Iran aimed at creating homogenized people (Souleimanov et al, 2013, 71). According to Brenda Shaffer, these nationalization policies and the interaction of Azerbaijanis with Persians led to the assimilation of some while others still kept their distinct identity (2002, 55). Another strategy adopted by Azerbaijanis as a reaction to discriminatory policies was boundary blurring by emphasizing other dimensions of their identity such as Shia religious faith. Although the Iranian Revolution gave them hopes to gain cultural autonomy and to fight against ethnic discriminations, the oppression of minority languages still continues. While Shia faith as one of the pillars of Iranian nationalism (Litvak, 2017, 10) and state ideology unites Azerbaijanis with other ethnic groups under the banner of Iranianness, the policy of Islamic Republic regarding minority languages also caused grievances.

Second, the level of ethnic differentiation also depends on the position in the hierarchies of power that the institutional order establishes. Following this logic, many scholars have argued that Azerbaijanis living in Iran are the most integrated group among the country's ethnic minorities (Elling, 2013, 28) due their representation among political, economic, religious, and military elites of the country. Additionally, the quantitative dataset designed by Ethnic Power Relations (Bormann et al., 2021) classifies Azerbaijanis as junior partners in the governance of the state, with Persians being the senior partners, while other groups have been described as

discriminated minorities since the Islamic Revolution. Azerbaijanis predominantly adhere to Shia faith like ethnic majority Persians and this is one of the reasons why they are considered to be the most integrated ethnic minority in the country and state ideology, and the religious legal system opened for them the access to power. Another reason is that, throughout history, Iranian Azerbaijan was the center of Iranian politics and empires encompassing all of Iran. The ruling dynasties and elites of the empires in Iran from 11th till early 20th centuries were Turkic (Azerbaijani) by origin with the exception of Zand dynasty which took the throne for 28 years in 18th century. The predominantly Azerbaijani populated city Tabriz was either capital or second politically important city of these empires during those centuries (Ahmadi, 1995). Despite their history of dominance and Shia religious faith, their distinct language and even accent in Persian led to stigmatization (Safizadeh, 2013, 60) and obstacle to reach power and prestige. All five strategies can be explained by the distribution of power in the country. Some favored assimilation as a group or as individuals to reach more power, some emphasized ethnic identity against stigmatization based on language and accent, some emphasized religious dimension of identity as it became state ideology, and others want to completely change ethnic hierarchy within the country while keeping their Iranian identity under control of Turks.

The network of alliances is the third factor affecting strategies of ethnic boundary making. The alliance of Azerbaijanis and Persians can be observed during the Constitutional Revolution, Islamic Revolution, and the war against Iraq between 1980-1988. Also, intellectuals, politicians, and cultural elites of the country allied with the ethnic majority to build Iranian nationalism based on Persian language and culture. Mirza Fatali Akhundov, Iranian Azerbaijani by origin, is considered the founder of Iranian nationalism and he was not the only Azerbaijani supporter of this idea. Another ethnic Azerbaijani, Tabriz born Ahmad Kasravi, believed that unity was essential for modernization and advocated for the linguistic and cultural assimilation of Azerbaijanis, preferring for Persian over Azerbaijani (Abrahamian,

1973, 284). Dr. Taqi Arani, a significant figure in the "Fifty-three" group in Iran, supported Persian assimilation based on orthodox Marxism, viewing centralization as vital for state efficiency. According to both Kasravi and Arani, modern Azerbaijani Turkic was not the original language of Iranian Azerbaijan, but was imposed after Mongol invasion, and thus, learning of Farsi was considered as returning the old Iranian language they forgot. Similarly, Tudeh activist Khalil Maleki endorsed the Persianization of Azerbaijanis, often disappointing fellow Azerbaijanis by refusing to speak his native language with them (Ahmadi, 1995). While all mentioned nationalists advocated for secular Iran, the main ayatollahs of the Islamic Revolution, Mohammad Kazim Shariatmadari, Fazel Lankarani, Musavi Ardababili, Sadegh Khoi were also ethnic Azerbaijanis and Tabriz played significant role in creation of Islamic government (Grebennikov, 2013, 71). Although before the revolution all-Iranian identification of Azerbaijanis was based on pride with pre-Islamic past of Iran and its culture, later Shiism played role in suppressing claims for separate ethnic identity. For both secular and religious forms of Iranian nationalism suppression of minority languages and creation of monolingual environment was one of the central goals, and these were mainly supported by local elites of Azerbaijan with the few exceptions.

However, there was not a consistent alliance of Azerbaijanis with the majority due to the linguistic character of Iranian nationhood. According to Andreas Wimmer, boundaries between nation and others are different from society to society and they determine the kind of the claims that ethnic minorities make in the public domain. In case of Azerbaijanis, because the main area of discrimination was suppression of language, their claims in public domain focused on this issue. These claims were reflected in politics first in 1920 when the revolution led by Sheikh Mohammad Khyabani started (Shaffer, 2002, 48). He did not seek to separate the Azerbaijani provinces from Iran, but advocated for a reformed democratic Iran with better center-periphery relations and cultural pluralism, including language rights for Azerbaijanis.

