



# Iran Is More Than Persia

## Ethnic Politics in the Islamic Republic

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Brenda Shaffer

Foreword by Reuel Marc Gerecht

April 2021

FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES





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## Foreword

In the late 1980s and early 1990s in Istanbul, which then had an Iranian expatriate population in the hundreds of thousands, one could meet Iranian Azerbaijanis, often referred to in Persian as Azeris, everywhere. As a case officer in the Central Intelligence Agency then serving in the American consulate, I spoke to hundreds seeking a reprieve from the Iran-Iraq War and the Islamic Republic's stultifying theocracy. Many were trying to snag tourist visas to the United States or Western Europe and the promise of illegal immigration and a better life. Unlike their compatriots from the Iranian plateau, the Azeris felt comfortable in Turkey. It was not just the language.

As I could tell with Azeris and other Iranian minorities who came to see me, Iran was a puzzle of hybrid cultures. Persian culture and, for most, the Shiite faith defined much of who they were, even if they reluctantly acknowledged the suzerainty. Many had profoundly mixed feelings about the arrangement. Some – the Baluch, the Arabs of Khuzestan, the Turkmen, and the Kurds – did not waste time expressing their distaste for their Persian overlords.

It was clear to me then, a decade after the Iranian revolution, that Islam had not made Iran a happy, ethnically diverse family. Islam's many empires – the Ottoman, Safavid, and Qajar realms all deeply affected the cultural oikumene in which Iran's people today live – were polyglot, multicultural, and multiethnic. The only transcendent identity in the empires that gave coherence to political sovereignty, culture, and an individual's sense of self was religion.

In theory, the Islamic Republic should have brought some fraternity to Iran's peoples, especially to the minorities who had engaged in insurgencies against the heavy-handedness of the Pahlavi shahs (1925–1979). That has not happened. The Persianization and centralization of the Iranian state have continued under the clerics. In practice, Islamization has been the obverse side of Persianization. Persianizing Islamists are an unintended tribute to the Pahlavis' success in creating a national identity from a recovered, reanimated past. To

the ethnic minorities who are more agnostic, mystical, or anti-clerical (a large number among the Shia), the Islamic Republic's Persianization may even seem more onerous and insulting than that of the Pahlavi shahs.

Brenda Shaffer's monograph, *Iran Is More Than Persia*, attempts to fill a serious void in English-language scholarship about Iran's ethnic diversity. That void is glaring inside the U.S. government, where reporting on the Islamic Republic's ethnic minorities has never been a priority. Without diplomats and case officers on the ground, and with few analysts who speak the required languages (to assess the Ahvazi Arab question well, for example, one needs both Arabic and Persian), it is not surprising that attention usually goes elsewhere.

Some may find the topic of Dr. Shaffer's work controversial. It ought to be clear, however, that an innovative, deeply researched discussion of Iran's mosaic, no matter the conclusions, is exactly what a think tank should do. She is not arguing for fracturing Iran, and FDD institutionally opposes this. Within FDD, there is a wide and sharp difference of opinion on the minority question within the Islamic Republic and how outsiders should view it. For me, the physical integrity of the country is something for its denizens to decide. I would hope they can decide their fate democratically, and that self-determination, a hallowed principle of American foreign policy for over 100 years, applies as much to the peoples of the Middle East as it did to Europeans. Even for those who find that principle today unsettling, and there are FDD scholars who certainly do (in a Western parallel, sympathies would go with Spain over Catalonia, France over Corsica), a basic human right still remains: Kurds, Azeris, Ahvazi Arabs, Baluch, and Turkmen ought to be able to teach their children their mother tongues and use them publicly without fear.

No matter where one comes down on Iran's internal divisions and borders, it behooves us to be curious about the country's peoples. Curiosity should never be checked by nationalism, dogmas, or political correctness. In foreign policy, as in so much else, analytical anorexia is a sure path to surprises, mistakes, even calamity.

*Reuel Marc Gerecht*

## Introduction: Why Ethnicity in Iran Is Important

For most of the Soviet period, the West tended to refer to Soviet citizens as the “Russians” and assumed that the regime’s efforts to Russify non-Russian citizens across the Soviet Union were successful. Not until the mid-1980s, when protests emerged during Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms, did it become clear that ethno-nationalism was a politically potent force in the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and 15 new countries emerged, there was no denying that the Russification of the Soviet ethnic minorities had been a myth.

Several times in recent decades, policymakers have had to play catch-up when central governments have weakened and ethnic and other communal cleavages took center stage. This was true amid the Soviet breakup, the Yugoslav Wars, and the Syrian civil war. There may be a similar blind spot regarding Iran’s multiethnic composition and regime stability.

**“Iran is a multiethnic country; Persians comprise less than half of Iran’s population. Overwhelming majorities of non-Persian groups inhabit most of Iran’s border provinces, in contrast to Iran’s Persian-dominated center.”**

Iran is a multiethnic country; Persians comprise less than half of Iran’s population. Overwhelming majorities of non-Persian groups inhabit most of Iran’s border provinces, in contrast to Iran’s Persian-dominated center. Moreover, over 40 percent of the population of Iran lacks fluency in the Persian language.

Ethnic cleavages and dissatisfaction pose growing challenges to the rule of the regime in Iran. When they overlap with poverty and lower levels of government services and infrastructure, these challenges become more severe. Iran’s ethnic minorities inhabit the state’s

poorest provinces. The country’s growing environmental challenges, including widening water shortages, hit the ethnic minority provinces harder than the Persian center.

The growing importance of the border provinces in anti-regime activity was evident during the last major round of anti-regime protests in Iran, which began in December 2017 and surged again in late 2019. The demonstrations started in the country’s provincial cities and were more intense in the minority-heavy provinces than in the Persian heartland.

Technological changes, including widespread access to foreign television and social media in minority languages, have strengthened identity trends in Iran. Large percentages of Iran’s ethnic minorities regularly watch foreign television broadcasts in their native languages instead of regime television, which often depicts ethnic minorities with derogatory stereotypes.

Ethnic groups in Iran are also exposed via social media to the wave of identity politics in the United States and Europe. This, too, may contribute to increased opposition to the regime, particularly among Iran’s youth. Previous generations in Iran had, by and large, submitted to the notion that ethnic minorities are inferior to the great Persian nation. But Iran’s minorities increasingly reject this idea, while Persian nationalism appears to be growing among Persians dissatisfied with the religious calling of the Islamic Republic.

Since late 2017, the anti-regime activity of several ethnic groups entered a new stage, featuring increased armed attacks on army, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and government installations. Among Iran’s minorities, the Kurds, Ahwaz, and Baluch have active paramilitary groups. Most of the violent anti-regime activity in Iran takes place in their home regions: Sistan-Baluchistan, Khuzestan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan. Iran’s border areas populated by Kurds and the Baluch endure regular threats to the regime’s forces. Ahwazi groups periodically conduct anti-regime attacks in Khuzestan but do not run a constant insurgency like the Kurds and Baluch do.

A critical variable in assessing the potential ethnic threat to the regime is the attitude of Iran's Azerbaijanis, because of their large numbers, wealth, and perceived status as a mainstay of the regime. A major turning point for this group took place last autumn in response to Iran's support for Yerevan during Armenia's war with Azerbaijan. Iranian Azerbaijanis observed Iranian trucks moving Russian arms and supplies to Armenia. The Iranian government arrested dozens of Azerbaijanis for protesting Tehran's support for Armenia. Amidst rising Azerbaijani opposition, the regime's policy of backing Armenia may no longer be sustainable.

But the Azerbaijani challenge is not the only one. Ethnic minorities form a majority in several strategic locations in Iran. For instance, Khuzestan province, which is the center of Iran's oil production and home to several important ports and a major road juncture, has a majority-Ahwaz population. Khuzestan is an unstable province, and sustained anti-regime activity there could affect Iran's ability to produce, export, and transit oil and natural gas. In addition, Iran's strategic Chabahar Port is located in Sistan-Baluchistan, a perennially unstable province populated almost entirely by Baluch. India invested heavily in Chabahar Port, which represents New Delhi's attempt to counter China's infrastructure projects in neighboring Pakistan.

The shared non-Persian ethnic groups that straddle much of Iran's borders, especially Baluch, Kurds, and Azerbaijanis, strongly impact Iran's foreign policy with most neighboring states. These ethnic groups are a major challenge in the volatile security situation on Iran's borders with Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan. In recent years, Iran's ethnic minorities have shown organizational ability on the ground. In an all-out regime crisis, revolts in several minority provinces in Iran could mount a significant challenge to the central government.

## Tehran Knows

While they often publicly deny that Iran faces any challenge from its minorities, regime officials periodically make statements and commission internal government studies that indicate otherwise. These statements and studies provide a window into how the regime views the ethnicity question. The findings of some of these studies have been published or disseminated among officials and researchers. The studies noted that new developments, such as widespread access to social media and the establishment of the neighboring Republic of Azerbaijan, upended earlier assumptions.

Contrary to the official government line, Ali Yunesi, after serving as Iranian minister of intelligence, remarked in 2005, "I see no political threat towards Iran in the future, but if any crisis occurs, it will be ethnic and societal."<sup>1</sup> In November 2008, General Gholamali Rashid, who served as deputy commander-in-chief of Iran's joint armed forces, stated that Kurdistan, Baluchistan, and Khuzestan are hotbeds of armed opposition that Tehran must confront.<sup>2</sup> In discussing the wave of anti-regime protests in November 2019, IRGC Spokesman Brigadier General Ramezan Sharif declared that "secessionists" were involved.<sup>3</sup>

Iran's Interior Ministry periodically conducts studies on popular beliefs and attitudes, including on issues of ethnic identification. A 2004 ministry study concluded that:

ethnic identity awareness/commitment among major ethnic groups – that is, the extent to which groups' primordial claim to identity is their ethnicity rather than their national citizenship as "Iranians" – is increasing and is as follows: Azeris 83 percent; Baluch 84 percent; Turkmen 79 percent, Arabs – 76 percent, and Kurds 76 percent.<sup>4</sup>

1. Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), page 93.

2. "سرلشگر رشید: در آستانه جنگ احتمالی قرار داریم" [General Rashid: We are on the verge of a possible war], *BBC Persian* (UK), November 23, 2008. ([https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2008/11/081123\\_ka\\_rashid](https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2008/11/081123_ka_rashid))

3. "Iran warns regional states of consequences if they stoked unrest," *Reuters*, November 23, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-gasoline-protests/iran-warns-regional-states-of-consequences-if-they-stoked-unrest-idUSKBN1XX07O>)

4. Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), page 99.



In the mid-2000s, Iran’s Center for Strategic Studies conducted several studies on the country’s minorities on behalf of the Iranian parliament, or Majles. According to a 2007 report, “the country will face even more serious internal unrest unless the government better addresses the needs of its ethnic minorities.”<sup>5</sup>

Iranian scholars employed by government research institutes have also published several studies on specific provinces and ethnic groups. Almost all pointed to a trend of rising ethnically based political activity and recommended that the central government improve services and extend rights to these provinces and groups.<sup>6</sup>

Following riots by Azerbaijanis in Iran in May 2006, official journals and government research centers published several studies.<sup>7</sup> Mohammad Ali Qasemi, a researcher at the Presidential Institute for Strategic Studies, wrote that protestors and other activists clearly had demands, which included:

recognition of the Turkish language as an official language, teaching it at different educational levels, allocation of television and radio channels to this language, modification of radio and television programs ‘to stop humiliating and offensive programs’, local autonomy to the extent of federalism, some economic demands, [and] opposition to cultural assimilation.<sup>8</sup>

In 2007, Qasemi claimed that among Iran’s ethnic movements, there is “no doubt that significant developments have taken place in the last 15 years.” He noted that several factors drove an increase in ethnically based activity: wider literacy, minority activity in

cyberspace, and minority activists’ increased awareness of developments in other parts of the world due to the internet. According to his report, the Republic of Azerbaijan’s independence helped catalyze a “rise in ethnic awareness” among Iranian Azerbaijanis. Access to Azerbaijan yielded access to books, publications, films, and cultural figures there.<sup>9</sup>

In his study, Qasemi concluded:

Analysts who regarded ethnic activists as a few illiterate and deceived foreign puppets were unable to predict and understand the incidents. The notion that ethnic issues are confined to a limited number of isolated and ineffective people in society was probably one of the causes of the continuation and escalation of the recent crisis... Although it is unlikely that the movement will find tendencies to be armed, it is possible to be radicalized, depending on the policies adopted.<sup>10</sup>

## Demography

Most of Iran’s frontier provinces are heavily populated by non-Persians. Iran’s major ethnic minority groups also share ties with co-ethnics in bordering states: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Ethnic self-identity is much higher in the provinces than in the Persian-dominated center, especially Tehran. Several of these groups, such as the Kurds, Turkmen, Ahwazis, and Baluch, not only have a separate ethnic identity and language, but also are among Iran’s poorest inhabitants. Most of Iran’s frontier provinces receive a much lower level of government services and infrastructure investment than the center.

5. Ibid, page 96.

6. On the Baluch in Iran’s official Journal of Strategic Studies, see: Morad Kaviani Rad, “Political Regionalism in Iran: the Case of Iranian Baluchestan,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 10, Issue 1, 2007, pages 89–121. (<https://www.magiran.com/paper/467381?lang=en>). On the Kurds, see: J. Haghpanah, *The Kurds and the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Foreign Policy* (Tehran: Cultural Research Institution, 2009); “Ethnic Azerbaijan Nationalism: An Overview in Iran,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Volume 5, Number 2, 2002, pages 573–581.

7. See, for instance: Mohammad Ali Qasemi. “New Societal Movements: The Case of Azerbaijan,” *Presidential Institute for Strategic Studies*, Tenth Year, Number 1, 2007.

8. Mohammad Ali Qasemi. “New Societal Movements: The Case of Azerbaijan,” *Presidential Institute for Strategic Studies*, Tenth Year, Number 1, 2007.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

Tehran itself is a multiethnic city; approximately half its residents are non-Persians. Many of Tehran's neighboring satellite towns, such as Islamshahr, Shariyar, and Varamin, as well as nearby cities, such as Karaj, the capital of the neighboring province Alborz, have an even higher ethnic minority composition, and minority-language use is stronger in these towns and cities than in Tehran proper.

## Iran's Ethnic Groups

### Persians

Persians are the largest ethnic group in Iran. However, they comprise less than 50 percent of the population. Central Iran has an overwhelming Persian majority. According to a study published by the Iranian government's Council of Public Culture, Persians comprise at least 50 percent of the population in 12 provinces: Isfahan, Busher, Tehran, North Khorasan, Razavi Khorasan, Semnan, Fars, Qom, Central Kerman, Hormozgan, and Yazd. In the provinces of Alborz, North Khorasan, Khuzestan, and Golestan, Persians do not form the majority but have a strong presence.<sup>11</sup>

Until the 20th century, Iran functioned as a multilingual empire, with Turkic dynasties leading the country's political and military institutions and Persian speakers dominating cultural life. This changed under the Pahlavi shahs, who promoted Persian nationalism as a state ideology. Technological advances allowed the central government a more significant presence in the provinces in the 20th century. With an increasingly firm grasp on education and the press, the Pahlavi regime attempted to assimilate ethnic minorities into a Persian-centric society.

Despite officially adopting Islam as the state ideology, the Islamic Republic retained the Pahlavi's Persian-centric policies.

### Azerbaijanis

The Azerbaijanis are Iran's second-largest ethnic group. In Iran, Azerbaijanis are often referred to and self-refer as Turks and refer to their language as Turki. In Persian, the group is referred to as Azeris. Turkish media refer to the Azerbaijanis in Iran as Turks, Azerbaijani Turks, or Azeri Turks. In the Republic of Azerbaijan, co-ethnics in Iran are often referred to as southern Azerbaijanis. They are predominately Shiite. They are concentrated in Iran's northwest provinces, forming a clear majority in the region between the Caspian Sea and the border with Turkey and between Tehran and Iran's border with the Republic of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani Turks comprise at least 50 percent of the population in six provinces: East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, Qazvin, and Hamadan. Most of Iran's Turkic tribal groups identify as Azerbaijanis. This includes the Qashqai, located in Fars province, and other mountainous Turkic tribal groups. These tribal groups are much less assimilated into general Iranian culture and the Persian language than the urban Azerbaijanis.

