

From The Great Empire to The Islamic Republic Minorities in Iran: Assimilated Identities, & Denied Rights

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Abstract

As the current modern state system is composed of nearly two hundred states that encompass more than five thousand ethnic groups, these groups speak more than three thousand languages. This form of diversity has become a real element within any modern society. Moreover, recognition and respect for these dissimilarities are assumed to be vital for stabilizing domestic affairs and ensure peace and prosperity within a state. In fact, the development of minorities concept came along with/as a result of many factors, one of these factors was the development of other concepts such as nation, citizenship, and superior identity/macro-identity, especially with the rise of remarkable philosophical and intellectual movements during and after the French revolution such as J. J. Rousseau and his social contract. The real development of the minority rights, however, came along with the development of the human rights universalism, which came as a result of the horrifying human losses and the wide-scale of human rights abuses, during the Second World War.

Iran, on the other hand, had witnessed enormous historical development; these developments had resulted in creating a widely diversified society in terms of religious views, ethnicities, and linguistic communities. The first national project, however, had failed to emulate the Western model of the modern state and thus was unable to complete its national project, especially after the rise of the Islamic Revolution. On the other hand, the post-revolution Iranian constitution is based on religious interpretations of Islam (Jaafari / Twelfth Shi'a), thus some of the existed minorities are recognized and many others are denied.

Although Iran's policy towards minorities varies according to the differences in the political wings in office (reformists and

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conservatives), international reports indicate that the general policy of the Iranian state tends to be arbitrary and might develop into violence and retaliation actions due to linking minority societies into fears of regional rivalry /international threats.

This article aims to shed light on the minorities in Iran. Today's Iranian rule doesn't allow freedoms for minorities when they don't submit fully to the ruling authorities and power.

Keywords: Minorities in Iran, Assimilation in Iran, Minority Studies, Ethnic Cleansing, The Iranian Question.

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1. The Birth of Nation (A Brief History):

The today's known Iranian population was one division of the Indo-European family of populates who migrated from what are today the Russian steppes to settle not only in Iran but also in Central Asia, and northern India in a series of resettlements and invasions, some of them used to live as farmers and mixed with the pre-existing people affecting their languages and culture, some of the Iranians, however, were nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, who migrated later (Among other Non-Iranian nomadic tribes migration witnessed by the area) (Cameron, 1936, P. 22-43).

These Iranian-Speaker were more than one group/Tribe, thus some of their successors are called as Medes and Persians, these two groups show great appearance in historical sources, that shows a close relationship among them. Both tribes had a coalition fighting Assyrians since many historical records show legends such as Deioeces the first king of the Medes, and Achaemenes the Persian king. The history shows that the first Iranian Empire was established by Medes in 700 BC the, and continued to grow as they destroyed the Assyrian capital in 612 BC, this enabled them from establishing an empire stretched from Asia Minor (Anatolia) to the Hindu Kush, and south to the Persian Gulf (Axworthy, 2007, P.5).

In addition to the kings, there was one extraordinarily important figure Zoroaster (Known in modern Persian as Zardosht), although historians, could not agree upon the exact time and place of his existence, he is considered a key figure not only in the Persian history but also in the history of world religions, thus Zardosht elicits as a key religious thinker (Prophet) with a book that contains all Zoroastrianism's tradition (Avesta), these traditions were widespread 600 BC, the philosophies of this religion left a vital impact in the culture of today's Iran (Axworthy, 2007, P.6-8).

Judaism however as another religion have strong historical relations with Iran, as waves of Jews were distorted to the Babylonian territory, which in the later years became under Persian control and this lead to

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strong mythological relations between Jewish texts and Zoroastrianism (Brook, 2010, P. 233).

There are also many myths about the Achaemenid Empire, which ended with occupation by Alexander the Great (this explains a strong relation between Persian and Greek ancient civilizations), followed by Seleucid Empire after Alexander's death, followed by the Parthians and the Archaeologists interspersed with some invasions by the Romans. Thus it should be noticed that each of these civilizations has had a profound impact on the culture, literature, and history of Persian identity (Katouzian, 2010, P. 40-45).

One of the vital civilizations following the Archaeologists, which is the Sasanians whom also left an important heritage within the Iranian Identity, as a result of ruling Persia for 400 years, this impact reflected also in literature and language (such as the book of the Kings), additionally, the Sasanians era was the first time of announcing Zoroastrianism as the official religion of the state, however, some group of other faith also existed either secretly or publicly such as (Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism), as the most important event during Shapur II era was the conversion of Constantine the Great and Rome as a result of Christianity and this opened a new episode in the Armenian question after it converted to Christianity (Katouzian, 2010, P 60-61).

