

Rights Denied: Violations against ethnic and religious minorities in Iran



Cover photo:

A Kurdish man at Hawraman-at Takht, Iranian Kurdistan, Iran.

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Key findings

- While the repression and human rights violations by the Iranian government are well documented, less attention is paid to the specific situation of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities. From hate speech and police intimidation to denial of fundamental rights and opportunities, Iran's minorities are routinely denied equal access to justice, education, employment and political participation.
- While Iran's Constitution guarantees religious freedoms, it only extends these rights to Islam and three other recognized religions – Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism – leaving practitioners of other faiths, including Bahá'í, Sabeen-Mandaeans and Yarsanis, with no guaranteed protections. At the extreme end, members of religious minorities – in particular, Iran's sizeable Bahá'í community – have been vilified, arrested and even executed on account of their beliefs. They are frequently punished harshly with broad charges of threatening public morality or national security, resulting in long prison terms and even death sentences.
- Ethnic minorities, including Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks and Baluchis, have been treated as second-class citizens, targeted on the basis of their identity and sidelined from education, health care and other basic services. Minority-populated regions such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan remain underdeveloped, with higher poverty levels and poorer health outcomes. These inequalities have contributed to profound discontent and resentment, reflected in the arrests of thousands of peaceful demonstrators in these regions. Prison data shows that at least three quarters of Iran's political prisoners are from ethnic minorities.
- Despite some limited gestures of conciliation since the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, hopes of a more inclusive and rights-based approach to Iran's ethnic and religious minorities have yet to be realized. For this to be achieved, Iranian authorities will need to embark on a more comprehensive process of reform: this should include equitable economic development and political representation for minorities, as well as the lifting of all restrictions on their religious and cultural rights.

1

Introduction

Ethnic and religious minorities – including Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds, Bahá'í, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and others – are a vital part of the Iranian national fabric. Despite their diverse histories, they share long experiences of marginalization and denial of basic rights, which in many cases go back to the birth of the Iranian state. For decades, the central government has imposed a homogeneous Iranian identity rooted in Persian language and culture and, since the 1979 Revolution, Shi'a Islam. This has resulted in the repression of minority languages, faiths and cultures, and to varying degrees the exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities from public life and the benefits of economic development.

In his 2013 election campaign, President Hassan Rouhani pledged to end patterns of discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. His 10-point election platform contained a series of promises directed at minorities, including commitments to increase their public participation and employment, introduce mother tongue education in schools and universities, guarantee freedom of religion or belief, and prioritize the economic development of marginalized border areas. Rouhani won the election with overwhelming support among minority voters and was re-elected for a second term in 2017. However, while there have been some conciliatory measures since Rouhani's entry to office, such as introducing minority language and literature degree courses at universities, the overall picture shows that the human rights situation of ethnic and religious minorities

has not improved significantly, with some of the worst violations continuing unabated or even increasing.

Minorities continue to be the targets of arbitrary arrest, and are imprisoned and executed on political and national security-related charges at disproportionately high rates. Many provinces in which ethnic minorities are concentrated are impoverished and underdeveloped, and in some cases are still plagued by landmine contamination and other legacies of war. Minorities are excluded from high-level posts in the government, judiciary and military, and are underrepresented in senior and mid-level posts in many fields of employment. While basic protections are in place for the three constitutionally recognized minority religions, converts as well as adherents of non-recognized religions

are vulnerable to harassment, arrest, hate speech and attacks on their places of worship.

The outbreak of nationwide protests in Iran, beginning on 28 December 2017, symbolized the discontent of many Iranians with the lack of progress on major economic, political and social grievances. Significantly, the protests encompassed a number of major cities in minority-populated provinces, where disillusionment was fuelled by patterns of discrimination, environmental degradation and economic neglect specific to minority areas. Many protesters chanted slogans in their own minority languages (Arabic, Baluchi, Kurdish, Lur) and, in the case of some

Arab protesters, voiced demands specific to their ethnic group.¹ These developments are a stark illustration of the tensions that can result from long-term marginalization and denial of rights of a significant segment of the population.

This report is a comprehensive assessment of the human rights situation of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran since Rouhani's election, covering roughly the period from 2013 to 2017. It discusses the situation of minorities through the lens of civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights. Finally, it concludes with a series of recommendations to improve respect for the rights of minorities, directed at the Iranian government.

2

History

Surrounded by Armenia, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan, Iran is a highly diverse country home to a rich array of ethnic and religious groups, some of whose presence in the region goes back thousands of years. While many communities historically enjoyed their own regional spheres of influence and even autonomy, their recent history has been shaped by successive attempts by the Iranian state to impose a unified identity based in Persian culture and, since the 1979 Revolution, Shi'a Islam. This centralizing impulse has manifested itself in the attempted assimilation of minority cultures and languages, repression of regional demands for self-governance, and periodic episodes of armed conflict over the years.

