



ETHNICITY AND RELIGIOUS MINORITY POLITICS IN IRAN

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Contemporary Iran, somewhat similar to its pre-Islamic Persian empire, is a heterogeneous, multiethnic (if not multinational), and multilingual country. Many Iranians, scholars among them, are hesitant to acknowledge or even talk about the reality of the ethnonational diversity of Iran, either out of ignorance, prejudice, or chauvinism, or from the fear of a potential movement for separatism and secession. This fear has been due, in part, to external interventions. Attempts to fan ethnic tensions in Iran by some regional powers, to gain political concessions from the country's central government, has been one reason for suspicion toward any ethnic-related demands, thus the association of ethnic issues with national security. In the past, the Soviet Union and pan-Turkists of Turkey were seen as the primary encouragers of ethnic tensions in Iran. At present, playing the ethnic card has become part of the U.S. strategy of "regime change." The continuous crisis in U.S.–Iran relations, therefore, has exacerbated the sensitivity and significance of the ethnicity question in Iran.

As of 2000, the total population of Iran was estimated to be 67 million, with approximately 98 percent of the people Muslim; Shi'a make up 89 percent and Sunni 10 percent of the country's total population.¹ Non-Muslim religious groups are a clear numerical minority (about 1 percent of the population), yet sociopolitically, economically, and culturally they make up a significant portion of Iran's society. Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahais, and others constitute the non-Muslim population.

Ethnic differences lay at the intersections of religious differences in Iran. Most of the Sunnis (as a religious minority in Iran) constitute distinct ethnic minorities as well, residing in the Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchestan, Golestan (formerly Gorgan), and Khuzestan provinces. Not all Shi'a are ethnic Persians. According to Eliz Sanasarian, "If language is utilized as the main distinguishing feature of ethnicity, Persian (*Farsi*), despite being the official language, is the mother tongue of barely half of the population of Iran."² Other languages include Turkic

(of different dialects such as Azeri, Turkmen, Qashqai, and Shahsavan), Kurdish, Baluchi, Luri, Arabic, Gilaki, Assyrian, and Armenian. Sanasarian points out that of the five dominant non-Muslim religious minorities, three of them (the Bahais, the Jews, and the Zoroastrians) have Persian as their mother tongue. Ethnically and linguistically, Turkic-speaking people are the largest minority in Iran.

There are no reliable or exact figures about the sizes of the ethnic minorities in Iran. It is harder to find demographic information on ethnic groups than on the religious minorities. The figures presented here, then, are the estimates frequently found in official and standard sources.³ As of 2003, the ethnic classifications are estimated as: Persian (51 percent), Azeri (24 percent), Gilaki and Mazandarani (8 percent), Kurd (7 percent), Arab (3 percent), Lur (2 percent), Baluch (2 percent), Turkmen (2 percent), and other groups—Armenian, Jew, Assyrian, Qashqai, Shahsavan, and others (1 percent).⁴

Though the words “Persian” and “Iranian” are often used interchangeably, as of the 1990s only a little over half of the Iranian population is ethnically Persian. Available estimates of the population size of the Turkic people vary; the official estimate in the mid-1980s was 14 million, and in a conservative estimation, they make up about 26 percent of the Iranian population. Azeri ethnonationalist activists, however, claim that number to be 24 million, hence as high as 35 percent of the Iranian population. Iranian Turks are not a unified collectivity; they are divided along Shi’a–Sunni, subethnic, tribal, family, and local lines. Many Shi’a Turks (in particular Azeris) have assimilated into the Persian milieu.

THE STATUS OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN IRAN

Any assessment or analysis of the status and rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, as elsewhere, has to be done on three levels: the state institutions (e.g., the constitution, legal rights, state policy, state ideology); the response of the minorities, or the state-minorities relations; and the interreligious groups or interethnic relations—that is, the way the majority group (be it religious or ethnic) perceives, feels, and treats or interacts with the minorities (i.e., patterns of prejudice and discrimination that exist in the society at large).⁵

Addressing all three levels of assessment is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, particular attention will be made here to the role of the state, as scholars agree that, “the state plays a critical role in designing and implementing minority policy,” especially in a state-centered country such as Iran, where the state is omnipresent in both private and public spheres of people’s lives. In this context, I examine some general patterns concerning state policy and the ideology of the ruling elite in Iran vis-à-vis ethnic and religious minorities.

In her book *Religious Minorities in Iran*, Eliz Sanasarian has used Milton Esman’s formulation for the various approaches taken by the state elites

toward ethnic diversity and the minority question.⁶ According to this formulation, the state elites in different countries have generally shown two distinct preferences.

First, if the state elites refuse to accept or tolerate pluralism in its society, instead it will tend to promote homogenization or depluralization. The goal is to make everyone part of a collective whole and to do away with particularities. Assimilation either through coercion or through “positive incentives” (by, for example, rewarding those who acculturate) is a method of enforcing state policy. In extreme cases, homogenization involves population transfers and extermination, including genocide.⁷ Sanasarian suggests that the Pahlavi state’s policy on ethnionationals and religious minorities was shaped by the goal of homogenizing society and doing away with diversity—to make everyone in an ethnic and religious minority into an “Iranian.”⁸

Second, if the state accepts pluralism as an inevitable fact—“a permanent and legitimate reality” of society—Esman argues, then the policy alters radically. It becomes one of “regulating” or “managing” religious and ethnic conflicts and preventing ethnic uprisings and interreligious clashes. This approach may implement a variation of federalism and regional autonomy. Using the case of the United States, as discussed by, for example, Crawford Young suggests carefully designed measures and rules based on the principles of bargaining, compromise, and legal equality. Equality for the individual and collectivity, institutionalized access to authoritative allocation at the national level, and guaranteed security are seen as necessary tools against cultural oppression and coerced assimilation.⁹

However, the state’s accepting religious and ethnic pluralism does not necessarily preclude coercive measures and policy. The third possibility is that the state may coercively exclude certain minorities and “confer on one dominant ethnic or religious segment a monopoly of political participation, economic opportunity, and cultural prestige.”¹⁰ Or, as is more common for this approach, state officials may employ a policy of subordination whereby the state “generally offers the minority some rights, although they are inferior to the rights enjoyed by members of the dominant community.”¹¹ Under circumstances of subordination, a minority group may enjoy “freedom of enterprise” or even a higher per capita income than the majority, yet it also experiences “significant state-sponsored discrimination” in other areas of life. The form and nature of discrimination may vary from country to country and minority to minority.¹²

The Islamic republic falls under the third approach. As Sanasarian states, “In contrast to the Pahlavi state, the clerical-led regime has shown acceptance of the permanence of [the ethno-religious] pluralistic nature of society. It is an accepted practice for parliamentary deputies to introduce their provincial/ethnic identity during their speeches on the floor. (This would have been a betrayal

of the “Iranianness” of the state under the previous regime.) Yet, as the Esman model suggests, acceptance does not preclude the use or the threat of coercion. The policy concerning constitutionally recognized non-Muslim minorities has differed from those non-Muslims not recognized in the constitution.”¹³ The Bahai and the Christian converts remain excluded and have been targets of violence and persecution, for example.

According to state ideology, Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, and Zoroastrians are “legitimate people” (*ahl al-dhimma*, or protected people)—*ahl al-kitab* (people of the Book, or followers of revealed religions)—hence they possess some recognized and valuable rights (e.g., the ability to vote for their own deputies, the right to assemble, the right to practice their religion freely, and so forth), yet they are excluded (overtly or covertly) from other rights and are clearly a subordinated collectivity. The theocratic nature of the state and Islamist ideology pursued by state elites have excluded non-Muslim and non-Shi’i religious minorities, as well as many secular Muslims, from access to membership in the polity, especially with regard to the real organs of power and decision making.