One of the most important Sasanian kings was Khosrow I due to the cultural and literary developments, which happened as a result of the prosperity of the empires under his rule, and which contributed without a doubt in creating symbolism and legacies within the Persian cultural identity. The following Sasanian kings, however, faced many internal problems, which made them weak in facing the Islamic Waves coming from the Arabian territory (Daryaee, 2009, P. 1–38).

According to historians the three main events that affected the Persian identity were; the fall of the Achaemenid Empire with Great Alexander invasions, and the fall of Sasanian Empire with Arabian Conquests, and the Mongolian invasion in the 13th century. Thus with the Islamic conquest of Iran and the fall of the Sasanian state, the movement of conversion to Islam (especially Christianity and Judaism)

began because they were two Abrahamic religions. Shifts from Zoroastrianism however, were slower, especially due to geographic factors (Katouzian, 2010, P.65).

The era of the Righteous Caliphs and the following era of Umayyad Caliphs began to convey Arabian culture and language due to the ruler efforts for encouraging people to learn, and because they started to send Arab settlers to Persia. The Persian national feeling, however, was very strong, and thus most of the Iranian population, despite converting faith to Islam, and despite the Arabian influence and power, kept using their Persian language, moreover, they kept their Persian traditions, and culture (Ashtiani, 1933, P.9-10), thus when they found an opportunity during the rule of Al-Ma'mun, the seventh Abbasid caliph, to establish their own families whom indeed aimed to capture the power, and get their independence, those families are usually are divided into two categories: the first categories includes the families who did not accept the sovereignty of the Caliph due to the conflict with the Sunni doctrine of the "Caliph, one good example of this category are Alawites in Tabaristan, while the second category recognized the authority of the Caliph and considered itself to be appointed by the Caliph as "emirs" because of the compatibility with the Sunni Caliphate (Ashtiani, 1933, P.18-19). It should be noted that the historical dispute that began with the reign of the third Righteous Caliph Ali bin Abi Talib led to the emergence of the Twelver Shiites, and the historical accounts remain on the difference between Sunnis and Shiites about what happened at the time, but the certain thing was the beginning of the Shiites mass spread with the death of Ali. However, it was only in the sixteenth century that Shiites became the greatest doctrine and the official state religion in Iran.

The difference between Sunnis and Shiites must be deeply understood, because the disagreement between them is not only doctrinal, but also theological, and it does not seem solvable. Whereas the most radical Sunnis deny some of the practices of the Shiites, which may be considered part of pre-Islamic Persian culture, One example of this practices is visiting shrines, another is the concept of having a

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supreme guide so-called Mujtahid, which in the twentieth century was called the ayatollah (Katouzian, 2010, P. 70-80).

The role of the Persians increased significantly in the era of the Abbasid Caliphate (who were Arab) and similarly, the role of Turks was increasing. Although the Persians were influenced by the Arab civilization, at the same time the Persian contributed in many great achievements in the various fields of Islamic civilization.

The Persian nationalist factor remained dominant and was associated to a large extent Shiite doctrine. Thus, the family-related small states such as the Taherids and the Safarids, who continued to the fifteenth century, and the Samaritans, the Buhayun and the Zayari and whose rule ended with the increasing influence of the Seljuk Turks who were originally tribes coming from central Asia, the most famous figures were Targul and Alp Arslan, the Seljuk effect was not very deep on the Persian Identity, but it contributed in creating new traditions, and cultural intersections (Ashtiani, 1933, P.125-130).

One more important sect was the Ismailis, which emerged as a branch of the Shiites and founded the Fatimid State in Egypt and moved to Syria and Iran, the followers of this sect, were famous for the strategy of assassinations and hiding in the mountains, did not have an independent state, but they were influential in the state (Katouzian, 2010, P.90). The Ismailis are still a minority in Today's Iran, and Syria.

The Turks were followed by the (Khwarizmshahians) for a very short period, then they were followed by the two Mongolian invasions which affected the Persian history deeply, due to the cruelty of its wars, these wars resulted in the destruction of large parts of Persian civilization, the Mongolian invasions was followed however with two important event the first one was the rise of the Turkmen Unions, who are originally a result of the Mongolian invasions, but more importantly, it was the following rise of the Safavids and their ability to unite Iran again as a group of kingdoms, with one united symbol (Katouzian, 2009, P.105-111). This unification was based more on the religion bases, surprisingly the Twelver Shiites, was the supreme Identity, more than the Persian nationality, history, or culture. Thus

with the huge Shiites propaganda, many of the Turks in the Ottoman Empire started to follow the Shiites doctrine and this led to a war between these two forces. The Ottomans, however, were able to win the war, but inside the Iranian Safavids state, the conversion to the Shiite faith took a forced manner. Another important issue was the campaigns against the Christians, which led to the enslavement of many Armenians, Circassians and Georgians, which introduced the Caucasian element to the army and the royal palace.

