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**ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN THE  
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN:  
Policy suggestions for the integration of minorities  
through participation in public life**

**(Paper prepared by Nazila Ghanea-Hercock,  
University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies)\***

\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group or the United Nations

<b>SECTION</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>PAGES</b>
<b>SECTION 1</b>	Introduction	3
<b>SECTION 2</b>	The Profile of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Current Provisions for them	4 – 22
<b>SECTION 3</b>	Main Concerns and the Choice of Strategies	23 – 26
<b>SECTION 4</b>	Prospects for Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iran	27 - 28

## ***1. Introduction***

The Iranian political scene has been through significant change in recent decades. The most significant of these changes was the Islamic revolution and the overthrow of the monarchy in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Whilst the situation of most of the ethnic and religious minorities in Iran has remained unchanged<sup>1</sup> through these political upheavals in a number of significant and broad senses, any understanding of their political fortunes needs to be tempered by an understanding of the revolutionary context.

The geographic context of Iran is also significant in understanding a number of factors surrounding the fortunes of ethnic minorities in Iran. Iran is surrounded by seven countries: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Armenia to the north, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, the Arabian/Persian Gulf to the south with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates across the Gulf, and Iraq and Turkey to the west.

Whilst centuries ago the Persian Empire enjoyed enviable ethnic and religious diversity and harmony, there has been an uncomfortable record in more recent times, and there are numerous bloody events that have occurred surrounding ethnic and religious minorities from the early days of the twentieth century to present times. Much suspicion surrounds ethnic and religious minorities in the political, economic and social spheres. Some of this has been fuelled by instances of perceived preferential treatment towards ethnic or religious minorities by outside powers in recent Iranian history; much of it has been coloured by more general political uncertainty in the country and the perceived need for an excessive centralisation that cannot afford to cater effectively for ethnic and religious diversity; and these trends have been aggravated by intolerance of minorities in the name of both ideology and religion.

The fate of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities seemed to have been an issue that the 1997 and 2001 Presidency elections, that brought President Khatami to power, may have made a higher priority. However, two obstacles stand in the way of effective progress on this front at present. The first is that it will take a much broader coalition of forces in Iran than just the Presidency to be able to cater fully for the participation of ethnic and religious minorities in public life. Secondly, the increasingly complex and entrenched clashes between different political factions in Iran, often referred to as that between the 'reformists' and 'conservatives', have sidelined the situation of minorities whilst more general issues - such as the rule of law - are battled out.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not true of the situation of the Protestants, which has deteriorated since the revolution and the situation of the Bahá'ís which has dramatically changed from suffering some intolerance before the revolution to constant and active governmental persecution against them since.

## ***2. The profile of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Current Governmental Provisions for them***

The Iranian population stands at around 68 million spread over its 28 provinces. The northern and northwestern parts of the country are by far the most populated areas, with the lowest population density being in the eastern half of the country. There has not been an official census carried out which considers the population of the ethnic and religious minorities since 1956. This report will therefore give an estimate of the populations of ethnic and religious minorities using a variety of sources.

Whilst the population of ethnic minorities clearly puts them forward as numerically much more significant than religious minorities in Iran, there are reasons why this report has considered *both* ethnic and religious minorities in the country.

Firstly, there is not a clean overlap of ethnic and religious cleavages amongst Iran's minorities. Most of the Kurds, Baluchis and Turkmen are Sunni Muslims – making them distinct in religious terms as well as being ethnic minorities. Many of the religious minorities can also largely be considered by ethnic differentiation from the majority population – including Armenians, Assyro-Chaldeans and Jews. However, the Bahá'ís and Protestant Christians sharply contrast with this and can only be distinguished by their religious affiliation.

Secondly, and more importantly, Iranian governmental policies and strategies surrounding ethnic and religious minorities show significant markers of differentiation, and it is only by considering *both* ethnic *and* religious minorities in Iran that these policies can be adequately examined.

Whilst consideration of the ethnic and religious minorities in Iran cannot be exhaustive, the most significant of these populations will be examined and the main governmental policies towards minorities alluded to. In examining government policy, the first point of reference will be the Iranian Constitution of 1979 as revised in 1989.<sup>2</sup> This is because the Constitution serves as a significant indicator of the governmental limits on the position and role of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, including their participation in public life and their representation. The dominant Constitutional maxim, however, is Article 12's statement that 'The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'fari school, and this principle will remain eternally immutable.'

From the Iranian Constitution it can further be seen that the most fundamental difference between ethnic and religious minorities in the Iranian governmental structure is that, despite their *fifty-fold* numerical ascendancy, the former are given no explicit Constitutional recognition<sup>3</sup> whilst the latter are acknowledged in Article 13 of the Constitution – albeit in a measured and limited manner.

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<sup>2</sup> Although the Iranian Constitution of 1979 was revised in 1989 the changes do not impact on our analysis here, as they were focused on leadership by the new post of 'Supreme Leader' after the demise of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the elimination of the post of prime-minister.

<sup>3</sup> See Article 19 of the Constitution which states 'All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language and the like, do not bestow any privilege.'

## ETHNIC MINORITIES

The policy of governmental resistance towards ethnic minorities has remained unchanged in Iran since the early decades of the twentieth century. Successive Iranian regimes have tried to build up the nation and maintain unity through emphasising the ascendancy of the Persian ethnic group and making its Persian (or *Farsi*) language the only official language. All other ethnic groups have either faced non-recognition or clear repression. Whilst over time certain officials have come from particular ethnic minorities, this has largely been through individual upward mobility rather than through positive encouragement or representation of their community. Whilst ethnic representation in the national Parliament continues, “The Iranian leadership deals with these problems [of non-Persian national minorities in Iran] by trying to involve representatives of ethnic groups and national minorities into government structures, but they do not make any concessions in the fields of language, culture or self-governance.”<sup>4</sup>

The dominant trend through successive governmental regimes has definitely been on the centralisation of political life and the dominance of Persians, rather than on political decentralisation or measures of minority self-government. So much so that all attempts at mobilising minority representation have been considered as secessionist in ambition and been strongly resisted by the central government. The resistance shown to the Kurds and Azeris attempting to promote their language in schools demonstrates this well.

These policies are all the more surprising considering that approximately half of the population of Iran consist of non-Persians. Iran’s ethnic minorities include sizable populations of Azeris, Kurds, Gilakis and Mazandaranis. Lurs, Arabs and Baluchis. Most of these ethnic minority populations extend beyond the borders of Iran – the Azeris with Azerbaijan and Turkey, the Kurds with Iraq and Turkey, the Arabs with the Gulf region and Iraq and the Baluchis with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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<sup>4</sup> Nasib Nasibzade, The Azeri Question in Iran: A Crucial Issue for Iran’s Future, <<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/usazerb/334.htm>>, accessed November 2002

The population of Persians in Iran has been estimated at 45-51 %<sup>5</sup> of the total population of Iran. The rest of the population consist of:

Azeris	16-24 % <sup>6</sup>
Kurds	7-9 % <sup>7</sup>
Gilakis and Mazandaranis	8 % <i>approximately</i>
Luris	2-4 % <sup>8</sup>
Arabs	3 % <sup>9</sup>
Baluchis	2 % <sup>10</sup>
Turkmen	1.5-2 % <sup>11</sup>

The languages used can be summarised as follows:

Persian and Persian dialects: 58 %

Turkic and Turkic dialects 26 %

Kurdish: 9 %

Luri: 2 %

Baluchi: 1 %

Arabic: 1 %

Turkish: 1 %<sup>12</sup>

Four of these groups, with notable populations in sensitive border areas – the Azeris, Kurds, Baluch and Arabs – will be examined in more detail below.