### Kurds

Kurds are Iran's third-largest ethnic group. Iran's Kurds inhabit the country's Zagros Mountains bordering Turkey and Iraq. Kurds comprise a majority in three provinces: Ilam, Kurdistan, and Kermanshah. There are major Kurdish populations present in several other provinces. Kurds represent the second-largest group in West Azerbaijan province, and there is a large Kurdish community in North Khorasan province. Iran's Kurds belong to both Sunni and Shiite denominations. Kurds speak several different dialects of the Kurdish language, such as Sorani, Kurmanji, and Southern Kurdish.

11. Secretary of the Council of Public Culture Mansour Va'ezzi, "بررسی و سنجش شاخص‌های فرهنگ عمومی کشور" [Study and evaluation of the indicators of the general culture of the country], 2010.

### Ahwazi Arabs

The Ahwazis mainly live in two areas: Khuzestan province and the Persian Gulf coastal region between Bushehr and Bandar-e Abbas. Ahwazis also inhabit regions in Hormozgan, Elam, Boyer Ahmad, and Fars provinces as well as Iran's Gulf islands. These people refer to themselves as Ahwaz, while Persians refer to them as Ahvaz or Arabs.

The Arabic dialect spoken by Ahwazis varies. In the Khuzestan region, the Ahwazis speak a dialect close to Iraqi Arabic, while those in the south, in Bushehr and Hormozgan, speak the Gulf dialect. Northern Ahwazis are both Shiite and Sunni, while those in the south are predominately Sunni. Tribal affiliations and identity are strong among the Ahwazi.

Iran's Arabs refer to the greater Khuzestan region as al-Ahwaz, encompassing Khuzestan, Bushehr, Hormozgan, and some parts of the Elam, Boyer Ahmad, and Fars provinces.

In 2016, the population of Iran's Khuzestan province stood at 4.7 million. The bulk of Iran's oil production is located in Khuzestan province.<sup>12</sup> The oil and natural gas sector employs a large portion of Iran's Ahwazis. However, the province's Persian residents hold the high-paying jobs in the oil and petrochemical industry, while Ahwazis hold mostly blue-collar jobs. On January 6, 2021, Mohsen Haidari, representative of the supreme leader in Ahwaz, claimed that ethnic Arabs hold only 5 percent of the province's management-level jobs in the oil industry. He noted that when candidates with Arab-sounding names apply for well-paying jobs in the sector, they do not receive interviews.<sup>13</sup>

Khuzestan suffers from extreme water shortages as well as from health threats created by Iran's oil and petrochemical industry there.

### Lurs

The Lurs reside mostly in the central and southern parts of the Zagros mountains and comprise a majority in Iran's Lurestan, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad provinces. They are Shiite. The Bakhtiyars are one of the major tribal groupings of the Lurs and inhabit the Chahar Mahall va Bakhtiari province.

### Gilaks and Mazanis

Iranian government sources often refer to Gilaks and Mazanis as "northerners." Both groups often self-refer as "Caspianites." They comprise the majority in two provinces: Gilan and Mazandaran, which border the Caspian Sea. Their geographic location on the coast informs their lifestyle and culture.

### Turkmen

Iran's Turkmen are concentrated in North Khorasan and Gulestan provinces. Most of Iran's Turkmen are Sunni. Tribal groupings are strong among the Turkmen, and several of the tribes stretch into neighboring Turkmenistan.

### Baluch

Iran's Baluch live primarily in Sistan-Baluchistan, which is Iran's poorest province and has Iran's highest unemployment rate and lowest literacy rate. Most Baluch are Sunni. Tribal affiliations are strong among the Baluch.

12. Khuzestan contains approximately 80 percent of Iran's oil reserves and the bulk of its natural gas production. U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Agency, "Background Reference: Iran," January 7, 2019. ([https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/Iran/background.htm](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iran/background.htm)); see also: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, "Khuzestan: Iran's Achilles Tendon," August 26, 2013. (<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp09-00438r000100380001-7>)

13. "Official Confessions: Arabs are Seriously Discriminated in Iran," *Padmaz* (Iran), January 6, 2021. (<https://padmaz.org/en/?p=268>)

## Iran by the Numbers

To assess the relative strength of Iran's ethnic groups, it is important to have accurate statistics. Four primary sources are the basis of this analysis: (1) statements of Iranian officials, (2) the Iranian government's Values and Attitude Survey, (3) a report by Iran's Council of Public Culture, and (4) comprehensive historical survey data compiled by the Iranian military.

According to these sources, Persians comprise less than half of Iran's population. The sources also show that non-Persian groups form overwhelming majorities in most of Iran's border provinces, in contrast to Iran's Persian-dominated center. Ethnic identity and use of local languages are much stronger in the border provinces than among the minorities residing in Iran's center. Likewise, Persian proficiency is much weaker in the provinces than in Iran's central cities.

Many prominent academic and policy studies on Iran published in English in recent years rely on questionable data in assessing the size of Iran's ethnic groups. Most refer to the CIA's *World Factbook* as their key source,<sup>14</sup> even though the CIA stopped reporting the ethnic breakdown in Iran in 2016 (in contrast to its reporting on most other countries). This cessation likely signaled a lack of confidence in the data. Most likely, the assessments prior to 2015 also were not reliable. From 2000 to 2010, the *Factbook* claimed the Persian population comprised 51 percent of the population and the next-largest group, the Azerbaijanis, comprised 24 percent. One year later, in 2011, the *Factbook* reported, with no explanation, a significant change in its assessment: the Persian population was increased to 61 percent, and the Azerbaijani share was shrunk to 16 percent.

Among researchers, the most contested question is the number of Azerbaijanis in Iran. Accuracy is critical, since they are the largest non-Persian minority. In addition, the Azerbaijanis are Iran's only minority group in which significant numbers of the group assimilate and intermarry with Persians and reside in Iran's central provinces. Hence the debate on their numbers and identity, especially in ethnically mixed cities such as Tehran.

The Iranian government's demographic studies likely underestimate the number of Ahwazis. Since the group is concentrated in very strategic regions of the country – Khuzestan and Bandar Abbas, the centers of Iran's oil industry – this underestimation may reflect an intentional effort to obscure the government's potential vulnerability. Khuzestan alone has close to 5 million inhabitants, and at least half of the population is Ahwazi. Thus, the true number of Ahwazis is likely higher than reflected in Tehran's studies.

### Official Statements

While Iran does not publish official statistics on the ethnic background and native language of its citizens, Iranian officials periodically cite government numbers, especially when discussing educational challenges. Education Ministry officials often cite data on the number of speakers of Iran's various languages. In December 2009, for instance, Hamid Reza Haji Babai, then-minister of education and currently a member of Iran's parliament, reported that 70 percent of Iran's pupils are bilingual, with Persian still not a primary language after the first grade.<sup>15</sup>

14. Most U.S. think tank publications base reports on Iran's ethnic composition on older versions of the CIA's *World Factbook*. See, for instance: "Iran Factbox," *United States Institute of Peace*, accessed March 14, 2021. (<https://iranprimer.usip.org>); Bijan DaBell, "Iran Minorities 2: Ethnic Diversity," *United States Institute of Peace*, September 3, 2013. (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/sep/03/iran-minorities-2-ethnic-diversity>). Many academic publications published in recent years also refer to the *World Factbook* as their source on Iran's ethnic composition.

15. معاون آموزش و پرورش خیرداد: 100 ساعت آموزش زبان فارسی به کودکان دوزبانه در پیش دبستانی. [Deputy Minister of Education announced 100 hours of Persian-language teaching in preschool for bilingual children], *Iranian Students News Agency* (Iran), September 2, 2012. (<https://www.isna.ir/news/91072213844/معاون-آموزش-وپرورش-خیرداد-100-ساعت-آموزش-زبان-فارسی-به-کودکان>); چالش‌های حل‌نشده آموزش و پرورش در ایران [Unresolved challenges of Education in Iran], *Deutsche Welle* (Germany), September 22, 2017. (<https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/چالش‌های-حل‌نشده-آموزش-و-پرورش-در-ایران/a-40624912>)



During an official visit to Turkey in January 2012, then-Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, in pointing out the commonalities between Turkey and Iran, stated that 40 percent of Iranians speak Turkish,<sup>16</sup> suggesting that 40 percent of the country is ethnically Turkic.

**The Iranian Government’s Values and Attitudes Survey**

In 2015, Iran’s Office of National Projects of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior, conducted face-to-face interviews with 14,906 Iranian citizens in all 31 of Iran’s provinces, in both rural and urban

locations.<sup>17</sup> The 2015 Values and Attitudes Survey asked extensive questions that provide critical data regarding Iran’s ethno-linguistic composition.

When asked which language they speak at home, most non-Persians reported they do not speak Persian at home. The percentages of Turkmen and Baluch who reported speaking their minority language at home were exceptionally high: 92 and 94 percent, respectively.

Interestingly, 15 percent of the self-identified Persian respondents reported that they speak a minority language at home. This may indicate that they are partially assimilated.

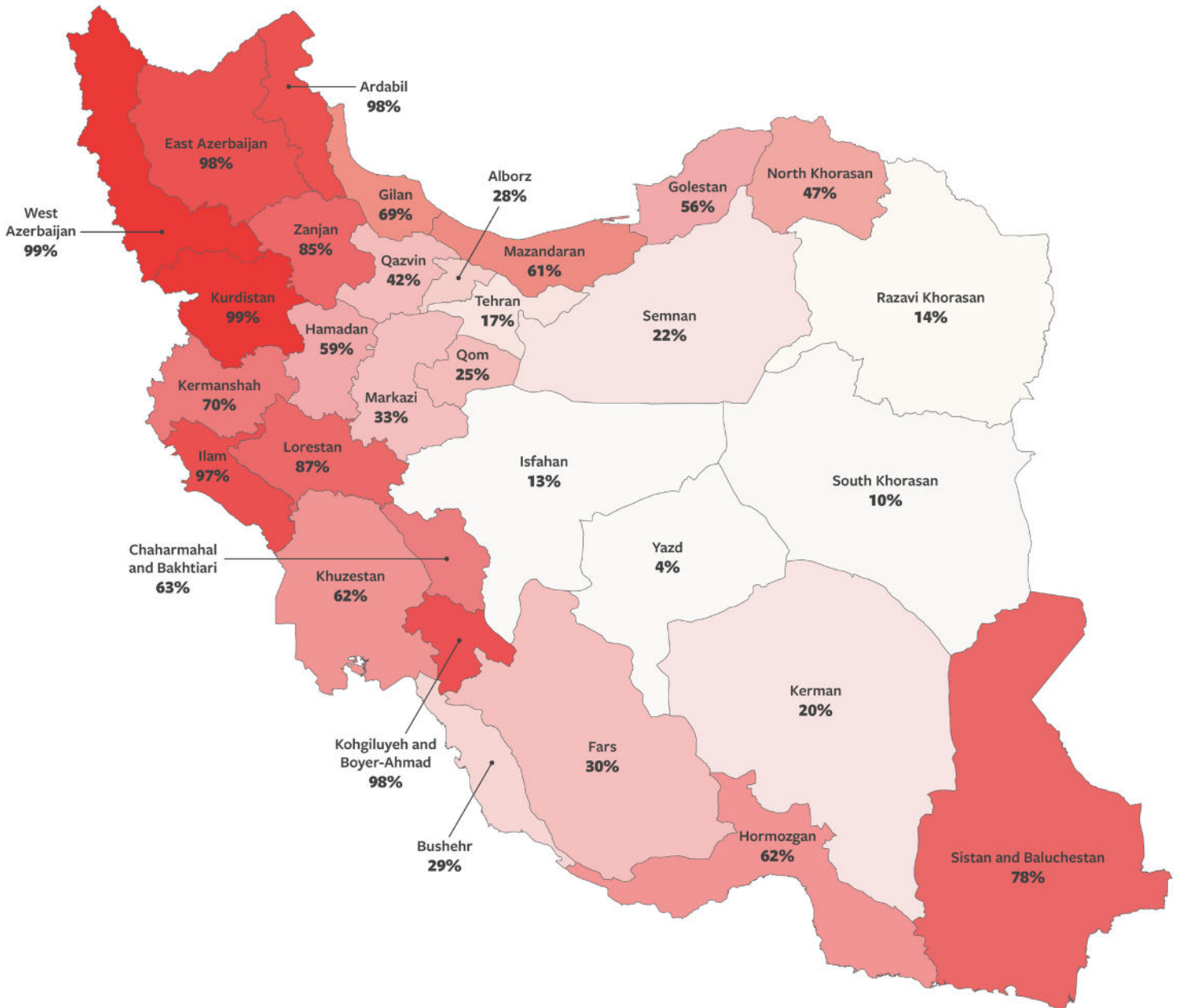
**Language Spoken at Home: Persian vs. Local Ethnic Language**

Ethnic Group	Local Ethnic Language	Persian
Persian	15%	85%
Azerbaijani	79%	21%
Lur	85%	15%
Kurd	85%	15%
Turkmen	92%	8%
Arab	82%	18%
Talesh	74%	26%
Baluch	94%	6%
Gilak	70%	30%
Mazani	65%	35%

16. HarayHarayMenTurkem, “Iran Foreign Minster: 40% of Iranians talk in Turkish,” *YouTube*, January 21, 2012. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFZVGvsw9gk>)

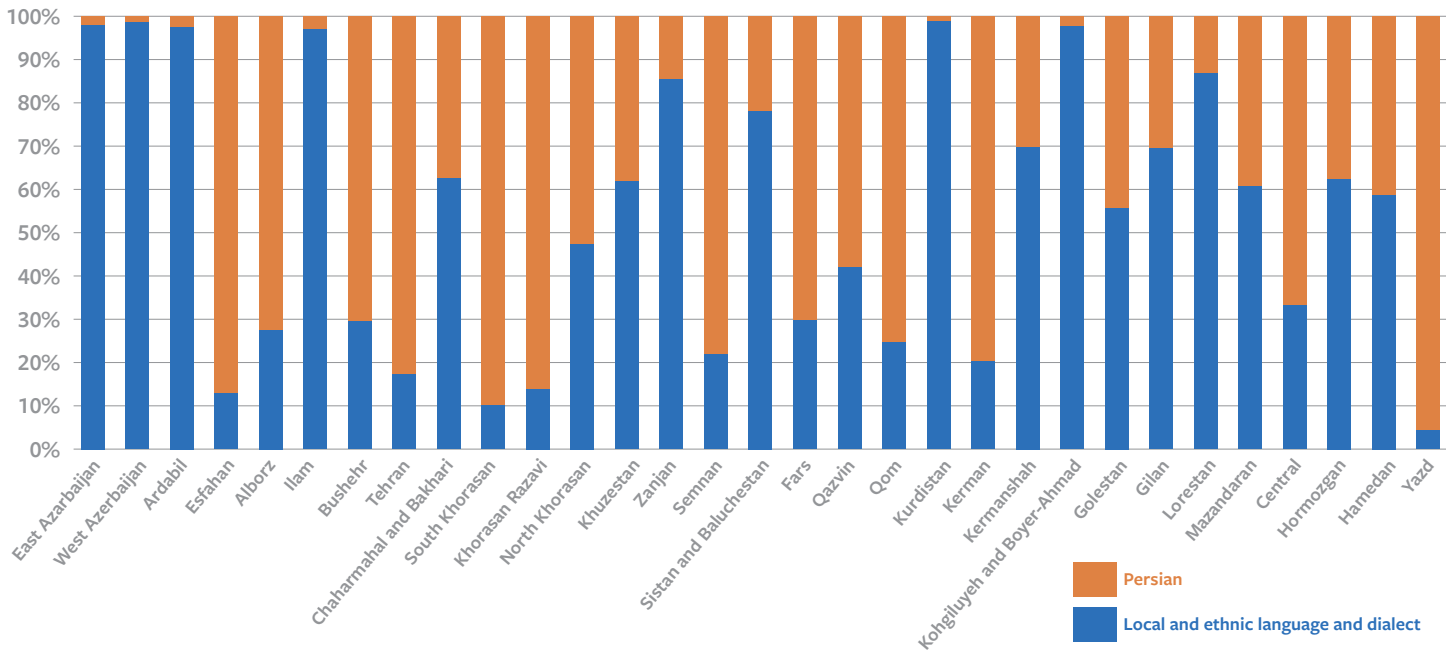
17. Islamic Republic Ministry of Culture and Guidance, Office of National Plans, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior, National Center for Social Observation, “Third Values and Attitudes Survey,” 2015. For background on the survey, see: Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Culture and Guidance, Research Center for Culture, Art and Communication, “A Brief Introduction to Iranian National Plan of Values and Attitudes (Third Wave),” November 28, 2017. (<https://www.ricac.ac.ir/en/en/7>)

### Percentage of Population Speaking Languages Other Than Persian at Home



There is significant variation in the extent of use of Persian between the central and border provinces of Iran. Within ethnic groups, residents of provinces where their group forms the majority almost universally speak their ethnic languages at home, while those in mixed provinces have greater variation in the language spoken at home. For instance, 21 percent of Azerbaijani respondents reported speaking Persian at home. Among those individuals, only 12 out of more than 1,000 respondents resided in the main Azerbaijani-populated provinces (Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, Zanjan, and West Azerbaijan). In Persian-dominated provinces, a greater number of Azerbaijanis reported speaking Persian: 60 percent in Tehran province and 42 percent in Alborz.