At the turn of the 20th century, Iran's ethnic and religious mosaic was loosely held together by the Qajar dynasty, but the latter's influence was nominal outside the major cities. As a result, local power structures exerted primary influence over the ethnic groups located in Iran's outlying regions.² However, the situation changed dramatically in 1925 when Reza Shah, the first of the two Pahlavi monarchs, ascended to power. Reza Shah undertook a repressive and far-reaching nation-building project, which sought to obliterate ethnic and tribal affiliations in favour of a unified, modern Persian national identity. Persian was made the official language, and schools and magazines that were teaching or publishing in Arabic, Kurdish Turkish and other non-Persian languages were shut down.³ Parents were forced to give their children Persian names, and geographic place names in local languages were changed into Persian.⁴ Reza Shah also mandated the wearing of European-style clothing

and outlawed traditional ethnic attire, including Persian and Islamic traditional dress.⁵ These assimilatory policies were accompanied by forced sedentarization of semi-nomadic peoples and subjugation of tribal leaders.⁶ Regions that had been semi-autonomous, such as Sistan-Baluchestan and Arab-majority Khuzestan, were brought firmly under the control of the central state.⁷

In 1941 and in the midst of the World War II, Britain and the Soviet Union forced Reza Shah to abdicate in order to ensure control of Iran's oil fields for the war effort. His young son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, assumed the monarchy, and the repression of ethnic minorities abated temporarily.⁸ The end of World War II witnessed two short-lived attempts by Iranian ethnic groups at regional self-governance, with support from the Soviet Union. Azerbaijani Turks established an autonomous territory in Iranian Azerbaijan in December

1945, while the Kurds declared the Mahabad Kurdish Republic in January 1946. The newly autonomous territories introduced mother tongue education in the Turkish and Kurdish languages respectively. However, after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Iran in 1946, the central government was able to reassert control over both areas, ending their brief experiment with autonomy and harshly punishing the leaders involved.⁹

In the ensuing years, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi consolidated his power, and resumed the Persianization campaign started by his father.¹⁰ The notorious SAVAK secret police assisted in the repression of minority demands for greater recognition.¹¹ Nevertheless, political organizing continued, with the 1960s and 1970s witnessing the emergence of several ethnic separatist parties, notably the Ahwaz Liberation Front.¹²

In 1978-1979, widespread protests against the autocratic Pahlavi monarchy culminated in the overthrow of Mohammed Reza Shah and the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Many ethnic minorities supported the Revolution and expected that the change in regime would lead to greater respect for their rights and aspirations.¹³ However, it quickly became clear that Khomeini had no intentions of granting greater autonomy to Iran's minorities. The ensuing unrest in the Kurdish regions, Arab-majority Khuzestan and Turkmen areas in the northeast was met with decisive military action from the new Iranian government. In subsequent years, the Islamic Republic sought to consolidate a new Shi'a, pan-Islamic national identity and repressed any perceived ethno-nationalist sentiments, leading to continuing repression of minority languages, religions and cultural expression.

As a result, the period since the Islamic Revolution has been characterized by recurrent tension between the government and Iran's various ethnic groups, as the latter's attempts to mobilize in favour of greater rights and even autonomy have largely been met by violence and repression. The Kurdish region, for example, was the site of low-level warfare spanning several decades, led by Kurdish armed groups including the Democratic Party of Kurdistan Iran (PDKI) and Komala – although the Kurdish movement has now largely given up armed struggle. Arabs living near the Iraqi border were treated with intense suspicion and branded as collaborators by the government during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988.¹⁴ Baluchi-majority Sistan-Baluchestan province has also been the site of unrest and resistance, turning more violent after the formation of several militant groups, leading to fatal attacks. Government operations against armed opposition groups were often accompanied by assassinations of political activists and widespread arrests of peaceful human rights defenders.

A slight reprieve from this overall pattern of repression took place during the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Khatami enjoyed overwhelming electoral support from many minorities, including Arabs and Baluchis. Upon assuming the presidency, Khatami granted some social, political and cultural freedoms to minorities, allowing publications in minority languages to flourish briefly.¹⁵ He also appointed a Kurdish governor in Kurdistan province for the first time.¹⁶ However, when Mahmoud Ahmedinejad took over the presidency (2005-2013), he reversed many of these developments, reverting to suppression of minority languages, military clampdowns in Sistan-Baluchestan and Kurdistan, and persecution of minority rights defenders.¹⁷

3

Minority profiles

Verifiable demographic data about minorities is difficult to come by in Iran, as the government does not publish the census data it collects on ethnicity, and does not collect demographic data for non-recognized religions. However, it is often surmised that ethnic and religious minorities together make up approximately half of Iran's population. This section contains a basic, though non-exhaustive, overview of some of Iran's main ethnic and religious minorities. It is important to note, however, that many ethnic and religious groups in Iran prefer not to self-identify using the term minority out of a desire not to be seen as less Iranian or as separatists.

Arabs live primarily in Khuzestan province in southwestern Iran, bordered by Iraq to the west and the Persian Gulf to the south.¹⁸ Locally, they refer to the province as Ahwaz and identify as Ahwazi or Ahwazi Arab. There are pockets of other Arab communities along the western coast of Iran. Estimates of the size of the Arab population in Iran today range up to 5 million.¹⁹ Most are Shi'a Muslims, although a substantial minority are Sunni and are consequently vulnerable to intersectional discrimination on the basis of both religion and ethnicity.

Azerbaijani Turks (also referred to as Azerbaijanis, Turks or Azeris) are Iran's largest ethnic minority and number as many as 15 million.²⁰ They are mostly found in north and northwestern Iran, in the provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardabil and Zanjan. Most are Shi'a Muslims like the Persian-majority population of Iran. However, as speak-

ers of Azerbaijani Turkish, lack of recognition of their language rights has been a persistent grievance.