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<sup>5</sup> The first of these estimates is from the United Methodist Church, General Board of Global Ministries, with these statistics having been drawn from the World Guide 2001/2002, New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 55 Rectory Road, Oxford, OX4 1BW, U.K, <[http://gbgm-umc.org/country\\_profiles/country\\_profile.cfm?Id=51](http://gbgm-umc.org/country_profiles/country_profile.cfm?Id=51)> (accessed November 2002) and the second is from the www.geographic.org website, 2000 index on Iran, <[http://www.photius.com/wfb2000/countries/iran/iran\\_people.html](http://www.photius.com/wfb2000/countries/iran/iran_people.html)> (accessed November 2002)

<sup>6</sup> The first of these estimates is from United Methodist Church website and the second is from the www.geographic.org website, 2000 index on Iran

<sup>7</sup> The first of these estimates is from the www.geographic.org website, 2000 index on Iran and the second is from the United Methodist Church website

<sup>8</sup> The first of these estimates is from the www.geographic.org website, 2000 index on Iran and the second is from United Methodist Church website

<sup>9</sup> www.geographic.org website, 2000 index on Iran

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The first of these estimates is from United Methodist Church website and the second is from the www.geographic.org website, 2000 index on Iran

<sup>12</sup> www.geographic.org website, 2000 index on Iran

### Azeris

The population of Azeris in Iran has been estimated at 20 million.<sup>13</sup> The Azeris largely reside in northwestern Iran – a strategically important and prosperous region and relatively close to Tehran and central government. They heavily dominate the populations of Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Zanjan, Hamadan, Astara and Gazvin.

The Azeris are predominantly Shi'i Muslims, and perhaps it is this religious affinity with central government that has largely inhibited opposition between them and the government. This link has been strengthened further by a number of senior and powerful clerics in Iran coming from Azeri ranks. Other factors that slowed the development of Azeri national aspirations in Iran included cultural closeness, a shared history and the permanent threat from Russia.<sup>14</sup> Another reason, however, is that the collapse of the Azerbaijan republic (of southern Azerbaijan rather than north Azerbaijan which is now an independent republic) in 1947 meant that, “Azari nationalism lost its political cohesion and direction”.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, there have been complaints about discrimination against Azeris by the Iranian regime, particularly against Turkic speaking Azeris. One commentator writes of the dominance of a policy of ‘Persian chauvinism’ leading to the removal of the Azeri language from official use in all areas such as schools, courts, government structures and the army as well as the prohibition of some forms of Azeri cultural expression.<sup>16</sup> The intolerance of the government towards such relatively minor 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. He subsequently faced police interrogation, torture, arrest and disqualification from the ballot. This led to widespread clashes in Tabriz.

### Kurds

The population of Kurds has been estimated at 5-8 million.<sup>17</sup> Most of the Kurds of Iran are resident in the west and northwest of the country, in areas neighbouring Iraq and Turkey. Other Kurds have also dispersed to Fars and Mazandaran provinces and moved to Tehran and the southwest of the country for economic reasons. The border areas are underdeveloped and remote from the centre of political power. The Kurds are predominantly Sunni Muslims. Despite the far greater population of Azeris in Iran, “in political terms, the Kurds continue to occupy the forefront of opposition”.<sup>18</sup>

Between the tenth and the sixteenth centuries, much of the territory known as Kurdistan had been administered by regimes ruling Iran. In 1514 the Safavid state lost most of this Kurdish territory to Ottoman rule, hence rule was transferred to Istanbul.

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<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran, Religious and Ethnic Minorities: Discrimination in Law and Practice, 1997 report, found at <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/iran/>>, accessed November 2002

<sup>14</sup> Nasib Nasibzade, The Azeri Question in Iran

<sup>15</sup> Abbas Vali, The Kurds and Their ‘Others’: Fragmented Identity and Fragmented Politics, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, vol. XVIII, no. 2, 1998, p. 88

<sup>16</sup> Nasib Nasibzade, The Azeri Question in Iran

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran, Religious and Ethnic Minorities

<sup>18</sup> Abbas Vali, The Kurds and Their ‘Others’, p. 88

The territories remaining in Iran enjoyed the status of semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities until the late 1800s and their demise under the Qajar state. Kurdish movements were suppressed further under the centralist policies of Reza Shah in the 1930s, though there was a short-lived period of Kurdish triumph (thanks to the presence of the Soviet Red Army, who were then part of the Allied Forces in Iran) that culminated in the creation of the Mahabad Kurdish Republic. This Republic was in existence for 11 months in 1946. Iran is therefore the only country to have had an independent Kurdish republic within its territory. The period after 1947 saw the decline in Kurdish fortunes, the co-option of the Kurdish tribal leadership and the downgrading of the political power base of Kurdish landowners through the land reforms of the 1960s.

Struggles for independence in the Kurdish regions continued after the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini warned Kurdish leaders in 1979 that any attempts towards independence would attract the harshest response. A well-organised rebellion by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (Komala) and the Kurdish branch of the Fadayan was launched in spring 1979. The regime responded strongly with the banning of the Kurdish Democratic Party, followed by an armed campaign against the Kurds, stepping this up further once the Iran-Iraq war broke out. According to Human Rights Watch, “more than 271 Iranian Kurdish villages were destroyed and depopulated between 1980 and 1992. Between July and December 1993 alone, during a major offensive against Kurdish armed groups, 113 villages were bombed”.<sup>19</sup> A number of commentators saw Iraq as using the Kurdish nationalists to weaken the Iranian regime.<sup>20</sup> This was nothing new, as Iran had also used the Kurdish population against the Iraqi government in the 1970s. 1992 saw the killing of a senior Kurdish leader and three of his collaborators in Berlin. The Berlin courts found senior Iranian government authorities to have been behind these assassinations. Kurdish groups have reported that 264 Kurds have been killed by the Iranian state.<sup>21</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, in addition to Kurdish villages being destroyed, Kurdish populations have been dispersed and large areas seeded with landmines.<sup>22</sup>

Relations with the government soured yet further when, in late 2000, a Kurdish Member of Parliament publicly alleged the existence of a campaign of repression and serial killings against the Kurdish community in Iran. In the following year, in October 2001, all six members of the Iranian Parliament from Kurdistan province collectively resigned.<sup>23</sup> Their joint letter to the Interior Minister claimed that the legitimate rights of the Kurds, especially the Sunni amongst them, was denied and their calls for justice on the political, economic, cultural and social levels had been neglected. It should be noted that whilst there are a number of Kurdish MPs they are not able to form a pro-Kurdish party and they hold their seats as independent candidates.

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<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran, Religious and Ethnic Minorities, quoting David McDowall, *The Kurds*, rev. ed., London: Minority Rights Groups International, December 1996, p. 22

<sup>20</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Southwest Asia: Political Development or Political Decay?*, Political Science Quarterly, vol. 99, issue 4, Winter 1984-1985, p. 677

<sup>21</sup> See Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, Victims of Iranian State Terrorism, <<http://www.pdk-iran.org>>, accessed November 2002

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran, Religious and Ethnic Minorities

<sup>23</sup> The collective resignation was apparently later withdrawn

## Arabs

The population of Arabs is around 2,000,000<sup>24</sup> and they are largely resident in southwestern Iran on the eastern shore of the Gulf. The majority are Shii Muslims and live in Khuzestan. They have largely stood firmly behind the revolutionary government since 1979 and were not swayed by Saddam Hussein's calls to liberate themselves from Persian rule during the Iran-Iraq war. However, during just two years in the mid-1990s in accordance to Human Rights Watch, "more than 180 Iranian Arabs have been detained and prosecuted on charges of espionage for Iraq or other Gulf Arab states. ... Arab activists claim that the attitude of the present government does not differ from that of the previous regime in its efforts to stamp out Arab culture. There is no Arabic-language newspaper dealing with domestic issues in Khuzestan ... Arabic is not taught in elementary schools, and the Arabic teaching in secondary schools focuses exclusively on religious texts. The governor of Khuzestan is not an Arab, and very few high-ranking government officials are from an Arab background."<sup>25</sup> Suspicion and discrimination therefore remains against the Arabs, despite what may be considered as a surprising level of loyalty by the Arabs for the revolutionary regime.

## Baluchis

The population of Baluchis stands at 1,000,000. The Baluchis mostly reside in southeastern Iran on the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan – a remote area that constitutes one of the least developed areas of Iran. The Baluchis are largely Sunni Muslims. Both in the 1970s and since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Iranian government has faced rebellions and secessionist attempts from the Baluchis. This was strongly resisted by the Iranian government, which felt it could not afford instability in the region bordering, at that time, Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. Economic incentives were largely effective in quashing this instability.