### Language Spoken at Home, by Province



A significant gap in Persian proficiency exists between ethnic minorities who live in rural areas and those who live in urban areas. Forty percent of those who live in urban areas consider their knowledge of Persian “very high,” compared to only 21 percent of respondents living in rural areas. Overall, 40 percent of the survey respondents described themselves as “not fluent” in Persian.

### Level of Persian-Language Knowledge

Ethnic Groups	To Some Extent or Less	High and Very High
Azerbaijani	43%	57%
Lor	41%	59%
Kurd	34%	66%
Turkmen	54%	46%
Arab	39%	61%
Talesh	35%	65%
Baluch	46%	54%
Gilak	51%	49%
Mazani	48%	52%

Among the Azerbaijanis in Tehran province, an exceptionally high number of respondents (67 percent) declined to answer the question on their Persian-language proficiency, likely suggesting embarrassment regarding their knowledge. In the Azerbaijani-populated provinces, by contrast, the overwhelming majority answered this question.

**Persian-Language Proficiency Among Azerbaijanis in the City of Tehran, by Age Group**

Age	Very Low	Low	To Some Extent	High	Very High	NA	N
15-25	0%	0%	4%	13%	9%	74%	15%
26-35	0%	0%	1%	20%	11%	68%	27%
36-45	0%	0%	6%	13%	9%	72%	17%
46-55	0%	2%	6%	18%	5%	69%	20%
56-65	5%	5%	9%	21%	2%	58%	14%
66-75	4%	13%	21%	13%	4%	46%	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Azerbaijani Persian-language proficiency varied significantly across different age groups. The younger generations reported greater capability in Persian than the older generations, potentially indicating that the government’s Persianization policies have achieved success over time. For example, Azerbaijanis between the ages of 15 and 25 reported being mostly proficient in Persian, in contrast to 40-year-olds and above.

**Persian-Language Proficiency Among Azerbaijanis in Four Predominantly Azerbaijani Provinces (Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Zanjan), by Age Group**

Age	Very Low	Low	To Some Extent	High	Very High	NA	N
15-25	1%	4%	22%	41%	23%	8%	21%
26-35	1%	5%	33%	43%	14%	4%	26%
36-45	7%	10%	37%	29%	13%	4%	23%
46-55	15%	13%	37%	25%	7%	3%	14%
56-65	26%	24%	22%	16%	8%	4%	10%
66-75	46%	24%	23%	4%	2%	1%	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>100%</b>



### Azerbaijanis’ Declared Persian-Language Proficiency, by Age Group

Age Group	Very Low	Low	To Some Extent	High	Very High	N
15-25	1%	3%	18%	43%	35%	21%
26-35	1%	4%	27%	42%	26%	27%
36-45	5%	8%	33%	33%	20%	21%
46-55	10%	10%	33%	31%	16%	14%
56-65	19%	19%	25%	25%	13%	11%
65+	33%	22%	27%	12%	7%	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>100%</b>

At the same time, Iran’s ethnic groups expressed a strong desire to teach their children their mother tongues. In what could be an indicator of self-identification, a majority of respondents from all ethnic groups said they feel “highly” or “very highly” committed to teaching their mother languages to their children.

### Desire to Teach Mother Language to Own Children

Ethnic group	Very Low	Low	To Some Extent	High	Very High
Persian	5%	5%	33%	36%	21%
Azerbaijani	2%	3%	18%	46%	31%
Lur	4%	6%	27%	44%	20%
Kurd	3%	2%	16%	34%	45%
Turkmen	1%	0%	12%	48%	40%
Arab	2%	3%	28%	32%	36%
Talesh	3%	1%	33%	41%	22%
Baluch	0%	1%	9%	52%	38%
Gilak	4%	7%	30%	50%	9%
Mazani	1%	1%	23%	53%	21%

## Iran’s Ethnic Groups

Ethnic group	Percentage of Total Population, According to 2010 Study
Persians	47%
Turks	23%
Northern <sup>18</sup>	9%
Kurd	8%
Lur	7%
Arab	2%
Baluch	2%

### Council of Public Culture Study

From 2008 to 2010, Mansour Va’ezi, secretary of Iran’s Council of Public Culture, led a study on the cultural practices and ethnic composition of each of Iran’s 31 provinces. The results of the study, published in 2010, showed that Persians comprised 47 percent of the population of Iran. The next-biggest group was the Turks, at 23 percent.<sup>19</sup>

The 2010 study seems to undercount the Baluch and Arabs. For instance, according to official Iranian government data, the population of Sistan-Baluchistan province stood at 2.8 million in 2016. It is doubtful that roughly 1.2 million non-Baluch live in Sistan-Baluchistan.

### Iranian Military Survey

The most detailed historical survey of Iran’s villages and towns, conducted by Iran’s military, shows that Persians form less than half of Iran’s population. From 1949 to 1952, the Iranian Military Geographic Research Headquarters published *Geographic Culture of Iran*, an 11-volume survey of the language and religious composition of almost every town and village in Iran.<sup>20</sup> The lead author, Hossein Ali Razmara, was an instructor at Iran’s war college and headed the military’s geographical department. The survey is very detailed and provides important insights into the composition of Iran’s population today. According to this study, the Iranian population stood at 17.15 million people in 1949,<sup>21</sup> with Persians comprising an estimated 49.5 percent of the population. The study categorized all inhabitants of Tehran and other major cities in central Iran as Persians, since they were likely to be proficient in the Persian language. Thus, the survey overestimated the ethnic Persian population.

18. “Northern” here refers to Gilaki and Mazani.

19. Secretary of the Council of Public Culture Mansour Va’ezi, Islamic Republic of Iran, “بررسی و سنجش شاخص‌های فرهنگ عمومی کشور” [Study and evaluation of the indicators of the general culture of the country], 2010.

20. Hossein Ali Razmara, فرهنگ جغرافیایی ایران [*Geographical Culture of Iran*] (Tehran: Iranian Military Geographic Research Headquarters, 1949–1952).

21. See also: Julian Bharier, “A note on the population of Tehran, 1900–1966,” *Population Studies*, Volume 22, Issue 2, 1968. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00324728.1968.10405540>)

According to the study, the ethnic composition of Iran in 1949 consisted of:

- Persians: 8,543,586
- Turks: 4,452,666
- Kurds: 1,165,087
- Lurs: 530,285
- Baluch: 395,257
- Arabs: 274,423
- Turkmen: 127,117
- Others (small groups and unknowns, including Gilanis [Gilaks, Gilakis], Lakis, Laris, Mazanis, Armenians, Georgians, and Jews): 2,000,000

This detailed historical survey reinforces later studies indicating that Persians comprise less than half of Iran's population, since it is highly unlikely that the percentage of Persians grew over the second half of the 20th century: There has been little outmigration among several of Iran's ethnic minorities (Kurds, Baluch, and Turkmen) from their native provinces, limiting their assimilation. Moreover, because the study categorized all residents of Tehran and other major central Iranian cities as Persians, it accounted for any assimilation that has occurred among minorities residing there. Finally, birth rates in Iran's border provinces are higher than in the center.

## The Islamic Republic's Policies Toward Ethnic Minorities

Tehran goes to great lengths to suppress political activity by ethnic minorities, including by assassinating and executing political and cultural leaders both in Iran and abroad and prohibiting the use of minority languages in official settings, such as schools and courts. The Islamic Republic arrests and imprisons, on various national security charges, citizens who join ethnically based political organizations or parties. If the

regime had no ethnic challenges, it likely would not feel compelled to apply such measures.

When faced with challenges from groups with Sunni members, such as the Kurds, Baluch, and Arabs, Tehran tries to frame the situation in religious rather than ethnic terms, claiming the perpetrators are members of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, or other extremist Sunni organizations. This policy also attempts to elicit Western sympathy for Tehran's efforts to address a common extremist challenge.

The regime often denies the existence of non-Persian groups in Iran. For instance, state media, publications for schools, leading Persian intellectuals, and senior government representatives frequently claim that Iran's minorities are genetically Persian but lost their Persian language due to foreign invasions. In this way, the government and Iranian intellectuals justify attempts to make these ethnic minorities into Persian speakers. One official who has made this claim in recent years is Ali Yunesi, an adviser to current President Hassan Rouhani. Yunesi said that Iran's Turkish speakers are actually "Persians who were forced to speak Turki."<sup>22</sup>

Official educational curricula attempt to assimilate Iran's ethnic minorities by teaching them that they are Persian in origin. For example, in 2020, the Ministry of Education published a magazine for second- and third-graders claiming that "Azeris" are actually Persians whose language changed several centuries ago.<sup>23</sup> School materials also depict Iran's Ahwazi population as Persians whom neighboring Arabs "Arabized." Official media often refer to these groups as "Arabic speakers" or "Kurdish speakers" rather than Arabs and Kurds. Furthermore, the government often attempts to bar citizens from registering names for their newborn children in minority languages. Ahad Jodi, director of the Civil Registry in East Azerbaijan

22. "Iranian MPs of Turkish origin slam Rouhani's aide over Azeri remarks," *Daily Sabah* (Turkey), April 22, 2018. (<https://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2018/04/22/iranian-mps-of-turkish-origin-slam-rouhanis-aide-over-azeri-remarks>)

23. Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Education, Educational Research and Planning Organization, *Roshd Noamooz*, Series 1, Number 317, September 2020.

province, noted that despite these government efforts, 40 percent of names in the province are Turkic ones.<sup>24</sup>



📍 *The government removes a Ferdowsi statue in Salmas following protests in 2015.*

In its efforts to mold minorities into the Persian identity, the regime often promotes Persian symbols and figures that the minorities disdain. For instance, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, one of the most revered works of Persian literature, portrays Arabs and Turks negatively. In several cities where minorities dominate, such as Salmas, Ardabil, and Ahvaz, the local government removed statues of Ferdowsi following violent demonstrations, though they later returned on orders from the central government.

## Use of Ethnic Minority Languages in Schools and Official Settings

The Islamic Republic's Constitution formally guarantees equal rights to all "people of Iran", regardless of ethnic or tribal background. "[C]olor, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege," states Article 19. Article 15 designates Persian as the Islamic Republic's official language: "The documents, correspondence, official

texts, and schoolbooks must all be in this language and script." Article 15 also states that the use of "regional and ethnic languages in the press, the mass media, and literature at schools is freely permitted." Thus, the use of minority languages in schools is legal but not a protected right. Article 16 of the Islamic Republic's Constitution guarantees the right to study Arabic in grades above elementary school, but Arabic is not allowed as a language of school instruction.<sup>25</sup>

In actuality, Tehran does not allow Iran's ethnic minorities to operate schools in their languages or to teach their languages alongside Persian. The government has prosecuted teachers for providing private lessons to students in their mother tongues. Most recently, Tehran sentenced one teacher, Zahra Mohammadi, to 10 years in prison for teaching Kurdish to children in private lessons in Sanandaj in Kurdistan province.<sup>26</sup>

While Tehran has long barred schools and government institutions from using minority languages, the regime took few measures before 2019 to obstruct minority-language use in informal settings, such as in homes. In May 2019, however, Iran's Ministry of Education announced that five-year-old and six-year-old children would be required to take proficiency tests in the Persian language.<sup>27</sup> Tehran would then bar children who fail the test from attending regular schools, placing them instead in special education schools for children with disabilities that would classify these children as "slow learners" or hearing-impaired. This policy effectively forces families to begin teaching and speaking Persian at home.

Tehran has also subjected teachers to new language demands. According to Iran's Ministry of Education, applicants with "thick accents" are not qualified to

24. "40]۰۴ هستند ترکی هستند percent of the names in East Azerbaijan are Turkish]," *Azar Anjoman News* (Iran), January 31, 2021. (<https://aazaranjoman.ir/40-درصد-اسامی-آذربایجان-شرقی-ترکی-هستند-40>)

25. Pupils in Iran study Quran Arabic from middle school through high school.

26. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," January 11, 2021, page 9. (<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/HRC/46/50>)

27. "تست بسندگی زبان فارسی» به سنجش سلامت نوآموزان در دستور کار." *Iranian Students News Agency* (Iran), May 29, 2019. (<https://bit.ly/3ngwgiB>)



serve as teachers. Thus, teaching is de facto limited to highly proficient Persian speakers.<sup>28</sup>

In recent years, Iran has allowed several universities in the provinces to offer local languages and literature as an academic discipline. For instance, since 2016, the University of Tabriz has offered BA-level degrees in Azerbaijani language and literature.<sup>29</sup> Since 2015, a degree in Kurdish language and literature is available at the University of Kurdistan in Sanandaj. The Islamic Republic has never banned study of the Arabic language in universities.

Government services in Iran are not offered in minority languages. For example, police interrogations and court appearances must be conducted in Persian, and citizens under investigation do not receive translations to their native languages, potentially paving the way for wrongful convictions.

## Incarceration and Execution Rates

Iran's ethnic minorities are subject to disproportionately high rates of incarceration and execution. This trend is documented biannually by Javaid Rehman, the UN Human Rights Council's special rapporteur on human rights in Iran.<sup>30</sup> For instance, Kurdish political prisoners charged with national security offenses constitute almost half of Iran's political prisoners.<sup>31</sup> Kurds reportedly account for 70 percent of judicial executions despite comprising less than 10 percent of the national population. In his spring

2021 report, Rehman stated that he is "alarmed at reports of executions and enforced disappearances of ethnic minority political prisoners," and that "[t]he imprisonment of individuals from ethnic and religious minorities for practicing their culture, language or faith is an ongoing concern."<sup>32</sup>

The regime often charges ethnic minority activists and cultural figures with various national security violations in order to suppress their activities. These include charges such as defamation of the state, "war against God," and anti-Islamic propaganda.

In the wave of anti-regime demonstrations since November 2017, ethnic minority groups have been particularly active and subject to the most extreme crackdowns. In his January 2020 report, Rehman stated that during the November 2019 crackdown on protests, the death rate was highest in provinces inhabited by minorities. "Dozens of activists from ethnic minorities, including Kurds and Azerbaijani Turks, were reportedly summoned or arrested following the protests," he reported.<sup>33</sup> In particular, the regime treated Arabs harshly during and after the 2017-2018 protests, leading to many deaths, including 84 in Khuzestan.

In the last decade, international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, have given scant coverage to violations of the human rights of Iran's ethnic minorities. This contrasts with these organizations' policies in the 1990s, when they extensively covered the issue.

28. "Iran Says Women Who Are Infertile Or Have 'Too Much Facial Hair' Can't Be Teachers," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 24, 2017. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-education-ministry-teachers-rules-women-infertile-too-much-facial-hair/28694884.html>)

29. "First graduation ceremony of students of Faculty of the Azerbaijani Language and Literature of Tabriz University Held," *APA* (Azerbaijan), September 23, 2020. (<https://apa.az/en/asia-news/First-graduation-ceremony-of-students-of-Faculty-of-the-Azerbaijani-Language-and-Literature-of-Tabriz-University-held-330947>)

30. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," January 30, 2019. (<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/40/67>)

31. "UN Special Rapporteur says half of Iran's political prisoners are Kurds," *Kurdistan24* (Iraq), August 20, 2019. (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/dc2df5b1-52bd-4f9d-9b87-deef25816a98>)

32. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," January 11, 2021, page 9. (<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/HRC/46/50>)

33. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," January 28, 2020. ([https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IR/Report\\_of\\_the\\_Special\\_Rapporteur\\_on\\_the\\_situation\\_of\\_human\\_rights\\_in\\_the\\_Islamic\\_Republic\\_of\\_IranA4361.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IR/Report_of_the_Special_Rapporteur_on_the_situation_of_human_rights_in_the_Islamic_Republic_of_IranA4361.pdf))

## Suppression of Protests and Other Political Activity

The Islamic Republic does not allow political activity geared toward promoting the cultural and language rights of ethnic minorities. Even when these groups assert rights guaranteed by the Islamic Republic's Constitution, the government brands them as "separatists."

