

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	577
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	Minority Rights Group International
Titel:	World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Iran
Udgivet:	Juli 2014
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	11. september 2014



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Iran : Overview

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date July 2014

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Iran : Overview*, July 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce53c.html> [accessed 29 August 2014]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Updated July 2014

Environment

Iran is surrounded by seven countries: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Armenia to the north, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, the Gulf to the south (with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates across the Gulf), and Iraq and Turkey to the west. This geographical location has a significant bearing on the country's minorities.

Peoples

Out of a population of approximately 76 million people, Persians comprise the largest ethnic group in Iran at approximately 61 per cent. Other ethnic minority groups include Azeris (16 per cent), Kurds (10 per cent), Lur (6 per cent), Baluchi and Arabs (both two per cent), Turkmen and other Turkic tribes (two percent), and other nomadic peoples comprising about one per cent of the total population. Other minorities include Armenians and Assyrians, as well as an Afro-Iranian minority. The most commonly used languages in Iran are: Persian (official), Persian dialects, Azeri and other Turkic dialects, Kurdish, Gilaki and Mazandarani, Luri, Baluchi, Arabic, and other non-Turkic languages.

The main religions in Iran are: Islam (98 per cent) - 89 per cent of which practise Shi'a Islam - strongly dominated by the Twelver Ja'fari School (referred to as Ithna'ashari in Arabic), and a minority of followers of Sunni Islam, and other Islamic groups such as Isma'ili Islam and Ahl-i Haq. Other religious groups include Bahá'í, numbering 300-350,000, Zoroastrians (Mazda-yasnie) (30-35,000), Jews (25,000-30,000) and Sabeen Mandaens (5,000-10,000) (UNCIRF).

Most Kurds, Turkmen, Baluch and some Arabs are Sunni, and can be discussed as ethnic communities since they do not form a cohesive coherent whole as Sunnis. Instead the various

communities tend to express their identity in ethnic terms. Sunnis represent some 10 per cent of Iran's population.

The Dom ('Gypsies') migrated from the Indian sub-continent as early as the sixth century and speak various dialects of the Domari language. They are among the most marginalized peoples of Iran: not counted in any official statistics, living in isolated - sometimes fenced-off - ghettos, and often deprived of employment and education because they lack identity cards. Many of the thousands of street children in Tehran are Dom.

History

Ever since the foundation of the Iranian State (formerly known as 'Persia' until 1935) by the Achaemenids in the sixth century BC, Iran has experienced alternating phases of political coherence and regional disintegration. The state has included indigenous groups and absorbed periodic waves of tribal invasions.

Historical accounts of Africans entering southern Iran can be traced back to the 17th century. East Africans were enslaved and sent to Khuzestan, Baluchistan and Kerman provinces in southwestern Iran, working in sugarcane or date plantations or as sailors, while others worked as nurses or personal tutors in affluent households.

Ethnic differences in Iran only began to acquire political importance during this century when the state had the means to enforce centralization. Reza Khan (from 1925 Reza Shah Pahlavi), who seized power in 1920, sought to forge the disparate peoples of Iran into a single nation. The state adopted Persian, spoken by 45 per cent of the population, as the official language and used it for all administrative and educational purposes, banning publication in other languages. It also imposed western dress on the population and attempted to settle nomadic pastoralists, by force where needed. These measures created a sharp sense of difference among those peoples which did not belong to the dominant Persian community.

Under his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, this sense of difference increased further. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rush to industrialize and modernize was concentrated on the central and northern areas of Iran, particularly through the White Revolution of 1963, which was heavily influenced by the French system of governance. These were not the first attempts of the state to achieve modernization and Westernization, however. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, European influences were already manifested in government architectural and structural schemes. At the bequest of the Qajar prince of Persia, Abbas Mirza, Persian students were sent to European universities to study and return with knowledge they had acquired, which became evident with the establishment of the first Ministry of Education in 1855, which was modeled after the French system.

It was during this time as the transition towards modernization and nationalism peaked that the emancipation movement of enslaved Africans also surfaced. By 1928, the parliament had implemented a law to abolish slavery throughout the state.