Baluchistan remains one of the poorest of Iran's provinces and a major transit area for drug trafficking and abuse as a border region – thus also making a centre of crime and instability. The government's war on drugs, some comment, has also, "provided cover for acts of political repression by the government".<sup>26</sup> The Baluchi grievances have related to discrimination against them in the economic, educational, cultural and political fields. A number of Baluchi Sunni leaders have been killed, and organisations such as Human Rights Watch find that the circumstances suggest the involvement of the authorities in their deaths. "As many as sixty Sunni religious leaders, mainly from the Baluchi community, are reported to be in prison for their support of demands for parity for Sunni Islam in Iran and for an end to repression in Baluchestan. ... The recent arrests and killings of Baluchi religious leaders is taking on the appearance of a concerted campaign to suppress Baluchi claims for parity for Sunni Islam and respect for Baluchi cultural and linguistic traditions."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran, Religious and Ethnic Minorities

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## Summary

It was expected by many ethnic minorities that the Islamic revolution of 1979 would enhance their position and afford them some decentralisation. It had been thought that Ayatollah Khomeini's calls for the revival of Islamic community may also conceive of loyal but autonomous ethnic areas. These hopes were, however, dashed early on. The 1979 Islamic revolution proved to be largely negligent of the ethnic minority issue.

It can be considered that with the Islamic emphasis on the brotherhood of all Muslims despite race and colour, Iran's Islamic revolution was fuelled with the ideology of de-emphasising ethnic diversity, especially amongst co-Muslims. As one writer sums up, "Minorities, in the Islamist concept, are non-Muslims who continue to live under Islamic rule on the basis of an agreement that allows them to continue to adhere to their faith and regulates their rights and obligations and other aspects of their relations with the Muslim community and Islamic government. ... The status of other groups is rarely considered in any comprehensive and organized fashion. ... Ethnic differences in race, language, or local culture are not usually discussed."<sup>28</sup> This principle of 'colour blindness' is stated more positively in the Iranian Constitution itself. Article 19 states 'All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; colour, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege.' In effect, however, this means the privileging of the Persian race and language to the detriment of all others. As one writer comments, "The concept of ethnic minority in the Iranian constitution is strictly cultural; it has no juridico-political identity ... In the constitution of the Islamic Republic the identity of political power is uniform and ethnic; Persian ethnicity defines the identity of the sovereign, the conditions of citizenship and hence the boundaries of the state and civil society".<sup>29</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini's regime was paranoid about the need to preserve Iran's territorial integrity, and a highly centralised and Persian-dominated rule resulted. The need to build up the new regime and ensure its legitimacy and survival, and the war initiated by Iraq, only served to heighten the regime's concern with 'national security' yet further. All attempts by ethnic minorities to maximise on any weaknesses in the country with the outset of the Iraq-Iran war, and all demands for levels of independence, were heavily quashed. Iran also accused a number of powers, such as the Soviet Union, the US and Iraq of supporting ethnic opposition to its rule.<sup>30</sup> All in all it has been highly evident over the past decades that, "Iran's Islamic Republican regime favors a strong center and is very hostile to ethnic dissidents."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Uriah Furman, Minorities in Contemporary Islamist Discourse, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, October 2000, pp. 2-3

<sup>29</sup> Abbas Vali, *The Kurds and Their 'Others'*, p. 91

<sup>30</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Southwest Asia*, p. 676

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 674

## RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

### Background History

In contrast with ethnic minorities, there *is* specific Constitutional recognition for three of Iran's religious minority communities. Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution recognises 'Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are the only recognised religious minorities'. They are permitted 'within the limits of the law' to 'perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters or personal affairs and religious education'. By implication, therefore, "Other religious minorities are generally denied these rights and often persecuted for their beliefs."<sup>32</sup> Even the ability of the three recognised groups to exercise their own religious laws is, as one writer comments, "curtailed, as required by communal interest. In contemporary Iran, communal interest is largely defined in terms of the regime's ability to maintain its control".<sup>33</sup>

Article 14 goes on to expand on the rights of non-Muslims, presumably still only implying the 'recognised' religious minorities of the previous Article. It states that 'the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights. This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran'. Presumably 'conspiracy or activity against' the Islamic Republic of Iran refers to espionage and treason, but its conjunction with such activity against 'Islam' makes it less determinate and more ideologically subjective. In any case, respect for human rights is made dependent on this somewhat vague conditionality, and is therefore very problematic according to international human rights standards. It is also not clear whether such loyalty and behaviour is to be judged on an individual and case-by-case basis or whether whole groups (or *all* other groups) may be considered 'conspirators'?

The most notable religious minority community left out in the cold insofar as Article 13's 'recognised religious minority' status is concerned is the Bahá'í community. Having long constituted the largest religious minority community in Iran, their omission from this Article can only be seen as having been intentional. Their ousting from Article 13, combined with the conditionalities attached to Article 14, serve as warning signals to the human rights situation of religious minorities in general, and to the Bahá'ís in particular.

Estimates have put the population of Iran as consisting of 89% Shii, 10% Sunni and 1% other religious minorities.<sup>34</sup> Of the 700, 000 or so religious minorities, the breakdown of populations has been estimated in this way:

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<sup>32</sup> Mehran Tamadonfar, Islam, Law, and Political Control in Contemporary Iran, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, vol. 40, no. 2, June 2001, p. 207

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 210

<sup>34</sup> www.geographic.org website, 2000 index on Iran

<b>Bahá'ís</b>		300,000-350,000
<b>Christians</b>	<i>Armenians</i>	150,000-200,000
	<i>Assyro-Chaldeans</i>	40,000
	<i>Protestants</i>	10,000-15,000
<b>Jews</b>		25,000-30,000
<b>Zoroastrians</b>		10,000

Iran has enjoyed a rich and varied tapestry of religious experience. Its distinctive spiritual heritage has made it the birthplace of three religions - the Zoroastrian, Bábí and Bahá'í beliefs; the only country with a Muslim Shi'i leadership; a country mentioned in the Old Testament<sup>35</sup> and with a Jewish community from Babylonian times; living alongside a variety of Christian groups, Muslims, Bahá'ís, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. The largest of the non-Muslim communities is the Bahá'í community, followed by the Christian, Zoroastrian and Jewish communities.

However, this rich mosaic of religious experience has never been fully incorporated into Iran's national life and periodic unrest has been witnessed against all but the least conspicuous of Iran's religious minorities. This chequered history witnessed, for example, the 1839 murder of 36 Jews in Mashhad and the forced conversion of the rest of them.<sup>36</sup> The late 1800s saw vicious attacks on the Bábís,<sup>37</sup> and later Bahá'ís.<sup>38</sup> In 1850 the Báb, Founder of the Bábí religion, was executed and the Founder of the Bahá'í religion,<sup>39</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, was exiled from Iran in 1853. Under Reza Shah's rule (1925-1941) the Armenians were suspected of Soviet leanings and their Archbishop was exiled. Jewish, Bahá'í and Armenian schools were closed down, but the Zoroastrians were left unharmed as Reza Shah tried to justify his reforms, such as the unveiling of women, with reference to their religion. Under Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979) the climate of religious tolerance was unpredictable. Religion generally became a less dominant factor in society, but that did not stop the Shah from compromising the principle of religious tolerance when it was a politically attractive option. The main example of this came in the mid-1950s when the Shah allowed attacks on the Bahá'í community<sup>40</sup> since he needed to attract the support of the clergy in his anti-Communist campaign.<sup>41</sup> The concession granted to the clergy was that they

<sup>35</sup> This is referred to as 'Elam'. See The Bible, Daniel, Chapters 8 and 9

<sup>36</sup> See: Raphael Patai, *Jadid Al-Islam: The Jewish 'New Muslims'* of Meshhed, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998

<sup>37</sup> The Báb, Founder of the Bábí Faith, was born in Shiraz, Iran, in October 1817. He declared his 'mission' in May 1844 and was executed in Tabriz in July 1850.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the level of suppression suffered by the Bábís and Bahá'ís see Martin J. Douglas, *The Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran 1844-1984*, Canada: The Association of Bahá'í Studies, 1984

<sup>39</sup> The Bahá'í Faith is closely associated with the Bábí Faith – with the two being referred to by Bahá'ís as 'twin Revelations'. However, they are two independent religions.