Demands for separate ethnic identity became much stronger after the establishment of Azerbaijan People's Government (APG) in Iranian Azerbaijan in 1945. Azerbaijanis were referred as a nation, its language started to be used in schools, radio, and the university during this one-year period of autonomous government under the leadership of Seyyid Jafar Pishevari (Atabaki, 1993). Although cultural rights of Azerbaijanis were highly suppressed after the fall of APG by Pahlavis, the revolution in 1979 created new opportunities for voicing demands for cultural autonomy. When their demands for linguistic rights and decentralization were not fulfilled by the new theocratic regime, the protests led by Ayatollah Shariatmadari erupted in different cities of Iranian Azerbaijan, mainly in Tabriz (Mammadov, 2023, 36). Although demands for cultural rights paused due to start of Iran-Iraq war, in 1996 elections for Parliament, candidate from Tabriz Mahmudali Chehraganli brought the topic of Azerbaijani language into Iranian politics again. Also, the largest demonstrations against ethnic discriminations happened in 2006 when the Iranian official newspaper resembled ethnic Azerbaijanis to cockroaches and insulted their language (Safizadeh, 2013, 57). Later, Iranian Azerbaijani protests against government also included the issues of economic, ecological, and political discriminations along with linguistic-cultural ones.

In summary, the diverse and sometimes conflicting strategies regarding ethnic boundary making have resulted in the proliferation of various national identifications and forms of nationalism among Iranian Azerbaijanis. While some Iranian Azerbaijanis played significant roles in the development of both secular and religious forms of Iranian nationalism, others alternatively advocated for cultural autonomy, secession, unification with the Republic of Azerbaijan, and even pan-Turanist irredentism which advocated for the creation of the state unifying all Turkic peoples (Mammadov, 2023)

While Wimmer's theory explains well the role of internal factors in explaining contesting nature of nation and ethnicity among Iranian Azerbaijanis, the historical role of kin-

state was still there. Khiyabani was influenced by intellectual environment in Baku and Pishevari got direct assistance from Soviet Azerbaijan and the USSR per se. Also, Brenda Shaffer argued that, independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 'led to demands for greater resources from the central government' (2002, 14). If the direct and indirect influence of the kin-state was removed from this case, Wimmer's theory would expect successful nation-building by Iranian state without ethnic contestation by Azerbaijanis. Thus, according to expectations of his theory, ethnic boundary making by Iranian Azerbaijanis was least likely to happen due to the religious institutional order of Iranian state, historical network of alliances with majority, and their hierarchical position in the power structures of the country.

Applying Wimmer's theory to the Iranian Azerbaijani case reveals that internal factors alone cannot explain politically salient ethnic boundaries. Although Wimmer (2008) mentions external factors, he does not elaborate on the specific influence of kin states. Our contribution to the theory is significant: the war in Karabakh demonstrates that kin-states play a crucial role in shaping ethnic boundaries. This modification underscores the importance of considering kin-states as vital external actors in the dynamics of ethnic boundary formation. By studying the Iranian Azerbaijani case, this research aims to modify the ethnic boundary making theory by Andreas Wimmer by integrating discussions on kin-state politics and relations between war and nationalism.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

For study of this case, I adopted a qualitative approach, conducting 13 semi-structured online interviews with Iranian Azerbaijanis living in different cities such as Tabriz, Meshkin, Urmiya, Zanjan, and Tehran. The interviews were carried mainly in Azerbaijani language; only once Persian and twice Turkish languages were used to make sure my questions were

understood by the respondents. Interviews lasted on average 26 minutes, minimum of it being 8 minutes and maximum 62 minutes. Interviews were conducted in April and early May of 2024.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, recruiting participants proved to be challenging. Reaching people through social media didn't work at all, while two out of eight contacted people agreed in advance, they later rejected due to concerns about their safety. To establish trust, I used my personal connections to reach people living in Iran and then, utilized the snowball sampling technique to expand the pool of interviewees. Deliberate efforts were made to include individuals with varied political opinions concerning Azerbaijan, Iranian nationalism, religious solidarity, and other political matters. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding the Karabakh conflict within the Iranian Azerbaijani community.

3.3. Questions:

Interview questions were designed to explore participants' understanding of the conflict, their assessment of Iran's policies, the stance of different ethnic groups, sources of information, and observed societal impacts. In the beginning, nine primary questions were crafted for semi-structured interviews. However, additional questions were frequently asked in order to explore relevant topics in greater depth. The first question sought to assess respondents' broad understanding of the Karabakh war. Their responses to the origins and outcomes of the conflict, as well as their recall of specific events, reflected their political position on the subject. The first and fifth questions were especially important to figure out how different sources of information influenced respondents' views. The second and sixth questions were designed to examine if the Karabakh conflict served as a historical reference

point for the identity of Iranian Azerbaijanis and to analyze the origins of differing and opposing perspectives on the war. The fourth question sought to discover whether heightened emotions about the war existed and if it held personal importance for the respondents. The third question, which compared the Karabakh conflict to those in Yemen and Palestine, aimed to identify any unique sensitivities regarding Karabakh. Similar to second and sixth questions, it also helped to understand the existence of alliances between different ethnic groups within Iran. The seventh and eighth questions were crucial for comparing Iran's political stance with the respondents' expectation and to find if Iranian and ethnic Azerbaijani identities of the respondents allied or conflicted during the war. Finally, the ninth question aimed to assess whether the Karabakh war played a role in increasing the attractiveness of ethnic identity and aspirations for ethnic claims.