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran has institutionalized discrimination or segmentation among its citizens on the basis of religion and gender, as manifested in its constitution, state policies, and state ideology. This systemic discrimination has explicitly favored men over women and Muslims over non-Muslims, and above all Shi’i over Sunni and other Muslim sects.¹⁴ In hindsight, it is no surprise that the first significant protests against the Islamic republic were carried out in 1979 by women and by ethnic and religious minorities (Kurds and Turkmens). When analyzing the minority politics in the Islamic republic, it is important to note that the central problem with regard to gender politics lies within the clearly male-biased laws, including the constitution. With regard to ethnic politics, it is not the law or the constitution as much, but mostly the failure to implement the rights enshrined in the constitution, that has been viewed as the primary problem. That is why in campaigning for their rights, women in Iran have directly challenged the constitution and the legal system, while the ethnic groups have emphasized policy issues.

For example, Article 19 of the Iranian constitution states: “The people of Iran regardless of ethnic and tribal origin enjoy equal rights. Color, race, language and the like will not be cause for privilege.”¹⁵ It can be noted that, while discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and race is ruled out, religion and sex are not mentioned, implying that these two can be causes for privilege and discrimination.

Article 15 of the constitution provides the following ethnic minority rights: along with Persian, “the official and common language and script of the people of Iran,” which is the language of official documents, correspondence,

and statements, as well as textbooks, “the use of local and ethnic languages in their press and mass media is allowed. The teaching of their literature in their schools, along with Persian language instruction is also permitted.”¹⁶ In practice, however, these rights have seldom been implemented. It can further be noted that this article does not obligate—but only allows—the state or private sector to provide instruction of literature or presentation of mass media in ethnic languages.

Articles 12, 13, 14, and 64 of the constitution pertain to religious minorities. As mentioned earlier, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians have been referred to in the constitution as recognized faith communities. According to Article 64, the Zoroastrians and Jews will each have one representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (the *Majles*) of 290 members. The Assyrian and Chaldean Christians will together have one representative, and the Armenian Christians of the south and the north will each elect one representative.

The following examples are among the concrete and practical implications of the discriminatory bases in the constitutions:

(1) As identified by human/women and minority rights lawyers such as Shirin Ebadi and progressive clerics such as Mohsen Kadivar, there are at least three bases over which the ruling law and penal code in Iran are explicitly discriminatory: sex, sexuality, and gender (bias in favor of the male and the heterosexual); religion (Muslim over non-Muslim and Shi’a over Sunni); social position and occupation (clergy over lay people). These have rendered obvious legal privileges for Shi’i Muslims and covert discriminations against Sunnis and non-Muslims in employment and in holding powerful public office. As a result, the head of all the ministries, the media (state TV and radio) the president, vice presidents, members of the Guardian Council, Expediency Council, and the Assembly of Leadership Experts, and finally the supreme leader (or the supreme jurist) all have been either by legal requirement or tacit agreement strictly male Shi’i.

(2) Only in the year 2002, thanks to the reformers’ efforts in the previous *Majles*, was the blood money (*diyeh*) of Muslims and non-Muslims equalized. Yet, when a Christian dies, if he or she has a Muslim heir among his or her heirs, the Muslim heir can take over the shares of all the rest.

(3) The social label or adjective *aqaliyat* (minority) on members of the religious minorities and placement of the sign *AQALIYAT* on the windows of stores and public sites belonging to religious minorities have had mixed consequences: it freed them from scrutiny for adherence to Islamic religious codes, but it also excluded them as the “stranger” or the “other” (*gheyr-e khodi*), the one who is separate from “us” (*khody*). Under the Islamic republic, as Sanasarian argues, this has led to an institutionalized “otherness.”

Accordingly, “religious minorities have been segmented in word, thought, and action. . . . Before 1979, everyone was an ‘Irani’ albeit in pretense; after the Revolution, Irani was replaced by aqaliat, Bahai, and Sunni. ‘Hamvatan’ [fellow countryman/countrywoman] was replaced by ‘Muslim sisters and brothers.’ These theocratic state designations were reflected in school textbooks, communal and national commentaries, and debates.”¹⁷ Initially, deputies representing religious minorities expressed objection to the use of the word *aqaliyat* in Article 13 of the constitution; they preferred the word *javame’* (communities), but now they use it in reference to themselves as well to ensure continuity and legitimacy, and when possible they push the boundaries within which they can maneuver.¹⁸

Like many aspects of society in postrevolutionary Iran, the status of religious and ethnic minority groups have remained unsettled. During the years immediately after the Revolution, there was a revival of ethnic cultures and a proliferation of publications in various ethnic languages. But this trend did not last long. Some positive ethnic characters or ethnic images, speaking in their ethnic languages, have made brief appearances in recent films made by Iranian filmmakers (something that was absent under the previous regime), but most other cultural manifestations of ethnic diversity have been constrained.

With the passing of years, and especially with the rise of the reform movement, flexibility and political and ideological divisions within the clerics and the ruling elite have resulted in contradictions of policy and practice. The presidential election in 2005, for example, displayed great fluidity and numerous contradiction vis-à-vis minority politics.

THE ETHNIC FACTOR IN THE NINTH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Compared with previous elections, the last presidential election (2005) was clearly influenced by ethnic factors. This ought to be of special importance to policy-makers, especially to those in Iran who insist that “Iran has no ethnic problem.” When Islamist authorities portray Iran as a cohesive Shi’i state, and secular nationalists (especially monarchists) describe it as a cohesive “Persian nation of Aryan race,” they brand any warnings about minority issues as “artificial,” “foreign instigated,” and “divisive,” thus avoiding serious scholarly debate on ethnic and minority issues.

There have been ample signs, however, of rising ethnonationalism and increased alienation among Iran’s ethnic and religious minorities in recent years, to the extent that some authorities have issued warnings. For instance, in late 2004, during the State Week (Hafteh-ye Dowlat), the minister of intelligence, Ali Younesi, reported that the nature of future crises in Iran will not necessarily be political but, rather, they will be ethnic and social.¹⁹ He, like other

authorities in the present and former regimes, however, claimed that foreign elements are trying to stir up sectarian and ethnic differences.

Candidates and Their Campaigns

Two months before the presidential election, the oil-rich Khuzestan province became the scene of bloody ethnic-related riots and confrontations. In their election campaigns, therefore, most of the presidential candidates placed special importance on their slogans and promises concerning ethnic and religious minorities. While some candidates gave lip service to the ethnic issues, others promised to implement Articles 15 and 19 of the constitution, and also to allocate a share of high government positions to ethnic minorities, especially non-Shi'i minorities. For instance, Mostafa Moin visited Sistan and Baluchestan province in March 2005, and in an unusual appeasing gesture to Sunnis, conducted the ritual prayer alongside the province's high-ranking Sunni cleric, Mowlavi Abdolhamid.