<sup>40</sup> There was surprise at this Governmentally condoned attack on the Bahá'ís, but lack of official recognition has always made them prone to such attacks. As Avery explained, "In 1955 observers were surprised when the Government suddenly instituted moves against the religious minority of the Baha'is; although there is religious toleration in Iran, action against the Baha'is was condoned on the grounds that their faith is not recognised as a separate religion." Peter Avery, *Modern Iran*, London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1965, p. 469

<sup>41</sup> Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah, Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution*, London: Hutchinson, 1985, pp. 113-114

could pursue their plan to try to win Bahá'ís back to Islam. "If they failed, the Baha'i in question would be put on a black list and boycotted by the Muslims. In some cases, the adamant Baha'i would be put to death".<sup>42</sup> This anti-Bahá'í organisation had up to 12,000 members by the late 1970s,<sup>43</sup> when the revolution provided with further scope for the realisation of their purposes.

More details will now be provided on the most populous of each of the religious minority communities in Iran:

### **Bahá'ís**

Despite a sad history of persecution against Bahá'ís since the founding of their Faith in Iran in the nineteenth century, the Islamic Revolution marks the starting point of a concerted, government-supported wave of intense persecution against them. The period since 1979 has witnessed attacks on their physical integrity, community structures, social standing and even their community survival.

Attacks on their physical integrity involved mass imprisonment and torture throughout the 1980s, amounting to over 200 Bahá'ís being killed<sup>44</sup> purely for their religious beliefs, and public attempts at forced recantations on Bahá'ís to become Muslims. Whilst killings and imprisonment continues to the present day, this physical aspect of government persecution against them has subsided in the 1990s. However, threats against Bahá'ís on alleged grounds of apostasy, espionage<sup>45</sup> and community activism remain real. Large numbers of Bahá'ís are continually imprisoned without charge for short terms, maintaining the sense of siege against them.

Attacks on Bahá'í community structures started with a concerted wave of killings and the disappearance of waves of elected national and local Bahá'í leaders throughout Iran in the early 1980s. This culminated in the Bahá'í Administration being declared illegal by government authorities in 1983, hence it was disbanded. Since the Bahá'í community does not have a religious hierarchy, the banning of the administrative structure has dismembered the community in terms of its internal organisation – its religious and social activities, religious educational classes within the community, and its organisation of matters of personal status such as the registration of marriage,

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<sup>42</sup> This plan was known as the 'Halabi' plan. See Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah*, pp. 113-114. After the revolution, however, the Halabi group's (called the 'Hojjatiyyeh') policy changed. "After the revolution, as the suppression of Baha'ism became the general clerical policy, the society turned to Marxism as the archenemy to be eradicated." Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 157

<sup>43</sup> This 'Hojjatiyyeh' organisation, however, rejected Ayatollah Khomeini's Velayat-i-Faqih (basically, that of direct clerical leadership) concept, and was ordered to disband by Khomeini in 1983.

<sup>44</sup> "Since 1979, 201 Baha'is had been assassinated and 15 others had been reported missing, presumed dead". UN Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.29, Commission on Human Rights, 52nd session, 29 February 1996, para. 69

<sup>45</sup> This linkage with espionage, especially Zionism, is alleged despite explicit Bahá'í teachings insisting on obedience to civil government and non-involvement in partisan political activity. It furthermore ignores the fact that the Holy Land is only of significance to the Bahá'ís as the place where their Founder passed away in 1892 due to having been exiled by the authorities from Iran in 1853. Nikki Keddie has pointed out the irony of the fact that far fewer Jewish leaders have been accused of Zionism in Iran since the revolution than Bahá'ís. See: Nikki R. Keddie, *Islamic Revivalism Past and Present*, with emphasis on Iran, in Barry M. Rosen (ed) *Iran Since the Revolution, Internal Dynamics, Regional Conflict, and the Superpowers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 152

divorce, burials and births. The viability of its whole community life is therefore at stake.

Regarding socio-economic pressures against Bahá'ís, they have clearly suffered the worst persecution of all the ethnic and religious minorities in Iran. The Bahá'ís in Iran are totally excluded from all forms of representation. They constitute legal and political non-persons, suffering total civil non-existence since 1979. The exclusion of the Bahá'ís from the Constitution, and non-recognition as a religious (or any other kind of) minority community, means their population of around 300,000-350,000 has been eliminated from the Iranian political scene. They cannot vote, they are not conceded any level of internal community organisation, tens of thousands of Bahá'ís were eliminated from the Iranian civil service from the early 1980s, their pensions have not been honoured, many community and individual properties have been confiscated over the decades; and no political or legal recourse exists for them. There have even been government campaigns to oust Bahá'ís from private businesses, their cemeteries have been raided, assets confiscated and all passports and exit permits denied to all of them until recent years. No single Bahá'í has been permitted to study or teach in tertiary education since the onset of the revolution. When Bahá'ís organised their own self-help Institute of Higher Education for the educational survival of their community, the government responded through raids of their labs and libraries, the imprisonment of their staff, threats and intimidation of students and the banning of their activities through the late-1990s<sup>46</sup> to the present day. In 1993, a circular issued by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council dated 25 February 1991 relating to the official policy to be followed in relation to the Bahá'ís, was revealed in the UN. Some of the main considerations of the Circular were that the progress and development of the Bahá'ís was to be blocked, they were not to be admitted to universities, their teachings were to be countered by the Government's Islamic Propaganda Organisation, that a plan was to be formulated to destroy their cultural roots outside the country, employment would be refused to them and they would be denied all positions of influence such as in education.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the Circular was signed by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Khamenei, is of particular concern. Whilst the authenticity of this Memorandum is denied by the Iranian government, a number of UN experts have noted its remarkable affinity with the current Iranian government policies on the Bahá'ís.

With no other recourse available to them, and with severe governmental physical, community and socio-economic assaults combining against them, Bahá'ís have registered their continual persecution through UN human rights bodies. This led to annual resolutions at the UN Sub-Commission and Commission condemning Iran for its treatment of the Bahá'ís from 1980<sup>48</sup> to 2002, and Iran was regularly censured at

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<sup>46</sup> See the following document for details: UN Doc. E/CN.4/1999/NGO/13, Commission on Human Rights, 55th session, 29 January 1999, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Written statement submitted by the Bahá'í International Community, The Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education: a creative and peaceful response to religious persecution in Iran

<sup>47</sup> UN Doc. E/CN.4/1993/41, Commission on Human Rights, 49th session, 28 January 1993, Final Report on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights, Mr. Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, para. 310

<sup>48</sup> Resolution 10 (XXXIII), adopted by the Sub-Commission on 10 September 1980 expressed 'profound concern' for the safety of the Bahá'ís, both individually and collectively. UN Doc. E/CN.4/1413, E/CN.4/Sub.2/459, p. 69, by 12 votes to none, with 6 abstentions, operative para. 1

the UN treaty bodies.<sup>49</sup> The Iranian government has responded in a variety of ways to these UN expressions of concern regarding the Bahá'ís. At all times Iran has denied religious minority status to the Bahá'ís. It has, instead, tried in various ways to tarnish their reputation and projected them as either a politically suspect group and/or a dangerous sect. At times it has been claimed that the population of Bahá'ís in Iran is minute, at others that they enjoy an enviable standard of rights in Iran, that they are exaggerating their treatment in Iran for political motive, and on a few occasions it has acknowledged public prejudice against them and claimed that the government is trying its utmost to enhance their social status.

In as far back as 1981 academics had asserted that, “Maintaining respect for the Bahá’í religion and people will be one severe test of human rights in an Islamic republic”,<sup>50</sup> and this human rights test remains one of the most illusive even in Iran today.

## Christians

### **Armenians**

Armenians have lived in Iran for around four centuries. Several hundred thousand Armenians were brought to Iran from Armenia in the early seventeenth century by Shah Abbas for political and economic reasons, as merchants and artisans. Initially they were settled through Isfahan and Gilan province, but then they spread to Tehran and Mazandaran provinces and Urumiyeh.

Armenian Christians have their two representatives in the Iranian Parliament, in accordance with the Iranian Constitution. One seat is reserved for Armenians resident in Tehran and northern Iran, the other for Isfahan and southern Iran. The population of Armenians in Iran before the revolution was estimated at 300,000 and their population in the year 2000 at 150,000 by their own Archbishop Babian (though some quote the higher figure of 200,000).<sup>51</sup> Many emigrated to Armenia after the revolution.