Bahá'í are believed to be the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, with the size of the community estimated at 300,000.²¹ The Bahá'í faith was founded in Iran in the mid-1800s and frames itself as new revelation and continuation of monotheistic, and other, religious traditions that predate it. Followers of the Bahá'í faith have long been labeled as heretics by the clerical establishment in Iran, with state-sanctioned persecution intensifying after the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Baluchis are an ethnic group spread across Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Baluchi population in Iran is estimated to be somewhere between 2 and 3 million.²² Most live in Sistan-Baluchestan, the country's poorest and most un-

derdeveloped province. They are speakers of the Baluchi language and the majority are Sunni Muslims, so face intersectional discrimination.

Christians in Iran include Armenians, the largest Christian group in Iran, whose presence dates back four centuries, and Chaldo-Assyrians, who are among the oldest settled groups in Iran. In addition, there are large numbers of Protestants and Evangelicals in Iran, many of whom are converts and are treated harshly by the government. According to the results of the 2011 government census, which only counts Armenians and Chaldo-Assyrians, there were 117,704 Christians in Iran,²³ although other sources give estimates closer to 300,000, including converts. Estimates for the number of converts vary widely, with some ranging between 66,000 to as many as 500,000.²⁴ The cities of Tehran and Isfahan are both home to substantial Christian populations.

Jews number 8,756 according to the 2011 census, although some groups give larger estimates.²⁵ Most Iranian Jews live in Tehran, although there are also communities in Shiraz, Isfahan and other large cities.

Kurds are concentrated in the northwest of Iran in the provinces of Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah and Ilam. Their numbers are estimated to fall between 8 and 10 million.²⁶ Since the early twentieth century, Kurds have faced threats to their traditional livelihoods as a result of forced sedentarization and militarization of their areas. Most are Sunni Muslims and therefore face intersectional discrimination on the basis of both sect and ethnicity.

Sabean-Mandaeans are adherents of a pre-Christian monotheistic religion based on the teachings

of John the Baptist. They number between 5,000 and 10,000 in Iran.²⁷ Most live in the Khuzestan province near the border of Iraq, where they rely on the Karoun River for the performance of baptism rituals.

Sufis are followers of a mystical tradition within Islam. Those in Iran belong to various orders, including the Nematollahi Gonabadi and the Naqshbandi orders. Many of these orders identify as Twelver Shi'a Muslim, the official state religion. State-affiliated Shi'a authorities, however, often regard Sufism as a deviation from Islam. There are no hard statistics on the number of Sufis in Iran, although some estimates place them at several million.²⁸

Yarsanis (sometimes referred to as Ahl-e-Haqq or Kaka'i) are followers of a syncretic religion dating to the fourteenth century. They are mainly found in Kermanshah and the other Kurdish provinces of Iran. The government does not recognize the religion and refers to some of its branches as 'misguided cults.' Consequently, it classifies Yarsanis as Muslims, a strategy also adopted by some members of the community to avoid discrimination. However, Yarsanis are adherents to a distinct faith and according to some estimates comprise around a million adherents in Iran.²⁹ Nearly all Yarsanis are Kurdish and therefore face intersectional discrimination on the basis of both religion and ethnicity.

Zoroastrians number 25,271 according to the 2011 census,³⁰ and live mostly in the provinces of Yazd, Kerman and Eastern Azerbaijan but with notable populations in the cities of Tehran and Shiraz as well. They are followers of one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the world, originating in ancient Persia. The name of the religion is derived from its founder, the prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster).



4

Legal framework

Iran's legal framework, while elevating Shi'a Islam as the official state religion, entrenches discrimination against non-Muslims in a range of areas, including freedom of worship, inheritance and judicial punishment. While this affects practitioners of the recognized religions of Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, it impacts particularly on worshippers from unrecognized religions. This is despite Iran being party to a number of international covenants and conventions that guarantee equality and non-discrimination.

Constitution

The Iranian Constitution of 1979 (amended in 1989) declares the country as an Islamic Republic, and names the Twelver Ja'fari School of Shi'a Islam as the state religion. It sets out the framework for a theocratic system of governance based on the principle of *velayat-e-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), in which the Supreme Leader holds ultimate authority. It also stipulates that the office of the President must be held by a believer in the state religion. Nevertheless, the Constitution affords recognition and some basic protections for both recognized religious minorities and ethnic minorities, and contains guarantees of non-discrimination. However, the rights set forth are far from being comprehensive, and are circumscribed in important ways by limitations contained in the Constitution itself.

For example, Article 12 of the Constitution calls for other Islamic schools, including the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, to be treated with full respect and allows them to follow their own regulations in areas in which they constitute the majority. Article 13 grants freedom to the Zoroas-

trian, Jewish and Christian minorities in matters of religious practice, personal status and religious education, while Article 64 provides for elected representatives for each group in Iran's legislative body. However, it is important to note that the wording of Article 13 states that the three aforementioned groups are the *only* recognized religious minorities, which implies that followers of other religions (such as Bahá'í, Sabean-Mandaeans and Yarsanis) do not enjoy the same rights.

Article 15 identifies Persian as the official language but permits the use of 'regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools.' The phrasing of this article in fact restricts the domains in which languages other than Persian can be used and does not guarantee the right of children from linguistic minorities to be educated in their mother tongue. Article 19 contains a guarantee of equality for all the people of Iran regardless of ethnic group or tribe, and states that 'colour, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege.' Notably, the provision does not mention religion as a prohibited basis for unequal treatment. However, Article

23 forbids the investigation of individuals' beliefs and states that 'none may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief.'

In several other instances, rights granted in the Constitution are qualified by broadly phrased provisos that leave a wide margin for denial of those rights. For example, while Article 14 calls on Muslims to respect the rights of non-Muslims and treat them with justice and equality, this is qualified by the stipulation: 'This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.' In a similar vein, Article 26 reads '[t]he formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities, is permitted,' but goes on to state 'provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic.'