During the Safavids search for new allies to fight the Ottomans, many European delegations were attracted to Iran, this was reflected in Persian culture and arts. The emergence of the term shah (called to kings) was also associated with the rule of the Safavids. Another theme during the Safavids era was the outbreaking of minor Sunni revolutions in Afghanistan and other areas as a result of the spread of religious persecution among minorities (Axworthy, 2007, P.130). The following years were a year of wars with Ottomans and Russians, during the rise of the great imperialism, the two major forces which affected Iran the most were Russia, and Britain, this could be due to Iran's geopolitical importance, following the Safavids, there was a wave of reforms and modernization, characterized by the competition with the Ottoman empire, these reforms included the rise of literature and other aspects of life, but some of these economic reforms were not very effective, and this led to the revolution of (1906), this revolution was inspired by the new European principles such as the "rule of law" this revolution also was called the "constitutional revolutions" the events could be summarized as when Mullahs and merchants took sanctuary in Tehran's royal mosque, the demands were basically regarding justice from the shah. There were many radical preaching and violence actions; one important demand was the establishment of a parliament. Thus the first "Majlis" was created as a result of this revolution in 1906, to grant power to popular-class guilds (Abrahamian, 1983 P. 70-73).

The political intent was towards establishing a constitutional monarchy with power held by a parliament and chosen ministers. The parliament "Majlis" produced the Iranian constitution that remained in effect, although this constitution was largely ignored by the monarchs,

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according to many historical resources until the (1979). This development was followed by national awakening feelings, especially among the middle-class writers, poets with an ideological dimension linking the Iranian nation to their European roots, and the pre-Islamic Persian Identity, this was the beginning of the Modern Iranian Nationalism Project (Marashi, 2008, P. 49-85), and was enhanced by the struggle among the big forces during WWI and the competition with Turks as well.

The last episode before the Islamic revolution was the era of Pahlavi family with the rise of Reza Khan, who was an officer in armed forces and showed an extraordinary excitement for the Iranian national ideological movement, with a program that aims to build a modern, centralized, and secular country. Khan in the other hand was a strong military dictator, but he had the support of the democrats, the socialists, and the nationalists, in addition to the support of the educated Iranian elite who came back from Europe. Khan, however, learnt that he couldn't be the shah without having the support of the religious elite as well, so he ensured to have their support. And thus after he became the Shah he tried to adopt a project similar to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk project of Turkey, but he could not, and many Iranians were believing a widespread rumour that time claims that Riza Khan was a British Agent. (Marashi, 2008, P. 93-99). Thus he tried to build the new governmental institutions, however, with the rule of his successor this (pro-western) modernization movement was continuous and even increasing, Riza Khan's son Mohamad Riza the last shah, things were going differently, because his son was romantic towards his modernization project but was not strong enough to implement this project, the demands for nationalizing the oil was one of the critical issues during Mohamad Riza era, it was a very important national dimension, and became a major source of political instability. But the source of the major political instability was indeed the forced secularism, social injustice, and the lack of political representation when AlKhomeini found an opportunity to incite the masses religiously (Kirby, 1996).

The nationalism of Iran became a mixture with the Zoroastrian identity, and the changing nature of the religion-society relation, as they

were inseparably connected in Pahlavi Iran. Additionally, Linked to the secularization of the ancient past "contained fundamental conflicts between inclusivity and exclusivity – with Iranian-ness so closely associated with the Zoroastrian past". Thus, due to the Iranian secular past, it was unmanageable to completely (Ringer, 2015, P.12-13).

Therefore, The revolution of Al-Khomeini (1978-79) opened new platforms for the Iranian national identity, and these platforms were against the secularism, and modernization, this revolution indeed participated in the formation of the new state of Iran, which we know today. But it is not correct to say that the Islamic Revolution of Iran has eliminated the Persian identity because the historical development of the nation created some symbols and mutual culture that cannot be easily assimilated, and with this diversified and rich political history, each event of the previously mentioned event has certainly participated in the creation of this identity and participated in creating dissimilar sub-identities living within the Iranian geography (Kurubaş, 2017, P.20-50). In the light of this huge diversity, it was not possible to rich a homogenous society, and therefore the freshly established state has to deal with these differences.

2. Forming A New Hegemonic Identity:

With oil prices going down the gap between rich and poor people was getting larger in Iran, and the state modernization efforts of the shah were only understood by the small elite, as the mass population saw the modernization project as the western influence in their country, The Iranian Islamic project thus started to find a good social fertilized public environment, and Al-Khomeini started to propagate (from Iraq and then from France), carrying anti-Western ideas from the beginning. With these ideas, the introduction of religious ideology as an alternative to the secularism presented by the Pahlavi model of nationalism (Richards, & Percy, 2009). This project indeed was introduced as the general will of the Iranian people, as they started the revolution while Al-Khomeini was outside the country, they might see the Islamic State a good alternative to the bad conditions they used to face daily, living