According to the 1993 Iran Year Book, the Armenians had 20 schools including eight high schools supervised by the Education Ministry, 20 Georgian churches, Armenian clubs and one daily printed in Armenian.<sup>52</sup> These possibilities have been granted more easily to Armenians by the authorities because Armenians do not proselytise and are not considered a threat by the regime. The majority of the Armenians are Gregorian Christians but some became Roman Catholics and Protestants as a result of past European and American missionary work in Iran.

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<sup>49</sup> These include Experts of the Human Rights Committee, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Falk, *Human Rights and State Sovereignty*, New York & London: Holmes & Meier, 1981, p. 212

<sup>51</sup> Reuters, Iran's religious minorities warning despite own MPs. 16 February 2000, see <<http://bahai-library.org/newspapers/021600.html>>, accessed November 2002

<sup>52</sup> These figures were given for 1993, See: The Armenians, Iran Year Book 1993, which can be found at <<http://www.netiran.com/Htdocs/Clippings/Social/930000XXSO07.html>>, accessed November 2002

## **Assyro-Chaldeans (Assyrians)**

The Assyrians are amongst the oldest settled peoples in Iran. Assyrian Christians have their own representative in the Iranian Parliament. According to the MP representing the Assyrians and Chaldeans, Shamshoon Maqsudpour, their population stood at 40,000 in 1999.<sup>53</sup> He also noted that 80% of their population was settled in Tehran and Urumiyeh and the rest were scattered in Salmas, Tabriz, Qazvin, Hamedan, Kermanshah, Shiraz, Bandar Abbas and Ahwaz. They are allowed to have their own community and sports associations and they produce some publications.

The Assyrian MP, however, has noted problems in relation to the continuance of Assyrian language and culture, since Assyrian schools had to teach children in Persian for all classes including those for religious education and even classes held for Assyrian children in the churches had to be examined in Persian.<sup>54</sup> Like other minorities, discrimination is also faced in relation to issues that involve Muslims, particularly in judicial matters.

## **Protestants**

The figure for the total number of Christians in Iran (of all denominations) has been estimated at between 200,000 and 250,000. The Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans represent the more traditional religious groupings in Iran and they constitute over 90 % of Iran's Christian population. They do not carry out any missionary activities and this stance has proven critical to their survival. The Protestants, particularly evangelical groups, have not fared so well and Christians abroad have ranked Iran seventh in their 'World Persecution Index'.<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch has estimated their numbers at around 10,000-15,000.<sup>56</sup> Churches have been closed down,<sup>57</sup> the use of Persian in sermons banned,<sup>58</sup> the publishing of Bibles restricted<sup>59</sup> and Muslims strictly prohibited from attending sermons, with previous converts from Islam being put under particular surveillance.

It was in 1991 that the UN Special Representative on the human rights situation in Iran was first informed about the persecution of evangelical Christian groups.<sup>60</sup> Then, in 1993, Christian ministers were approached by the Government and ordered to sign declarations promising that Muslims would not be allowed into their services.<sup>61</sup> Clearly there was a concerted governmental attempt to demonstrate intolerance of apostasy. Further evidence that apostasy was considered a capital crime came in 1994

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<sup>53</sup> Ozra Dozham, Discrimination, the Main Problem That Bothers Religious Minorities, Zaman, January 1999, no. 27, found at <<http://www.netiran.com/Htdocs/Clippings/Dpolitics/990101XXDP01.html>>, accessed November 2002

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> This index focuses on the persecution of Christians and is dated July 1999. See the Open Doors' Persecution Index at <<http://www.jesus.org.uk/dawn/1999/dawn9932.html>>, accessed November 2002

<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran, Religious and Ethnic Minorities

<sup>57</sup> Churches were closed in seven cities between 1988 and 1993

<sup>58</sup> This was the case in the mid-late 1990s in all but three churches

<sup>59</sup> The sale and publishing of Bibles in Iran has also been restricted since the closure of the Iranian Bible Society in 1990

<sup>60</sup> UN Doc. E/CN.4/1991/SR.42, 5 March 1991, Commission on Human Rights, 47th session, para.14

<sup>61</sup> Revolutionary Guards turned up in churches and arrested members of the congregation for questioning. See: J. Simpson & T. Shubart, *Lifting the Veil: Life in Revolutionary Iran*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, pp. 233-234

with the imprisonment of a pastor due to his conversion from Islam many years previously.<sup>62</sup>

Also in 1994, Assemblies of God Minister Bishop Haik Hovsepian Mehr<sup>63</sup> was found stabbed to death. His main ‘crime’ appears to have been that of refusal to join a number of leaders of various religions, allegedly put under pressure by the authorities, in publicly condemning two human rights reports issued in November 1993 by the UN Special Representative on Iran and by Amnesty International. He had also stood up for the rights of Christians in Iran and campaigned for the release Reverend Dibaj who had been in prison since 1984. He had thus rejected Governmental attempts at portraying a picture of freedom of religion in Iran. Reverend Mehdi Dibaj, pastor of the Church of the Assemblies of God and convert from Islam 41 years previously, was released from prison in January 1994. However, he went missing on 24 June 1994 and his body was ‘found’ by the authorities on 2 July 1994.<sup>64</sup> Some state that his death may have been indicative of serious divisions within the Government.<sup>65</sup> Reverend Tateos Michaelian<sup>66</sup> was also murdered in suspicious circumstances between June and July 1994. A show trial a year later, assigned the murders of Dibaj and Michaelian to three women accused of association with the outlawed opposition group, the Mojahedin-e Khalq - but many are sceptical about these claims.<sup>67</sup> 1996 saw another disappearance and death, of pastor Mohammad Bagher Yusefi, bringing to seven the number of obscure deaths of Christian leaders. The UN Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance thus called for considerable vigilance of Iran’s Protestant community. It was noted that their treatment had given rise to ‘traumatism’ within their community, and was due to their outreach activities amongst Muslims. However, the Special Rapporteur emphasised that, “the conversion of Muslims to another religion should in no way give rise to pressures, bans or restrictions on the Protestant community, on the converts or on ministers of religion”.<sup>68</sup>

### **Jews**

The Jews have been settled in Iran for over 2,500 years. Forced conversion, mass expulsion and murder of Jews seems to have commenced in the late 1500s against

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<sup>62</sup> Pastor of the closed Pentecostal Assyrian Church in Hamadan, Reverend Khosrow Khodadadi. A number of Bahá’ís have also been sentenced to death and killed on the charge of converting from Islam or encouraging others to do so. The sentences of Mr Dhabihullah Mahrami and Musa Talibi, and the execution of Mr Ruhollah Rawhani in July 1998, are cases in point.

<sup>63</sup> President of the Council of Evangelical Ministers of Iran and Superintendent of the Church of the Assemblies of God.

<sup>64</sup> Two years later Iranian government officials reported to the Special Rapporteur, during his visit to Iran, that, “conversion was not a crime and that no one had been punished for converting, as shown by the case of Pastor Dibaj, a converted Muslim who was sentenced to death for apostasy, but whose sentence was reviewed”. UN Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.29, para. 21.

<sup>65</sup> “There were suggestions he might have been murdered by militants from the Ministry of Information. He certainly lost his life because of his stand for the freedom of religion which the Iranian authorities claimed to protect”. John Simpson & Tira Shubart, *Lifting the Veil*, p. 234.