Membership in ethnically based political organizations is prohibited. Leaders and members are subject to national security and defamation offenses, long prison terms, and even execution. In his July 2019 report, Rehman contended that minorities suffer systematic oppression:

Human rights violations affecting many of the ethnic and religious minority groups include the arbitrary deprivation of life and extrajudicial executions; a disproportionate number of political prisoners; arbitrary arrests and detention in connection with a range of peaceful activities such as advocacy for linguistic freedom, organizing or taking part in peaceful protests and being affiliated with opposition parties; incitement to hatred and violence; the forced closure of businesses and discriminatory practices and denial of employment; and restrictions on access to education and other basic services<sup>34</sup>

Despite formally tolerating ethnic cultural societies, the regime arrests and convicts their members for national

security and defamation violations. One of the most prominent Azerbaijani political prisoners is Abbas Lisani, a poet and writer who promoted his native language. Tehran has held him in an Ardabil prison since July 2018. The judiciary sentenced him to eight years for "making propaganda against the Islamic Republic" and "forming a group to disrupt the country's security." At his 2019 appeal, the court lengthened Lisani's sentence to 15 years, followed by two years in exile.

In the spring and summer of 2019, massive floods in Khuzestan province led to hundreds of deaths and caused thousands to lose their homes and farmland. To quell the subsequent protests and maintain public order, Tehran deployed foreign militias from Lebanon and Iraq, including Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (Hashd al-Shaabi) and Lebanese Hezbollah, to the region.<sup>35</sup>

## Assassinations of Leaders of Ethnic Movements Abroad

Since the early days of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Tehran has assassinated anti-regime expatriates.<sup>36</sup> Leaders and representatives of Iran's ethnic minorities, especially those living in Europe, have been common targets. In Iran's most high-profile assassination operation in Europe, the clerical regime in 1992 killed Sadiq Sharafkindi, the general secretary of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, and three of his colleagues at the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin.<sup>37</sup> German courts concluded that the government of Iran was directly responsible for the murders.<sup>38</sup>

34. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," July 18, 2019, paragraph 29. (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3823681?ln=en>)

35. Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iraqis To The Rescue? Iranians Wary Of Paramilitary Forces Sent For 'Flood Relief' Efforts," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 16, 2017. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iranians-wary-iraqis-paramilitary-forces-sent-for-flood-relief-efforts/29884709.html>); "Following Iraqi Shiite Militias, Hezbollah Shows Up In Iran 'For Flood Relief,'" *Radio Farda*, April 17, 2019. (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/following-iraqi-shiite-militias-hezbollah-shows-up-in-iran-for-flood-relief-/29885674.html>)

36. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Iran's Assassination's and Terrorist Activity Abroad," May 22, 2020. (<https://2017-2021.state.gov/irans-assassinations-and-terrorist-activity-abroad/index.html>)

37. *The Criminal System: The Mykonos Documents*, Eds. Abbas Khodaghali, Hamid Nowzari, and Mehran Paydande (Berlin: Nima Books, 2000).

38. Parviz Dastmalchi, *The Text of the Mykonos Judgement* (Berlin: Azad Press, 2000); William Drozdlak, "German Court: Tehran ordered exile killings," *The Washington Post*, April 11, 1997. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/04/11/german-court-tehran-ordered-exile-killings/0a33d5cc-6f2c-40ed-aa3b-7b30ce21d767>)

The Islamic Republic continues to assassinate ethnic minority leaders and activists outside of Iran, especially those based in Europe. Recent operations in Europe include:

- In June 2020, Sadegh Zarza, a former leadership member of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, survived an assassination attempt in the Dutch city of Leeuwarden.<sup>39</sup>
- In June 2020, Danish courts convicted Mohammad Davoudzadeh Loloei, a Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin, for a plot to kill a leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA) who resides in Ringsted, Denmark.<sup>40</sup>
- In November 2017, Ahmad Mola Nissi, a Dutch citizen of Iranian origin who founded the ASMLA organization, was shot dead at his doorstep in The Hague, Netherlands. The Dutch government accused the Iranian regime of carrying out this assassination.<sup>41</sup>

Tehran has also kidnapped or demanded handovers of several ethnic activists visiting or living in neighboring countries. In October 2020, for instance, the regime kidnapped in Istanbul Habib Chaab, a Sweden-based Iranian Arab activist who reportedly led ASMLA's Swedish chapter, and brought him to Iran.<sup>42</sup> In addition, Tehran has pressured Erbil to turn over Iranian Kurdish activists who escaped to Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2020, Erbil acquiesced and returned Iranian Kurds.<sup>43</sup>

## Province Gerrymandering, Settler Programs, and Place Names

Tehran gerrymanders the borders of its provinces to prevent provinces from being dominated by any particular ethnic minority or to split ethnic groups up among several provinces. This was the case in East Azerbaijan, which Tehran in 1993 divided into two provinces with the creation of Ardabil. The Pahlavi Dynasty practiced this policy as well. In 1937, the Reza Shah government split off the Azerbaijanis in Zanzan and Qazvin from Azerbaijan State (*ayallet*). In 1935, Reza Shah split the Arab-dominated region, commonly known as al-Ahwaz, among several provinces.

**“Tehran gerrymanders the borders of its provinces to prevent provinces from being dominated by any particular ethnic minority or to split ethnic groups up among several provinces.”**

Iran also has conducted government programs to encourage Persians and other non-local groups to move into relatively mono-ethnic minority areas. For decades, Tehran has encouraged Persians and other groups to move into the strategically important Khuzestan

39. “Iranian dissident wounded in stabbing in the Netherlands, says report,” *Reuters*, June 20, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-netherlands-iran-stabbing/iranian-dissident-wounded-in-stabbing-in-the-netherlands-says-report-idUKKBN23R00D>)

40. “Trial Exposes Iran-Saudi Battle in Europe,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2020. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/trial-exposes-iran-saudi-battle-in-europe-11593158091>); “Norwegian found guilty of spying for Iran in Denmark,” *Reuters*, June 26, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-denmark-security-iran/norwegian-found-guilty-of-spying-for-iran-in-denmark-idUSKBN23X1EX>)

41. “Dutch foreign minister: Iran behind two political killings,” *Reuters*, January 8, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-netherlands-iran-kilings-idUKKCN1P2193>)

42. “Iran Intelligence Ministry Nabs Ringleader of Saudi, Israeli-Sponsored Terror Group,” *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), November 12, 2020. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/11/12/2388122/iran-intelligence-ministry-nabs-ringleader-of-saudi-israeli-sponsored-terror-group>); “Turkey says Iranian intelligence was behind elaborate plot to kidnap opponent in Istanbul,” *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iran-intelligence-turkey-kidnap-plot/2020/12/12/818e0c30-3b2c-11eb-8328-a36a109900c2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-intelligence-turkey-kidnap-plot/2020/12/12/818e0c30-3b2c-11eb-8328-a36a109900c2_story.html))

43. “Activists: Iraq’s Kurdish Region Becomes Less Safe for Iranian Dissidents,” *Voice of America*, May 13, 2020. (<https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/activists-iraqs-kurdish-region-becomes-less-safe-iranian-dissidents>)

province, the center of Iran’s oil production.<sup>44</sup> On April 15, the Ahwazi Arabs hold annual anti-regime protests called “Day of Rage” to commemorate the violent demonstrations that took place beginning on April 15, 2005, stemming from a leaked document outlining government plans to move Persians and other non-Arabs to Khuzestan. Mohammad Ali Abtahi, an advisor to President Mohammad Khatami, developed the plan. In addition, in his spring 2021 report, Rehman, the UN Human Rights Council special rapporteur on Iran, referred to the Ahwazis and stated that he is “concerned at reports of forced evictions in ethnic minority areas.”<sup>45</sup>

The regime has also systematically changed the names of geographic areas in Iran from local languages to Persian. For instance, Khorramshahr is known in Arabic as al-Mohammarah.

## Gubernatorial Appointments and Their Language Policies

In Iran, provincial governors are appointed by the central government in Tehran, not elected. Between 2010 and 2020, over 60 percent of governors appointed to Iran’s provinces were Persian or Lur.<sup>46</sup> Tehran appointed no Baluch or Turkmen as governors, and only one Arab and seven Kurds. The regime has failed to appoint any Sunni governors.

Tehran generally appoints governors to lead provinces with which they do not share ethnic ties. For instance, only one Kurdish governor has ruled a region with a large Kurdish population. In cases where the appointed governor shares the ethnicity of the governed province, the governor usually hails from another region. Tehran also seems to have a policy of sending non-Persians to

govern other minority ethnic groups to create discord among the minorities. For instance, over the last decade, the Kurdish provinces were mostly governed by Lurs, potentially to direct Kurdish dissatisfaction with the government toward the Lurs. Appointment of non-local governors prevents the emergence of local power centers in Iran.

In most provinces, the governors speak Persian in work meetings and with the wider population. The exception is East Azerbaijan province. Over the last decade, all governors appointed to this province have been ethnic Azerbaijanis, and they frequently use the Azerbaijani language at work. The governors also converse in the local language with the populations of East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and West Azerbaijan.<sup>47</sup>

**“The regime also exploits and exacerbates conflicts and cleavages between minority groups in Iran that live in close proximity or in mixed regions and have longstanding disputes over land, water, or other resources.”**

The regime also exploits and exacerbates conflicts and cleavages between minority groups in Iran that live in close proximity or in mixed regions and have longstanding disputes over land, water, or other resources. Primary examples are conflicts between Kurds and Azerbaijanis, especially in West Azerbaijan province, which both groups inhabit, and between Arabs and Lurs in Khuzestan and adjacent territories. To widen cleavages among the groups, the regime employs primarily Azerbaijanis to police Kurds in West Azerbaijan province.<sup>48</sup>

44. “Iran: Interview with Human Rights Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Miloon Kothari,” *ReliefWeb*, August 9, 2005. (<https://reliefweb.int/report/iran-islamic-republic/iran-interview-human-rights-special-rapporteur-adequate-housing-miloon>)

45. United Nations Human Rights Council, “Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” January 11, 2021, page 9. (<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/HRC/46/50>)

46. Fifty-four of 138 governors (39 percent) appointed from 2010 to 2020 were Persian, and 32 were Lur (23 percent).

47. Author’s interviews with individuals in Tabriz, December 2020.

48. Author’s interview with Rahim Rashidi, August 2020.



## Electoral Appeals to Ethnic Minorities

In recent decades, candidates in Iran's presidential and parliament elections have attempted to gain support among ethnic minority voters by promising to uphold and expand language and cultural rights. This reflects the candidates' perception that ethnic minorities desire greater language and cultural rights, and that promises to uphold these rights will garner support among ethnic minority voters.

For instance, during his first presidential bid in 1997, Khatami pledged to uphold Articles 15 and 19 of Iran's Constitution. His campaign also produced and distributed election materials in the Kurdish and Azerbaijani languages.<sup>49</sup> Khatami further promised to establish municipal elections. This idea attracted some support from ethnic minorities because it would grant them greater local influence over policies.

During Iran's 2009 presidential elections, in visits to Azerbaijani-populated provinces, Mir Hossein Mousavi, who is himself an ethnic Azerbaijani, gave speeches in the local language and read well-known Azerbaijani poems at his rallies.<sup>50</sup> He also hired popular Azerbaijani singers to compose lyrics for campaign songs in Azerbaijani.<sup>51</sup>

In his election campaigns, President Rouhani published election materials in minority languages, promised implementation of language rights, and appointed Ali Yunesi as an advisor on ethnic minority rights.<sup>52</sup> But the appointment did not generate enthusiasm, as Yunesi had served previously as Iran's minister of intelligence.

## Ethnic Minority Activity in Iran's Parliament

The Islamic Republic allows ethnically based associations to operate in the Iranian parliament. Parliamentarians from Iran's majority-minority provinces are also permitted to air demands related to the regions they represent. In 1993, parliamentarians from the Azerbaijani provinces formed the Assembly of Azerbaijan Majles Deputies faction. The faction focused on promoting issues of concern to those provinces and expanding relations with the newly independent Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>53</sup>

In 2016, Azerbaijani parliamentarians formed the Faction of Turkic Regions.<sup>54</sup> Over a hundred Majles members attended the faction's first meeting on October 30, 2016. Attendees represented 34 percent of the parliament's seats. Reportedly, when members of this faction met with intelligence minister nominee Mahmoud Alavi, they demanded education in their mother tongue, in keeping with Article 15 of Iran's Constitution. They also demanded that Tehran stop treating this request as a security issue.<sup>55</sup>

Majles members have weighed in on issues affecting Iran's ethnic groups. On the eve of planned Iranian executions of several young Kurdish men in 2010, Abdoljabar Karami, a member of parliament who represents Sanandaj, the capital of Iran's Kurdistan Province, tried to stop the executions.<sup>56</sup> In addition, Majles members have fought against name changes

49. Brenda Shaffer, "Iran, Nationalism," *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, Ed. Alexander Motyl (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2001), page 237.

50. Iran Resaneh, "سفر میرحسین موسوی به تبریز و سخنرانی او به زبان آذری" [Mir Hossein Mousavi's trip to Tabriz and his speech in the Azeri language], *YouTube*, May 26, 2009. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbRjnd8Ojxo>)

51. "سرود انتخاباتی-میر-حسین-با-صدای-رحیم-شهریاری" [Mir Hossein's campaign song with Shariyari's voice], *Mehr News Agency* (Iran), May 26, 2009. (<https://www.mehrnews.com/news/885856/سرود-انتخاباتی-میر-حسین-با-صدای-رحیم-شهریاری>)

52. "Can Rouhani's ethnic minority oriented policies be successful?" *Trend* (Azerbaijan), February 6, 2014. (<https://en.trend.az/iran/2238868.html>); "Iran's Ethnic Minorities," *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, April 23, 2014. (<http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1121746896&Country=Iran&topic=Politics>)

53. Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), page 180.

54. "Iranian Turks' new parliamentary faction breaking more taboos," *Trend* (Azerbaijan), October 31, 2016. (<https://en.trend.az/other/commentary/2679141.html>)

55. "Ethnic issues emerge as pivotal in Iran's policy making," *Trend* (Azerbaijan), August 15, 2017. (<https://en.trend.az/iran/politics/2787142.html>)

56. Nazila Fathi, "Relatives of Kurds Executed in Iran Are Denied the Remains, and 2 Are Arrested," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2010. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/12/world/middleeast/12iran.html>)

or splitting of provinces that affect ethnic minorities. For example, Majles members of Azerbaijani origin openly opposed Tehran's October 1992 decision to split East Azerbaijan province and remove the name Azerbaijan from the newly created province, Ardabil.<sup>57</sup> A parliament member from Ahwaz, Sharif al-Husseini, openly supported the protests in Ahwaz in October 2013 against Tehran's diversion of the Karun River, which exacerbated water shortages in Khuzestan.<sup>58</sup>

In an Iranian parliamentary session following Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's February 2019 visit to Iran, a parliament member from Urmia, Ruhulla Hezretpur, denounced the visit and Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani lands. He also condemned the fact that the visit had taken place during the anniversary of the 1992 Khojaly massacre of Azerbaijanis by Armenians. He pointed out that according to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, "Karabakh is an Islamic land. Now I ask, what is the difference between Palestine and Karabakh?"<sup>59</sup> Hezretpur also read a nationalist poem in the Azerbaijani language, leading some Majles members to boo him.

Following a wave of Azerbaijani protests in 2006, parliamentarians Akbar Alami from Tabriz and Nouraddin Pirmozzen from Ardabil delivered speeches before the Majles, protesting the regime's treatment of the Azerbaijani minority. Referring

to the derogative Persian practice of calling Turks donkeys, Alami also read Shahriyar's famous poem "Are you a donkey or us?"<sup>60</sup>

Majles members have sent letters of protest and petitions to the government on issues relating to their minority ethnic groups. In 2018, for instance, 50 Azerbaijani members of Iran's parliament sent a letter to President Rouhani protesting his advisor for minorities, Ali Yunesi, who said that Turks in Iran are actually "Turkish-speaking Persians" and that they, unlike other Turks, "only began speaking Turkish 300 years ago."<sup>61</sup> In addition, a Majles member from Ardabil, Sodeif Badri, announced that Majles members had signed a petition requesting implementation of Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution.<sup>62</sup>

Iranian Majles deputies from the Azerbaijani provinces led campaigns aimed at limiting Iran's relations with Armenia<sup>63</sup> and participated in demonstrations against Armenia.<sup>64</sup> Following the fall 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Ahmed Alireza Beygi, a Majles member from Tabriz, criticized Tehran, stating that Iran did not do enough to support Azerbaijan in the war, and that Turkey filled this void. Beygi issued this statement at the height of a spat in 2020 between Turkey and Iran over Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's perceived support for Azerbaijanis in Iran.<sup>65</sup>

57. Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pages 174–176.