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under the pro-western secular constitutional monarchy, thus the Islamic background held by the majority of Iranian population became the new hegemonic Ideology within the country, and a referendum was done to convert Iran into an Islamic state (Richards, & Percy, 2009). In addition to the religious dimension of the new supreme-identity the anti-western especially anti-US, feelings were a very vital characteristic of this new Identity, these feeling appeared mostly during the U.S. embassy hostages incident. Another important dimension was the total submission to Khomeini's authority and the usage of his image as a national symbol. (Richards, & Percy, 2009). Iranian-Shiite nationalism became more powerful as a result of the eight-year war against Saddam Hussein's Sunni Arab regime. But at the same time, the anti-Western Shiite dimension seemed stronger when Iran decided to support the "Arab resistance" in Lebanon against Israel, and as a result, participated in the establishment of the so-called Hizbullah (Juadeau, & Percy, 2009).

The period following the death of Al- Khomeini created a big gap because the whole idea of the Islamic State and the Islamic revolution was linked directly to his person. But with his death, the title of Supreme Leader of the Revolution remained the highest position in Iran and was fulfilled by Sayyid Ali Khamenei (1989). The Iranian state, however, had a second important position which is the presidency, which according to the state is been elected democratically by votes of the population, the supreme leader's authority, however, remains stronger and even unchallengeable. And the national dimension kept based on Anti-U.S. ideologies, especially due to the U.S. accuses and claims that links Iran with terrorism, considering Iran the source of global terrorism (Iran was considered more dangerous than the Sunni Salafism, before 11th of September attacks), on the other hand, the Anti-Sunni ideological dimension was increasing due to conflicts with the Sunni government of Taliban in Afghanistan. (Juadeau, & Percy, 2009).

This Anti-Sunni / Anti-Arab Ideology, however, appeared more with the later increasing tension with Saudi Arabia, especially after the so-called Arab Spring, as some scholars argue that this conflict is caused mainly by the geopolitical, and economic rivalry, while others put the

sectarian Sunni-Shiite historical conflict as the centre of the tension. The tension, however, can be considered as neither purely sectarian nor purely ethnic. The fall of Saddam's regime in Baghdad after (2003) U.S. invasion, had carried an Iranian expansionism policy and promoted for the so-called "Axis of Resistance" including many allies such as Assad's regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and a few militias in Iraq and the Houthi militia in Yemen, where it is noted that the sectarian tone became obvious in this alliance. But with the mottos of the resistance to Israel and the recent slogan of combating Salafi Jihadist terrorism (such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda) and supporters, that became the theme or the label through which Iran justify its expansionism. Thus Iran had managed to change its' position from the number one source of terrorism, into being "America's De-Facto Ally in the War Against ISIS" (Dergham, n.d.). All of this regional influence coupled with Iran's progress in its agreement with the United States over its nuclear program (Obama, 2015), gave the Iranian nationalism high prestige among its regional competitors, and contributed to the success of the "Islamic state" concept that Khomeini wanted to establish as we saw, making Iran take back its historical heritage of an old empire, but this time with an "Islamic" dimension.

This Islamic dimension does not only appear in the symbols such as The Coat of Arms on the Iranian flag "Iran's coat of arms symbolizes the five principles of Islam. The centred sword represents the country's strength" and the Iranian Motto: "Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic" (Anadolu Agency, 2014), Additionally it appears with the formation of the overall organizations and communities which was characterized to be in opposition to the Pahlavi ideologies. An ideology that includes "religious", "nationalism", "Marxism," and "Islamic-Marxism" along with the elimination of non-religious soldiers, technocrats from authority.

These actions, however, was not sufficient to eliminate the Persian historical identity from the Iranian society, given the condition of political authority-society relations which did not witness much change after the Islamic revolutions. Adding to that the development of the media, and the new age media which resulted in forming a new

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generation (Dehaghi, 2013, P.104-106). This intergenerational difference between people who lived the Islamic Revolution and the generation which followed is what to be considered a partial failure of the state's nationalization project.

In conclusion, the Iranian state was formed on the base of the Islamic revolution events and developed according to the regional and global variables, however, concepts such as the Iranian nationalism, and the minorities in the Iranian society was developed according to the historical events not solely happened during the ancient and middle ages but also those happened in the modern history of Iran.

3. State's General Policy Towards Minorities:

The 1.648 million Squared Km sized Iran, with a population of 81.8 million (U.S. Government July 2015 estimate). The post-revolution constitution declares the country to be the Islamic Republic, and Ja'afari Shia Islam to be the official state religion. Thus all laws and regulations should be based on "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia, according to the "Ja'afari Shia" understanding for the Islamic religion.