By 1976 the average level of urbanization in Iran was 46.8 per cent; the level in Kurdish and Baluchi regions, at opposite ends of the country, was less than 25 per cent, however, while that for the Persian-dominated Central Province was over 80 per cent. Other indices, for example literacy or electrification of homes, followed similar proportions. The non-Persian periphery felt it was subsidizing the industrialized core and this economic discrimination fueled community self-awareness on the periphery.

The Pahlavis liked to emphasize the ancient and pre-Islamic nature of the Iranian state. However, Iran had a strong Shi'a tradition going back to the initial schism with the Sunnis. The Safavid

dynasty had adopted Shi'a Islam in the sixteenth century, and the Pahlavis underestimated the ability of the Shi'a clergy to mobilize popular disapproval and dissatisfaction, as demonstrated in the 1979 Islamic revolution.

In the spring of 1979, following the Shah's overthrow, the Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed. All ethnic minorities, except the Azeris, sought autonomy, hoping that Tehran would be unable to maintain its grip on the periphery. The new regime feared that conceding autonomy to one community would lead to the disintegration of the state. Ayatollah Khomeini also argued that ethnic autonomy violated the universalism implicit in Islam.

Governance

The Islamic Republic of Iran has proven a highly centralized government, strongly opposed to any form of autonomy to the regions as risking the disintegration of the state. The early revolutionary period and the subsequent invasion of Iran by Iraq in 1979/1980 led to some rebellions and attempts to claim autonomy, particularly in the Kurdish areas. However, those claiming secession, as well as the communities they came from, paid a heavy price for this.

Article 5 of the constitution defines Iran as a Shi'a Republic. Article 115 debars non-Shi'as from presidential office. Article 12 of its Constitution declares Twelver Ja'fari Shi'a Islam as its official religion.

The state is currently under international scrutiny regarding discrimination against women running for political office. It was reported that all 30 female candidates running for presidential office in the 14 June 2013 election were disqualified, which led to questions regarding the 'fairness and transparency of the vetting procedures.'

Minorities

The Islamic Republic formally recognized the dhimmi communities in Article 13 of the new Constitution - Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians who "within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education". However, the state was less tolerantly disposed towards Protestant evangelical churches, and has been vehemently hostile to the Bahá'í. In fact, no recognition has been given to the Bahá'í community, despite it constituting the largest non-Muslim religious minority community in Iran. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief stated that persecution of Bahá'í was 'systematic and covering all areas of state activities, the various systems from family law provisions to schooling, education, security.'

Article 19 of the Iranian Constitution states: "All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; colour, race, language and the like, do not bestow any privilege." However, discrimination on the basis of religion and ethnicity is rife in Iran. Minority languages are suppressed and many minorities are disadvantaged politically, socially and economically.

The treatment is not constant across minority groups. The Islamic Republic of Iran has a discerning minority policy which distinguishes between the history of the demands of that minority, whether it constitutes an ethnic or religious minority, their relationship with outside actors, and whether and in what area a threat is perceived from that group. These factors determine the disadvantage and repression they may suffer. Hence, Azeris suffer linguistic and cultural discrimination in order to stem Azeri nationalism, the tolerance of Kurdish expression ebbs and flows in some areas depending on the latest encounter between Kurdish political activists and government forces, but intolerance of evangelical Christians and the persecution of Bahá'í on religious grounds has remained largely intact throughout the changes of the past 28 years.

Nevertheless there have been some developments - the position of Ismailis in Iran has improved, whereas official harassment of Sufis has increased since President Ahmadinejad took office in August 2005.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Ethnic and religious minorities make up nearly half of the Iranian population. Harassment of various minority groups has been intense in recent years, particularly among members of both recognized and unrecognized religious and ethnic minority groups such as Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis, Kurds, Nematollahi Sufi Muslims, Sunnis, Bahá'í, and Christians. Since Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in August 2005, the government has more forcefully promoted the country's majority Persian and Shi'a Muslim identity. In contravention of formal guarantees in the Iranian constitution and international commitments, in 2007 the government continued a crackdown on ethnic and religious minorities through methods including police repression, discrimination in education, and state media campaigns. There was significant overlap between minority rights abuses on ethnic and religious grounds in Iran, as nearly all ethnic Baluchis and Turkomans, most Kurds, and some Arabs practise Sunni Islam disfavoured by the regime. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a report on human rights in Iran in October 2008 that highlighted the regime's abuses against women and minorities. In 2009, following the disputed re-election of Ahmadinejad, protests broke out among opposition activists - dubbed the 'Green Revolution' - which were harshly suppressed by authorities and led to dozens of deaths as well as allegations of torture and sexual abuse.