58. "Iran: Ahwaz residents protest against Karun River diversion," *Al-Arabiya* (UAE), October 26, 2013. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/10/26/Iran-Ahwaz-residents-protest-against-Karun-River-diversion->)

59. Azerbaijan, "اعتراض نماینده اورمیه به میزبانی ایران از ارمنستان اشغالگر در سالگرد قتل عام مسلمانان آذربایجان" [Urmia representative protests Iran hosting Armenian occupier during anniversary of massacre of Azerbaijanis], *You Tube*, May 17, 2019. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=25&v=POi43CQQssY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=25&v=POi43CQQssY))

60. yaranealami, "نطق اکبر علمی در مورد حادثه آذربایجان" [Akbar Alami's speech about the incident in Azerbaijan], *You Tube*, April 22, 2009. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cEihAz4aP8>)

61. "Iranian MPs of Turkish origin slam Rouhani's aide over Azeri remarks," *Daily Sabah* (Turkey), April 22, 2018. (<https://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2018/04/22/iranian-mps-of-turkish-origin-slam-rouhanis-aide-over-azeri-remarks>)

62. "نماینده مجلس: طرح تدریس به زبان مادری در مدارس کشور آماده شد" [Member of parliament: the plan to teach in the mother tongue in the country's schools is ready], *Asriran* (Iran), April 17, 2018. (<https://bit.ly/3vfQHYS>)

63. See, for example: "Ahmad Hemmatl, Deputy From Meshkinshahr," *Resalat* (Iran), April 19, 1993, page 5. (Accessed via Foreign Broadcast Information Service)

64. Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), page 192.

65. "Ankara filled void when Tehran failed to support Baku, Iranian lawmaker says," *Daily Sabah* (Turkey), December 14, 2020. (<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/ankara-filled-void-when-tehran-failed-to-support-baku-iranian-lawmaker-says>)

## Portrayal of Ethnic Minorities by Iranian State Media

Iranian media frequently portray ethnic minorities negatively. The belittling of ethnic groups, including in mainstream official outlets, has set off mass protests, which in turn have led to arrests, deaths, injuries during ensuing regime crackdowns. The extreme responses reflect broader animosity toward the regime’s discriminatory policies and general Persian cultural hubris toward minorities.

Iran’s officially approved cultural sphere, such as films and TV, frequently applies negative stereotypes to Iran’s ethnic minorities, portraying Arabs as primitive and extremist<sup>66</sup> and Azerbaijanis as stupid. Sometimes the broadcasts that insult Arabs are targeted at the populations of the neighboring Arab Gulf States but in the process also anger Iran’s Ahwazi Arabs.<sup>67</sup>

The official Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) has often presented ethnic minorities in a very negative light, which has triggered mass public reactions from Iran’s ethnic groups. IRIB set off the first major post-revolutionary upsurge among the Azerbaijanis, a turning point of the Azerbaijani national movement in Iran. On May 8, 1995, the Iranian paper *Abrar* reported that IRIB<sup>68</sup> had conducted a survey of Iranian attitudes toward “Turk” citizens in Iran. Among the 11 questions in the survey were:

- Are you willing to marry a Turk?
- Would you allow your daughter to marry a Turk?
- Are you willing to participate in religious ceremonies (like Ashura) together with Turks?

- If you bought a house, would you be willing to be a neighbor of a Turk?
- Are you willing to live in a neighborhood or city where there is a Turk majority?
- Are you willing to be friends with a Turk?
- Are you willing to go to the home of a Turk as a guest?



IRIB Survey Questions

66. See, for example: “عکس/ گریم محمدرضا شریفی‌نیا در نقش داعش” [Photo / Grim Mohammad Reza Sharifinia in the role of ISIL], *Mashregh News* (Iran), June 7, 2018. (<https://www.mashreghnews.ir/photo/872753/عکس-گریم-محمدرضا-شریفی-نیا-در-نقش-داعش>)

67. For example, this article in the newspaper *Hamdali* states that Arabs have advanced from burying women alive to ministers in the UAE government: “کوری-تا-وزارت%E2%80%8C%8Cبه%E2%80%8C%8Cزنان-عرب-از-زنده/483690” [Arab women from cradle to the grave to the ministry], *Aftab News* (Iran), October 20, 2017. (<https://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/483690>)

68. At the time, Ali Larijani headed the Iranian National Radio and Television Broadcasting Authority. He later went on to become speaker of Iran’s parliament and one of the most influential figures in the Islamic Republic.



The results revealed Iranian society’s extremely negative attitudes toward the group, with most respondents reporting a desire not to interact with Iran’s Azerbaijanis.

Ahrar’s article on the IRIB survey triggered a wave of Iranian Azerbaijani protests beginning on May 9. University students led the protests, which focused on racism in Iranian society as well as on IRIB’s motives in conducting and publishing such a divisive survey. The demonstrations began at Tehran University. Azerbaijani students assumed that Persian students would join them, but they did not. In response to the lack of solidarity, Azerbaijani university students established their own student union. Up until then, there had been no separate student unions based on ethnicity. Protests followed in Tabriz and cities with large Azerbaijani populations.<sup>69</sup> At Tabriz University, some 2,000 students other participated in the May 9 demonstrations.

In addition, university students conducted a letter-writing campaign to the offices of Iran’s president, the Majles, the Friday sermon leaders, and the governors of East Azerbaijan, Zanjan, and Ardabil provinces. The letters condemned the survey and called for the right to use and study the Azerbaijani language at Tabriz University.<sup>70</sup>



Cockroach cartoon in Iran, May 12, 2006.

of racist publications that set off cycles of violence is the infamous cockroach cartoon. On May 12, 2006, the official government newspaper *Iran* published a cartoon of a cockroach that cannot understand a child speaking to it in Persian. In the cartoon, the parents explain to the child that the cockroach does not understand him, “because he speaks Azeri.”

The cartoon shows the cockroach saying “namana,” which means “what?” in Azerbaijani, a word widely known to Persians, as they often mimic the pronunciation when teasing Azerbaijanis. The

69. Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pages 179–180.  
70. Ibid.  
71. “Letter of the Azerbaijani Students Studying in Tehran Universities to the Azerbaijani Deputies of the Iranian Majlis,” *Azerbaijani Student Union*, May 1995. (original document)

parents advise the child not to give the cockroach any food and to starve it and suggest other ways to destruct the cockroach.

This publication triggered more than a week of mass protests that broke out on May 22 in a dozen cities with large Azerbaijani populations. The demonstrations started at Tabriz and Tehran universities and spread. The demonstrations in Tabriz, which were the largest, turned violent, targeting and damaging government buildings. In quelling the demonstrations, the regime killed at least seven people (including four in Naghadeh, West Azerbaijan province) and arrested and jailed hundreds more. Azerbaijani nationalist organizations claim 20 were killed. Mohammad Ali Qasemi, a researcher at the government-sponsored Presidential Institute for Strategic Studies, wrote, “Those protests were a manifestation of accumulated dissatisfactions.”<sup>72</sup>

**“In quelling the demonstrations, the regime killed at least seven people (including four in Naghadeh, West Azerbaijan province) and arrested and jailed hundreds more.”**

In November 2015, a racist incident on IRIB TV-2 again set off demonstrations in Iran.<sup>73</sup> On a children’s program called *Fetilehha* (“The Wicks”), a stench

in a hotel is blamed on an Azerbaijani tourist who, according to the manager, used a toilet brush to brush his teeth. The show mocked Turkic accents in Persian. The broadcast triggered a demonstration that culminated in government forces killing a demonstrator in Urmia.<sup>74</sup> Media outlets in the Republic of Azerbaijan also condemned the show.<sup>75</sup>

Similar demonstrations erupted in March 2018, this time among Ahwazis.<sup>76</sup> A children’s program on IRIB TV-2 displayed a young boy placing dolls dressed in the traditional clothing of ethnic minority groups on a map of Iran. Yet the boy did not represent the Ahwazis. Instead, he placed two dolls in Lur clothing on Ahwaz’s place on the map.<sup>77</sup> This was likely intended to stir inter-communal tensions between the Lurs and Ahwaz. The demonstrations lasted several days. Protestors chanted nationalist slogans, including against Iran’s policies of settling non-Arabs in Khuzestan: “Ahwaz belongs to Ahwazis!” and “We die for Ahwaz, no place for settlers!” The Ahwazis referred to their demonstrations as an “intifada.”<sup>78</sup>

The demonstrators also protested the government’s environmental damage to the region, which suffers from water shortages and severe health threats to residents. Reportedly, the government security forces killed 50 demonstrators and arrested over

72. Mohammad Ali Qasemi. “New Societal Movements: The Case of Azerbaijan,” *Presidential Institute for Strategic Studies*, Tenth Year, Number 1, 2007.

73. “Iranian television show sparks outrage among Azeris,” *Anadolu Agency* (Turkey), November 12, 2015. (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/iranian-television-show-sparks-outrage-among-azeris/472509>)

74. “Azeris hold protest over racial slur,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 9, 2015. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/azeris-hold-protest-in-iran-over-racial-slur/27354275.html>); “Iran’s Azeris protest over offensive TV show,” *BBC News* (UK), November 9, 2015. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34770537>)

75. “YAP Güneydə baş verənlərə reaksiya verdi [YAP reacts to what happened in the South],” *Musavat* (Azerbaijan), November 12, 2015. ([https://musavat.com/news/gundem/yap-guneyde-bash-verenlere-reaksiya-verdi\\_304663.html](https://musavat.com/news/gundem/yap-guneyde-bash-verenlere-reaksiya-verdi_304663.html)); “Iranian Azerbaijanis rise up against Tehran,” *Haqqin.az* (Azerbaijan) November 8, 2015. (<https://haqqin.az/news/56724>)

76. “In southern province, Iran’s Arabs report crackdown as regional tension simmers,” *Reuters*, May 3, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-rights-arrests-idUKKBN1I411F>)

77. Shima Silavi, “Arab Ahwaz citizens protest against Iran’s IRIB media corporation,” *Al-Arabiya* (UAE), March 28, 2018. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/media/digital/2018/03/28/Iran-s-Ahwaz-citizens-protest-against-IRIB-media-corporation>)

78. Ahwazna, “انتفاضة الكرامة: مظاهرات في الأحواز تنديدا باستهداف الهوية العربية الأحوازية” [The dignity *intifada*: Demonstrations in Al-Ahwaz condemning the targeting of the Ahwazi Arab identity], *YouTube*, March 13, 2018. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYON5XsuZgE>). The Palestinians use the term “intifada” to refer to their coordinated uprising in the late 1980s and early 1990s against Israeli rule.



300.<sup>79</sup> The government closed the Tehran bureau of *Al Jazeera* after the network reported about the protests in Ahvaz.<sup>80</sup>

Iranian Majles members from Kurdish provinces have complained about the official media's mockery of Kurdish citizens.<sup>81</sup> Kurds were especially angered by an interview with Kurdish intellectual Fariborz Azizi broadcast on January 17, 2021, by Mohammad Jafar Khosravi, host of a popular Iranian state television show. Khosravi mocked the guest's traditional clothing, saying that he looked like a shepherd ("*chorban*"). The guest retorted: "This is Kaveh Ahangar's dress and a symbol of freedom from the clutches of tyranny." Kaveh Ahangar is a venerated figure from ancient Iranian mythology who led an uprising against a foreign ruler.<sup>82</sup> The Kurdish guest's point seemed lost on the show's host.

In light of Iranian state media's practice of mocking ethnic minorities and its overall lack of interesting programming, it is not surprising that large percentages of Iran's minorities tend to watch foreign television broadcasts in their native languages instead of Iranian television, which is predominately in Persian. Azerbaijanis in Iran watch television from Turkey, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and millions of Azerbaijani speakers watch the U.S.-based Gunaz TV, which is primarily broadcast in the Azerbaijani language. Ahwazis watch television broadcasts in Arabic from Iraq and Saudi Arabia and some U.S. network broadcasts. Iranian Kurds tend to watch Kurdish-language television broadcasts, primarily from Europe and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Many Azerbaijanis in the border provinces can access television and radio broadcasts from the Republic of Azerbaijan without special satellites or other

connections. Thus, Iranian jamming of foreign media does not disrupt them. The ability to cross easily into Azerbaijan has allowed Iranian Azerbaijanis access to the internet when the clerical regime closes the internet at home. During Iran's November 2019 protests, Iranian Azerbaijanis and others were able to get information and disseminate videos and news by crossing the border.

## Ethnic Mobilization

In recent years, Iran's ethnic minority groups have proven their organizational ability. They have been able to organize demonstrations, orchestrate letter-writing campaigns, and sometimes compel the central government to reverse policies. Since the regime does not allow explicit ethnically based political organizations, parties, or activity in Iran, non-political arenas, such as sport and environmental activity, serve as surrogates for political fora. In some cases, minorities have mobilized to engage in paramilitary activity.

## Sports

Soccer games in Iran serve as a means of expressing ethnic identity and provide a venue for protests, including those with anti-regime messages. Intellectuals have poetry and literature; the wider public has soccer. Soccer stadiums are actually a logical venue for protests: Tens of thousands of people can gather without a permit or prior political organization. Thus, the soccer stadium becomes one of the only arenas where Iran's ethnic groups can express demands for rights and use their languages in a mass setting. Moreover, the regime is hesitant to break up protests at games due to the large crowds and the rowdy atmosphere, which could easily descend into violence. It is for this reason the government built a new soccer stadium for Tabriz,

79. "Iran: Reports of Ethnic Violence Suppressed," *Human Rights Watch*, May 9, 2005. (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2005/05/09/iran-reports-ethnic-violence-suppressed>)

80. Ibid.

81. "اعتراض نمایندگان کُرد مجلس به توهین به لباس کردی در صداوسیما [Kurdish MPs protest against insulting Kurdish dress on broadcast]," *Asriran* (Iran), January 18, 2021. (<https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/765858/اعتراض-نمایندگان-کُرد-مجلس-به-توهین-به-لباس-کردی-در-صداوسیما>)

82. "اعتراض نمایندگان کرد به «توهین» مجری صدا و سیما به لباس کردی," *Deutsche Welle* (Germany), January 18, 2021. (<https://bit.ly/3sGXDmZ>)

outside the city, in a valley surrounded by mountains. The deputy chief of security in East Azerbaijan province, Colonel Mir Jomehri, reportedly described the motivation as follows: “Let them shout all they want in the stadium outside the city and return quiet.”<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, the enthusiasm of Iran’s main Azerbaijani soccer team, Tractor Azerbaijan, and its fans is well-known throughout Iran. The recent name change of this team reflects ethnic motivations. For several decades, the team, which is based in Tabriz, was named Tractor Sazi Tabriz. In 2019, after the team’s privatization, the team changed its name from association with a city to association with a land- Tractor Azerbaijan, a clear expression of ethno-nationalism. In official Iranian television, the team is referred to as Tractor, omitting the word Azerbaijan. In addition, Iranian national television stations have disrupted broadcasts of the Tractor games when the anti-regime messages were obvious, such as massive chants of “Death to Khamenei” in November 2017.<sup>84</sup> Fans of Persian teams often chant racist slurs at Tractor Azerbaijan; they often call the players “*Türk-e khar*” (“Turkish donkeys”).<sup>85</sup> On several occasions, the regime has arrested Tractor fans for pro-Azerbaijani chants during matches, such as the match between Tractor and Persepolis of Tehran in 2019.

Tractor fans run several social media accounts that regularly publish ethno-nationalist slogans and express solidarity with the Republic of Azerbaijan, including support for Azerbaijan and criticism of

Tehran’s support for Armenia during the 2020 war. Tractor fans have expressed anti-Armenian sentiments at matches in recent years, indicating solidarity with the Republic of Azerbaijan. On March 1, 2019, following Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s visit to Iran, where he claimed the right to territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Tractor fans burned an Armenian flag during a match. In addition, they waved Azerbaijan’s flag and chanted “Karabakh is and will be ours.” Iranian security forces arrested 29 Tractor fans.<sup>86</sup> Fans of teams from Persian-majority areas in Iran have hurled Armenian flags at matches with Tractor Azerbaijan<sup>87</sup> several times in an attempt to incite the ethnic Azerbaijani players to break rules and thus incur fouls.