<sup>66</sup> Interim President of the Council of Protestant Ministers of Iran

<sup>67</sup> UN Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.2, Commission on Human Rights, 52nd session, 9 February 1996, report of Mr Abdelfattah Amor, p.19, para. 84

<sup>68</sup> UN Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.29, para. 116

them,<sup>69</sup> with prejudices about their ritual polluter and religious minority status combining to make them outcasts. Social ostracisation and physical segregation was their lot in Iran; with survival techniques of “social invisibility”, “the avoidance of vocational confrontation, or competition”<sup>70</sup>, and the creation of an “invisible political structure” for community decision making”<sup>71</sup> being mastered by them. Despite being despised, Iranian Jews were, “able to fulfil important economic and social roles that were morally or religiously prohibited to Shi’ite Muslims”.<sup>72</sup>

17 Jews have been killed since the Revolution - at least ten of these on the grounds of having connections with Israel or Zionist organisations, corruption or links with the Shah’s regime.<sup>73</sup> The Jewish community has a representative in the Iranian Parliament, community-run schools,<sup>74</sup> and their own cultural centres. The vast majority of the community emigrated, but those who remained had generally adapted to restrictions facing them. The population of Jews in Iran before the revolution had been estimated at 80, 000 but that of the year 2000 at 30-35,000 by the Jewish MP for Parliament, Manuchehr Eliasi. Other sources have put the Jewish population lower at 20-25,000.<sup>75</sup> Concern with their situation was heightened once again with the imprisonment of thirteen Jews<sup>76</sup> in March 1999 on charges of espionage for Israel. The Government insisted that, “The arrest and charges against a number of Iranian Jews has nothing whatsoever to do with their religion.”<sup>77</sup> Eight of these thirteen remained in prison as of November 2002.

There have also been records that the Iranian regime has, “confiscated Jewish property, including factories, hotels, cinemas, houses and other assets, and has made it increasingly difficult for Jews to obtain business licences ... Since 1994, premises belonging to non-Muslims, especially those serving food, have been obliged to hang a sign at the entrance saying ‘run by religious minority’ This order ... continued to cause much concern ... for fear of violent attacks. Members of religious minorities, including Jews, are forbidden to join mainstream sports clubs but are permitted to run their own associations ... Religious leaders of minority groups, including Jews, are forced to sign statements claiming that they enjoy full rights and safety in Iran. ... Jews in Iran are banned from having any connection with Zionist or non-Iranian Jewish organizations abroad”.<sup>78</sup>

### **Zoroastrians**

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<sup>69</sup> Laurence D. Loeb, Dhimmī Status and Jewish Roles in Iranian Society, in Shlomo Deshen and Walter P. Zenner (eds), *Jews among Muslims, Communities in the Precolonial Middle East*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, p. 249

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 253

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 255

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 257

<sup>73</sup> See: Antisemitism and Xenophobia Today, <<http://www.axt.org.uk/antisem/archive/archive1/iran/iran.htm>>, accessed November 2002

<sup>74</sup> All recognised non-Muslim schools had to have Muslim heads (until the year 2000), and this led the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance to encourage the Government to allow minorities to direct their own schools. See: UN Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.29, para. 98

<sup>75</sup> Reuters, Iran’s religious minorities warning despite own MPs

<sup>76</sup> Eight Muslims were also charged.

<sup>77</sup> Press Release I, Islamic Republic of Iran Permanent Mission to the UN, posted on the website of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran at URL <<http://www.iran-embassy.org.uk/stoppres/press1.htm>>, accessed November 2002

<sup>78</sup> See: Antisemitism and Xenophobia Today

Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the ancient Persian Empire, which was established in the sixth century BC. Whilst Zoroastrians are not recognised in the Qur'an as one of the 'People of the Book' or *ahl al-kitab*, similar concessions to Jews and Christians were granted to them when Islam replaced Zoroastrianism as Iran's official religion, and the equal treatment to Jews and Christians continues to apply to them in present day Iran.

The Zoroastrians have their own representative in the Iranian Parliament, in accordance with the Iranian Constitution. Their numbers, as of the year 2000, were estimated to be around 10,000 in Iran.<sup>79</sup> The Zoroastrians are largely resident in central Iran in the city of Yazd and also in Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz. Their parliamentary representatives in the past have asked the international community not to raise their human rights situation, as they prefer to deal with any problems through dialogue with the national authorities and without their situation being politicised in the international arena. However, a former Zoroastrian MP was reported to have complained that some laws discriminated against religious minorities by encouraging conversion to Islam.<sup>80</sup> One such law was that on inheritance, ensuring that if a minority child converted to Islam all the parent's property automatically went to him on the passing of the parents and at the expense of all other siblings.

### **Contrasting the situation of the various religious minority communities**

It is evident that all the religious communities have been coerced into adopting a posture of low social visibility. Many have internalised a minority complex of kowtowing to the majority and going to great lengths to avoid any conflict or competition with Muslims that may be used against them. Furthermore, all the religious minorities complain of varying degrees of discrimination in employment and serious economic hardship.<sup>81</sup> This, in turn, has impacted on their communities through both the mass migration of their populations out of Iran as well as low birth rates. Even recognised religious minorities have complained of the discrimination faced by their members in employment. For example, employment notices in the newspapers demanded Islamic faith as the first precondition to employment through to the late 1990s. Through the intervention of one religious minority MP, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance agreed to change this condition to membership of one of the official religions of the countries (i.e. primarily to exclude the Bahá'ís), but the same MP complained that discrimination continued and most government ministries still rejected minorities claiming that they are only obeying instructions.<sup>82</sup>

It is clear that those religious minorities that are essentially cultural, ethnic associations who have long resisted or forbidden conversions into the faith have generally suffered less in Iran, with those with a previous history of Muslim

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<sup>79</sup> Reuters, Iran's religious minorities warning despite own MPs

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Whilst much economic hardship exists for the Iranian population at large, it is doubly difficult for minorities. This is because they have to face the general economic deprivations as well as deal with serious discrimination in competing for jobs or running businesses. They are not able to compete with an equal footing for either public or private positions or in running their own businesses, they are disadvantaged in terms of inheritance, and hence suffer *greater* economic hardship than the rest of the population.

<sup>82</sup> Ozra Dozham, Zaman newspaper, Discrimination, the Main Problem That Bothers Religious Minorities

conversions being repressed most. It is for this reason that the UN Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance described the 1995 situation of Iran's Zoroastrian, Jewish, Assyro-Chaldean and Armenian minorities as being generally "satisfactory".<sup>83</sup> A number of these religious minorities have even taken the initiative in warning the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance that they do not wish their situation to be publicised at the international level.<sup>84</sup> What has singled out the Protestants and Bahá'ís for particularly harsh treatment from amongst all the religious minority communities is the perceived attraction of their messages to disenchanted Muslims and their links with co-religionists overseas.

A major concern that remains are the clear limits to the upward mobility of even the recognised religious minorities. The theoretical comment that has been made regarding minorities in Islamist discourse seems to actually hold in relation to recognised religious minorities in Iran. "The range of public offices that they may hold is limited to those that do not involve religion and commandments; in effect, this deprives them of political rights and important channels of social mobility. Non-Muslims cannot serve in key decision-making positions, as rulers of the state, as army commanders, or as judges."<sup>85</sup> Whilst recognised religious minorities in Iran have political rights in the sense of a structure for parliamentary representation, they are unable to play a role in mainstream politics. In effect, they are sectioned out and limited in terms of their political participation, and this structure has been imposed upon them as their *only* means of representation. The extent to which particular Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian members of parliament are co-opted within the government machinery and may be more representative of subjugation rather than their community's true interests, is hard to assess. In any case, there is no other alternative open to them. A fundamental change that is required both in relation to ethnic and religious (particularly the un-recognised) minorities is, "the implementation of radical constitutional reforms whereby the prevailing 'ethnic' conceptions of citizenship are replaced by democratic notions of citizenship which exclude all ethnic, racial and religious or cultural qualification for membership of state and society".<sup>86</sup> There is a need for an end to the stratification of society. In Iran what currently exists is separate and unequal treatment for some Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians; and a very sharp and unhealthy demarcation between those 'recognised' and not recognised as such. Iran's religious minorities have, at best, been ghettoised - suffering insecurity and arbitrary treatment; whilst others suffer a much worse fate with their lives or attempts at daily existence being hampered. Even of those that the World Report on Freedom of Religion and Belief states have been 'most privileged'<sup>87</sup> it is stated, "Everywhere, they are made to feel that they do not belong, that they are inferiors compassionately tolerated on Muslim land."<sup>88</sup>

A recent positive development, however, has been the equalisation of blood money between Muslims and recognised religious minorities in November 2002 by the Iranian parliament. This means that whereas before recognised religious minorities received half the compensation if the victim of crime was a male member of a

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<sup>83</sup> For more details see: UN Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.29, paras. 37, 39, 42 and 44

<sup>84</sup> UN Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.29, para. 46

<sup>85</sup> Uriah Furman, Minorities in Contemporary Islamist Discourse, p. 5

<sup>86</sup> Abbas Vali, The Kurds and Their 'Others', p. 86

<sup>87</sup> The Armenians.