Domestic laws

Many elements of Iran's domestic legal framework discriminate between Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, Article 881 of the Civil Code bars non-Muslims from inheriting property from Muslims. However, if a non-Muslim leaves behind a Muslim heir, he or she is entitled to the entire inheritance including the shares of any non-Muslim heirs. The Islamic Penal Code (IPC) also prescribes different penalties depending on the religion of the perpetrator and/or the victim of some crimes. For example, the IPC prescribes a punishment of 100 lashings for fornication, but if the male party in the act is a non-Muslim, the punishment is death.³¹ Similarly, a non-Muslim male is sentenced to death for being the active party in non-penetrative homosexual relations, whereas a Muslim male is punished by lashing.³²

In cases of murder, the IPC sanctions the practice of *qesas* (retaliation in kind), which allows the family of the murder victim to opt for the execution of the murderer. Not only is the practice itself widely condemned by human rights advocates, but it is also applied discriminatorily under the IPC on the basis of religion and belief. *Qesas* is an option when a Muslim or member of a recognized minority kills another Muslim or member of a recognized minority, or when a member of an unrecognized minority kills another member of an unrecognized minority. However, if a Muslim or recognized minority kills a follower of an unrecognized religion, the family of the victim has no resort to *qesas*.³³

The Charter of Citizens' Rights

On December 19 2016, President Rouhani unveiled the Charter of Citizens' Rights, a promise which he had made to voters during his 2013 election campaign. This Charter is not a law, but rather a declaration of his administration's policy. The 120-point Charter makes multiple references to minority rights. For example, Article 10 states 'it is prohibited to insult, degrade or cause hatred against ethnicities and followers of other faiths and creeds and social and political groups.' Article 96 states 'diversity in general and cultural diversity of the people of Iran shall be respected as a part of cultural heritage, within the framework of national identity' while Article 101 guarantees that 'citizens shall have the right to learn, use and teach their own local language and dialect.'

Although many of the Charter's points echo guarantees already found in the Constitution, others seem to provide rights that do not have a clear parallel in existing laws. However, since the Charter has not been presented as a bill to parliament, it is not legally enforceable. On 24 November

2017, Shahindokht Mowlawerdi, Rouhani's special assistant for citizenship rights who was charged with establishing an office to uphold the Charter, stated that there was no need for the Charter to become law because all of its articles are already found in the Constitution.³⁴

International legal framework

Iran is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights

of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Iran has recently participated in its Universal Periodic Review and has cooperated with treaty body mechanisms.

However, Iran has denied access to the country to UN Special Procedures since 2005, despite a standing invitation extended in 2002. Ten Special Procedures, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, have unanswered visit requests. However, in 2015, Iran announced that it had invited the UN Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures to visit the country and investigate the impact of internationally imposed sanctions on the country. Iran has also invited the Special Rapporteurs on the right to food and on the right to health. So far, none of them have been able to find an agreement on the conditions of a visit.

5

Violations of civil and political rights

It is well known that the Iranian government has little tolerance for dissent, and regularly arrests and imprisons human rights activists and others involved in peaceful oppositional activity. As a result, hundreds of political prisoners fill the ranks of Iran's detention facilities, with minorities forming a disproportionately high share of those detained for political reasons. Despite Rouhani's conciliatory gestures towards minorities, there have been no significant improvements with regards to the arbitrary arrest of minority activists since 2013, with some groups claiming that detentions and executions of minorities may actually have gone up some years.

Arbitrary arrest and imprisonment

In many cases, ethnic and religious minorities have been arbitrarily arrested and detained in connection with a range of peaceful activities such as advocating for linguistic freedom; organizing or taking part in protests; being affiliated with oppositional parties; campaigning against environmental degradation in their areas; or simply participating in religious or cultural activities. For minorities, the simplest forms of ethnic rights activism are often deliberately construed by the authorities as a threat to national security or falsely conflated with separatism. For example, Arabs have been targeted for expressing their ethnic identity through Arabic-language poetry and traditional clothing,³⁵ and Kurds are often detained for mere membership in Kurdish political parties.³⁶

Comprehensive data on prisoners in Iran is notoriously hard to obtain due to the government's deliberate secrecy in this regard and the suppression of independent monitoring groups in country. However, Iran Prison Atlas (IPA), a database run by the non-profit United for Iran, collects information on political prisoners disaggregated by ethnicity and religion. As of 21 January 2018, IPA's database showed that at least 657 political prisoners were detained in Iran. The available figures on ethnicity showed that at least 76 per cent of those were ethnic minorities, with Kurds forming the largest group (Figure 1). Although data disaggregated by religion was much less complete,³⁸ Sunnis made up the majority of those political prisoners for whom religious affiliation was known (Figure 2).

It should be noted that more than half of the political prisoners included in IPA's database were charged by Iranian

Profile: Ali Kab-Aomair, a detained Arab environmentalist

On 8 February 2017, intelligence agents in the city of Ahwaz arrested Ali Kab-Aomair, a 17-year-old Arab activist, without any formal charges, breaking his arm in the process. Kab-Aomair had recently participated in a demonstration calling on officials to protect the Karoun River. He was held for months without access to a lawyer.

Kab-Aomair had been active for some time in protests and social media criticism of the government's

water conservation policies, air pollution in Khuzestan and Iran's involvement in Syria. Before his arrest, he was summoned to the Intelligence Ministry and questioned about his activism. In an interview with the Center for Human Rights in Iran, his cousin said:

'Ali went there and the officials asked him why he wore traditional Arab clothing in rallies for the protection of the Karoun River and carried signs in Arabic.