Tractor fans frequently campaign to allow women, whom the regime bars from soccer matches, to attend their games. At games, the stadium regularly sings together: “Oh my mother, sister and wife! You are ladies! Men and women are equal! Attending in community is your natural right! Azerbaijani Turk ladies rise and get your rights!” The stadium also chants, “Azerbaijan’s girls are the stars of the skies!”<sup>88</sup> Iranian gender-equality organizations rarely give a platform to these calls or report on activities not conducted in Persian. Fans of Ahwaz teams also often voice pro-Arab chants in Arabic at their soccer games.<sup>89</sup>

In June 2018, Iran national team striker Sardar Azmoun, an ethnic Turkman, announced his early retirement from Iran’s national team due to frequent racist slurs.<sup>90</sup>

83. Author’s interview with a participant in the meeting, December 2020.

84. The author observed the game and the cutting off of the broadcast.

85. See, for example, at a match with the Persepolis team: @TractorOfficial, “There is a fifa report about racism against TractorFC fans in iran. Why FIFA doesn’t condemn racism in Iran’s football? Persepolis fans called Tractor’s fans “Donkey” because of their ethnic.” *Twitter*, December 29, 2017. (<https://mobile.twitter.com/TractorOfficial/status/946805728332873728>)

86. “Iran Detains 29 Azerbaijanis for Burning Armenian Flag,” *Asbarez*, March 5, 2019. (<https://asbarez.com/178135/iran-detains-29-azerbaijanis-for-burning-armenian-flag>)

87. “Fans of Tehran football club attend match with Tebriz with Armenian flags,” *News.Az* (Azerbaijan), March 12, 2013. (<http://www.news.az/articles/armenia/77791>)

88. Güneş Azərbaycan Demokratik Türk Birliyi – GADTB, “Azərbaycan qızları-göylərin ulduzları şüarı [Azerbaijan’s girls - are the stars of the sky chant],” *YouTube*, February 6, 2019. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ghtt4v3S8B4&feature=youtu.be>)

89. “Ahwazi fans chant ‘listen Tehran, we are Arabs’ during football match,” *Al-Arabiya* (UAE), November 7, 2019. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/sports/2019/11/07/Ahwazi-fans-chant-listen-Tehran-we-are-Arabs-during-Foolad-football-match>)

90. “Iran’s Sardar Azmoun announces international retirement after World Cup abuse,” *ESPN*, June 28, 2018. (<https://www.espn.com/soccer/fifa-world-cup/story/3548973/irans-sardar-azmoun-announces-international-retirement-after-world-cup-abuse>)

## Environmental Movements

Environmental movements can also serve as surrogates for ethno-nationalist agendas.<sup>91</sup> In political systems in which ethnically based politics is illegal, environmental issues often provide a safe topic usually tolerated by non-democratic regimes. In Iran, the regime tolerates some environmental organizations and clubs.

Environmental issues are easy issues for ethnic groups to mobilize around due to their widespread appeal and broad support among ethnic groups that may split on other issues more directly related to ethno-nationalism. Members of ethnic minority groups often believe that their regions are enduring environmental damage due to discriminatory policies of the ruling regime. Environmental education can also be used to promote ethno-nationalist sentiments. Love for the land and animosity toward the outside ruler, who is seen as responsible for ecological damage, easily come together.

Iran's environmental challenges are growing more severe, with extreme water shortages in many parts of the country, frequent dust and salt storms, and health-threatening pollution. The most foreboding threats, especially water shortages, particularly afflict Iran's ethnic minority provinces. Environmental challenges clearly overlap with other minority grievances and continue to grow, increasing the discontent of ethnic groups.

## Ahwazis

The residents of Khuzestan bear the brunt of health and environmental damage from Iran's oil production, which is centered in Khuzestan, but receive little economic benefit from this industry. The Ahwazis frequently protest environmental degradation in Khuzestan province and the resulting public health dangers. Recognizing the link between environmental and ethnic political activity, the regime has arrested many Arab environmental activists.<sup>92</sup>

One of Khuzestan's main challenges is a shortage of water for agriculture and safe drinking. Many Khuzestan Ahwazis claim the regime intentionally creates water shortages to force farmers to leave their lands, thus diluting the Arab presence. Even Iranian environmental officials have criticized the central government's water-management policies in the region.<sup>93</sup>

In October 2013, thousands of Ahwazis formed a 5-kilometer human chain in Ahwaz on the banks of the Karun River to protest the river's diversion.<sup>94</sup> Ahwazis also frequently protest against the drying up of Khuzestan's wetlands, which they believe results from Tehran's policies.

## Kurdish Green Activities

Iran's Kurds have an active environmental organization that according to Kurdish representatives in the West, works to promote ethnic awareness through "green activities."<sup>95</sup> The organization organizes nature walks

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91. During the Soviet period, ethnic nationalism movements often conducted environmental campaigns. See, for instance: Jane I. Dawson, "Anti-Nuclear Activism in the USSR and Its Successor States: A Surrogate for Nationalism," *Environmental Politics*, Volume 4, Number 3, autumn 1995, pages 443–444. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09644019508414215>); Marshall I. Goldman, "Environmentalism and Ethnic Awakening," *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review*, Volume 19, Issue 3, 1992, pages 511–513. (<https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1459&context=ealr>); Duncan Fisher, "The Emergence of the Environmental Movement in Eastern Europe and Its Role in the Revolutions of 1989," *Environmental Action in Eastern Europe: Response to Crisis*, Ed. Barbara Jancar-Webster (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993). In one example of an ethno-national protest, Azerbaijanis in 1988 protested against the building of a facility for an Armenia-based aluminum enterprise in the Topkhana Forest, located in the Azerbaijani region of Karabakh. See: Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), page 128.

92. See, for instance: "Intelligence Ministry Violently Arrests Teenage Ethnic Arab Activist in Khuzestan," *Center for Human Rights in Iran*, February 15, 2017. (<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2017/02/intelligence-ministry-violently-arrests-teenage-ethnic-arab-activist-in-khuzestan>)

93. Maasouma Ibtikar, director of the Iranian Environmental Protection Agency, spoke out against the diversion. She said she opposed running the vital river dry and depriving the residents of drinking water. See: "Iran: Ahwaz residents protest against Karun River diversion," *Al-Arabiya* (UAE), October 26, 2013. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/10/26/Iran-Ahwaz-residents-protest-against-Karun-River-diversion>)

94. Ibid.

95. Author's interview with Rahim Rashidi, September 2020.



⬆ L: Map of Lake Urmia (Source: Financial Times); R: An abandoned ship stuck in Lake Urmia (Photo by Maximillian Mann/NPR)

and activities by young people to protect Kurdistan’s nature. Local residents also self-organize for firefighting to protect the region’s forests and wildlife.

### **The Azerbaijani Lake Urmia Campaign**<sup>96</sup>

Lake Urmia is the largest lake in the Middle East and the third-largest saltwater lake in the world. The lake straddles the Iranian provinces of East Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan. In August and September 2011, thousands of protestors took to the streets in Urmia and Tabriz to protest the lack of government action to save Lake Urmia.<sup>97</sup> Activists believed that government damming and causeway construction caused the lake’s retreat. Demonstrators derided the Iranian parliament’s failure to allocate funds to combat this retreat. Instead, the parliament proposed relocating the residents around Lake Urmia due to the emerging uninhabitable conditions, such as salt storms. Many of the protests ended in violent confrontations with Iranian security forces, which arrested more than 30 people. In one protest, demonstrators waved the flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Fans of Tabriz’s soccer

team, Tractor Azerbaijan, also took up the Lake Urmia issue, blaming government policies for its retreat.<sup>98</sup>

While the formal demands of the 2011 protests were ecological in nature, the intensity of the struggle and the clerical regime’s fierce reaction to it suggest that the Lake Urmia protests were part of Iran’s increasingly severe ethnic troubles.

### **Militias and Violent Ethnic Organizations**

Although its constitution does not formally discriminate against Muslims from different ethnic groups, the Islamic Republic has upheld the hegemony of the Persian language and ethnic group. The Islamic Republic used force to subdue several ethnic minority provinces from the early days of the revolution.<sup>99</sup> As the Islamic Republic consolidated its rule in late 1979 and early 1980, it faced full-scale insurgencies and rebellions in the Azerbaijani and Kurdish provinces, centered in the cities of Tabriz and Mahabad. Members of Khomeini’s inner circle enticed Kurdish and Azerbaijani groups to support the Islamic

96. Urmia has several spelling variations: Urmia, Urmiya, and Ormiyeh.

97. “The drying of Iran’s Lake Urmia and its environmental consequences,” *UNEP Global Environmental Alert Service*, February 2012. ([http://www.unep.org/pdf/GEAS\\_Feb2012.pdf](http://www.unep.org/pdf/GEAS_Feb2012.pdf))

98. “Azeri Activists Detained In Iran For Environmental Protests,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 26, 2011. ([https://www.rferl.org/a/azeri\\_activists\\_detained\\_in\\_iran/24309313.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/azeri_activists_detained_in_iran/24309313.html))

99. Güney Azerbaycan, “NBC- Turkish people protest against Khomeini - 1980 - Tabriz, Iranian Azerbaijan,” *YouTube*, June 4, 2018. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrciCoA7Gho&feature=youtu.be>)



Revolution with commitments that the new regime would allow language rights for ethnic minorities and a degree of regional autonomy. However, soon after the regime consolidated its power, it became clear that the clerics had no intention of granting either regional autonomy or the right to education in native languages. This contributed to the emergence of open rebellions by the Azerbaijanis and the Kurds.<sup>100</sup> The new regime used lethal force, executions, and mass arrests to subdue the unrest.

Since late 2017, the anti-regime activity of several ethnic groups has entered a new stage. The frequency and intensity of violent attacks on Iranian army, IRGC, and other government targets have increased. Most of the attacks occur in regions where the groups predominate: Sistan-Baluchistan, Khuzestan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and the southwest section of West Azerbaijan. Baluch, Arab, and Kurd groups frequently strike Iranian forces stationed on the country's borders. For instance, in October 2018, an ethnic Baluch group abducted 12 IRGC and security personnel in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province,<sup>101</sup> which borders Pakistan. Kurdish insurgents regularly conduct attacks on Iranian soldiers and IRGC members in provinces with a large Kurdish presence, often in cooperation with Kurds in neighboring countries, such as Iraq. Consequently, Tehran attacks Kurdish targets in Iraq, too. In addition, both Iranian and Turkish officials have publicly acknowledged the Kurdish insurgency and their cooperation against it, including through coordinated attacks against Kurdish targets.<sup>102</sup>

The Ahwaz have carried out daring attacks on Iranian military and IRGC forces. The most audacious attack in recent years occurred on September 22, 2018. Arab perpetrators attacked a military parade in Ahwaz city and killed more than 30 members of Iranian security forces as well as attendees. Following the attack, the regime executed more than 20 Ahwazis and arrested hundreds more in Khuzestan province.<sup>103</sup>

Tehran portrays the violent activities of the Baluch, Kurds, and Arabs as Sunni extremism, since the Baluch and large percentages of Iran's Ahwazi Arabs and Kurds are Sunni. Tehran often describes the groups as allies of al-Qaeda and ISIS and tries to portray the regime as a victim. This effort resembles China's claims that Uyghur anti-regime activity is connected to ISIS.<sup>104</sup> Western journalistic reporting on these violent acts often fails to examine their actual motivations and instead simply echoes the regime's erroneous claims that the attacks are connected to transnational Sunni extremist movements.<sup>105</sup> In most cases, the activity is motivated by ethnic factors, not transnational Sunni activity.

In contrast to the Baluch, Arabs, and Kurds, Iran's Azerbaijanis have not conducted violent attacks. Azerbaijanis in Iran with an ethno-nationalist agenda have determined that their movement should be non-violent. This non-violent strategy was tested in fall 2020, when some activists suggested blocking roads near the Iran-Armenia border crossing to disrupt supply convoys to Armenia during its war with the Republic of Azerbaijan. However, movement

**100.** For details of the Azerbaijani rebellion, see: Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pages 95–101. On the Kurdish rebellion, see: David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), pages 270–272.

**101.** “Iranian security staff unconscious when kidnapped to Pakistan--Guards chief,” *Reuters*, October 17, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-security-kidnapping/iranian-security-staff-unconscious-when-kidnapped-to-pakistan-guards-chief-idUSKCN1MR1Q7>)

**102.** “Turkey and Iran Unite to Attack Kurdish Rebels,” *Associated Press*, June 6, 2008. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/06/world/europe/06kurdish.html>)

**103.** United Nations Human Rights Council, “Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” July 18, 2019. (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3823681?ln=en>)

**104.** See, for example: “Uighur Extremists Joining ISIS Poses a Security and Economic Headache for China's Xi Jinping,” *Time*, July 21, 2016 (<https://time.com/4416585/isis-islamic-state-china-xinjiang-uighur-xi-jinping>)

**105.** See, for example: “Iran Says Tehran Assailants Were Recruited Inside the Country,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2017. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/08/world/middleeast/iran-tehran-attack.html>)



leaders decided that maintaining their non-violent stance was more important for the movement's long-term success.<sup>106</sup>

## The Mainstream Opposition's View on Ethnic Minority Rights

Most mainstream Iranian opposition groups want to preserve Iran's current borders and Persian hegemony within the country, including the unquestioned dominance of the Persian language. The regime skillfully uses this fact to its advantage, fostering fear among these opposition groups that regime change would threaten Iran's territorial integrity. Broadly put, the opposition envisions a democratic Iran that provides gender equality and religious freedom, but not cultural and linguistic rights for half of the population. Iran faces a conundrum: In a multiethnic state where one non-majority group – the Persians – prevails over others, future democratization in Iran would risk the loss of control over territories inhabited by some of Iran's ethnic minorities.<sup>107</sup>

Most of Iran's opposition parties and organizations profess their support for the establishment of a democratic and secular government in the event of regime collapse. However, these parties want Iran to remain a unitary state with a strong central government rather than becoming a federation or confederation.

Some opposition parties have expressed concern that in the transition to democracy, a weakened central government would give minorities an opportunity to win autonomy or split off. For this reason, some Iranian opposition figures seem to prefer a transitional period of military or strongman rule to preserve firm control over Iran's provinces.

The political programs of Iran's opposition parties focus on individual rights, such as freedom of religion and speech, but few mention communal rights for groups in Iran, with the exception of labor rights. A former Green Movement activist stated: “[T]here is no such thing as ethnic rights. There will only be universal citizenship rights in the future democratic Iran. We are all on this ship together. Either there is a democracy, and we all flourish under such a system or nobody can make it to prosperity and freedom.”<sup>108</sup>

Most opposition figures want Persian to remain Iran's only national language and do not support a policy of multiculturalism or multilingual government. Some opposition parties support the right to teach minority languages in high schools, like a foreign language or foreign literature or culture class, but all want Persian to be the primary language of instruction. Most movements oppose teaching minority languages alongside Persian. The most ardent opponents of granting language and culture rights to Iran's ethnic minorities are the monarchist organizations. Most of these organizations do not even recognize Iran as being ethnically diverse, claiming that Iranian identity is supra-national and applies to all groups inhabiting Iran.

Left-wing political organizations are less averse to limited language rights for minorities, so long as they do not jeopardize the unitary state in Iran. Esmail Nooriala, head of the Iranian Secular Democracy Movement (Mahestan), stated that his party believes that education in a student's mother tongue is acceptable and that individuals should be able to establish, fund, and run private schools in their mother tongue. The California-based Constitutionalist Party of Iran stated that Persian will continue as the official language but supported the options of mother-tongue instruction for non-Persian pupils.

**106.** Gunaz Television, “Iran rejimi işğalçı erməni dövlətinin arxasında 1/3 [The Iranian regime is behind the occupier Armenian government],” *YouTube*, September 30, 2020. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=je1yjUGsQ9s>)

**107.** For a wider discussion on Iran's ethnic democracy conundrum, see: Brenda Shaffer, “Iran's multiethnic society explains why Tehran fears democracy,” *The National Interest*, August 31, 2020. (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-multiethnic-society-explains-why-tehran-fears-democracy-168128>)

**108.** Interview conducted by Ahmad Hashemi, December 2020.

The Iran Transition Council is the only organization that has addressed the potential for a future ethno-federal system and the importance of education in mother tongues.

The lack of support among most of Iran's mainstream Persian opposition for granting language and cultural rights to Iran's ethnic minorities divides the country's opposition movements and prevents cooperation with anti-regime forces among Iran's ethnic minority groups.