3.4. Limitations:

The limitations of these interviews are related to sampling of participants and my personal background. My first limitation was achieving balanced representation in terms of age and gender. To address these shortcomings, I didn't only ask their own opinions, but also wanted them to express the different opinions they have heard in their families and society. This gave me a chance to hear different perspectives and voices of the people who didn't directly participate in the interviews, Second, interviewees' information about my citizenship of the Republic of Azerbaijan could potentially bias the responses towards a more pro-Azerbaijani stance. Participants might refrain from expressing their disappointments regarding the outcomes of the second Karabakh war or criticisms of the Azerbaijani government. Once again, questions about different opinions circulating in society allowed my respondents to share information about various perspectives which could be critical of Azerbaijan's stance during the Karabakh war. The third limitation was the overrepresentation of respondents residing in Tabriz, with seven interviewees, compared to those from other locations. However, except for

three respondents, all others lived in cities different from their places of birth. This diversity also allows for capturing opinions from various regions. Finally, the interviews being conducted online and transcribed might lead participants to withhold certain opinions due to the authoritarian nature of the political regime. This also presents a significant ethical challenge when conducting research with respondents from an authoritarian country because their safety could be at risk. To address this, I ensured their anonymity and they were made aware of the potential risks associated with their involvement. To further safeguard their identities, I omitted specific demographic details like occupation and education level, which were not essential for the research. Additionally, I used age ranges instead of exact ages to conceal their identities more (as shown in Table 1). These measures were implemented to minimize any potential risk to the participants while still maintaining the integrity of the research. Most importantly, as I found participants through personal connections, this helped build trust between us, encouraging them to share their views more openly without feeling the need to self-censorship.

To better address the mentioned shortcomings in future research, employing digital ethnography and quantitative methods, such as survey questions, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Table 1: Interview participants

Respondents	Gender	Age	Place of residence
Interviewee 1	Male	30-40	Tabriz
Interviewee 2	Male	30-40	Tabriz
Interviewee 3	Male	20-30	Tabriz
Interviewee 4	Female	20-30	Urmiya
Interviewee 5	Male	30-40	Tabriz
Interviewee 6	Male	30-40	Zanjan
Interviewee 7	Female	30-40	Tabriz
Interviewee 8	Male	20-30	Urmiya
Interviewee 9	Male	30-40	Tehran
Interviewee 10	Male	30-40	Tabriz
Interviewee 11	Female	30-40	Urmiya
Interviewee 12	Female	30-40	Tabriz
Interviewee 13	Male	30-40	Meshkin

4. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

4.1. Karabakh Wars

The independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991 was followed by two large-scale wars in Karabakh region against another post-soviet state, Armenia. The conflict started in 1987 from the demands of unifying Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Republic to Armenian Soviet Social Republic. The first war lasted till 1994 ceasefire agreement in Bishkek and resulted with the occupation of 20% of Azerbaijani territories, over 30,000 casualties from both sides, displacement of 300,000 Armenians and 724,000 Azerbaijanis from Azerbaijan, and Armenia and Karabakh, respectively (UNHCR, 1996). Despite military achievements of Armenia during the first war, it was not followed by the diplomatic victory. Self-proclaimed state of Nagorno-Karabakh war not recognized by UN and any de-jure members of it, including Armenia. While armed clashes continued in the frontlines after ceasefire, the negotiation process mediated by OSCE's Minsk group could pause the large-scale war for 28 years from 1992 till 2020.

The Second Karabakh started in September of 2020 and ended with a Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement on November 10 of the same year. During the war lasting 44 days, Azerbaijan could reclaim some surrounding regions and strategic geographical positions and by ceasefire agreement, the Republic of Armenia agreed the return of three other regions to Azerbaijan. The ceasefire agreement also included deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) which continued its existence. Although not everyone in Azerbaijan was satisfied about the presence of Russian peacekeepers and Armenian armed forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, official discourse called agreement victory of Azerbaijan's diplomacy and military, and capitulation of Armenia.

After three years of the ceasefire, between September 19 and 20, 2023, Azerbaijan initiated a military operation against the self-declared state of Nagorno-Karabakh. The military operation lasting a day resulted with the breakaway of the separatist state and regaining of complete control by Azerbaijan on its territories. With this military advancement and the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers in April of 2024, the previous discontent about the officially proclaimed victory of Azerbaijan was no more present. However, the peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia is still not achieved due to disagreements over several issues including demarcation and delimitation of their borders, and status of Zangezur corridor, a projected road connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through South Armenia.