In early March 2005, the cleric and presidential candidate Mehdi Karrubi visited the city of Ahwaz in the Khuzestan province, and he praised the role of "brave young people, particularly Arab, Lur, and the tribes of Khuzestan."²⁰ Also in Tehran, while meeting with some activists of the House of Ethnic Groups (Khaneh-ye Aqwam), Karrubi listened to their demands and promised that, under his presidency, the status of ethnic minorities would improve.²¹ Conservative candidate Ali Larijani, too, while speaking in Maragheh (in the Azerbaijan province) claimed that he had been in favor of "preserving Iran's ethnic identities and reviving the culture, arts, music, and language of various ethnic groups, including Azeri-speakers." He then traveled to Aq Qal'eh, in the northeastern Golestan province, where in he praised Turkmen people and expressed his "strong opposition to the appointment of nonnative officials to administrative positions in the country's provinces and districts."²²

Another conservative candidate, Mohsen Rezai, met with tribal leaders in Abadan on March 24, 2005, and said, "[w]hen I talk about justice I mean that there should be no difference between the provinces or tribes and we should not have first and second class citizens. In order to realize this... we must treat all ethnic groups equally. In fact a change in our view towards ethnic groups is extremely important and the next government must courageously pursue this issue."²³

Rezai's statement is a clear admission of the existence of ethnic discrimination under the present regime. But what caused more opposition was the statement made by President Khatami's spokesman, Abdullah Ramezanzadeh, a Kurd who previously served as governor of Kurdistan province. During a conference organized by the reformists in the mostly Kurdish town of Kermanshah, Ramezanzadeh said: "We [the Kurds] will only take part in the elections and vote if we are guaranteed to have a share in the power."²⁴ Conservatives

criticized him and pointed out that there were already some Kurds in the government, such as Bijan Namdar-Zanganeh, the petroleum minister, and Massoud Pezeshkian, the health minister. As a result of an outcry against Ramzanzadeh, President Khatami reportedly barred him from taking part in any more election meetings.²⁵ However, Kurdistan's subsequent low turnout in the elections proved Ramezanzadeh's earlier remarks.

Promises Made, Votes Cast

How these ethnic-related promises were received varied among the different ethnic groups. According to Eqbal Rezai, a Kurdish journalist from Sanandaj, people of Kurdistan did not trust the promises candidates made. Turkmens, however, seemed more optimistic about the prospect of such promises being fulfilled, as reported by Ahmad Khatami-Nia, a Turkmen journalist. The reason behind the relative optimism on the part of Turkmens is that, after the Revolution, for the first time a number of district and regional heads were appointed or elected from among native Turkmens.²⁶ In their meetings with the presidential candidates, therefore, Turkmen representatives asked the candidates to address at least their minimum demands. According to Abdolrahman Diyejji, editor of the daily *Sahra*, "the election turn-out was good."²⁷

Some of the conservative ruling clerics, on the other hand, warned against promoting ethnic rights during the presidential campaigns. During his two Friday prayer sermons in late February 2005, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, secretary of the Guardian Council, scolded the presidential candidates for bringing up "[certain] issues in certain provinces" and that "ethnic sensitivities will be provoked and will result in discord."²⁸ Later he warned that the United States was determined to exploit the rifts and "hatch the same plots against Iran" that it did in Lebanon and Iraq, "fanning the flames" of ethnic and religious differences.²⁹

In response to the above comments, the chair of the Association of Khuzestani Arabs located in Tehran (Beyt al-Arab, or Arab House), Hasan Abbasian, sent an open letter to Ayatollah Jannati, admonishing his "unjust, undemocratic, and un-Islamic" stance on the issue of ethnic minorities. This powerful and long letter written within an Islamic-nationalist framework cites both the Koran and the constitution to support its arguments for ethnic diversity, minority rights, and federalism.³⁰ Abbasian argued that the true Islamic approach toward *mellat* (nation) and *ommat* (faith community) and minority rights is compatible with the internationally accepted definitions and also with the long tradition of ethnic diversity and respect for ethnic rights and cultures in the old tradition of the Islamic Caliphate (from the earliest times to the Ottoman period), and also within the tradition of the Persian empire since the ancient Achaemenids to the Sassanids, to the Islamic era, and under Mongols, Safavids,

Afsharids, and Qajars, arguing that Iran's polity has always contained autonomous emirates with different ethnic groups, nationalities, languages, and cultures. Accordingly, under King Darius, for example, "there were 49 ethnic or racial groups and at least 25 to 30 provinces or federal states that were governed autonomously."³¹

Abbassian continued by saying that "it was only under the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi and his centralized and anti-Islamic dictatorship that a policy of de-ethnicization was established in order to eliminate diverse identities. He imposed the culture and language of one ethnic group, Persian, on all other ethnic groups."³² He further pointed out that, "owing to the special international conditions of the time, British colonialism had dictated this policy to Iran in order to prevent communist influence."³³

He wrote passionately about the poverty and deprivation in Khuzestan, and further pointed out that, "Unfortunately whenever we talk about our ethnic rights, we are accused of treason and separatism." But, he stressed, "Arabs demand Islamic democracy, freedom of speech, respect for the rights of women, religious and ethnic minorities. These demands are in common with what non-Arab Iranians want." He argued that it is only by addressing the valid concerns and by respecting the rights of non-Persian Iranians "who constitute over 50 percent of the country's population," could the country remove excuses for foreign intervention, prevent foreign manipulation of ethnic and religious differences toward secessionism, and become better able to maintain Iran's territorial integrity.³⁴

In sum, the way the 2005 presidential campaign was conducted, as well as the election results, clarified the political map of Iran. It showed that, rather than herdlike and homogeneous, the Iranian citizenry was a differentiated community with important crisscrossing splits in terms of socioeconomic class backgrounds, genders, cultural practices, provincial and ethnic ties, and political aspirations.³⁵ Among other things, the election results indicated strong ethnic-related patterns: in the first round, the five provinces with the lowest turnouts were either Kurdish or Azeri regions.³⁶

Many minority members seem to cast their votes for a candidate who was perceived as more sensitive toward their specific concerns, regardless of factional affiliation. For example, Hasan Abbasian (chair of the Beyt al-Arab, an official organization of the Arabs of Khuzestan) claimed that, "the left or right candidates, regardless of their slogans are the same in the eyes of the Arabs of Khuzestan. What matters for the local people here is which candidate will care for Arabs' concerns and will better address their demands."³⁷

Three out of seven candidates had ethnic ties: Mehdi Karrubi was from Lorestan, Mohsen Mehralizadeh from Azerbaijan, and Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf was a Khorasani Turk. But ironically, Mostafa Moin, who was not associated with any ethnic minority, made more promises on ethnic-related issues

than all the other candidates. The candidates with local and ethnic ties did well in their own provinces. Mohsen Mehralizadeh, an Azeri Turk, won most of his votes from his own region. Karrubi, an ethnic Lur, also received the highest votes in Lurestan. Given the capital's low voter turnout, it appears that national elections are increasingly being decided outside of Tehran; the first-round voter turnout in Tehran was only 33 percent as opposed to 62 percent nationwide.³⁸

THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT AND THE ETHNIC QUESTION

Regardless of whether Hasan Abbasian's version of Iran's history or his analysis is accurate or not, his perception of ethnic issues and his ethnic-related demands are shared by many Arab activists, as well as activists from other ethnic groups, except that many of them may use a more secular language.³⁹

Like Abbasian, most ethnic rights activists reject separatism and assert that they want their constitutionally guaranteed rights—that is, implementation of the aforementioned Articles of 15 and 19 of the constitution, as well as Article 48, which requires “just distribution of national incomes among provinces and distribution of economic projects on the basis of needs and potentials of each area,” and Articles 12, 13, 14, and 64 that pertain to religious minorities.