## Iran's Foreign Policy: The Domestic Ethnic Factor

Iran's domestic ethnic composition affects Tehran's foreign policy with almost every bordering state, since all of Iran's major ethnic minorities share ties with groups in neighboring Turkey, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Iran and most of its neighbors treat each other's ethnic minorities as tools of foreign policy. Iran has tried to incite Azerbaijan's Talysh minority<sup>109</sup> against the government of Azerbaijan and runs programs to encourage separatism. Iran even ran a Talysh-language radio station directed at the Talysh minority, which resides primarily in the south of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Iranian station was based in Armenian-occupied Azerbaijani territory, and Tehran worked together with Yerevan in an attempt to undermine Azerbaijan's stability. At times, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey have supported Kurdish movements active in neighboring states, while in parallel suppressing their own Kurds. Islamabad also at times lends support or, at a minimum, does

not intervene when the Pakistani Baluch provide aid and refuge to Baluch movements and militias in Iran. Concurrently, Islamabad condemns Tehran's incitement of Pakistan's Shiites and may see support for Iran's Baluch as a deterrent against Tehran's outreach to Pakistani Shiites.

Recently, the ethnic factor has impacted Iran's relations with Turkey. Tehran viewed President Erdogan's December 2020 speech in Baku celebrating Azerbaijan's victory against Armenia as an attempt to incite Iran's Azerbaijani Turkish population against Tehran's rule.<sup>110</sup> During his speech, Erdogan read "Lachin," a poem famous in both Azerbaijan and Turkey that speaks of the Araz River, which runs along the Iran-Azerbaijan border, as separating two parts of the Azerbaijani nation.<sup>111</sup> Senior Iranian officials, including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javid Zarif, issued severe condemnations of President Erdogan.

Both before and after the speech, the Turkish press increased its coverage of human rights abuses against Iran's Azerbaijani minority. While relations between Ankara and Tehran have returned to normal, Tehran sees Turkey as a provocateur of Iran's Azerbaijanis and Ankara understands that it can affect an Iranian pressure point if needed. Azerbaijanis in Iran received Erdogan's poem-reading gesture enthusiastically.<sup>112</sup>

Two of Iran's border regions are security hotspots: the borders with Iraq and Turkey and the border with Pakistan. In both areas, the existence of shared ethnic groups that straddle the frontiers – the Kurds along Iran's borders with Iraq and Turkey and the Baluch on the border with Pakistan – has led to transnational conflicts. Tehran's internal strife with its Kurdish and Baluch minorities sometimes spills

**109.** The Talysh minority in Azerbaijan speak a dialect of Persian and are relatively observant Muslims. Iran has hoped this group would thus be more susceptible to Iranian influence.

**110.** "Zarif responds to Erdogan's 'wrong' poem on Iranian Azerbaijan," *Tehran Times* (Iran), December 11, 2020. (<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/455619/Zarif-responds-to-Erdogan-s-wrong-poem-on-Iranian-Azerbaijan>); "Her sözün bir yeri var [Every word has its place]," *Tehran Times* (Iran), December 13, 2020. (<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/455697/Her-sözün-bir-yeri-var>)

**111.** "Erdogan: Azerbaijan has assured territorial integrity," *Report.Az* (Azerbaijan), December 10, 2020. (<https://report.az/qarabag/erdogan-azerbaycan-erazi-butovluyunu-temin-edib>)

**112.** Author's observation based on the surge in Azerbaijani-language social media activity in Iran discussing the event.

over Iran's borders, at times requiring coordination with its neighbors. The insurgencies led by these two groups often receive support from co-ethnics in other countries. Sometimes, these insurgencies even receive direct support from neighboring governments. To mitigate the Baluch threat, Iran built a wall in 2011 on its border with Pakistan to foil incursions and to halt co-ethnic support for the Baluch in Iran. Pakistan in March 2019 also began building a fence on part of its side of the border. In 2020, Turkey built a wall to thwart attacks by Iranian Kurds and to prevent direct cooperation between Turkey's and Iran's Kurds.

Iranian official media frequently claim that terror groups cross the country's borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq to conduct attacks, indicating that Tehran sees the connections between Iran's ethnic minority groups and their co-ethnics in neighboring countries as a threat.<sup>113</sup> Iranian media and government representatives openly draw a connection between Iran's border security and the actions of its neighbors. In November 2020, for example, *Iran Daily* reported, "Tehran has frequently advised its neighbors to step up security at the common borders to prevent terrorist attacks on Iranian forces."<sup>114</sup> The activity of these shared ethnic groups is an issue of concern in Iran's bilateral relations with half of its neighbors: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, and Azerbaijan.

Iran's northern neighbors – Azerbaijan and Armenia – have warred since their post-Soviet independence in 1991. The Iranian provinces bordering those countries are inhabited primarily by ethnic Azerbaijanis. From the beginning of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, domestic security concerns related to Iran's Azerbaijani minority drove Tehran's policies toward both countries.

## CASE STUDY: Iran's Relations With the Republic of Azerbaijan and Policy Toward the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

While the regime in Iran formally declares that its foreign policy is based on Islamic solidarity, Tehran almost always puts pragmatic concerns above religious fraternity.<sup>115</sup> In the case of the war between Iran's two northern neighbors, the clash between ideology and pragmatic considerations was unmistakable: Christian Armenia had invaded Shiite Azerbaijan, captured close to 20 percent of its territory, and turned almost a million Azerbaijani Shiites into refugees. Tehran hoped that the devastation and poverty created by the war and occupation in Azerbaijan in the early years of the conflict would serve the Iranian regime's goal of preventing development of affinity between its Azerbaijani minority and the new Republic of Azerbaijan. As part of this policy, Tehran supported Yerevan in its war with Azerbaijan and has continued close cooperation with Armenia.

From the initial post-Soviet independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, domestic considerations dictated Iran's policies toward Baku and not their shared Shiite identity. The *Tehran Times* wrote shortly after the Soviet collapse:

The first ground for concern from the point of view in Tehran is the lack of political stability in the newly independent republics. The unstable conditions in those republics could be serious causes of insecurity along the lengthy borders (over 2,000 kilometers) Iran shares with those countries. Already foreign hands can be felt at work in those republics, [e]specially in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan republics, with the ultimate objective of brewing discord among the Iranian Azeris and Turkmen by instigating ethnic and nationalistic sentiments.<sup>116</sup>

**113.** See, for instance: "Three border guards killed in clashes with terrorists in NW Iran," *PressTV* (Iran), May 29, 2020.

(<https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2020/5/29/626335/Three-border-guards-killed-in-clashes-with-gunmen-in-NW-Iran>)

**114.** "Three border guards killed in clashes with terrorists in NW Iran," *Iran Daily* (Iran), November 14, 2020. (<http://www.irandaily.ir/News/276766.html>)

**115.** For more on this topic, see: Brenda Shaffer, "The Islamic Republic of Iran: Is it really?" *Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*, Ed. Brenda Shaffer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

**116.** "Gorbachev's Downfall, and New Concerns in Tehran," *Tehran Times* (Iran), December 30, 1991, page 2. (Accessed via Foreign Broadcast Information Service)

Mahmoud Va'ez, who served as deputy foreign minister of Iran in the early 1990s and now serves as President Rouhani's chief of staff, confirmed that during the initial war period, domestic security concerns dictated Iran's approach to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict:

Iran was in the neighborhood of the environment of the conflict. Karabakh is situated only 40 km distance from its borders. At that time, this possibility raised that the boundaries of conflict extended ... beyond ... Karabakh. Since the[n], Iran's consideration was based on security perceptions... Iran could not be indifferent to the developments occurring along its borders, security changes of the borders and their impact on Iran's internal developments.<sup>117</sup>

After the initial war period, Iran preferred to preserve a large de facto border with Armenia.<sup>118</sup> Va'ez further stated Iran's preference for such a border with Armenia (and opposition to direct links between Turkey and Azerbaijan):

Iran expressed its opposition to the change of political geography of the region. If this plan could have been somehow implemented it would have had wide political, economic and security effects on the region. Linking Nakhchevan to Azerbaijan would have reduced the importance of Iran's unique and distinctive position in the Caucasus and interrupted Iran's linkage with Armenia.<sup>119</sup>

Tehran's policy tilt toward Armenia was predicated on the assumption that Iran's domestic Azerbaijani community would not actively oppose this policy. For many years, Tehran's bet paid off. However, several factors since late 2017 have increased the opposition

to Iranian-Armenian cooperation among Iran's Azerbaijani community. Thus, Iran's alliance with Armenia may have become domestically costly and difficult to sustain.<sup>120</sup>

During the 2020 war, as during the First Armenia-Azerbaijan War from 1992 to 1994, Iran served as the main conduit of supplies – military and otherwise – to Armenia. Russia does not share a border with Armenia and thus depends on transit through Iran. Russia supplied Armenia during the 2020 war, both via flights that overflowed Iran and via land shipments from Iran's Anzali port on the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijanis in Iran are still pushing the government to halt this transit to Armenia, which, adding insult to injury, passes through Azerbaijani-populated regions in Iran and is directly visible to this community.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan war in 2020, which saw Baku regain control of the regions bordering Iran, set off a wave of ethnic solidarity among Iranian Azerbaijanis. To limit this jubilation, Tehran arrested hundreds of protestors and activists who criticized Iran's support for Armenia.<sup>121</sup> Several rounds of demonstrations took place in Iranian cities with large Azerbaijani populations. Many Iranian Azerbaijanis also gathered at the border area to observe the fighting and cheer on the Republic of Azerbaijan's soldiers as they regained control of their lands bordering Iran.<sup>122</sup>

Even before Baku regained control of the entire border with Iran in the 2020 war, direct interaction through trade and cultural and educational exchanges was common between Azerbaijanis in both countries. Many Azerbaijanis share cross-border family ties. In 2019, more than 250,000 Iranian citizens, a large

**117.** Mahmoud Va'ez, "Mediation in the Karabakh Dispute," *Center for Strategic Research*, January 2008. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20110722014529/http://www.csr.ir/departments.aspx?lng=en&abtId=07&depId=74&semId=989>); see also: "Iranian Official on Solution to Conflict," *Interfax* (Russia), March 25, 1992. (Accessed via Foreign Broadcast Information Service)

**118.** Author's interview with a former senior Armenian official, winter 2000.

**119.** Mahmoud Va'ez, "Mediation in the Karabakh Dispute," *Center for Strategic Research*, January 2008. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20110722014529/http://www.csr.ir/departments.aspx?lng=en&abtId=07&depId=74&semId=989>)

**120.** Brenda Shaffer, "Iran's Longstanding Cooperation with Armenia," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 11, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/09/10/irans-longstanding-cooperation-with-armenia>)

**121.** "Hundreds of Protesters Arrested for Opposing Iran's Support of Armenia," *Iran Wire*, October 4, 2020. (<https://iranwire.com/en/features/7720>)

**122.** @Behzad\_Jeddi, *Twitter*, October 18, 2020. ([https://twitter.com/Behzad\\_Jeddi/status/1317892041456668673](https://twitter.com/Behzad_Jeddi/status/1317892041456668673))



portion of them Azerbaijani, visited the Republic of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani visitors from Iran are often moved by Azerbaijan's open embrace of their language and culture.

Tehran preferred Armenian control of the legal border with Azerbaijan. The regime enjoyed extensive cooperation with Armenia in the occupied territories, including the renovation of a mosque and the building of a hydroelectric plant that serves Iran's border regions.<sup>123</sup> Iranian state-sponsored media warn that Iran could face commercial losses from the change in border control.<sup>124</sup>

After the 2020 war, Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev's first trip to the liberated territories included a visit to the Khudafarin Bridge, which straddles the Araz River which forms the border between Azerbaijan and Iran. Aliyev personally hoisted an Azerbaijani flag on the bridge, which generated enthusiasm among Iranian Azerbaijanis. During the visit, an Iranian sniper published pictures of Aliyev and his wife taken through his gun's scope.<sup>125</sup>

As the conflict raged, Iranian Azerbaijanis observed that Israel gave Azerbaijan extensive support as part of their strategic partnership. This increased positive feelings toward Israel among the group, creating another reason for anti-regime sentiment.<sup>126</sup>

## CASE STUDY: The Kurds and Iran, Turkey, and Iraq

Iran's border regions with Iraq and Turkey are a significant security challenge for Tehran. Kurds inhabit both sides of these borders. Recent reporting indicates that an average of five to 10 Iranian soldiers and IRGC members die every month in these border regions.<sup>127</sup>

The policies of Iraq, Turkey, and Iran toward their domestic Kurdish communities are intertwined with wider transnational conflicts. As there are many divisions and animosities among the Kurds, the three states often exploit these fissures and at times maintain good ties with a Kurdish group in a neighboring country while suppressing Kurds at home.

Their shared Kurdish communities also affect these states' foreign policies toward one another. At times, they conduct joint operations against Kurds.<sup>128</sup> This interstate cooperation against the Kurds is transitory and can vanish quickly as well. For instance, in fighting against domestic Kurdish militants, Tehran sometimes shells Kurdish villages in Iraq, eliciting criticism from Baghdad. In late September 2018, Iran fired ballistic missiles at a Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran (KDP-I) base in northern Iraq, killing 17 and wounding more than 50, possibly in retaliation for an earlier Kurdish attack that killed 10 Iranian

123. "Iran Completes Controversial Hydropower Project on Aras River," *Jamestown Foundation*, July 24, 2020. (<https://jamestown.org/program/iran-completes-controversial-hydropower-project-on-aras-river>)

124. "تبعات اقتصادی قرارداد آذربایجان و ارمنستان برای ایران/از دست رفتن نوار مرزی ایران با ارمنستان [Economic Consequences of Azerbaijan-Armenia Agreement for Iran—Loss of Iran-Armenia border belt]," *Fars News* (Iran), November 13, 2020. (<https://bit.ly/3sUwspb>); "یادداشت| تحولات در: [Developments in the northern borders and Iran's involvement in traditional approaches to foreign policy]," *Tasmin News Agency* (Iran), November 22, 2020. (<https://bit.ly/3xlGSKL>); Brenda Shaffer, "The Armenia-Azerbaijan War: Downgrading Iran's regional role," *Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, November 25, 2020. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13650-the-armenia-azerbaijan-war-downgrading-iran's-regional-role.html>)

125. "Iranian sniper posts provocative photo taking aim at Azerbaijani President Aliyev," *Daily Sabah* (Turkey), November 19, 2020. (<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/iranian-sniper-posts-provocative-photo-taking-aim-at-azerbaijani-president-aliyev>)

126. @AhmadObali, "After 41 years of 'Death to Israel' slogan by Iranian Mullah, over 30 million #South Azerbaijanis in #Iran love #Israel. -We took 40 live calls. None were against Israel -38 Callers were from Tehran, Karaj, #Tabriz ... -you can watch the entire show:" *Twitter*, March 5, 2021. (<https://twitter.com/AhmadObali/status/1367848470556667911?s=20>); Itamar Eichner, "Most Iranian people are pro-Israel, expatriate says," *Ynet* (Israel), March 23, 2021. (<https://www.ynetnews.com/magazine/article/r10h00SUEd>)

127. Author's calculations based on Iranian state media reporting on numbers of casualties.

128. See, for instance: "Turkey, Iran carried out joint operation against Kurdish militants: minister," *Reuters*, March 18, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-iran/turkey-iran-carried-out-joint-operation-against-kurdish-militants-minister-idUSKCN1QZ1CI>)



border guards.<sup>129</sup> Days later, Iran shelled targets in Erbil. In addition, in October 2020, IRGC units shelled Kurdish villages in Iraq.<sup>130</sup>

Kurds in Turkey and Iraq provide critical support to the Iranian Kurdish insurgency against Tehran. At times, this support brings Tehran into conflict with Ankara and the Iraqi Kurdistan authorities, which Tehran criticizes for failing to rein in their Kurdish populations. In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, Tehran often takes direct action against Iraqi Kurdish residents.

### CASE STUDY: The Baluch in Iran and Pakistan

Since 2005, Iran's Baluch have waged an anti-regime insurgency in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province bordering Pakistan. In December 2005, insurgents attempted to assassinate newly elected president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Sistan-Baluchistan, killing three in his security detail. In October 2009, Baluch attacked a IRGC delegation, killing 42 people, including the deputy commander of the IRGC's ground forces and five other senior IRGC commanders. In October 2018, Baluch groups abducted more than a dozen Iranian IRGC members.<sup>131</sup> The next year, Baluch paramilitary forces attacked an IRGC convoy transiting the region, killing nearly 30.<sup>132</sup>

Two main Baluch groups that engaged in anti-regime terrorism and attacks on Iranian military and IRGC members are Jundullah and Jaish ul-Adl. Jundullah was especially active from 2005 to 2010, conducting more than a dozen major attacks in Sistan-Baluchistan,

including a December 2010 bombing that killed 38 at a mosque in Chahbahar.<sup>133</sup> Jundullah's activities receded after Iran captured its leaders, the brothers Abd al-Malik Rigi and Abdolhamid Rigi. Tehran executed them in 2010.