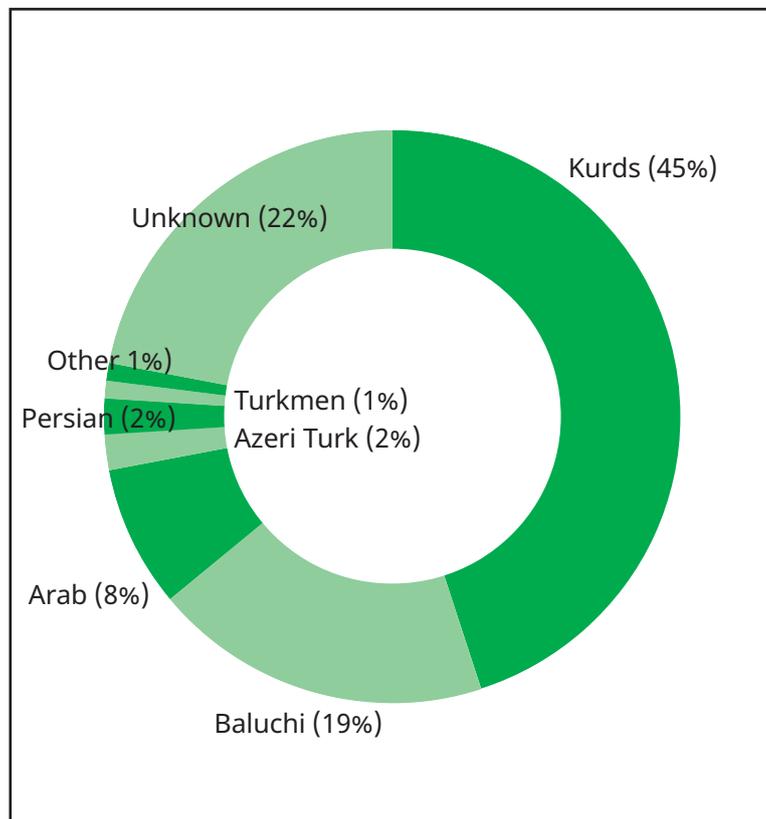
The officials wanted to scare him so that he wouldn't go to protest rallies again. As a matter of fact, Ali was very careful and had even deleted photos from his Instagram page that showed

him in traditional Arab clothing because the officials are very sensitive about it.

The agents raided Ali's home on February 8 without warning. They searched the whole house and confiscated computers, books and Ali's mobile phone. Then they wanted to take Ali with them, but the family protested and after Ali resisted, the agents resorted to violence and broke his arm in front of his family and took him away by force.

His family just wants to know where he is and what he has been charged with, but no one is answering and they are worried he might be tortured.¹³⁷

Figure 1: Political prisoners by ethnicity, January 2018



Source: Iran Prison Atlas.

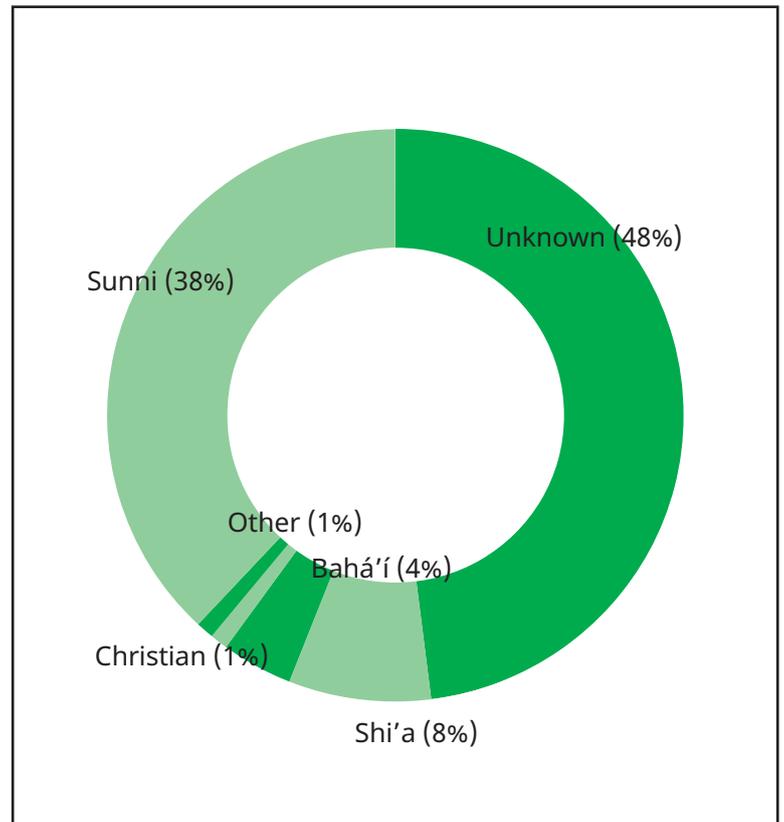
authorities with violent crimes or providing support to violent groups. Some of those convicted are believed to be actually guilty of the crimes with which they were charged, while in other cases the IPA could not confirm enough about their cases to exclude the possibility of violence.³⁹ However, these cases are included in the IPA database because they are nonetheless political detentions made arbitrary with fair trials violations.