4.2. Iran during the Karabakh War

The conflict in Karabakh during the early 1990s posed a significant security threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran, with the potential to escalate and affect neighboring regions. Instead of supporting the similarly Shia Muslim Azerbaijan Republic, Iran opted to remain neutral, adopting a mediatory stance to resolve the conflict and limiting its support to providing humanitarian aid to Azerbaijan during the first Karabakh War. Anna Gevorgyan argued that, Iran's main interest was status-quo in the region, because 'every escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict creates a new opportunity for those interested in the spread of Pan-Turkic and anti-Iranian sentiment among the Turkish-speaking population' (2022, 75).

Although Iranian politicians did not explicitly discuss the potential effects of the Second Karabakh War on its internal politics, Iran's concern about the disruption of the status quo was evident in the early statements made by its officials. One day after the onset of the Second Karabakh War, Saeed Khatibzadeh, the spokesperson for the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called for an immediate ceasefire and emphasized Iran's readiness to act as a

mediator in the conflict (Iran Press, 2020). Echoing this stance, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted, ‘Our neighbors are our priority and we are ready to provide good offices to enable talks’ (Zarif, 2020). President Rouhani also warned that the Karabakh War had the potential to escalate into a regional disaster. He voiced his concerns about missiles and shells landing in Iranian border areas, highlighting the imminent dangers. Additionally, during a phone conversation with Vladimir Putin, Rouhani expressed his worries regarding the presence of mercenary groups in the conflict zone (Tehran Times, 2020). The target of these concerns about terrorists was Azerbaijan because of allegations about the presence of Syrian mercenaries fighting in Karabakh on their side. Also, an article on the official website of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) titled “Iran's clear message about the presence of terrorists in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis” criticized Azerbaijan for bringing two terrorist groups into the region: the Turkic nationalist Grey Wolves and Salafist factions like Al-Nusra (Magami, 2020).

However, many Iranian politicians openly called for the restoration of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity. The representatives of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei from the predominantly Azerbaijani provinces of Zanjan, Ardabil, West Azerbaijan, and East Azerbaijan convened in Tabriz, where they issued a collective statement expressing their support for Azerbaijan, honoring the martyrs, and calling for the implementation of justice: “The steps taken by the Azerbaijani government to return the occupied territory are completely legal and in accordance with Sharia law, thus trying to implement UN resolutions (2022, 392). While their arguments for supporting Azerbaijan was grounded in both religious and international legal perspectives, the lack of similar support from other representatives in the country suggests that ethnic kinship ties played a significant role.

In a televised speech on November 3, 2020, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said that, ‘Territories seized by Armenia must be returned and liberated. This is an essential

condition'. However, security of Armenian minority in Karabakh was also mentioned in the same speech and he warned of firm and unequivocal reaction if there will be mercenaries near the Iranian border (France 24, 2020).

On one hand, expectations of its own people due to Shia Islam ideology of the state, on the other hand fear of Azerbaijani or pan-Turkic irredentism and concerns about strategic partnership of Israel and Azerbaijan, and strategic importance of Armenia led to complex and inconsistent political stance by Iran. In general, during the Second Karabakh war, statements by Iranian political officials were balanced by mentioning both Azerbaijani and Armenian arguments during the war about territorial integrity and minority rights, respectively, and also accusing Azerbaijani side of bringing terrorists to the region.

Iran's primary concern centers on the ninth article of the trilateral ceasefire agreement, which mandates guaranteed connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Azerbaijan refers to this as the Zangezur Corridor, integral to the Middle Corridor project connecting East to West through Azerbaijani territory. Iran fears this project will diminish its role as a transit country and sever its land border with Armenia, exacerbating its isolation by the West (Koolae and Rashidi, 2024, 4).

Thus, Iran has taken a proactive stance in the Azerbaijan-Armenia dispute over Zangezur. To show its position, Iran opened a consulate in Kapan, located in the Zangezur region, signaling its disagreement with Azerbaijan. Iran's Minister Abdullahian's statement about Zangezur issue can summarize the political stance of his country: "Iran considers Armenia's security to be the security of its own and the region" (Al Jazeera, 2022).

4.3. Karabakh Wars and Iranian Azerbaijanis

The first Karabakh war inspired Iranian Azerbaijanis who had long been separated from their ethnic brethren in the north, fostering a sense of connection (Suleymanov & Krauss, 2017, 5). Reactions to it included parliamentary speeches by the representatives of Azerbaijani provinces, student protests and newspaper articles highlighting support for the Republic of Azerbaijan by their ethnic kin. Azerbaijanis in Iran continued expressing their support for Azerbaijan by protesting the visits of Armenian officials to Iran, the commemoration of tragic events such as Khojali, and slogans during football matches against the main teams of Tehran. Between two Karabakh wars the reaction of Iranian Azerbaijanis only once turned into street demonstrations during April clashes of 2016 between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

However, the scale of support for Azerbaijan was much more stronger during Second Karabakh war while Iran's official position remained mainly neutral. In cities such as Ardabil, Tabriz, Urmiya, Zanjan, Julfa, Alamdar, Khiyav, Kaleybar, Maku, and Tehran, ethnic Azerbaijanis staged protests backing the Azerbaijani military operations and condemning Iran's stance during the war (RFE/RL's Radio Farda, 2020). The main precipitating event was when video footage and images captured by South Azerbaijanis began circulating on social media, revealing the transportation of military supplies purchased from Russia being moved into Armenia via the Norduz border crossing in Iran (Motamedi, 2020). While on September 29, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied these allegations, media outlets in Azerbaijan later shared videos depicting the transfer of military equipment from Iran to Armenia.