The government policy toward all types of minorities is making the estimations hard to be done thus the ranges of the estimations are wide, and not accurate, however, U.S. government estimates show that Muslims constitute 99% of the population; while 90-95% are following Shia doctrine and forming the majority, as the remaining 5-10% who follows Sunni doctrine (most of these Sunnis are from different racial or ethnic backgrounds such as Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively). In the same context, official statistics on the number of Muslims who practice Sufism is not available, but the unofficial reports, estimate their number to be several million.

On the other hand, U.S. government estimates state that non-Muslim groups constituting the remaining 1% of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The

largest three groups of non-Muslim minorities are Bahais, Christians, and Yarsanis. Although there is no confirmed count of Yarsanis, according to one nongovernmental organisation and some of their leaders Yarsanis number is estimated to be one million.

However, the Iranian government often classifies them as Shia Muslims practising Sufism, but Yarsanis identify their doctrine "Yarsan as a dissimilar faith (known as The Haq or Kakai). Yarsanis are mainly located in Luristan and Gurani-speaking areas of southern Kurdish regions" (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2015).

Report of the U.S. government quoting from Human Rights Watch database, that the Bahais number is at least 300,000. And for the same reason the same report quoted from World Christian Database statistics, to prove that there are roughly 285,000 Christians, some estimates, however, claim that the actual number might be Christians way larger than the actual report. The report also quoted from the official statistics of the Iranian Statistical Center that there are 117,700.

The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians living in Tehran and Isfahan. The Assyrian Church, however, estimated that the total Assyrian and Chaldean Christian population combined are around 7,000 persons. Additionally, there are also Protestant quantities, those include the evangelical groups, but even the U.S. reports could not find a defined number by any official statistics. Thus the report took into consideration the estimates of the Christian groups from outside the country that estimated the size of this Protestant community to not more than 10,000. And at the last, the report stated according to both the Zoroastrian groups and the Statistical Center of Iran, announced about nearly 25,000 of Iran's population follows Zoroastrians faith. As for Jews minority, according to Tehran Jewish Committee reports, the existence of an approximately 9,000 Jews, but the media estimations are more than double where they predict that their number to be between 18,000 to 20,000. And supposedly there are 5,000 to 10,000 Sabean-Mandaeans (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2015).

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The Iranian constitution states citizens shall enjoy human, political, economic, and other rights, "in conformity with Islamic criteria". Moreover, the Iranian constitution recognizes the five major Sunni schools be "accorded full respect" and enjoy official status in issues related to religious education and definite personal affairs. But "Within the limits of the law," the constitution additionally states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities permitted to have freedom of faith and to form religious communities, proselytizing, however, is prohibited by law.

According to Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. Bureau of Democracy Human Rights and Labor, (2015-2017) reports, "Both recognized and unrecognized" religious minority groups (including Baha'is, Sunni's, and Christians) are facing a policy of assimilation and discrimination, including actions against freedom of religion, freedom of education, and Press freedoms. Additionally, the actions included the elimination of governmental and administrative positions, and prevention from political participation, and other punishment procedures including, violence, arresting, imprisoning, lack of protection, and the encouragement of hate speech and hateful actions against minorities.(Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2015).

In the same respect there are ethnic minorities who are non-Persian ethnic minorities and who make up approximately 40% to 50% of Iran's population, these minority groups according to (U.S. Department of State, March 2008) are mainly distributed as the following Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2%, others 1%.

These groups are subject to assimilation, and oppression policy, starting from the times of Pahlavi centralized government, which tried to mould all of the ethnic minority groups into the leader's vision of an ideal Iranian nation. These efforts included banning the usage of other languages and using force for suppressing and subjugating all the non-Persian groups and trying to create a homogeneous society (Marashi, 2008, P.90-112).

The Islamic revolution, however, did not bring much of a change, as the new Islamic government attempted to reconstruct a theocratic Shiite Persian-centric homogenous nation. Indeed this heterophobia comes mainly from the nature of the regime, which sees diversity and sub-identities/ micro-identities as an internal threat to the vision of the "Supreme national identity" or the macro-identity, adding to that the fear from surrounding geopolitical threats, because these minority societies are considered as an advantage for the foreign powers, including Britain, the United States, Israel, and even Saudi Arabia. these fears indeed are similar to most of the assimilationist regimes fears, since the excuse of protecting minority can form a justification for interference in the internal affairs of the country.

The Islamic Revolution has two opposite views regarding the minority policies these two differences comes from the revolution's two main wings, namely the conservative and reformist wings, each of these wings have a different policy toward minorities which is linked to ideological dissimilarities between them. As the reformists seek for more freedoms and moderation towards integration policy, the mechanism they see it is through expanding political power beyond the traditional elite.