Around 7 per cent of the Iranian population is Kurdish and concentrated in the north-west, along the borders with northern Iraq and south-west Turkey; another sizeable community of Kurds lives in the north-east, along the border with Turkmenistan. The Iranian regime has watched with alarm as Kurds have consolidated their autonomy within Iraq, and fears the establishment of a Kurdish state that would make claims on Iranian territory. Regular repression of the country's Kurdish population has occurred. In 2012, for example, five Kurdish prisoners held in Orumiye Prison were charged for 'contacting the office of the Special Rapporteur' and 'reporting prison news to human rights organisations, among other charges.

Ethnic Baluchis, who are mostly Sunni Muslims, live on both sides of the Iranian-Pakistani border and comprise around 2 per cent of the Iranian population. Sistan-Baluchistan, where much of the Baluchi population is located, is the country's poorest region and includes the highest rates of infant and child mortality as well as the lowest rates of life expectancy and literacy in Iran. According to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Baluchis are 'reportedly subjected to systematic social, racial, religious, and economic discrimination'. Like many other ethnic minorities, Baluchis have also been denied equal representation within government and also experience linguistic discrimination as Baluchi-language publications are banned by the state.

Instability in Iraq has stirred unrest in the neighbouring Iranian province of Khuzestan, which in Arabic is called al-Ahwazi. High poverty rates among Ahwazi Arabs, despite their province's production of 90 per cent of Iran's oil revenue, have fuelled resentment, as has discrimination on cultural-linguistic grounds. Some Arabs are Sunni and not allowed to practice their faith publicly, or construct a single Sunni mosque. Amnesty International reported that Ahwazi Arabs community also experience forced evictions and expulsion from their ancestral lands due to the government's 'land expropriations for agricultural and other purposes'.

Azeris make up nearly one-quarter of the population and are concentrated in north-western Iran, along the borders with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Of all of Iran's ethnic minorities, Azeris receive perhaps the greatest acceptance among Persian Iraqis; indeed, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah

Khamenei, is ethnic Azeri. Nevertheless, Azeris continue to face discrimination and are denied education in their mother tongue.

Iran's largest religious minority, the Bahá'í, also faces some of the worst government abuse. The estimated 300,000 Bahá'í adherents are persecuted for their belief that other prophets followed Muhammad and, as followers of an unrecognized religion, are barred from public worship or contact with co-believers in other countries. In 2008, the Iranian security services arrested seven Bahá'í leaders known as the "Yarán" and held them incommunicado. In 2010, the Yarán were each sentenced to 20 years in prison - the longest prison sentence for any prisoner of conscience in Iran.

May 2011 marked the most recent attacks on the Bahá'í community. State security officers raided the homes of 30 Bahá'í administrators or educators of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) - an informal postsecondary-level educational institution created and developed by Bahá'í faculty in 1987. The BIHE offered an alternative higher education opportunity to Bahá'í students who are systematically denied access to all universities and colleges throughout the country.

In addition to the challenges faced by some of Iran's religious minorities, followers of religions recognized in the Iranian constitution are also notably receiving unjust treatment. In a recent report regarding the human rights situation in Iran, the Special Rapporteur expressed concern regarding the state's discrimination against members from both unrecognized and recognized religious communities, including 'various levels of intimidation, arrest and detention.' Since June 2010, more than 300 Christians have been arrested.

In May 2013, the Pastor Robert Asserian of a Pentecostal church was arrested during a church service after his home was raided by government officials, and the closure of the church was also announced. His arrest marks the latest of a series of arrests of Christian pastors. Pastor Saeed Abedini, a citizen of the U.S., was arrested in September 2012 and sentenced to eight years in the notorious Evin prison, and another Christian pastor, Behnam Irani, is currently being detained in Ghezel Hesar Prison. The arrest of Yousef Nadarkhani, a pastor who had served three years in prison awaiting his death penalty sentence, attracted such international protest that he was later released.

Copyright notice: © Minority Rights Group International. All rights reserved.

Search Refworld

by keyword

and / or country

All countries

[Advanced Search](#) | [Search Tips](#)

Countries

- [Iran, Islamic Republic of](#)

Topics

- [Minorities](#)