Iranian Baluch share significant ties with Baluch in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The porous Iran-Pakistan border facilitates illicit cross-border economic activity, and Baluch from each side often cross the border to visit relatives and attend family events. Iranian Baluch militias and groups frequently receive support from Baluch in Pakistan. Militants often escape to Pakistan after conducting armed attacks in Iran. Iranian forces have crossed into Pakistan seeking to subdue and capture Iranian Baluch militants. Baluch have captured Iranian border guards in Pakistan and held them captive there.<sup>134</sup>

Iranian-Pakistani relations often experience tension due to Islamabad's perceived lack of action against co-ethnic supporters of the Baluch insurgency in Iran. At times, Iran has claimed that the Jundullah organization has links to the Pakistani security services. The IRGC has periodically threatened to cross the border unilaterally or attack Pakistani Baluch with missiles if Islamabad does not curtail support for the insurgency.<sup>135</sup>

Pakistan's policy toward Iran's Baluch is probably affected to some extent by Iran's policy toward Pakistan's large Shiite community, which comprises around 20 percent of Pakistan's population. Tehran has attempted to appeal to Pakistan's Shiites and often releases statements in support of this community.

129. Bilal Wahab, "Iran's Missile Attack in Iraqi Kurdistan Could backfire," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 11, 2018. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-missile-attack-in-iraqi-kurdistan-could-backfire>); "Iran Guard claims missile attack on separatist Kurds in Iraq," *Associated Press*, September 9, 2018. (<https://apnews.com/article/39a6e79233574b0fb8ef2a794625ed33>)

130. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards 'Shell Border Villages' In Iraqi Kurdistan," *Iran International*, October 30, 2020. (<https://iranintl.com/en/iran-in-brief/iran's-revolutionary-guards-shell-border-villages-iraqi-kurdistan>)

131. "Militants seize 14 Iranian security forces near Pakistan," *Associated Press*, October 16, 2018. (<https://apnews.com/article/a2cc578c430245289372210833f56bdf>)

132. "Nearly 2 Dozen Iranian Revolutionary Guards Reportedly Killed In Bomb Attack," *NPR*, February 13, 2019. (<https://www.npr.org/2019/02/13/694352657/nearly-two-dozen-iranian-revolutionary-guards-reportedly-killed-in-bomb-attack>)

133. "Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options," *Congressional Research Service*, December 9, 2020. (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL32048>)

134. Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), page 230.

135. *Ibid.*, pages 235–236.

Saudi Arabia's conflict with Iran also impacts Pakistan's policy toward Iran's Baluch. Riyadh shares close ties with Pakistan and occasionally encourages Islamabad to increase support for Baluch groups operating in Iran or along the Iran-Pakistan border.<sup>136</sup> Pakistan's policies toward Iran's Baluch is also affected by the state of Tehran's ties with New Delhi. The presence of an Indian consulate in the Iranian city of Zahedan, the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan, and India's investment in Sistan-Baluchistan's Chabahar Port, suggests Delhi is interested in the Baluch region and may see it as a pressure point against Pakistan.

**“The presence of an Indian consulate in the Iranian city of Zahedan, the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan, and India's investment in Sistan-Baluchistan's Chabahar Port, suggests Delhi is interested in the Baluch region and may see it as a pressure point against Pakistan.”**

The year 2014 especially strained Iran's relations with Pakistan because of the Baluch insurgency. On February 14, 2014, the Baluch militia Jaish al-Adl abducted five Iranian border guards and brought them to Pakistan. It took months of diplomacy before Islamabad facilitated their release.

Iranian-Pakistani tensions over the cross-border Baluch insurgency reached new heights in October 2014, when 30 Iranian security forces crossed the border in pursuit of Baluch insurgents, leading to clashes with the Pakistani military and the death of a Pakistani soldier. Following these clashes, Iran and Pakistan agreed to increase counterterrorism cooperation and attempted to deflate the crisis. However, the Baluch insurgency and Islamabad's perceived complacency or even support continue to trouble Iranian-Pakistani relations.

## Impact on Regime Stability

Iran's ethnic composition and activism could pose challenges for the stability of the Islamic Republic. Previous generations in Iran had, by and large, internalized the message of the Pahlavi regime and accepted Persianization. Yet this idea has significantly less resonance at the very same time Persian nationalism is growing among Iran's Persian citizens.

Technology and a Western surge in identity politics have influenced Iran. Since the early 1990s, Iranian citizens have increasingly watched foreign television broadcasts in their native languages via satellite transmission. Widespread use of social media in minority languages, often with co-ethnics outside Iran, has boosted both linguistic ability and ethnic pride.

The regime policy of mocking ethnic minorities in official media and claiming in school curricula that the ethnic identities of Iran's minorities are not genuine is backfiring, provoking mass demonstrations and increasing resentment toward the regime.

At the same time, the regime's violent suppression of ethnic political activity still serves as a potent deterrent. As noted in this study, Iran's ethnic minorities have the highest incarceration and execution rates. Cultural leaders are periodically incarcerated, deterring others from engaging in even non-political ethnically based activity. The regime's proven reach to kill and kidnap ethnic leaders abroad, as with the November 2020 abduction of a Sweden-based Arab leader visiting Istanbul,<sup>137</sup> likely also deters ethnic activism in and outside Iran.

<sup>136</sup>. Stephane A. Dudoignon, *The Baluch, Sunnism and the State in Iran* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), page 2; Shay Shaul, “The tensions between Iran and Pakistan,” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, May 18, 2020. ([https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2548/The\\_Tensions\\_between\\_Iran\\_and\\_Pakistan#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2548/The_Tensions_between_Iran_and_Pakistan#gsc.tab=0))

<sup>137</sup>. “Iran Intelligence Ministry Nabs Ringleader of Saudi, Israeli-Sponsored Terror Group,” *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), November 12, 2020. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/11/12/2388122/iran-intelligence-ministry-nabs-ringleader-of-saudi-israeli-sponsored-terror-group>); “Turkey says Iranian intelligence was behind elaborate plot to kidnap opponent in Istanbul,” *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iran-intelligence-turkey-kidnap-plot/2020/12/12/818e0c30-3b2c-11eb-8328-a36a109900c2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-intelligence-turkey-kidnap-plot/2020/12/12/818e0c30-3b2c-11eb-8328-a36a109900c2_story.html))

The regime's future hold over Iran's ethnic minorities is far from guaranteed. In the case of the Soviet Union, once Moscow's grip on the republics weakened, nationalist groups organized and hastened Soviet collapse. Throughout modern Iranian history, when central control over the provinces has weakened significantly, Iran's ethnic minorities have risen up and attempted to achieve self-rule. Notable examples include the 1920 Khyabani Rebellion at the end of Qajar Rule, the Azerbaijani and Kurdish declarations of independence during the allied occupation after World War II, and autonomy attempts during Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

In an acute regime crisis, the ethnic factor could play a role in toppling the government, as it did with the collapse of the Shah's regime and the Islamic Republic's ascent to power in 1979. In recent years, Iran's ethnic minority groups have demonstrated their organizational ability.

Yet rebellions by ethnic minorities are not likely to trigger an all-out anti-regime uprising, since the Persian opposition is unlikely to cooperate with ethnically based movements. Most of the mainstream opposition does not support granting rights to Iran's ethnic minorities or any activity that could threaten Persian control over Iran's current territory.

Moreover, some of Iran's ethnic minority groups themselves are unlikely to cooperate with each other. Tehran has successfully exacerbated inter-group conflicts by pitting minority groups against each other, such as by organizing police forces along ethnic lines to police rival groups and appointing governors from competing groups to rule over others. Many groups now have a history of competing for resources in multiethnic provinces, such as West Azerbaijan, which is populated by both Kurds and Azerbaijanis, and Khuzestan, where there is competition between Arabs and Lurs.

The Islamic Republic's status as a unitary state rather than a federation or confederation also favors continuation of Persian dominance. Federative and confederative structures facilitate empire disintegration, thanks to their clear internal borders and local government officials who often benefit from the demise of central rule. As an additional protection, the clerical regime has a track record of appointing governors and local security chiefs who are not native to the regions they govern and do not speak the local languages. Thus, in contrast to the Soviet model, there are few official local leaders with an interest in breaking away from the center.

In addition, most of Iran's neighbors, such as Turkey and Iraq, do not support a change in its borders.

However, a major development may have taken place among Iran's largest ethnic minority, the Azerbaijanis. For many decades, Western scholarship has assumed that Azerbaijanis are the most well-integrated minority in Iran,<sup>138</sup> sharing common Shiite faith with Persians. But that may be a misreading of this ethnic group, especially after Iran's support for Armenia in the 2020 war with Azerbaijan. The war was a watershed moment for Iranian Azerbaijanis, who observed in real time Iranian trucks transiting Russian arms and supplies to Armenia. Hundreds went to the border area with Azerbaijan, observed the battles, and openly expressed encouragement to the Azerbaijani soldiers despite the regime's best efforts. The Republic of Azerbaijan's subsequent success on the battlefield inspired ethnic pride among Iranian Azerbaijanis. The Iranian government's arrests of dozens of Azerbaijanis during and following the war did little to curb that.

For most of its history, the Islamic Republic has faced insurgencies and security threats in Iran's Kurdish, Baluch, and Arab provinces. Tehran has rarely enjoyed satisfactory security in these areas. However, these insurgencies have proven manageable for Tehran, since those ethnic groups are relatively small and the

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**138.** Many published works have claimed that Azerbaijanis are a "well-integrated minority." See, for instance: Patricia J. Higgins, "Minority—State Relations in Contemporary Iran," *Iranian Studies*, Volume 17, Number 1, winter 1984, page 59; Bijan DaBell, "Iran Minorities 2: Ethnic Diversity," *United States Institute of Peace*, September 3, 2013. (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/sep/03/iran-minorities-2-ethnic-diversity>)

attacks were confined to their home regions. Their armed attacks rarely affect Iran's Persians, since they take place in minority-inhabited provinces. However, the Azerbaijani Turks are a different story. If a large percentage of this group were to break with the regime, it would pose a formidable threat. Losing Azerbaijani support would be akin to the Soviet Union's loss of support of Ukraine during the Gorbachev era, on the eve of the Soviet demise.

Another challenge to regime stability is the environment. Iran's environmental challenges are growing more severe, with extreme water shortages in many parts of the country, frequent dust and salt storms, and toxic pollution. The most foreboding threats, especially the water shortages, are largely located in Iran's ethnic minority provinces. Thus, environmental challenges reinforce ethnic grievances. As Iran's environmental threats mount, they will fuel additional ethnic unrest.

Over the last two years, the clerical regime has sought to foster Persian nationalism to bolster support in the face of growing domestic opposition. Both Supreme Leader Khamenei and Foreign Minister Zarif have extolled Persian culture in their public messages. This is reminiscent of Stalin's use of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian nationalism to galvanize Soviet subjects to fight during World War II. While this may galvanize Persians, it incites ethnic minorities and may further weaken Tehran's hold on more than half the population.

## Policy Recommendations

Iran researchers and journalists insufficiently look beyond Tehran or Iran's Persian heartland. Protests and anti-regime activity in non-Persian languages, such as demonstrations at soccer games, are scarcely reported. Western assessments of the clerical regime's stability could benefit markedly from a better grasp of the ethnic factor and developments in Iran's border regions. Moreover, if the Islamic Republic were to fall, it would behoove Washington to have a better grasp of these dynamics, which could possibly reshape

the Middle East. Washington should therefore take the following steps:

- **Revise U.S. government publications, including the CIA's *World Factbook*, about the size of ethnic groups in Iran.** A correct assessment of Iran's ethnic composition is critical to understanding regime stability and other developments. Many researchers and journalists still reference old volumes of the CIA's *World Factbook*, even though the publication long ago stopped reporting the sizes of Iran's various ethnic groups. New and more accurate analyses are needed.
- **Integrate developments among ethnic minorities into U.S. government assessments of the Islamic Republic's stability and foreign policy.** To encourage the U.S. intelligence community and other government entities to better assess Iran's ethnic minorities, relevant congressional committees should hold hearings on Iran's ethnic questions. Congress has not held a hearing on these issues for close to a decade, and the Congressional Research Service has not reported on Iran's ethnic minorities since 2008. The U.S. Department of State should also report to Congress on Iran's ethnic minorities as part of its regular reporting on Iran. The director of national intelligence should also include assessments on Iran's ethnic minorities in reports on Iran.

Also, media (including social media) in minority languages constitute an important source of information that does not appear in the Persian language. American intelligence agencies should integrate this information into their analytical work and release unclassified material, especially translations, to the wider policy community.

The greatest intelligence focus should be on the Azerbaijanis and the Ahwazi Arabs, given their numbers and potential influence. Azerbaijanis dominate the Iranian northwest and now are a significant part of the population in Tehran. Some are integrated into the ruling regime. Without Azerbaijani support, Iran as we know it would cease to exist.



For their part, the Ahwazi Arabs in Khuzestan sit atop Iran's primary oil resources. For this reason, Ahwazi Arabs were once a major focus of U.S. government research on Iran.<sup>139</sup> They should be again.

- **Report on Iran's human rights abuses against ethnic minorities.** Washington's international human rights reports should detail the plight of ethnic minorities in Iran. The U.S. Department of State produces an annual assessment on global human rights. In the chapter on Iran, ethnic minorities are discussed only briefly. The Department of State should augment this coverage. U.S. reporting on international religious freedom should also examine the state of Iran's Sunni ethnic minorities.
- **The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) should support organizations and individuals championing the language and cultural rights of Iran's ethnic minorities.** Over the years, USAID has supported a variety of organizations working on human rights-related issues in Iran, such as religious freedom and women's rights. Minority-rights organizations should be supported, too.
- **U.S. government messaging to and about Iran should be mindful of the fact that Iran is a multiethnic country.** U.S. officials often use the word Persian interchangeably with Iranian. In March 2021, for instance, the White House sent Novruz greetings for the "celebration of the Persian New Year." U.S. government officials often compliment the accomplishments of the "Persian nation." This leaves out half of Iran's population and could be construed as an indication that the U.S. government does not understand or respect Iran's multiethnic demography.
- **Strengthen U.S. media coverage of Iran's ethnic minorities.** U.S. government media, such as Voice of America, Radio Farda, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, currently do not significantly cover Iran's ethnic minorities or developments outside Iran's Persian-majority cities. Since these media outlets already broadcast in several of Iran's minority

languages (Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Arabic), they can provide programming for Iran's minorities at little or no additional cost.

- **Monitor and study the impact of foreign television broadcasts in the minority languages.** Foreign broadcasts have a significant impact on Iran's ethnic minorities. These include Turkish, Azerbaijani, and Iraqi Kurdistan television, as well as U.S.-based Gunaz TV. U.S. government agencies should study the impact of these broadcasts within Iran. Many Gunaz TV shows are interactive, and the broadcasts can shed light on attitudes and developments in Iran's minority provinces.

Finally, by granting interviews in minority-language broadcasts, U.S. officials can reach larger swaths of the population of Iran.

When assessing the viewing rates of foreign broadcasts in Iran, Washington should include the non-Persian-language foreign broadcasts in addition to the Persian language broadcasts.

- **Consult with neighboring countries about Iran's ethnic minorities.** In forging a new U.S. policy toward Iran's ethnic minorities, it is important to conduct discussions with and learn from bordering countries that share ties to ethnic groups in Iran: Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These countries have important knowledge on the developments among co-ethnics in Iran, including insights gleaned through asylum requests and refugee flows.
- **Assess the risks associated with the Ahwazi position at the center of Iran's oil production.** The bulk of Iran's oil production and major export pipelines and ports are located in the Khuzestan region. Khuzestan is the center of Ahwazi anti-regime activity and is therefore potentially unstable. Analysts assessing global oil markets, such as at the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Information Agency, should increasingly assess domestic threats to oil production and export facilities in Khuzestan.

<sup>139</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, "Khuzestan: Iran's Achilles Tendon," August 26, 2013. (<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP09-00438R000100380001-7.pdf>)







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