The protests demanded the closure of Iran's border with Armenia and the Norduz border gate to stop the transport of military vehicles. Chanting slogans like "Join the front lines, my brother, arms are heading to Yerevan," "Karabakh belongs to us and will remain so," "Baku, Tabriz, Ankara, Our path is different from Persians," and "Supporting Armenia is crime," protesters faced police intervention, including tear gas, rubber bullets, and the arrest of over a

hundred participants (Ramezani, 2020). Additionally, support for Azerbaijan extended to social media platforms, with online campaigns emerging during the Karabakh War and on Azerbaijan's Independence Day under the slogan "We are not supporters of Azerbaijan; we are Azerbaijan." Later, when the Shusha city was liberated, Iranian Azerbaijanis celebrated it with victory marches, sweets distribution, fireworks, and animal sacrifices in several cities. However, Iranian security forces intervened, arresting some participants and threatening others. They imposed restrictions on access to central squares in cities like Tabriz, Ardabil, and Urmia, deploying special police officers in these areas. During the protests more than 200 people in Iranian Azerbaijan were detained by the police due to their participation in rallies and other activities intended to show support to Azerbaijan.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The first question on general knowledge about Karabakh revealed various political perspectives and levels of awareness regarding the conflict. Only one respondent (Interviewee 4) said that, she doesn't know much about Karabakh and her only knowledge was that Azerbaijan and Armenia fought over these lands. All other interviewees clearly demonstrated pro-Azerbaijani stance, however, they either referred to identity, or international law for justification. Only two of the interviewees (3 and 10) referred to the four UN resolutions, when they condemned Armenia's occupation in early 1990s, however, others largely mentioned ethnic and religious factors by calling Karabakh 'Azerbaijani', 'Islamic', or 'Turkic'.

The most frequently discussed topics related to the Karabakh conflict included the Khojali massacre, occupation of territories, destruction and desecration of religious sites, and ethnic cleansing. Interviewees often used possessive language, such as 'our,' when discussing these issues. While the first question aimed to assess their knowledge of the war and the influence of identity on their opinions, the responses to subsequent questions provided valuable insights for testing my hypotheses on the role of kin-state conflicts in ethnic boundary formation.

Asking respondents about the two Karabakh wars allowed me to compare the consequences of Azerbaijan's defeat and victory for Iranian Azerbaijanis. According to interviewee 10, "anti-Turks" frequently bullied Azerbaijani people by emphasizing their inability to reclaim Karabakh, using it as a symbol of dishonour and failure: "Karabakh is in the hands of Armenians, and you still can't take it back". He further explained that the Karabakh issue was politically exploited to undermine Azerbaijani demands for a separate identity:

Karabakh was such a big wound in the heart of Azerbaijan, doesn't matter North or South [Iranian Azerbaijan]. Because even in politics they [anti-Turks] tried hard to hit

Azerbaijanis with the topic by saying that, "If you have an honour, go and get Karabakh back. Azerbaijan got separated [from USSR] and what happened to them? They lost the Karabakh and cannot return a single piece of Karabakh from Armenia". There were many such opinions, and they started political discussions with that topic. And now we liberated it!

Additionally, interviewee 2, mentioned that before the war, Azerbaijan was perceived as a weak, anti-religious, and corrupt country. He noted that pro-government individuals criticized Azerbaijan for not adhering properly to Shia Islam, and they linked this perceived deficiency to Azerbaijan's defeat in the first war:

The authorities said that Baku is an anti-religious, anti-Islamic regime. They do not have the strength and courage to liberate Karabakh. I'm sorry to say these things, this is what we heard. For example, here many Persian nationalists and mullahs would say that their only thoughts are going to the disco, drinking, and such things. They do not have the power to take Karabakh. The only way is for them to be part of us, if they come to Islam, they can liberate their lands.

He continued, explaining that Azerbaijan's victory boosted the confidence of Iranian Azerbaijanis in their own strength. He said, "A hope came to the South. The nation started to hope for the future. If the North got stronger, we can also get stronger and secure our rights". Interviewee 5 used a sports metaphor to describe how Azerbaijan's victory increased self-confidence:

Just like if a warrior loses in sports, he will be discouraged to do anything else, now this is the reason why we started to keep our heads up. It was good for our mood, we have hoped that a person can achieve many things if he wants, both for me, personally and for the nation.

According to some interviewees, the majority and the government have also recognized the power of Iranian Azerbaijanis after the war. Interviewee 7 argued that, whereas before the war they were freely insulted by the government, more gentle policies have been adopted due to fear of backlash from Iranian Azerbaijanis. She added that, after Azerbaijan's victory, the government began praising the Turkic identity with statements like "Azerbaijan is the heart of Iran" to ensure integration and mitigate the increasing fear of separation.