Yet, there has been tension and mistrust between many Iranian pro-democracy or human rights activists and the ethnonationalists who emphasize ethnic and minority rights. This tension is somewhat similar to the one between the nationalists (secular as well as religious) and the women's rights activists (feminists). But whereas tension between feminists and nationalists has diminished in recent years, tension and mistrust between nationalists and ethnic-rights activists has not decreased much. For instance, Yusef Azizi Bani-Torof, the former prisoner of conscience and an Iranian Arab writer and advocate of minority rights, has complained that many human rights activists, intellectuals, and political organizations in the opposition, including the Center for Defenders of Human Rights in Iran (CDHRI) (*Kanun-e Modafe'an-e Hoquq-e Bashar dar Iran*), founded by Shirin Ebadi, and the Writers Association (*Kanun-e Nevisandegan*) have shown hesitance when speaking out in support of people in Khuzestan and in condemning government repression of Iranian Arabs. This hesitance is due to an old suspicion of secessionism and also to sensitivity toward applying such terms as nationality (*melliyat*) to minorities such as Arabs, Azeri, Kurds, and Baluchi. He argues that “Whatever you want to call them, ethnic groups or national groups, Azeri-speaking Iranian or Iranian Turks, Arabic-speaking Iranians or Arab-Iranians, the fact remains that half of Iran's population who happen to be non-Persian are deprived of many of their social, economic, cultural and political rights.”⁴⁰

To overcome this tension, at least among the elite, an educational campaign on identity politics is in order. Accurate terminology, better theoretical conceptualization of the ethnic question, national versus ethnic identity to prevent confusion between nationality (*melliyat*) and ethnicity (*qowmīyat*), and understanding of the interconnectedness of minority rights, women's rights, and democracy are needed. At the same time, there needs to be made a practical and strategic demarcation between what constitutes separatism and what are legitimate ethnic and minority rights.

Policy-makers in Iran need to be reminded that national or ethnic identities are neither exclusive nor fixed. Many scholars of identity, ethnicity, and nationalism, from Benedict Anderson⁴¹ to Anthony Smith,⁴² Crawford Young,⁴³ Milton Esman,⁴⁴ Dov Ronen,⁴⁵ and Joseph Rothschild,⁴⁶ including the ones who have studied the identity question in Iran, such as Mostafa Vaziri,⁴⁷ Richard Cottam,⁴⁸ Touraj Atabaki,⁴⁹ and Lois Beck,⁵⁰ among others, have come to conclude that tribal identity, as with ethnic and national identity, is an imagined identity based on continually revised conceptions of history and tradition in the context of contemporary circumstances. That is, identity is constructed. Tribal people in Iran have invented and reinvented traditions according to changing sociopolitical conditions. Each tribal group was composed of people of diverse ethnolinguistic origins, yet each group forged its own customs and created legends of origins.⁵¹ According to Beck, various "communities have survived by mixing with others, by shifting loyalties, and by transforming themselves socially, culturally, and politically."⁵² State repression and coercive homogenization may only exacerbate the interethnic distrust and latent resentment, and prejudice would therefore strengthen the more extreme and separatist elements. Even those elements within the ethnic-rights movements who are separatists should be allowed to express their ideas as long as they do it through nonviolent means. It is only through fair division of power and resources among different provinces of Iran, and by learning and understanding the grievances of minority groups through open dialogue and debates, that the extremist elements can be isolated and peaceful, respectful, and pluralistic coexistence can be maintained.

In its statement issued in the aftermath of violent unrest, the CDHRI warned the government authorities that unrest in Khuzestan was a "wake-up call that is expected to have awoken the authorities"; that it was about the reality of "discrimination and suffering" and the necessity for "respecting different ethnic groups and uniting them around national interests by eliminating discrimination and deprivation through concrete and effective measures." The CDHRI condemned the police attack against the peaceful demonstrators and demanded justice for the victims of the violence and an end to discriminatory laws and policies.⁵³

The latest spate of ethnic-related unrest in Iran was the massive demonstrations of Azeri in Iran's northwestern province of Azerbaijan, from May 22 to May 28, 2006. This unrest highlighted the growing role that ethnic issues play in Iran's domestic politics and international relations. The trigger for the protests was a cartoon published in the May 19 issue of *Iran*, a state-owned newspaper based in Tehran, which depicted Azeri and their Turkic language in insulting terms (including the use of cockroach imagery). A protest initiated by Azeri students in Tabriz, the regional capital, and the smaller cities of Ardabil, Orumiyyeh, and Zanjan, soon spread farther and was followed by closure of shops and bazaars and a gathering of tens of thousands of people on the streets.

It is striking that the focus of the protests soon shifted from the controversial cartoon to broader sociopolitical issues. The demonstrators demanded the resignation of local officials and police authorities who had ordered repressive measures against the overwhelmingly peaceful protests. Several people, including journalists working for Turkic-language newspapers or Web sites, were arrested; other citizens were severely beaten by police. The cartoon was a catalyst for the expression of long-held grievances and suppressed feelings of humiliation and resentment by many Azeri people. The slogans of the demonstrators—among them “Down with chauvinism,” “Long live Azerbaijan,” and “Azerbaijan is awake and will protect its language”—reflected both ethnic-related grievances and antiestablishment sentiments.

To defuse the crisis and divert people's anger, state authorities shut down the *Iran* newspaper and jailed the cartoonist and editors, who issued an apology to the Azerbaijanis. This did not appease the outraged Azerbaijanis; they sought an apology from the minister of culture and Islamic guidance, and from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself. The minister belatedly apologized, but President Ahmadinejad did not; indeed, he blamed the turmoil on foreign elements and linked it to Western pressures over the issue of Iran's nuclear proliferation. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, reinforced this view days later with talk of a “foreign plot” by Iran's “desperate enemies” trying to disrupt national unity by instigating ethnic unrest. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani cities remained under a semi-curfew for days, and were filled with special antiriot guards and plainclothes security men, reportedly deployed from Iran's southern provinces.⁵⁴

Many activists concerned with ethnic minority rights believe that their ethnic-related demands are inseparable from the national demands for democratic rights and socioeconomic improvement that concern all people of Iran. All Iranian ethnic groups want improvements in their economic situation and increased opportunity to participate in decision making and the administration of their country; according to a journalist from Ardabil, “whomever among the candidates who can respond positively to these demands will win

the votes of the minorities as well.”⁵⁵ Whether federalism (and, if so, what forms of federalism) can be the answer for Iran’s ethnic question in a democratic polity is a subject for another book, but in one of the following sections I introduce a new proposal akin to federalism that has been recently proposed by some reformers in Iran.

PERILS OF THE “SECURITY APPROACH” TO THE ETHNIC DEMANDS

According to some scholars, the Arabs, but more so the Kurds and Baluch, are suspected of having the highest potential for secession, especially since they stand with past claims to separatism. Eliz Sanasarian, for example, lists the following interconnected reasons: (1) Religious (sectarian) differences, in addition to ethnic differences, have placed Baluch and Kurds (who are overwhelmingly Sunni) in conflict with Shi’i theocracy. (2) Arabs are half Shi’i and half Sunni (according to some estimates most Arabs in Iran are Shi’i and their conflict with the government does not have sectarian nature), while Kurds and Baluch are overwhelmingly Sunni. (3) All three are border ethnic groups and have counterparts across the Iranian borders. (4) The past history of political movements among Kurds and Baluch point to an unceasing quest for some type of independent statehood. (5) Both Kurdish and Baluchi ethnic groups, despite their intraethnic rivalry and their poverty, have shown strong cross-border connections and networks and both groups possess large land areas and populations. (6) Their resistance to and lack of interest in Persianization has remained unchanged.⁵⁶

I would add to these reasons the recent regional and international factors developed after the U.S. invasion of Iraq that might have given more urgency to the Kurdish question. Karim Sadjadpour, for example, argues that a newfound self-confidence among Iraqi Kurds has amplified the sense of ethnic nationalism among Iranian Kurds. Recent regional changes in Iraq and Turkey have resulted in some new dynamics among Kurds, rendering past conventional wisdom unrealistic. Specifically, it has been assumed that Kurds are far closer historically, culturally, and linguistically to Persians than they are to Turks or Arabs, hence Iranian Kurds were assumed to be far less prone to separatist agitation than Turkish or Iraqi Kurds. But these assumptions may not hold true in light of recent changes.⁵⁷ Internal factors, especially the shortsighted and repressive policies of the Islamic republic, seem to be reinforcing this potential. For instance, the latest cycle of violence in the Iranian province of Kurdistan and neighboring Kurdish areas, which was incited by the brutally violent and provocative murder of Shivan Qaderi, a Kurdish opposition activist (in Mahabad, on July 9, 2005) by some members of security forces, has already left up

to 20 people dead and hundreds wounded. Hundreds of others are believed to have been arrested, including prominent Kurdish human rights defenders and activists.⁵⁸

The Unrest in Azerbaijan

It may further be noted that many of the above reasons would also apply to Sunni Turkmen, but more so to Shi'i Azeris. For instance, Sanasarian argues that since Azeri people are more assimilated within the Persian milieu, they are not particularly separatist and do not have a past history of political mobilization for separatism. However, among many people, Azeri activists are also suspected of separatism; the Azerbaijanis' 1945–1946 movement toward autonomy has been recorded in the collective memory of many Iranians, whether true or not, as a separatist move.