This was obvious with the presidential period of Khatami (1997) who's reforms strengthened civil society in ethnic regions and created an environment that encourages a higher degree of ethnic minority participation. However, the return of the conservatives to the office with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013), carried a policy of a heavily Persianized Shiite theocracy that downgrades non-Shiites religious minorities, and non-Persian ethnic minorities. This could be explained by understanding the nature of the conservative wing of the Islamic revolution, knowing that it is made up of "traditional religion scholars, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and allied businessmen" to a large extent and this might explain the reason beyond their preference of the status quo. Indeed, with the return of conservatives back to the office the policy towards minorities was even more violent and minorities were more oppressed (Nader, & Stewart, 2013). The reason for this radical escalation might be caused by the regional rivalry, and

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the increased instability sourced from the changing balances in the Middle Eastern political scene, as minorities might be considered to form a real threat, to the Iranian national project.

4. State's Policy Towards Each Minority Group

Minorities in Iran are classified into religious minorities and ethnic minorities in comparison with the theocratic Shiite Persian-centric majority; some of the minorities' characters develop together, as some of the ethnic groups might have other similar joint characteristics such as religion, and/or language (Oran, 2001, P.67-69).

This case of having multi sub-identity/micro-identity can be found in many minority societies around the globe (Kurubaş, 2017), however, this article will list the groups separately as religious minorities and ethnic minorities

A. Religious Minorities

a. The Sunni Muslim Minority

As the largest religious minority, the Sunni Muslims are forming the majority of Kurds, nearly all Baluchis and Turkomen, and a minority of Arabs are Sunnis, additionally, Sunni Muslims are forming small groups of Persians mainly in the southern part of Iran and the region of Khorasan.

Commonly, the Iranian Shias are persuaded to consider Sunnis as "fellow Muslims, but as those whose religion is incomplete". Supposedly the Sunni population of Iran, which includes Kurds and Baluchis, complain that there is not a single Sunni mosque in the country In municipalities which includes mixed populations such as West Azarbaijan, the Persian Gulf region, Baluchistan, and Sistan. Such municipalities (containing mixed population) are witnessing sectarian tension between believers of Shias doctrine and believers of Sunnis

doctrine, existed not only before but also after the Islamic Revolution (Hassan, 2008. P.6-13).

However, recently observers can notice that this tension is increasing, due to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As this competition is intensifying and inflaming, events took action against minorities such as executing Shiite cleric in Saudi Arabia the Nimr's, Similarly, there were reports of arrests and harassment against the Sunnis minorities in Iran. Such as what the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) cited reports prepared by activists that authorities in Ahvaz arrested some Arab-Iranians for converting from Shia Islam to Sunni Islam, arresting them with no arresting warrant and then delaying them in MOIS office. Few of them were sentenced to death on charges of "enmity against God through spreading propaganda against the system."

On one hand, there is the rivalry with Saudi Arabia, and on the other hand, the rise of ISIS, which is Sunni, doesn't make Iran's opening up to Sunnis any more likely—especially when taken with a fear of growing Salafism within the country, As "Iranian authorities said they had smashed an ISIS-affiliated cell in Western Iran, in a Kurdish Sunni province" (GRAHAM, 2016).

The Sunni minority in Iran has become a fuel to pay for the rivalry with Saudi Arabia, and the fears of the Iranian regime of the Salafist tide. Thus, violations of Sunni minority rights are registered in more than one report despite the constitutional recognition of the Sunni minority. In addition to the harassments and arresting, the Sunni minority is facing restrictions in education, discrimination by the government and the members of this Sunni community have been a target of religious assimilation, and oppression (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2015).

b. The Baha'i Minority:

There is an estimated more than 300,000 Baha'is believe, Baha'is religion started in the 14th century, and the violence against its followers started since the beginning and continued during the 20th

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century throughout the country. The constitution of the "Islamic revolution" did not consider the Iranian Baha'is as a recognized minority, and for that reason, they are not allowed to teach or practise their faith or to maintain links with co-religionists abroad, moreover, the followers of Baha'is faith are oppressed and fought in many life aspects. The Baha'i faith is defined by the current government as a political "sect" which according to them is linked to the Pahlavi era and, for that reason, as a counterrevolutionary sect (Hassan, 2008, P.8).

Because the Baha'is are not recognized religious minorities in the constitution, they are not even allowed to establish neither community centres nor any other types of cultural/social associations, Iranian government indeed denied the Baha'is right to assemble officially or to uphold any administrative organizations since 1983. (Hassan, 2008, P.8). Also, Baha'is are facing another problem including; the government direct threats to the physical safety and freedoms of the Baha'is society members, and disregarding their property rights, denial of access to education and employment, denial of their identity and historical heritages, and eroding the economic base of the Baha'i community continually. Most importantly the government is supporting or at least allowing for propaganda that carries hate speech, and violence encouragement against the Baha'i community, this policy indeed could be reflecting part of an overall strategy of the government to disobey the international standards of justice and human rights without attracting the attention of the international society to itself (Bahá'í International Community, 2012, P. 23-28).

c. Christians, Jews, and Other Religious Minorities:

I. Christians

Lately, the authorities have become increasingly assertive in limiting proselytizing activities by evangelical Christians, whose services were conducted in Persian. A government is monitoring and restricting the church from practising all of the religious advocacy activity.