<sup>88</sup> Kevin Boyle and Juliet Sheen, (eds), Freedom of Religion and Belief, A World Report, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 423

recognised religious minority (all women continue to receive half the compensation even now), now they will receive equal blood money. Whereas this Parliamentary Bill needs to be approved by the Guardian Council before formally becoming law, it is expected that this will just be a formality as the Supreme Leader has already voiced his support for this change.

In a statement on 13 June 1999, Iran's President Khatami stated that he was responsible for protecting every single member of any religion who lives in Iran and accepted the system of the Islamic Republic.<sup>89</sup> Since there is no evidence that any of Iran's religious minorities wish to interfere with the system of Iran's Republic, this statement *should* be used as the grounds of offering a window of opportunity for an improvement in the lot of Iran's religious minorities.

### **Contrasting the situation of recognised religious minorities and ethnic minorities**

In contrasting the situation of Iran's *recognised* religious minorities and ethnic minorities, it is interesting to note the greater structural concessions granted to the former. A number of reasons for this may be put forward. One reason, that has already been discussed, is that of Islamic beliefs in the brotherhood of all Muslims regardless of ethnic differences. A consequence of this was that the Islamic Revolutionary Government of Iran did not see the ideological need for differentiating between the representation and political participation of Iranian Muslims. The only differences that were afforded were those between Iranian Muslims and Iranians belonging to recognised non-Muslim communities – Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians.

The second reason is political. The population of the recognised three religious minority communities was minute enough not to constitute a threat, with the largest of these – the Christians – constituting less than 0.25 % of Iran's total population. (This can be contrasted with ethnic minority groups, such as the Azeris, which constitute up to 24 % of that population i.e. outnumber the Christians 100 fold!) With the conversion of Muslims being forbidden by the law of apostasy, combined with socio-economic pressures to convert to Islam or migrate, these small populations of recognised religious minority communities was bound to diminish further with time. They therefore did not constitute any political threat to the system of the Islamic Republic and controlled concessions and representations for them as part of the government system was bound to largely co-opt them into the larger governmental machinery.

Thirdly, and unlike the ethnic minority groups, there was no significant congruence between these three populations and co-believers across Iran's borders. Interestingly enough, whilst the continuity of belief with neighbouring countries *did* exist insofar as Sunni Muslims were concerned, as Muslims they were not granted religious minority status and, in fact, also suffered repression as their ethnic and religious loyalties were thus considered much more suspect by the authorities.

One ironic consequence of the above was that whilst the governmental authorities have not granted official recognition to the languages of the ethnic minority communities, they have been comfortable in encouraging the use of minority languages amongst relevant religious minority communities. In theory the

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<sup>89</sup> Press Release I, Islamic Republic of Iran Permanent Mission to the UN

Constitution sets out in Article 15 that whilst the official language and script of Iran is Persian and all official documents, correspondence *and text books* must be in Persian, the additional use of regional and tribal languages is permitted in the press and mass media and the teaching of literature in schools. In practice, however, the authorities have refused, for example, the teaching of Kurdish at any level in schools in Kurdistan, limited the use of Kurdish in the print and electronic media and drastically reduced the air-time for Kurdish programming since 1979.<sup>90</sup> Armenian religious schools are, however, free to teach Armenian, but governmental schools in the provinces where the ethnic minority communities are dominant do not teach Azeri for example or allow its use in governmental circles. So much so have minority languages amongst religious minority communities been encouraged, that in the mid-1990s evangelic Protestant communities were told by the authorities to carry out their services in a language other than the official Persian (or *Farsi*) language!<sup>91</sup> Whilst minority language usage amongst ethnic minorities is considered threatening of separatism, its use amongst religious minorities buttresses the government's policy forbidding the conversion of Muslims, who would not be conversant in – for example - Armenian. This differentiation echoes the sophistication of the Iranian minority policies, as well as the paranoia that informs it.

### **Political Provision for the Recognised Religious Minorities**

Five seats in the Iranian Parliament ('Majles' or Islamic Consultative Assembly), from the 290 available seats, are reserved for the representation of Iran's recognised religious minorities. This policy actually continues unchanged from Iran's first Constitution of 1906, which granted these same religious minority seats for the first time. These recognised religious minorities therefore have their votes 'separated out' from the rest of the population and are only able to vote for their own representative in Parliament. They therefore cannot participate in the election of other representatives. These five 'Minority MPs' usually only address matters relating to their own community in parliament rather than wider political affairs. Whilst the principle of 'separate but equal' regarding educational and cultural facilities for minorities is encouraged by many human rights activists,<sup>92</sup> its role in carving out the *only* means of political representation is more suspect.

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<sup>90</sup> UN Doc. E/CN.4/2002/42, Commission on Human Rights, 58th session, 16 January 2002, para. 9

<sup>91</sup> This, despite the fact that Iran's multi-ethnic Protestant community does not have access to a shared language other than Persian to converse in!

<sup>92</sup> For a discussion see Tom Hadden, *The Rights of Minorities and Peoples in International Law*, in Kirsten E. Schulze, Martin Stokes and Colm Campbell (eds), *Nationalism, Minorities and Diasporas: Identities and Rights in the Middle East*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1996, pp. 19-22

### ***3. Major Concerns and the Choice of Strategies: Relating the Lund Recommendations to the situation of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iran***

The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life<sup>93</sup> call for forms of effective participation of national minorities in the governances of states, leading to the integration of diversity within the state and the adoption of measures to alleviate tensions related to national minorities towards conflict prevention. Judging by its criteria and standards, it would have to be concluded that Iran has not achieved ‘effective participation of its ethnic and religious minorities in public life’.

#### **Specific Arrangements**

Whilst a limited number of ‘specific arrangements for national minorities’ have been adopted in Iran, and these *can* serve as the very early foundations of a future working machinery; to date these arrangements have been limited, hierarchical, themselves discriminatory, and serving primarily as a means of co-option rather than real engagement for the limited number of groups. Ethnic minorities have largely been left out, as has the largest religious minority community. As the Lund recommendations maintain, any institutions established to ‘ensure the effective participation of minorities in public life’ need to be respectful of the human rights of all – and this is an area where more attention is required.

#### **Minorities to be able to maintain their own Identity and Characteristics**

The aim of such arrangements would have to include, as a minimum requirement, enabling minorities to ‘maintain their own identity and characteristics’. None of the ethnic or religious groups in Iran could be said to have been enabled to do so *on their own terms*. Some tokenistic, externally-determined characteristics have been allowed to be maintained – for example through some governmentally recognised religious schools – but even here the head of the schools needed to be Muslims (until this was changed very recently) and the language of instruction is determined by the government.

#### **Political Rights**

Regarding the principle of respecting the rights of national minorities to ‘participate in public life’ and ‘enjoy other political rights’, allowing for the ‘full development of civil society’ in its full diversity, much progress remains necessary. The channels, scope and grounds of this participation, and those to be involved in such participation, are currently strictly determined by the government. Parliamentary representation, where granted (i.e. to Iranian Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews in Article 64 of the Constitution – thus discriminating outright against the others, especially the Bahá’ís), is largely adequate insofar as the numerical threshold for representation is concerned and it does to some extent guarantee the role of these three groups in the legislative process. However, it also serves to exclude recognised religious minorities from larger

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<sup>93</sup> The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations

political processes. Religious minorities cannot stand for Presidency<sup>94</sup> and they have not been enabled to comment on wider issues beyond their own community concerns.

Insofar as ethnic minorities are concerned, the Lund Recommendations uphold the freedom to ‘establish political parties based on communal identities’ as well as those ‘not identified exclusively with the interests of a specific community’. The Iranian Constitution recognises the formation of political parties in Article 26, but these require a prior permit from the government in accordance to the Law on the Activities of Parties, Societies, Political and Corporate Organisations, Islamic Associations and Associations Founded by Recognised Religious Minorities. Such permits are often rejected to ethnic minorities, they are by definition denied to non-recognised religious minorities and they are regularly delayed in the case of recognised religious minorities.