Both then and now, most Azeri activists maintain that they have not been after separation. Rather, they demand their legitimate cultural and ethnic rights within a democratic federal system—the rights constitutionally authorized since the constitutional revolution of the early 20th century, in the articles relating to *anjoman-ha-ye ayalati va velayati* (provincial societies), which are grassroots local councils. These councils, formed through direct elections, would operate on behalf of the civil society in order to monitor the state functions and protect people's interests at the local, regional, or provincial levels.⁵⁹

The recent developments in Khuzestan, Baluchestan, Kurdistan, and to a lesser extent Azerbaijan indicate that, under the right circumstances, any border ethnic group has the potential to activate its ethnic identity and mobilize along ethnoreligious lines. As Dov Ronen observed in his studies, whenever individuals perceive the government as an obstacle to the target of their aspirations for freedom or goods, they activate their ethnic, national, or other identities to bring about change.⁶⁰

Cross-border and international reinforcement of these potentials would, of course, add to the likelihood of ethnic mobilization, as demonstrated in the recent cases of Khuzestan, Baluchestan, and Kurdistan. In all three cases, it was state policy or local government authorities, however, that wittingly or not provoked an outrage among Arabs and Kurds, resulting in violence and ethnic mobilization. It seems that a similar process of provocation has been underway in Baluchestan, a Sunni region, caused by the appointment of a new governor. Following the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, a Shi'i from Sistan, Habibollah Dehmoredeh, who is known for his hard-line anti-Sunni Islamism, was appointed as the governor of Baluchestan. This resulted in an outrage among Baluch and two Baluch deputies in the Majles resigned in protest.⁶¹ In a statement issued on September 15, 2005, by the United Front of the Iranian Baluchestan (Jebhe-ye Mottahed-e Baluchestan-e Iran), they said:

An evil-minded plot similar to the ones carried out in Khuzestan and Kurdistan, which led to so much bloodshed and violence, is about to take place in Baluchestan. Peoples of Sistan and Baluchestan have always lived together in peace despite the fact that the language of people in Sistan is Persian and their religion is Shi'a while the language of people in Baluchestan is Baluchi and their religion is Hanafi Sunni, at the same time about 30 percent of people in Sistan are also Baluch. Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has tried all sorts of tricks to exploit the cultural and religious differences between us; for one, most of the governmental positions in various cities of Baluchestan have been occupied by Sistanis. Now, the new government has decided to impose Habibollah Dehmordeh on the Baluch, a person whose Hezbollahi [i.e., hard-line], anti-Baluch, and anti-Sunni background has been known for years. His 26 years of record is full of mischief and divisive actions among Sistanis and the Baluchis. . . . Our people need to remain vigilant and careful in their reaction to this new imposition. The intention of the government is to attack our protest actions under the usual pretext of fighting separatists, smugglers, and rebels.⁶²

The Khuzestan Trouble Spot

A closer review of the recent (2005–2006) ethnic-related clashes in Khuzestan can help us understand how the old suspicions and “security approach” (*didgah-e amniyati*) to ethnic demands are feeding new tensions, and how the wrong state policies or wrong government actions are complicating the minority politics in Iran today.

Two curious incidents instigated the 2005 bloody confrontations in Khuzestan and Kurdistan. The first one was the dissemination (initially through some Internet sites) of a letter (a secret official directive) in April 2005, just a month before the presidential election. The letter, allegedly written by a prominent reformer, Mohammad-Ali Abtahi (Khatami's former chief of staff), was addressed to Mohammad-Ali Najafi, then head of the Plan and Budget Organization, advocating a government plan to alter the Arab composition of Khuzestan by transferring a great number of Arabs to other parts of Iran and replacing them with non-Arab ethnic groups, and also changing the Arab names of various places and streets of this province to Persian names. Provoked by this letter, there was a peaceful demonstration in Ahwaz on April 15, 2005, but it soon turned violent, owing to the attack by special antiriot police. This was followed by more demonstrations and acts of violence in subsequent days.

Abtahi's denial of the authenticity of this letter on his personal Web site was rather vague, while asking political factions not to use Khuzestan for scoring points with the reformers because, if they keep doing that, he threatened, “it

is the conservatives who have to respond to many unanswered questions that have preoccupied many people's minds." As implied by Abtahi, some observers believe this was a deliberate provocation on the part of certain forces to terrorize the atmosphere, on the one hand, and on the other, to mobilize Arabs and by implication other ethnic groups, against the reformers. For one, the letter was widely spread with no attempt by the security forces to prevent the leak, and the timing coincided with the day (April 20) that was declared by pan-Arabists as "the 80th anniversary of the occupation of lands of Alahwaz by Iranian forces." The Arab media in the region, Aljazeera in particular, fueled the provocation, leading to the unrest, demonstrations, and counterdemonstrations, as well as many arrests, injuries, and unconfirmed killings.⁶³ The U.S. government reacted to the unrest in Khuzestan by accusing the government of Iran of violating the rights of Arabs; "this is not the first time that Iran is violating the rights of minorities," stated Adam Early, the spokesperson for the U.S. State Department.⁶⁴

Though officially the Iranian government attributed Khuzestan's unrest to foreign elements,⁶⁵ some members of both factions blamed each other for instigating the unrest as a plot intended to influence the results of the election.⁶⁶ In a letter signed by 180 deputies in the Majles, local authorities were criticized for their "negligence" and Khatami's government for its delay in issuing an official denial of the letter.⁶⁷ As damage control, Ali Shamkhani, the defense minister who is a native Arab from Khuzestan, rushed to that region, and in a public speech, promised speedy release of the arrested Arabs. He denied the existence of any governmental plans for forced migration or transfer of Arabs, or any plans against the Arabic language. "By including Arabic language lessons in the curricula of the public schools in the country, we have actually tried to promote Arabic," Shamkhani declared.⁶⁸

The Question of Foreign Instigation

The ruling conservatives, be they the secular nationalists of the former Pahlavi regime or the present Islamists of the Islamic republic, have usually used the threat of a foreign-incited disintegration of Iran (*tajziyeh*) and secessionism (*joda'i-khwahi*) as excuses to scare the public away from serious consideration of the valid grievances minorities have in Iran. In the past, any demands for ethnic rights or any movement toward autonomy were attributed to pan-Turkism (in the case of Azerbaijan) and/or leftist agitation tied to a Soviet plot for annexation of Iran's territories. Nowadays, in the absence of the Soviet Union, it is the West, Zionism, and Western-supported pan-Turkism that is said to be the main culprits behind ethnic-related demands or movements. This long-held suspicion has resulted in a sense of distrust and insecurity on the part of the central government and the ruling elites,

hence a “security approach” to any complaints or movements of peoples in Kurdistan, Baluchestan, Khuzestan, and Azerbaijan.⁶⁹ This distrust of ethnic issues has practically justified either secular ultranationalist homogenization (in the case of the Pahlavis) or religious (Shi’i Islamist) segmentation under the present regime.