Additionally, members of the church are forced to carry special identity cards, which could be considered as discrimination. Church meetings are only allowed on Sundays, which is considered as a violation of assembly freedom. Mistreatment of evangelical Christians has continued in recent years including "government harassment of churchgoers, visible monitoring outside Christian premises by Revolutionary Guards to discourage Muslims or converts from entering church" (Hassan, 2008, P.8). Despite all of these restrictions an underground church is becoming very effective, and because Iran's regime does not provide any media freedoms, thus "much of Iran's Christian population is forced to obtain religious materials and teachings from satellite TV or social media forums like Telegram and Instagram and gather for worship services in the homes of pastors and other clergy members" because the gathering is held illegal (Chiaromonte, 2016).

II. Jews

In the same context, Jews are one of the recognized religious minorities, however, reports show that the official discrimination is highly frequent, the reason might be the government's anti-Israel attitude, and the view of much of the population that Jewish citizens supported Zionism and the state of Israel, created a threatening atmosphere for the small community". This drove the member of the Jews minority to limit their contact with Israel, and out of fear of punishment activities. The reason for these fears could be the criticism of Jews following to anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations, this created a threatening environment for the Jewish community. The threatening environment includes threatening some of the minority leaders, the limitation of the religious practices, and the arrest of few people with a justification of being an agent in the Israeli intelligence (Hassan, 2008. P8).

Despite the overall government policy of assimilation and restrictions some opinions, however, consider the Jews minority status in Iran is better than other minorities, since the number of Jews in Iran

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is increasing continuously. This comparison could be relative, if the situation of this Jewish minority was compared to other Jewish minorities in the Middle Eastern countries "Except for Israel" (Sengupta, 2016).

III. Sabian Mandaean

In 2006, UNESCO listed the Sabian Mandaean language in its Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing. Additionally, the members of the minority groups were highly "*assimilated into nominally Muslim society, and the remaining is tiny communities in Khorramshahr and Ahwaz, in south-western Iran*" (Minority Rights Group International, 2014).

IV. Yarsan

Recently the leadership of the Yarsan in northwestern Iran wrote to the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, seeking his approval for a constitutional amendment to end the discrimination in contradiction of the faith's followers and recognise their religious beliefs. The Community Civil Activists Society, which considered as representative for almost 2 million followers in Iran according to the group, is seeking towards "protection of religious identity," "achieving the national settlement," "seeking freedom," "achieving equality among all citizens" and "ending all forms of discrimination." To accomplish its goals, the group has taken the struggle to work peacefully within the constitutional framework of Iran's as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2016).

V. Zoroastrianism

The ancient religion is still a dilemma in Iran's with an estimated 25,000 Zoroastrians under the country's Islamic revolution system, legitimately; Zoroastrians are a protected religious minority by the constitution with guaranteed parliamentary representation. Thus the

members of this minority society are facing the same issues of the other minorities, but relatively their situation is better than other minorities. Some of the Zoroastrianism followers "*have sought refugee status in America under an officially backed program to help Iranian religious minorities*" (Tait, 2016).

B. Ethnic Minorities

a. Azeri Minority

With its population estimated as nearly 20 million, they are mainly distributed in the northwest of Iran, a vital and strategic area, The Azeris are chiefly Shii Muslims, and this religious empathy with the centralized government might be the reason of that has reduced the opposition to them and the government, as they have a very good status theoretically, the nationalism theme is weakened within their culture. One of the reasons for this could be the closeness and assimilation policy of Iran, while another reason might be the collapse of Azerbaijan Republic (1947), which meant "*Azeri nationalism lost its political solidity and path*" (Hercoc, 2004, P.5). Despite the good relative situation of the Azeris in Iran, a report shows some complaints about discrimination against Azeris by the Government, mainly against Turkic-speaking Azeris,

The fanaticism of the Iranian regime towards any negligible cultural demands can be seen through "the case of Mr Chehragani, an Azeri candidate for the March 1996 Parliamentary elections from Tabriz. During his candidacy, Chehragani emphasised Article 15 of the Constitution on the use of local languages" (Hercoc, 2004, P.5). He afterwards faced violent campaign, threaten his safety, and freedom, and was arrested and imprisoned, and his question was one episode of tension in the Azerbaijani-Iranian relations, while Iranians actions show some concerns about the Azerbaijani threat of promoting for the unification of some parts of the Iranian lands with Azerbaijan (Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 1999), these fear indeed is similar to many other cases in the history of "*the minority issue*" when the minorities start demanding the right to recognition, escalates their language, and

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cultural demands, and end up with demands for autonomy, and/or even independence (Kurubaş, 2017, P.50).