Mass arrests of minority activists continued unabated throughout 2017. For example, on 25 June 2017, 13 people were arrested in Ahwaz, including Arab activists and poets. Those arrested had apparently recited poetry and chanted in support of political prisoners at a religious celebration the night before a planned demonstration for Arab rights.⁴⁰ In September 2017, authorities arrested at least 100 Kurds who went out into the streets of Sanandaj to celebrate the results of the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, some of whom were subsequently charged.⁴¹ Between March and September 2017, at least 10 Baluchi civil right activists were arbitrarily detained.⁴²

The Iranian authorities also arrested thousands of people following the eruption of large-scale protests on 28 December 2017. Although the protests began in Mashhad, they quickly spread to include dozens of cities across Iran, including cities in minority-populated provinces such as Khuzestan, Eastern Azerbaijan, Western Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Lorestan, Ilam and Sistan-Baluchestan. The organization Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRAI) documented the arrests of 2,455 protestors, although a member of parliament reportedly cited higher numbers (3,700).⁴⁵

After Tehran, the minority-populated provinces of Khuzestan and Eastern Azerbaijan saw the highest numbers of documented arrests according to HRAI (Figure 3). Most arrested protestors appear to have been released within days or weeks, although there is no official information on the nature of the releases or whether any protestors are still facing charges.

Figure 2: Political prisoners by religion, January 2018



Source: Iran Prison Atlas.

Profile: Siamak Mirzayi, an imprisoned Azerbaijani Turk activist

Siamak Mirzayi, an Azerbaijani Turk activist, was arrested without a warrant by the Ministry of Intelligence on 14 December 2016 in Parsabad-Moghan and transferred to Evin prison. In January 2017, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison and two years in exile on charges of 'acting against national security' and 'insulting the leader,' in connection with his participation in a gathering to mark International Mother Language Day on 21 February 2016.

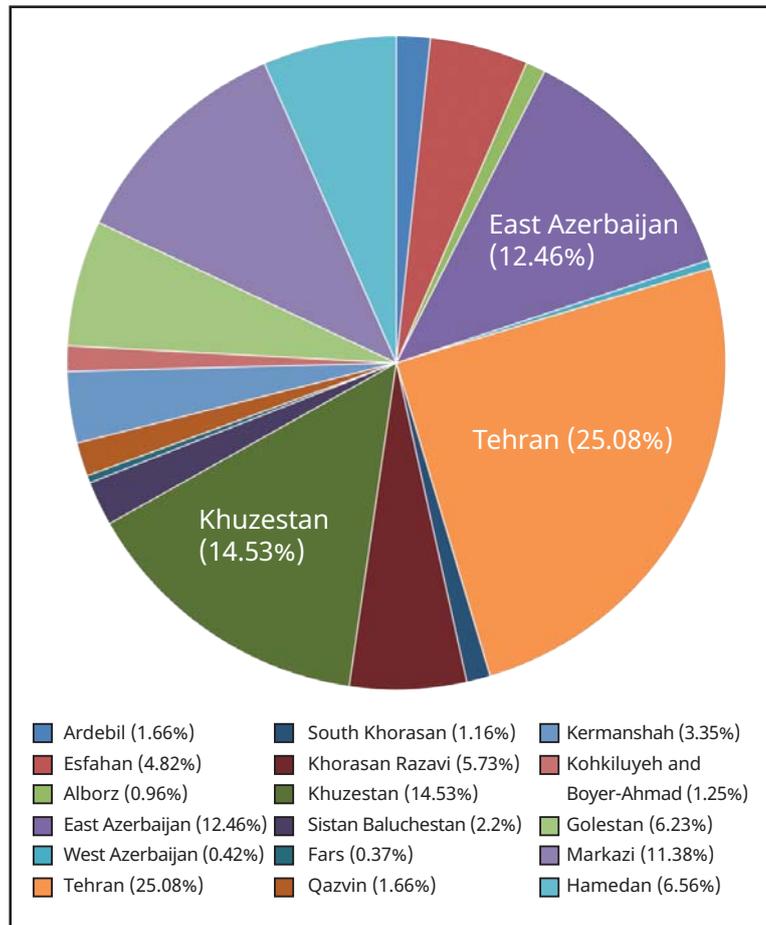
According to the Center for Human Rights in Iran, although he posted bail (set at one billion tomans or \$308,185 USD), he continued to be kept in prison illegally. The Appeals Court claimed it could not deliberate on his case because the lower court had not forwarded the required evidence and transcripts. In June 2017, Mirzayi began a hunger strike in protest, which ended in July 2017.⁴³

In a letter to the Baherstan city prosecutor published on 1 November 2017, Mirzayi wrote:

'The arrest, detention, or sentencing of a person should be based on legal charges. How did you find that I am creating a network and acting against national security? [...] Security agents accused me of creating a network,

while they could not find any name or evidence for it.

*I have fought for my father's mother tongue and the right to education and training in my mother tongue with only a pen as a weapon. From Lake Urumieh, I have fought for the region's economic development and its natural identity. And I have fought against the legal system of mono-linguism, extreme centralism, and the lack of economic development of non-central regions of Iran. I have fought against the lack of freedom of the press and parties and the lack of freedom of expression and association. [These efforts] are not in conflict with the security and integrity of the country, but are nothing but demands for the unity, reform and peace of the country.'*⁴⁴

Figure 3: Arrests in connection with December 2017 protests, by province

Source: Human Rights Activists in Iran.