Having been warned of the problems associated with a “security approach” does not mean that foreign manipulation has *not* played a significant role in the minority politics of Iran. Several studies have documented the role of the British, Russian, and later the Soviet governments in ethnicization of politics or politicization of ethnic issues in Iran’s modern history.⁷⁰ Some recent changes in the U.S. policy toward the ethnic question in Iran also require special attention as far as the “foreign factor” is concerned. For example, as Ervand Abrahamian notes that, traditionally, the United States used to support the territorial integrity of Iran and the homogenization and assimilationist policies upheld by Pahlavis (as in the U.S. supportive role in the shah’s crushing of the autonomous movements in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in 1945–1946). In the past, it was countries like Russia and, to some extent, the pan-Turkists of Turkey that desired a disintegration of Iran. But during the past 15 years, Abrahamian argues, there has been a new shift in U.S. policy: “The American neo-conservatives, in collaboration with the operators in Washington, have openly spoken of the major minorities in Iran such as Arabs, Baluch, and Kurds who would need the right to independence. Of course, if all these ethnic groups obtain independence, there will remain no country named Iran.”⁷¹

Some scholars of Iran such as Shirin Hunter even suspect that it is not only the so-called regime change in Iran that many in Washington (as well as many in Iran) are pursuing, but also that some in the West contemplate certain changes in the size and composition of Iran’s geopolitical map (“Iran is too big for them”), the idea that most Iranians abhor.⁷²

IS IT ETHNICITY OR THE CENTER-PERIPHERY DISPARITY, OR BOTH?

Many observers of human rights in Iran attribute the recent ethnic-related clashes and violence in Khuzestan, Kurdistan, and other regions to socio-economic disparity between central Iran and its provincial peripheries. For example, Mohammad-Ali Dadkhah, a human rights lawyer and member of the CDHRI, sees the main reason for turmoil in Khuzestan to be the wider extent of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and overall underdevelopment in this province compared with others. He blames this on the government’s neglect to observe and implement the constitutional rights of Khuzestani people: “Based on the Article 30 of the Constitution, state is obligated to provide all citizens of Iran regardless of where they live or what ethnic

background they have, with public education, primary health care and job opportunities. . . . There is a religious proverb that ‘A hungry person has no faith or religion.’”⁷³

The phenomenon of “hungry person” is among what the chair of Beyt al-Arab, Hasan Abbasian, emphasized, too:

Most Arab people of Khuzestan sleep with empty stomachs on a sea of oil. In the summers they have to drink salty and bitter water because, during the shah’s oppression, part of Karun’s water was channeled to Isfahan and after the Revolution, some parts of Karun’s water was channeled to Yazd, and recently to Kerman, and based on a new decision, the little remaining will be channeled to Qom in the future. The fertile lands of Arab peasants have been forcefully taken away from them and given to the unsuccessful sugarcane industry, which has damaged the environment and hurt the local agricultural economy and the well-being of indigenous people. Instead of helping the unemployed and dispossessed Arabs, they allocate resources to nonnative companies. Due to the lack of familiarity with the environment and inadaptability among the owners of such companies with the hot climate of the region, they are usually unsuccessful and can survive only by employing the cheap labor of indigenous Arabs. State employers discriminate in favor of non-Arabs; all administrative and managerial jobs are given to nonnatives—at times to inexperienced and unconcerned ones. The lack of hygiene, communication, and transportation; the refusal to issue permits for newspapers and publications in Arabic language; the lack of local radio and TV programs; and the lack of attention to development of cities, especially reconstruction of wartorn areas, are among the problems concerning Arab people in Iran. Hospitals and doctors’ offices are full of Arab patients; poverty, disease, addiction, and unemployment are rampant. An Arab can barely take advantage of loans and economic opportunities that are available to non-Arabs. The seeds of hatred and prejudice have been planted in the hearts of non-Arabs; nonnatives usually hate Arabs and Arab parents are not free to even choose their preferred names for their children.⁷⁴

This long quotation is worth citing because it illustrates the center-periphery as well as interethnic dynamics in Iran. The passionate description indicates how minority politics is more complicated and profound than a simple interethnic tension incited by outside manipulators. It is related to an uneven, top-down, overcentralized, *étatiste*, and authoritarian strategy of development, a Tehran-centered modernization, or as many see it, a “Persian-centered” nation-state being built that has resulted in wide urban-rural and center-periphery gaps. Since most ethnic groups live in the provincial peripheries, the socioeconomic

disparity, and the exclusion of local members of provinces from administrative jobs and political decision making have created centrifugal tendencies that may exacerbate ethnic differences.

Two of the constitutional articles treasured by ethnic groups directly relate to the problem of center-periphery disparity. Article 48 prescribes: "There should be no discrimination with regard to benefits to be gained from the use of natural resources, the utilization of public funds on the provincial level, and the distribution of economic activities among the provinces and various regions of the country. This is so that every region will have within its reach capital and opportunity to fulfill its needs and develop its skills." Article 100 postulates: "In order to ensure socio-economic development, public health, cultural and educational programs and other welfare matters through popular cooperation in keeping with local circumstances for administrating these affairs, every rural area, district, township or province will elect from its citizens members for councils for the village, district, township, and province."⁷⁵

In their open letters to presidential candidates, both Azeri and Kurdish groups have pointed out the failure of the state to properly implement these two Articles.⁷⁶ The idea of "councils" at various levels has been in the Iranian constitutions since the constitutional revolution in 1906–1911. But under the increasingly centralized governments of the Pahlavis, it was never implemented; and under the Islamic republic, though provincial councils were created, they remained powerless.

As a move toward decentralization and strengthening of the civil society, President Khatami waged a campaign for implementation of city and village councils. With much ado and expectation, a national election, with active and massive participation by women and men, led to the creation of such councils in 1999. But the unelected power organs of the state, which were dominated by conservatives, and internal conflicts within many city councils left them deprived of power, authority, and effectiveness.

A FEDERAL STATE FOR IRAN?

In response to the structural problems that have perpetuated a widening center-periphery disparity, weak provincial and city councils, and hence a weak civil society, plus alienation among ethnic groups, most of whom reside in provincial peripheries, a new reform proposal was introduced by the Management and Planning Organization (MPO) during the last months of Khatami's presidency. This proposal seemed akin to a federal system. The recent prominence of "federalism" in Iraqi politics could also have played a role in revisiting the political and power structure of the Iranian state.

The main goal of this proposal was said to be decentralization of state power in the capital through the expansion of the jurisdiction of provincial authorities, the creation of provincial ministries with more autonomy from the center,

and the assignment of more administrative positions and roles to regional and local/native people. Based on this interesting proposal, there would be new administrative divisions in the country. The present 30 provinces would turn into nine geographic areas/regions, and three levels of ministries would be created to administer the country's affairs under the rubric of central/national affairs, provincial affairs, and local affairs at macro, mezzo, and micro levels. This proposal was to be a compromise between the present centralized system and a federal system demanded by many ethnic activists.⁷⁷

The initiator of this proposal, the Management and Planning Organization (MPO), is not affiliated to any ministry. It is an independent organization supervised by the president. The president appoints its director, who is one of the six vice presidents, too. The importance of the position of director of the MPO is next to the first vice president, hence one of the most important positions in the cabinet, or at least among the vice presidents.⁷⁸ This background underscores the significance of the proposal, yet I have not been able to find any discussion or debate on the proposal and its fate remains unknown. Overall the government of Ahmadinejad did not take the proposal seriously. But it is worth noting that, unlike other presidential candidates, Ahmadinejad did not talk about ethnic issues or make special promises to any ethnic constituencies. Though he emphasized the need to decentralize the state bureaucracy and empower the provincial governors,⁷⁹ this was seen in line with his election platform of "social justice" and change in distributive policies, as Ahmadinejad promised he would put national wealth at the service of the masses and not the economic elite concentrated in central part of Iran.