According to the Lund Recommendations, the participation of ‘national minorities at the regional and local levels’ is to be promoted, and the ‘structures and decision-making processes of regional and local authorities’ to be made ‘transparent and accessible in order to encourage the participation of minorities’. Article 100 of the Iranian Constitution creates Village, Division, City, Municipality and Provincial Councils, to be elected by the population of the locality. However, candidates are always vetted and the Constitution strictly requires them to ‘preserve national unity, territorial integrity, the system of the Islamic Republic, and the sovereignty of the central government’ and requires the decisions of the Councils to ‘not be contrary to the criteria of Islam and the laws of the country’ (Article 105). Even representatives that have merely emphasised existing Constitutional provisions for the use of minority languages have been harshly rejected. Clearly these Constitutional conditionalities are being *very* conservatively interpreted.

As the Lund Recommendations identify, there is a distinction between minority *representation* and minority *influence*. It is suggested that Iranian Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews have been afforded the former in Parliament but not the latter. Their further representation in other branches of the government, particularly the judicial branch and relevant Ministries, remains necessary. Furthermore, and as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief has commented in the past, Iranian government authorities should not project this as a ‘privilege’<sup>95</sup> towards these groups but a necessary measure for a peaceful society. Ethnic minority representatives, on the other hand, have regularly been rejected at the candidacy stage for Parliamentary elections. This falls far short of the need for ‘an effective voice at the level of central government’ for minorities at the level of central government.

### **Consultative Processes**

The goal of pursuing an ‘inclusive, transparent, and accountable process of consultation’ between governmental authorities and minorities remains illusive in Iran, though *some* grounds exist of such channels with a number of the recognised religious minority communities – but not yet with any of the ethnic minority groups.

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<sup>94</sup> See Article 115 of the Iranian Constitution.

<sup>95</sup> The Iranian authorities had claimed to the Special Rapporteur that, “the privileges granted to the recognized minorities could not be extended to all ... lack of recognition did not mean an absence of rights or the existence of a prohibition or discrimination”. UN Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.29, para. 18

This would serve as the basis of creating a much-needed ‘climate of confidence’. The Lund Recommendations propose the establishment of ‘advisory or consultative bodies ... to serve as channels for dialogue’ between government and minorities, particularly on issues such as ‘housing, land, education, language and culture’. The latter three issues, and non-discrimination in employment, would be issues of top priority for discussion in Iran. At the socio-economic level for minorities, Iran falls short of the Lund recommendations for ‘special measures for minority participation in the civil service’, and it denies outright the ‘provision of public services in the language of the national minority’.

Again, some structures are in place in Iran that can serve as the early foundations of the required institutional framework for such developments. This includes the Council of Minority Religious Schools and the National Committee for the Promotion of the Rights of Religious Minorities. Both need to be expanded in membership, scope of activities and powers so that they may fulfil the Lund standards of being able to ‘raise issues with decision makers, prepare recommendations, formulate legislative and other proposals, monitor developments and provide views’; be consulted regularly on ‘minority-related legislation and administrative measures in order to contribute to the satisfaction of minority concerns and to the building of confidence’; contribute to ‘the maintenance and development of the identity and culture of national minorities’ and generally to their ‘way of life’. These channels should be built up until they are established as a means for ‘the prevention of conflicts and dispute resolution’.

### **Measures towards levels of Autonomy for Iran’s Minorities**

Issues related to self-governance and territorial and non-territorial arrangements for minorities, as proposed in the Lund Recommendations, would appear to be a long way off insofar as Iran’s minorities are concerned. Initially, confidence between the minorities and authorities needs to be built up, and current representation and measures expanded, *before* arrangements for self-governance are put on the agenda. The government may first need assurance that ‘defense, foreign affairs, immigration and customs, macroeconomic policy, and monetary affairs’ will remain in *its* hands; and will not be threatened by discussions about ‘shifting certain legislative and executive functions from the central to the regional level’ – particularly in relation to ‘education, culture, use of minority language, environment, local planning, natural resources, economic development, local policing functions, and housing, health, and other social services ... taxation, administration of justice, tourism and transport’.

There needs to be a *significant* change of attitude before such a great shift in mentality may be possible on the part of the government, hence a very gradual step-by-step approach is recommended. At present, “the state continues to equate any efforts towards self-administration and autonomy with separatist tendencies”,<sup>96</sup> especially in relation to ethnic minorities, and it is not evident how this attitude may come to be altered. One recent research project on ethnic minorities in Iran noted that whilst Iran paid lip-service to ‘practical recognition of minority rights, “In reality, Iranian state policies now advocate unity, encourage acculturation to a common culture, and promote assimilation. The state, Persian nationalism, and Shia Islam are supposed to

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<sup>96</sup> See: Center for Economic and Social Rights, Minorities and Islam: The Comparative Case of the Kurds under the Islamic Republic of Iran. <<http://www.cesr.org/PROGRAMS/iran.htm>>, accessed November 2002

be the unifying factors, and this unity is imposed through force when necessary.”<sup>97</sup> The writer warns that, “Iran is clearly one of the countries that must come to terms with ethnic diversity if its territorial integrity or, at least, its political stability is to remain unthreatened.”<sup>98</sup>

One option may be presumed to come from current debates in the Iranian polity about the role and activities of civil society. Is it possible that there will be a beneficial spill-over effect from the current debates in Iran about civil society that will gradually enhance the political representation of ethnic and religious minorities and lead to the emergence of greater levels of autonomy being granted to them. Vali calls for the widening of the civil society discourse in order for it to become representative of difference. What is required in Iran in his view, is, “a democratic quest for changing the ethnic identity of political power, to ensure the representation of non-sovereign identities and rights in political, social and cultural processes”.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> A. William Samii, The Nation and its Minorities: Ethnicity, Unity and State Policy in Iran, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, vol. XX, nos. 1 & 2, p. 129

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 128

<sup>99</sup> Abbas Vali, The Kurds and Their ‘Others’, p. 91

## **4. Proposed steps for Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iran**

From the assessment of the situation of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, and the analysis of this situation in the light of the Lund Recommendations, the following steps are proposed for the enhancement of the participation of Iran's Ethnic and Religious minorities in public life in Iran. These proposals are categorised under four different steps:

### **(1) Addressing discrimination and the excluded minorities**

- Legislative measures to address the areas in the Constitution that have not yet been put into the effect for the benefit of minorities
- The introduction of corrective measures and policies regarding minorities that have been left out of Constitutional provisions thus far

### **(2) Specific Arrangements for the minorities**

- Honouring the spirit of Article 14 of the Constitution, and expanding its remit to *all* non-Muslims
- The de facto abrogation of Article 13 limiting the number of recognised religious minorities in Iran
- Measures building on Article 15 of the Constitution regarding the use of languages other than Persian
- Applying the principle of self-definition regarding the identification of all minorities; and ensuring no discrimination applies, either in theory or *effect*, to those who declare themselves as minorities

### **(3) Political Rights and Consultative Processes between the government and minorities**

- Establishing effective and equitable institutions for dialogue between minorities and government authorities
- Issues that may be considered early on for dialogue include: the teaching of languages other than Persian in schools, the publication of schools text books in minority languages, the issue of the representation of minorities in Parliament (building upon the provision of Article 64 of the Constitution) and also minority representation in other branches of government – particularly the consideration of ethnic and religious minority interests in the judiciary, so that discrimination against minorities in the penal and civil codes may gradually be dealt with
- Matters such as equal legal status, economic rehabilitation and equal employment opportunities *in practice*, freedom of association and the establishment of cultural, social and educational associations by minority communities also need to later be addressed
- After such internal and immediate matters have received consideration, the full involvement of minorities in the wider political and cultural life of Iranian society can be dealt with

- Once some mutual confidence has been built, past incidents can be investigated and claims for the return of confiscated individual and community assets can be addressed as well as the issue of compensation

#### **(4) Measures towards levels of Autonomy for Iran's Minorities**

- With no modern national government in Iran having granted autonomy for minorities, steps towards the discussion of any measure of autonomy for national minorities needs to be deferred to a much later date. Addressing the serious problems of recognition and accommodation of all ethnic and religious minorities need to be tackled first
- Issues of autonomy should only be dealt with when there is no risk of the breakdown of all government-minority relations, or of triggering fears of national security being at risk
- The above measures need to be informed by the desire to allow minorities an effective voice in their own affairs, combined with non-violence, peaceful relations and maintaining the territorial integrity of the country