b. Kurd Minority

The estimation of their numbers varies from one source to another, some source show that their number can reach up to 8 million, and might be more, most of them live in the west and northwest of Iran, chiefly Sunni Muslims, and despite that their population less than Azeri's population the Kurds occupy the forefront of opposition among other minorities. As Iranian state lost most of the Kurdish territory to Ottoman rule, the remaining Kurdish area took the status of semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities until the late 1800s and their demise under the Qajar state. Kurdish national movements were crushed further under the national centralist policies of Reza Shah in the 1930s, nevertheless, there was a short-lived era of Kurdish victory, this victory was aided by the presence of the Soviet Red Army, as a part of the Allied Forces in Iran that concluded in the creation of the "Mahabad Kurdish Republic, which lasted for 11 months (1946). This made Iran as the only country that had an independent Kurdish republic within its borders. (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010, P.14-15)

The period following 1947 saw the decline in Kurdish prosperity, the co-option of the Kurdish ethnic leadership and the reduction of the political power and influential base of Kurdish landlords with the land reforms of the 1960s. The Kurdish struggles for independence within their territories sustained after the 1979 revolution. And this lead Ayatollah Khomeini to warn the Kurdish leaders in 1979 that any attempts towards independence will cost them a lot, however, a well-organized revolt started by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (Komala) and others in 1979. (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010, P.17-19). The response was tough and the government banned the Kurdish Democratic Party, and then an armed campaign against the Kurds started, stepping this up further once the Iran-Iraq war broke out. Relations with the government ruined yet further when, in the year 2000, when a Kurdish Member of Parliament publicly claimed the existence of a campaign of suppression and serial killings against members of the Kurdish community in Iran. Today, many Kurds claim

that their legitimate rights of "especially the Sunnis" are denied and thus they launched many calls for justice on the political, economic, cultural and social levels had been (Hercock, 2004, P5-6).

c. Arab Minority

Reports indicate that the Arab population in Iran more than 1.5 million. Most of them are living in the town of Ahwaz. They are facing increased oppression and discrimination in recent years, due to the previously mentioned reason for regional revolts, the governmental actions include arrests of protesters, and discrimination in education employment, politics, and culture" (DaBell, 2013). Reports indicate that the years following the so-called Arab spring (2011), was the worst for the Arabs of Iran, even worse than the period of the war against Iraq, especially after the vital role of Iran in the Syrian Crises. As the Arabs of Iran are looking forward retaining their previous autonomy status, which was ended (1925), their national leaders are taking the advantage of the Syrian war and the other Iranian-Arabian struggle to use as fuel helping to recall the Arabian national spirit, and national feelings, to reach to their autonomy, some of them additionally is collaborating with the "Sunni Kurds" in their resistance to the Iranian-Shiite Assimilation efforts (Coles, n.d.).

d. Baloch Minority

Most of the total 5 million Baloch communities are living in the area of West Balochistan, (South-Eastern Iran), striving to survive under the military rule of Iran, since they suffer regular military operations done by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, under these circumstances they cannot find any space for their own culture, language or religion to develop. Also, the majority of them is living in extreme poverty and becoming victims of forced migration and land confiscation in favour of resettled Persians sent to the region. The governmental actions against them include arresting, imprisoning, kidnapping, and killing (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, 2013)

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e. Other Minorities

In addition to the previously mentioned minorities there is a notable one ethnic and linguistic minority, which is the Gilakis and Mazandarani, Lurs, Turkmen, who also have been prevented from having any cultural, and/or social rights by the constitution, and thus were subject to assimilation by the majority of Persian nationalism. The Groups of Assyrians and Armenians, however, are parts of the previously mentioned Christians,

As Assyrians are among the rarely found minorities they are under a threat of vanishing, as for Armenians they are keeping strong cultural-religious links with neighbouring Armenia. Another ethnic and linguistic minorities can be found in Iran but with smaller percentages, these minorities are in real danger of vanishing.

Conclusion

The region that we know today as Iran had witnessed many historical changes, many empires rose and failed, and each of these empires left an effect on the culture, and the identity of the Persian people, furthermore many of these changes resulted in creating minority societies within the Iranian demography. The Iranian National project was established on the base of assimilation, and oppression of the others since the Pahlavi's era, and with the new Era of the "Islamic Revolution" the regime began to be more assimilationist and had a project of creating a supreme Identity /Macro-identity carrying a policy of a heavily Persianized Shiite theocracy.

Despite the slight changes of this during the reformist era, the returning of the conservatives to office brought more radical assimilation and oppression policy towards minorities, combined with the escalation in the political and regional competition, and the international threats, the Iranian regime is violating the human rights in various manners, as some minorities in Iran are still seeking for recognition, others are demanding for autonomy occasionally, in the

same way, some of the minorities are being treated better than the others due to their political relations with the relative surrounding societies (Azeris, Kurds, Arabs).

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