This might have boded well for the provincial minorities resentful of the Tehran-centered strategy of socioeconomic development carried out under the Pahlavis, and continued with little change under the Islamic republic to date. Could Ahmadinejad's own experience as the governor of Ardabil province have contributed to his purported attention to the economic disadvantages of Iran's provinces during the election campaign? And could his emphasis on decentralization make him interested in the decentralizing plan proposed by the reformers? So far, he has not taken any considerable measures toward decentralization.

What is known is the existence of a strong opposition within the power circle to any kind of federalism or devolution of certain powers to the provinces. It was in part owing to this opposition that Khatami failed to actualize some of the promises he had made to the ethnic groups. Many reformers, therefore, do not see any capacity within the hard-liners toward federalism.

Commenting on this question, a political analyst inside Iran maintained that those power circles behind Ahmadinejad are intolerant toward diversity and any distribution of power. A revealing example, he pointed out, was the fact that "Tehran is one of the rare capitals around the world where

no Sunni mosque can be found. They have never allowed Sunnis to build a mosque of their own in Tehran. In this way, Tehran falls behind even Athens, that up to very recently was the only capital in the entire Europe where no mosque could be built!"⁸⁰ While in the summer of 2006, an initial plan was approved by the Greek parliament to build the first mosque in Athens since the Ottoman rule,⁸¹ the Iranian Shi'i-supremacist government has yet to allow any building of a mosque for Iran's Sunni Muslim minority in Tehran.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

During the Khatami presidency, the motto "Iran for all Iranians" was introduced as a gesture toward inclusiveness, pluralism, and multiculturalism. But this inclusive idea was soon abandoned with the revival of a Shi'i Islamist exclusionary discourse of Ahmadinejad's administration. Yet many reformist intellectuals are moving beyond the old paradigms of both secular Aryan-centered and religious Shi'i-centered homogenized Iranian identity. In opposition to both the external threat of exploitation of ethnic tensions and the internal threats of interethnic issues, and to contribute to the ongoing debates on ways to democratize Iranian political culture, a new pluralistic approach has been gaining ground.⁸² Much of contemporary intellectual discourse on ethnicity and national identity recognizes Iran's multiethnic reality and also its multidimensional identity (a synthesis of Iran's pre-Islamic heritage, its Islamic tradition, and its secular modernity).⁸³

The question of "national identity" of Iranians is beyond the scope of this chapter. By focusing on the ethnic dimension of the latest presidential elections as a case study here, I have tried to demonstrate the reality and significance of ethnic and minority politics in Iran to which the Persian-speaking political and intellectual elites can no longer remain insensitive. My main argument is that a Tehran-centered socioeconomic development strategy has aggravated the sense of deprivation and resentment among the ethnic-oriented peripheries, thus perpetuating an internal potential for ethno-nationalist centrifugal movements that can neither be removed by repressive "security approach" nor be dismissed as a product of foreign conspiracies.

A decentralizing process in distribution of national resources and political power on the one hand and strengthening of the civil society to observe the civil rights and national identity of its citizens on the other, can therefore be viewed as a most viable strategy for fostering national and territorial integrity. Such socioeconomic policy needs to be complemented with a pluralistic cultural and intellectual discourse that redefines nationhood and "Iranianness" by emphasizing on citizenship and rights rather than ethno-linguistic criteria grounded on race, blood, and cultural or religious variables.

NOTES

1. Robert Famighetti, *The World Almanac and Book of Facts: 2000*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
2. Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 9.
3. Ken Park, *The World Almanac and Book of Facts: 2002*, World Almanac, revised edition, 2001.
4. These figures do not add up to 100 percent, another reason to question the exactness of them.
5. This section has drawn and benefited from the theoretical framework used by Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, pp. 3–8.
6. Milton J. Esman, *Ethnic Politics*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994; Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 6.
7. Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
9. Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, esp. pp. 505–528, cited in Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
11. Esman, *Ethnic Politics*, p. 256, cited in Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 6.
12. Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 6.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
14. By implication, the Shi'i clerics as a social stratum have a specially privileged position in this system, with certain rights and obligations distinct from the rest of the citizens.
15. Rouhollah Ramezani, "Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Middle East Journal* 34(2), spring 1980, pp. 181–204.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 154.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
19. Mehرداد Farahmand (reporter), "Qowmiyat-ha-ye Irani va entekhabat-e riasate-jomhuri" (Iranian ethnic groups and presidential elections), BBC Persian, June 17, 2005, available at www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/06/050617_mf_ethnicities.shtml. See also RFE/RL *Iran Report*, December 20, 2004, available at www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/06/printable/050617_mf_ethnicities.shtml.
20. Bill Samii, "Iran: Ethnic politics out of bounds," Fars News Agency, cited in RFE/RL *Iran Report* March 31, 2005, available at www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2005/iran-050331-rferl02.htm.
21. The proceedings of this meeting are one of the most illuminating and concise representatives of the current concerns and demands of ethnic groups in Iran that have been articulated in legal language, carefully avoiding any breach of the Islamic and constitutional redlines; available at www.achiq.org/millimesele/xaneyeqvam.htm. I am grateful to the anonymous coordinator of the Achiqsoz Azerbaijani Internet site for providing me with this very informative report.
22. Samii, "Iran: Ethnic politics"; see also Mazdak Bamdadani, "Negahi be tanesh-ha-ye qowmi-ye rouzha-ye gozashteh" (A look at the ethnic tensions of recent days), *Iran-Emrooz*, available at www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php?/politic/print/691.
23. Samii, "Iran: Ethnic politics."
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*

26. Farahmand, "Iranian ethnic groups."
27. Ibid.
28. Samii, "Iran: Ethnic politics." It is pertinent to note that Jannati's aversion to any acknowledgement of minority rights is related to his role in repressing the Arab uprising in Khuzestan during the early years of the Islamic republic, when he was the Friday prayer leader of Ahwaz, the capital city of Khuzestan province.
29. Samii, "Iran: Ethnic politics."
30. Hasan Abbasian, "Nameh'i baraye Jannati" (A letter to Jannati), *Iran Emrooz*, April 20, 2005; translation from Persian to English is mine.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Farideh Farhi, "What does the ninth presidential election say about Iranian politics?" *Iran after the June 2005 Presidential Election*, Occasional Paper Series, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, summer 2005, pp. 8–9.
36. Karim Sadjadpour, "The Iranian street in the post-Khatami era," *Iran after the June 2005 Presidential Election*, Occasional Paper Series, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, summer 2005, p. 19.
37. Farahmand, "Qowmiyat-ha-ye Irani va entekhabat-e riasat-e jomhuri."
38. Sadjadpour, "The Iranian street."
39. This is based on this author's review of the views and demands of some prominent activists, such as Yusef Azizi Bani-Torof (writer and journalist who was imprisoned because of his critical views) and Jasem Shadidzadeh (a former deputy from Ahwaz); Javad Hey'at (a prominent Azeri surgeon and writer); Hasan Rashedi, Farzad Samadali, and Akbar Azad (all Azeri writers); Kamal Moradi (editor of the banned weekly *Mobin*); Ro'ya Tolu'i (a Kurdish women's rights activist, who escaped Iran after her release from prison); and Valad-Beygi (head of the Institute for Kurdish Studies).
40. Cited by Khosrow Shemirani, "Vaqa'ye'-e Khuzestan az manzar-e hoquq-e bashari-ha va siyat-madaran" (Events in Khuzestan from the viewpoint of human rights activists and politicians) in *Shahrvand*, May 6, 2005, also available at www.rowzane.com/000_maqalat/000_m2005/2505/50507sharvand.htm.
41. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.
42. Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
43. Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976.
44. Esman, *Ethnic Politics*.
45. Dov Ronen, *The Quest for Self-Determination*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979.
46. Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.
47. Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity*, New York: Paragon House, 1993.
48. Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979.
49. Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and Autonomy in Twentieth-Century Iran*, London: British Academic Press, 1993.

