

## **Abstract**

Azerbaijanis constitute the largest minority living in Iran. They are concentrated in three northern provinces of Iran on the borders with the Republic of Azerbaijan. The very fact sets up a strong potential for separatism on the part of Iranian Azerbaijanis. Therefore, the main objective of the paper is to analyze to what extent Iranian Azerbaijanis possess a sense of collective identity, either national or ethnic. The paper also explores to what degree this collective identity evokes separatist tendencies among Iranian Azerbaijanis or whether the Iranian regime's fear of Azerbaijani irredentism is justified.

The paper comes to the conclusion that Azerbaijanis in Iran indeed have an awareness of collective identity based on their ethnic origin which dissociates them from the Persian majority. In the past few years, they have started to speak out and demand cultural emancipation, most of all to be allowed to study in their own language. Although Iranian Azerbaijanis have political demands, they primarily seek for their minority rights, perhaps even autonomy but there are no indicators so far that they strive for secession from the Iranian state. Nothing implies that Iranian Azerbaijanis wish to establish an independent state of their own or accede to the Republic of Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the situation in Iran is stable. The emancipation of Iranian minorities stems from the democratic deficit in the country, while the discontent with the restrictive policies of the theocratic regime applies to broad ranks of young people who demand a social change. Therefore it seems that the only long term and sustainable solution of the domestic situation is an overall democratization and liberalization of the state of affairs in Iran.