Conviction and sentencing

Detained minority activists are usually not informed of their charges right away, sometimes having to wait for weeks or months.⁴⁶ Eventually, however, activists are usually presented with vaguely worded and extremely broad charges drawn from Iran's Penal Code. The most notorious of these charges include *moharebeh* ('waging war against God') and *efsad-e-fel-arz* (corruption on Earth), both of which can carry the death penalty. Amendments made to the Penal Code in 2013 expanded the scope of both offenses to leave wide room for interpretation, allowing judicial authorities to prosecute the government's political opponents for a range of civil, political and economic activities.⁴⁷ The presumption of innocence was also removed for both crimes as part of the amendment of the Penal Code.⁴⁸ Other charges often used to prosecute activists include 'gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security' (Article 610), 'membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting na-

tional security' (Article 499), 'spreading propaganda against the system' (Article 500), 'insulting the Supreme Leader' (Article 514) and 'insulting Islamic sanctities' (Article 513).⁴⁹

The use of torture to extract confessions is common in the pre-trial detention stage, and members of minorities are regularly subjected to beatings, torture and other forms of ill treatment.⁵⁰ Activists charged with national security crimes are usually tried in Revolutionary Courts, where proceedings are secretive in nature and rife with due process violations. Defendants are often denied the right to meet with a lawyer until shortly before trial, leaving insufficient time to prepare a defense.⁵¹ Those charged with *moharabeh* are regularly prevented from meeting a lawyer in private, sometimes even at the trial stage.⁵² One human rights lawyer interviewed was only allowed to present a defense of a few minutes long for a group of Sunni Kurds clients charged with *moharabeh*.⁵³ Moreover, legal proceedings are conducted entirely in Persian with no interpretation available, disadvantaging ethnic minorities who do not speak Persian as a mother tongue.⁵⁴ Trials themselves often last for only a few minutes, with judges relying on 'confessions' extracted through torture or televised prior to trial as the main evidence on which to base convictions.⁵⁵

For those sentenced to imprisonment, the poor conditions of Iran's prison system are a major concern. Physical and psychological abuse, overcrowding and denial of medical care are widespread problems. For example, the former head of Kermanshah Prison stated that the prison had the capacity for 600 individuals, but more than 4,000 individuals were incarcerated inside.⁵⁶ In 2017, the Baloch Activists Campaign documented 168 instances of prisoner rights violations, including 28 cases of physical or psychological torture, 33 cases of deprivation of adequate medical treatment, 44 cases of suicide in prison, 27 cases of long-term detention without any sentence, and a number of other violations.⁵⁷ In Khuzestan, prisoners have reported that plastic cables are routinely used to beat inmates, who are then not given access to treatment for their wounds.⁵⁸ Finally, narcotics are reportedly widely available, with prison guards playing an active and systematic role in smuggling narcotics into prisons.⁵⁹

Profile: Emadeddin Mowla-Zehi, an imprisoned Baluchi rights activist

In January 2018, Emadeddin Mowla-Zehi, a Baluchi rights activist, was sentenced to 10 years in prison by a Zahedan court on charges of 'acting against national security.' Mowla-Zehi was arrested in Saraban, Sistan-Baluchestan province, on 21 November 2016 when he was out shopping for carpet cleaning services in preparation for gatherings to mourn his father's recent death.

In an interview with the Centre for the Study of Human Rights (CSHR), a source close to Mowla-Zehi said:

'Intelligence officers shot at his car and killed his friend instead of him. They arrested [Mowla-Zehi] and he was sent to Zahedan prison. We did not hear from him for 25 days.'

'He was initially sentenced to 15 years in prison in charge of "being a member of ISIS." They had forced a confession through psychological torture. This sentence, however, was dismissed by the appeals court.'

According to the source, after Mowla-Zehi was exonerated by the appeals court, authorities asked for 300 million Toman (\$90,000) in bail, but still refused to release him. Authorities then changed the judge for his case and presented him with new charges of membership in Jeysho-al-Adl, a semi-armed Sunni group in

Sistan-Baluchestan which the Iranian government considers a terrorist organization.

'They did not let us appoint a lawyer for him, and we cannot trust the lawyers they provide for us.'

Mowla-Zehi was previously detained on 7 January 2010, when the intelligence services came to his home and took him to Zahedan prison. According to the source, Mowla-Zehi experienced mental and physical torture during the first 12 months he was in prison. He spent a total of four years in prison with no charges before being sentenced to five years in prison for 'cooperation with a terrorist group.' He was released on bail on 19 March 2014, before being arrested again in 2016.

Executions

Use of the death penalty

Iran has one of the highest rates of executions in the world. The Penal Code allows the use of the death penalty for more than 80 different offenses, many of which do not meet the threshold for 'most serious' crimes under international law, such as adultery, homosexual relations, drug possession and *moharebeh*.⁶⁰ Furthermore, many of the offenses carrying the death penalty are among the charges most commonly used to target and convict minorities. Consequently, minorities form a disproportionate share of those executed every year.