50. Lois Beck, "Tribes and state in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran," in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, eds. Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, Berkeley: University of California, 1990, pp. 185–225.

51. Beck, "Tribes," p. 189.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Reported by BBC Persian, "Hoshdar be hokumat-e Iran dar erbebat ba havades-e Khuzestan" (Warning to the Iranian government regarding the events in Khuzestan), April 23, 2005, available at www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/04/050423_mf_ahwaz_warning.shtml.

54. See Nayereh Tohidi, "Iran: Regionalism, ethnicity and democracy," *OpenDemocracy*, June 29, 2006, available at www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/regionalism_3695.jsp.

55. According to Behzad Khosrovani, a journalist in Ardabil, as reported in Farahmand, "Iranian ethnic groups."

56. Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, p. 14.

57. Sadjadpour, "The Iranian street," p. 19.

58. According to many reports, after murdering Shivan, the security forces tied his body to a Toyota truck and dragged him in the streets. Instead of inducing the intended fear among Kurds, this act of savagery caused widespread anger and disgust in the Kurdish region. See Amnesty International Public Statement, AI Index: MDE 13/043/2005 Public News Service 215, August 5, 2005.

59. See, for example, Mostafa Rahimi, *Qanun-e Asasi-ye Iran va Osul-e Demokrasi* (Iran's Constitution and Principles of Democracy), Tehran: Sepehr, 1979, pp. 177–178.

60. Ronen, *Quest for Self-Determination*, p. 4.

61. This resignation turned out to be symbolic, as following some intervention the two deputies came back to the Majles and reclaimed their seats.

62. Full statement published in *Iran Emrooz*, September 5, 2005.

63. Referring to a statement by Ali Yunesi, the intelligence minister, on April 18, 2006 BBC Persian reported of 200 arrests. See, "Yunesi: 200 nafar dar Khuzestan dastgir shodand" (Yunesi: 200 people were arrested in Khuzestan), available at www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/04/050418_v-younesi-khozestan.shtml.

64. BBC Persian, "Amrika Iran ra mottahem be naqz-e hoquq-e Arab-ha kard" (United States accused Iran of violating Arabs' rights), May 16, 2005, available at www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/04/050420_a_iran_ahwaz.shtml.

65. Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari, the interior minister, claimed that the letter attributed to Abtahi was fabricated outside Iran and then disseminated in Khuzestan in order to play havoc with the upcoming presidential elections; see BBC Persian, "United States accused Iran."

66. BBC Persian, "Warning to the Iranian government."

67. BBC Persian, "United States accused Iran."

68. *Ibid.*

69. For a discussion of the implications of a "security approach" to ethnic issues, see Nader Entessar, *Nameh* 40, August 2005, pp. 55–57; see also Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynn Rienner, 1992.

70. For example, see Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, revised edition of *Azerbaijan, Ethnicity and Autonomy in the Twentieth-Century Iran*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2000; and David B. Nissman, *The Soviet Union and Iranian Azerbaijan: The Use of Nationalism for Political Penetration*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1987.

71. From an interview with Ervand Abrahamian, available at <http://free.gooya.com/politics/archives/026122.php>.

72. Shireen Hunter, "Letters to the president: The Islamic world and U.S. foreign policy," paper presented at Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., April 14–16, 2002.

73. Cited by Shemirani, "Events in Khuzestan."

74. Abbasian, "Letter to Jannati," p. 4.

75. Ramezani, "Constitution of the Islamic Republic."

76. See, for example, the "Open letter by Kurdish reformers about the demands of the Kurds to presidential candidates," *Emrooz*, April 2005; for Azeri and Arab groups, see "Ayatollah Karrubi dar didar ba barkhi az fa'alin-e khaneh-ye aqwm: aqwm-e Iran dar zamineh-ye azadi-ha-ye farhangi ba tang-nazari-ha-ye shadidi ruberu hastand" (Ayatollah Karrubi in meeting with some activists of the House of Ethnic Groups: Iranian ethnic groups are faced with severe restrictions in cultural freedoms), available at www.achiq.org/millimesele/xaneyeqvam.htm.

77. For additional discussion on this proposal, see Kaveh Omidvar, "Tarh-e dowlat-e eyalati dar Iran," BBC Persian, May 8, 2005.

78. This organization is the result of a merger of two organizations, the Plan and Budget Organization and the Administrative and Employment Affairs Organization. The merger took place in July 2000 under President Khatami.

79. Siamak Namazi, "The Iranian presidential elections: Who voted, why, how and does it matter?" *Iran after the June 2005 Presidential Election*, Occasional Paper Series, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, summer 2005, p. 7.

80. Personal exchange with Mohammad-Hossein Hafezian, senior research fellow at the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies, Tehran, September 19, 2005.

81. See Andrew Burroughs, "Athens Muslims to get a mosque" BBC News, July 18, 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5190256.stm>; and "First Athens mosque," Athens City Guide, July 26, 2006, available at www.greece-athens.com/article.php?article_id=60.

82. For the ongoing debates on democratization, see Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

83. For a critical review on the ethno-linguistic view of nationhood and chauvinistic approach in construction of Iranian national identity, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Contesting nationalist constructions of Iranian identity," *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, 12, spring 1998, pp. 43–55.



IRAN'S REGIONAL POLICIES SINCE THE END
OF THE COLD WAR

Anoushiravan Ehteshami

Outside forces have played a major part in the birth and development of Middle Eastern and North African (hereafter MENA) states, as well as in shaping the environment in which these states operate. As a penetrated regional system, the MENA region, for all its active internal dynamics (nationalism, Arab-Israeli war, radical Islam, etc.), was by the 1950s subject to the influence of strategically driven calculations made by the world's two superpowers. The superpowers' calculations and strategies directly affected not only the politics of the region but also the environment in which the local forces were taking shape. For over a generation, the cold war was the framework of the MENA regional system, from North Africa in the west to the borders of the Soviet Union in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It created a loosely controlled environment for the regional actors to function within.

The cold war, for all its inconsistencies and tensions, however, had at the very least given the region a degree of forced organization, even "organized chaos." Its ending not only exposed the Soviet allies to new pressures, not only threatened to remove the special privileges of the pro-U.S. allies, but also, perhaps most importantly, lifted the externally imposed conditions on internal processes of the regional system itself. Thus, the sea change in the international system, which followed the end of the cold war and the implosion of the Soviet superpower, created the necessary conditions for a new period of dynamic change in the MENA region, which, as far as Iran is concerned, has manifested itself in two broad ways: the de-radicalization of Arab states; and the radicalization of Sunni-affiliated Islamic terrorist networks (such as al-Qaeda), which at the same time contain a strong anti-Shi'a core.

With the 20th century an increasingly distant memory, it is now possible to take stock of the cold war itself on regional politics, as well as to chart the types of forces that will probably be shaping the MENA region into the 21st century. It is not in dispute that the end of the cold war has caused a real and perceptible