Azerbaijan's victory also raised expectations among Iranian Azerbaijanis of receiving help from their kin-state if needed. They argued that, now that Azerbaijan is no longer preoccupied with Karabakh and possesses stronger military power and strategic alliances, it can help Iranian Azerbaijanis more effectively: *Everyone here was afraid that if we do something in Tabriz, they will put us in prison and kill us. Today, they say that Azerbaijan has become stronger and will support us. Turkey has become stronger and will support us (Interviewee 2).*

The expectation of assistance from kin-state is not only thought to be used against their host government, but also to solve territorial disputes with others if secession happens. One of these territorial issues is over the West Azerbaijan which is also claimed by Kurdish nationalists to be part of Kurdistan state in future:

When they claim for any Azerbaijani territory to be Kurdish land, we say that, then, there will be no place for you on the land, there can only be a place under it. An example is Karabakh, we have succeeded there, and there we will succeed too. They remain calm and are afraid. After this argument, there is nothing to say. It was very good that this victory has been achieved and it let Turks stand stronger in front of the Kurds. (Interviewee 7)

However, some interviewees were critical of the heightened expectations regarding Azerbaijan's power and interest in Iranian Azerbaijan. Interviewee 3 criticized ethnic

nationalists for exaggerating Azerbaijan's power and their irrational learning from the war, warning that this overconfidence could lead to more bloody conflicts that might otherwise be resolved peacefully:

War created such a thinking among the nationalists in Iran, South Azerbaijan, that we are very strong, we are so strong that we can stand against anyone we don't like. This is a little too much, it scares me a little that it can lead to a war. There is a Kurdish issue in Azerbaijan. However, there is no war, now I think that these are the issues that can be resolved through negotiation. After Azerbaijan won Karabakh, there is an opinion among Azerbaijanis that now we can start a war with the Kurds and we will win this war 100%. But they don't think that, for example, this war is over, but look at how much sadness it caused to Azerbaijan, how many injuries it caused, how many people lost their lives in the meantime.

Questions about differing opinions on Karabakh and public sentiment among other ethnic groups in Iran aimed to uncover potential networks of alliances during the war. Only one interviewee claimed that everyone he knew from various ethnic groups in Iran believed Karabakh rightfully belonged to Azerbaijan (Interviewee 12). Interviewee 9 from Tehran noted that not many people in his city were aware of the situation in Karabakh and those who did know initially supported Azerbaijan's victory but gradually became indifferent, especially after Azerbaijan allied with Turkey and Israel. Another interviewee mentioned that, although other ethnic groups were initially uninformed about the conflict, their opinions shifted to a more pro-Azerbaijani stance once they received information (Interviewee 13). However, most other interviewees highlighted significant differences in perspectives between Azerbaijanis and other ethnic groups in Iran, particularly Kurds and Persians. Four interviewees noted that only a few Iranian nationalists among Azerbaijanis either were indifferent to the war or leaned more pro-Armenian. All interviewees stated that almost all Azerbaijanis in Iran, especially those from

Tabriz and other border regions with the Republic of Azerbaijan, were pleased about the liberation of territories. When asked about their personal memories about the first day of the second Karabakh war, three interviewees (1, 6, 7) shared that they cried with joy when the territories were liberated. One interviewee (7) became emotional recalling the news from the first day of the war. Another interviewee (1), who was in prison at the time, said the first question he asked his parents when he had the opportunity to call them was about Karabakh. He also described how people celebrated with war songs about the Karabakh conflict during and after the war:

A song was sung in Baku, "So, what happened, Pashinyan?" and that song is still played in cars. That song became a trend here. You can't find a person in Tabriz who didn't listen or dance to it. Especially when Tractor Tabriz football club played, 70 or 80 thousand supporters were there, and after winning the match, they started chanting "What happened, Pashinyan?"³ or "so, what happened, Esteghlal"⁴?"

When asked about the opinions of other ethnicities in Iran, more than half of the interviewees claimed that Persians, who were aware of the war, tended to support Armenia due to their animosity towards Turks. They argued that support for Armenia came not only from the government but also from opposition groups, particularly supporters of the Shah and other Iranian nationalists who were firmly against Azerbaijan's victory. Interviewee 3 argued that,

³ The phrase 'What happened, Pashinyan?' is the most famous quote from President Aliyev's speech following the trilateral ceasefire agreement on November 10, 2020. This quote is often used to mock the defeated side.

⁴ Esteghlal represents capital city, Tehran and matches between football clubs from Tehran and Tabriz are usually accompanied by ethnic slogans and slurs.

Karabakh war united Persians from completely different ideologies against Azerbaijan by comparing their varying opinions on other political topics:

Because the Iranian state supported Palestine, the Persian society supported Israel, and they even used very racist words such as 'ugly Arabs'. They condemn Yemen, Iraq, Syria, all those countries that Iran supported. But in the case of Armenia, it was the other way around, Iran supported Armenia, and Persians also supported it.

In addition to Azerbaijanis, other Turkic people in Iran, such as Turkmen, Khorasan Turks, and Qashqai Turks, were reported to show their support for Azerbaijan during the war. According to interviewee 1, the positions of non-Turkic minorities also varied:

You know that we have a problem with the Kurds. Similar to PKK in Turkey, there are PJAK and 10-15 other organizations here. Enmity with the Kurds started from the beginning, the Kurds sided with the Persians against us. They have maintained these positions for many years. But the nation that is with us here, supports us, rejoices us are Arabs.

According to interviewee 3, the consequences of the war boosted the confidence of religious Azerbaijanis, viewing the victory as a triumph for fellow Muslims. However, this sentiment was not shared by Persian mullahs. He remarked, "Religious Persians supported Armenia, which surprised me. It was against their ideology. How can you call yourself a devoted Muslim and stand against other Muslims?" Interviewee 2 added that a pro-Azerbaijan joint statement by the Representatives of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in four provinces was not well-received by many. He noted, "Tehran and Pan-Persians spoke a lot of bad words to these four imams, cursing, insulting, and criticizing them for making this statement". Additionally, two interviewees (5 and 7) argued that although Azerbaijanis are also Shia like Persians, the Islamic Republic of Iran did not support them as it did Sunni-majority countries like Syria and Palestine. They attributed this solely to animosity towards Azerbaijanis.

In addition to Karabakh, other topics frequently brought up by interviewees, even though they were not specifically mentioned in the questions: ethnic discriminations against Azerbaijanis and Zangezur corridor. Many interviewees frequently cited ethnic discrimination as an argument to support their claim that Iran's political stance is against Azerbaijan and to explain reasons behind it:

The ones ruling the Iranian state are Persian nationalists. The laws that are written are privileging them only. They were not as happy like us about Karabakh's liberation.
(Interviewee 11)

The most mentioned form of discrimination was linguistic. Interviewee 6 compared the cultural rights of ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis to explain Iran's political position during the war:

We have very few Armenians in Iran. Let's say 200 thousand in 80 million. But it is interesting that these 200,000 Armenians have the right to read and write in their own language and to send their children to schools in their own language. Although there are 30 million of us, we have not had such a right since the Pahlavi period. And if we demand it, they say imprison them, arrest them.

Although all of the respondents (with the exception of Interviewee 4 who didn't know much about the conflict) supported Azerbaijan on the Karabakh issue, there were opposing views about the 9th article of the trilateral ceasefire agreement, which mentions the connection between Azerbaijan to its Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan and is called as Zangezur corridor by Azerbaijan. Some interviewees wished for the opening of the corridor as it will unite Turkic world and by this, Azerbaijanis in Iran will get stronger support. Two other interviewees were against Zangezur corridor project. While talking about the history of

Karabakh region and conflict, interviewee 8 called it to be rightful territory of Azerbaijan, however, he added that he and others in his city don't think same about Zangezur:

It is against the connection between Iran and Russia. However, the idea in Azerbaijan was to capture Zangezur and unite Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan, and through Nakhchivan connect with Turkey. As a result, Iran's transit to other countries will be cut off and the northern part of Iran will fall into the hands of Azerbaijan. I am satisfied with the current policy of Iran. The more neighbours we have around us is better.

Interviewee 9 also said that, while he thinks Karabakh should be part of Azerbaijan, Iran's neutral stance during the war and its resistance against the Zangezur corridor project is rational due to the similar arguments mentioned by interviewee 8. He explained his support for Iran's political stance by emphasizing his Iranian identity: "For everyone national interest comes first, including you and me. You will support Azerbaijan and I will do the same for Iran'.

In this chapter, I briefly discussed the most significant findings from my interviews. The main goal was to highlight the varying perspectives of Iranian Azerbaijanis on the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan's victory, and Iran's political stance. This analysis aims to understand their role in challenging Iranian nation-building and strengthening ethnic sentiments. In the next chapter, along with my concluding remarks, I will explore how these findings contribute to broader theoretical discussions on ethnic boundary-making, kin-state politics, and the relationship between war and nationalism.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to the main findings of this research, the Second Karabakh War played a significant role in shaping the ethnic boundaries of Azerbaijanis in Iran and challenging Iran's nation-building strategy.

Azerbaijan's victory in the war increased the attractiveness of ethnic identity among Azerbaijanis in Iran. Before the Second Karabakh War, the occupation of Azerbaijani territories and the inability to regain its territorial integrity for 26 years served as a counterargument to claims for a distinct ethnic identity, as it was equated with being weak and indifferent to their lands. This situation engendered a sense of shame and embarrassment among Iranian Azerbaijanis, as their ethnic kin in the Republic of Azerbaijan struggled to reclaim their lands. However, the outcome of the Second Karabakh War turned Azerbaijani identity in Iran from a source of previous embarrassment and perceived weakness into a powerful symbol of pride and prestige, thereby reinforcing ethnic boundaries.

Also, ethnic boundaries of Azerbaijanis became more politically salient due to perceptions about their increased power in Iran. These perceptions about increased power stems from two main sources: help of kin-state and confidence in their power. Firstly, they believed they could rely on Azerbaijan's support if needed, as the country had resolved its primary political issue and demonstrated its military strength. Perceptions about change in the power dynamics within Iran is also affected by Turkish military alliance with Azerbaijan and its political support during the war. The potential assistance of these two countries were expected not to use only against the center, but also to solve territorial disputes over West Azerbaijan province with Kurds if dissolution of Iran happens in future. Secondly, the victory of their ethnic brethren boosted confidence of Iranian Azerbaijanis in their own potential to achieve similar successes in the future within Iran.

Dissatisfaction among Iranian Azerbaijanis with the position of Iran and other ethnic groups increased the salience of separate ethnic boundaries. The perceived neutrality or indifference of the state and ethnic minorities negatively impacted notions about the networks of alliance with state and other groups. Additionally, the belief that the Iranian state, Persians, and Kurdish people supported Armenia further reinforced these separate ethnic boundaries, following the logic of "my enemy's friend is my enemy." Before the war, it was easier to maintain both supra-ethnic Iranian and ethnic Azerbaijani identities, but the conflict between these identities intensified as Iran and these two ethnic groups were accused of supporting Armenia during the war.

Finally, the myth from war played a significant role in increasing ethnic boundaries and solidifying ethnic identity. However, reference points from the history of the Karabakh conflict were primarily drawn from the first war. Although the role of the kin-state's war in myth-making for ethnic identity was evident during interviews, no one mentioned specific individuals or events from the second war, with the sole exception of the liberation of Shusha in 2020.

The main theoretical contribution of this research is the modification of Andreas Wimmer's ethnic boundary-making theory by integrating literature on kin-state politics and the relationship between war and nationalism. To achieve this, a single case study of Iranian Azerbaijanis was conducted. Wimmer primarily focused on the internal factors of institutions, power, and networks to explain varying degrees of ethnic boundaries. However, I argued that the ethnic boundary dynamics of Iranian Azerbaijanis, considered a 'least likely' case, cannot be adequately explained by focusing solely on these internal factors within nation-states. The victory of a kin-state can alter minorities' perceptions of power dynamics within their host-state by increasing the attractiveness of ethnic identity and influencing (mis)calculations about their power relative to the central authority. Furthermore, the network of alliances can be negatively

affected if the state and other ethnic groups adopt different political stances. Lastly, war of kin can function as a mythomoteur, solidifying ethnic identities through references to specific events, memory politics, and the heroification of certain individuals.

However, the diverse and sometimes opposing views expressed by interviewees about the Karabakh war allowed me to identify more limitations and propose an agenda for future research. The respondents' answers varied primarily based on their sources of information about the war. These sources included family members, nationalist activists, citizens of Azerbaijan, Iranian Azerbaijanis living in border regions, different Telegram channels and Instagram pages, Iranian state and opposition media, Turkish and Azerbaijani TV channels, and international media in English. These varied sources of information do not only influence the mythomoteur power of the war and alter the network of alliances, but also reshape the entire value of 'victory' by attributing it with adjectives such as just or unjust. This complexity highlights the need for more research to better understand the different perspectives on the war and its impact on ethnic identity and boundaries.

Appendices

Appendix A

Müsahibədə iştirak üçün təsdiq forması (in Azerbaijani, English below)

Mərkəzi Avropa Universitetində Milliyyətçilik Araşdırmaları ixtisası üzrə magistr tələbəsi olan İsmayıl Zeynallının magistratura tezis araşdırma layihəsi üçün ediləcək müsahibəyə şəxsi məlumatlarımın paylaşılmaması şərtlə qoşulmağı qəbul edirəm. Araşdırma haqqında məlumatlar ətraflı şəkildə araşdırmaçı tərəfindən bildirildi. Danışığımızın səs yazıya alınmasına razılıq verir və araşdırma nəticələrinin Mərkəzi Avropa Universiteti ilə paylaşılmasını təsdiq edirəm.

Bu araşdırma layihəsi professor Daniel Bokslerin elmi bələdçiliyi ilə aparılmaqdadır.

Araşdırmaçının əlaqə məlumatları: zeynalli_ismayil@student.ceu.edu

Müsahibə edilənin adı

Tarix

İmza

Araşdırmaçının adı

Tarix

İmza

Consent Form

I hereby accept to participate in the interview for the graduate research project of Ismayil Zeynalli, a graduate student in the Nationalism Studies Program at Central European University, on the condition that my identity information will not be shared. Detailed explanations about the study were made orally by the researcher. I consent to the video recording of the interview and sharing the research findings with Central European University.

This research project is under the supervision of Professor Daniel Bochsler.

Contact information of the researcher: zeynalli_ismayil@student.ceu.edu

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Name of researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix B

A. Participant Consent and Recording

I ensured that participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and the confidentiality of their responses. Written consent was obtained from each participant. The interviews were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' responses and to facilitate detailed analysis.

B. Ethical Considerations

I adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. All data were stored securely, and interviewees were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. This commitment to ethical standards ensured the integrity of the research process and the protection of participants' rights and well-being.

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