Drug-related offenses and *moharebeh* in particular are sentences that have been overwhelmingly used against minorities. In the case of drug-related crimes, the overrepresentation of Baluchis and other minorities is linked to the impoverishment and marginalization of their areas, as in the case of Sistan-Baluchestan province, where the drug trade has flourished across the province's porous borders with Afghanistan. One recent positive de-

velopment was an order by the head of the Iranian judiciary in January 2018 suspending death sentences for drug-related crimes until sentence reviews could be completed, following amendments to the drug trafficking law that narrowed the scope of offenses carrying the death penalty.⁶¹ However, the death sentence for *moharebeh* remains in full force and is also more likely to be applied to minorities, especially Arabs, Baluchis and Kurds.⁶²

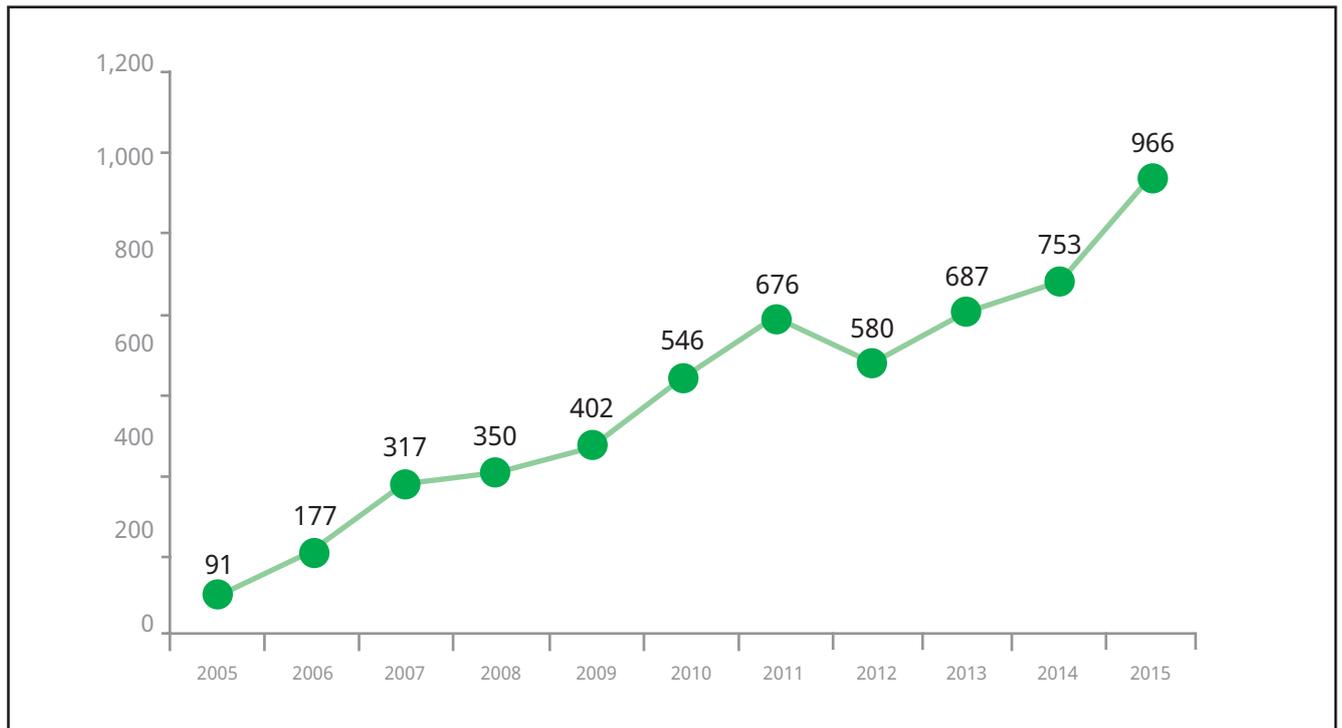
Despite the high rates of executions carried out on a yearly basis, there is no agreement on exact numbers. Official government figures do not include all executions, since many are carried out secretly. According to the organization Iran Human Rights, out of 124 people executed in the provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan in 2017, only four of these executions were announced by official sources.⁶³ Several human rights organizations compile annual death penalty figures, based on government figures and independently verified local reports. Such counts vary slightly due to the

different information gathering methodologies applied by various monitoring groups.

According to data published by the UN Special Rapporteurs on Iran, which is based on figures compiled by human rights monitoring groups, an-

nual execution numbers increased every year except one between 2005 and 2015 (Figure 4).⁶⁴ Execution numbers for the first three years of Rouhani's administration were significantly higher than any of the preceding eight years.

Figure 4: Executions by year, 2005-2015



Source: UN Special Rapporteur on Iran.

According to the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, the Iranian government executed at least 530 people in 2016, and 507 people in 2017.⁶⁵ It is unclear whether the relative drop in executions in 2016 and 2017 was a policy decision in response to international pressure, or a case of underreporting. Executions for drug-related charges made up 44 per cent of total executions reported in 2017. Provinces in which minorities form the majority of the population accounted for three of the top five provinces in terms of executions. West Azerbaijan and Sistan-Baluchestan were among the top three provinces with the highest number of executions for drug-related charges (Figure 5).

According to a 2016 breakdown provided by Iran Human Rights, after drug-related charges, the most common charges for which executions took place were murder, rape, *moharebeh*, and *efsad-e-fel-arz* (Figure 6).

As detailed previously, trials in Iran are often grossly unfair and do not respect the most minimal due process standards, even when the death penalty is under consideration. The accused are not given adequate opportunity to defend themselves, and forced confessions are regularly used as evidence upon which to base convictions. Death sentences themselves are also carried out in an arbitrary and degrading manner. Inmates on death row are sometimes not told ahead of time of the date of their execution, and sentences are often carried out without notifying the family. For example, on 2 August 2016, Iranian authorities carried out a mass execution of 25 Sunni Muslim men convicted of *moharebeh* – 22 of whom were Iranian Kurds – in Karaj with no prior notice to their families or lawyers.⁶⁶ According to multiple rights groups, these men were subjected to a pattern of severe human rights abuses and fair trial violations.⁶⁷ All those exe-

Figure 5: Executions in 2017 by province and charge

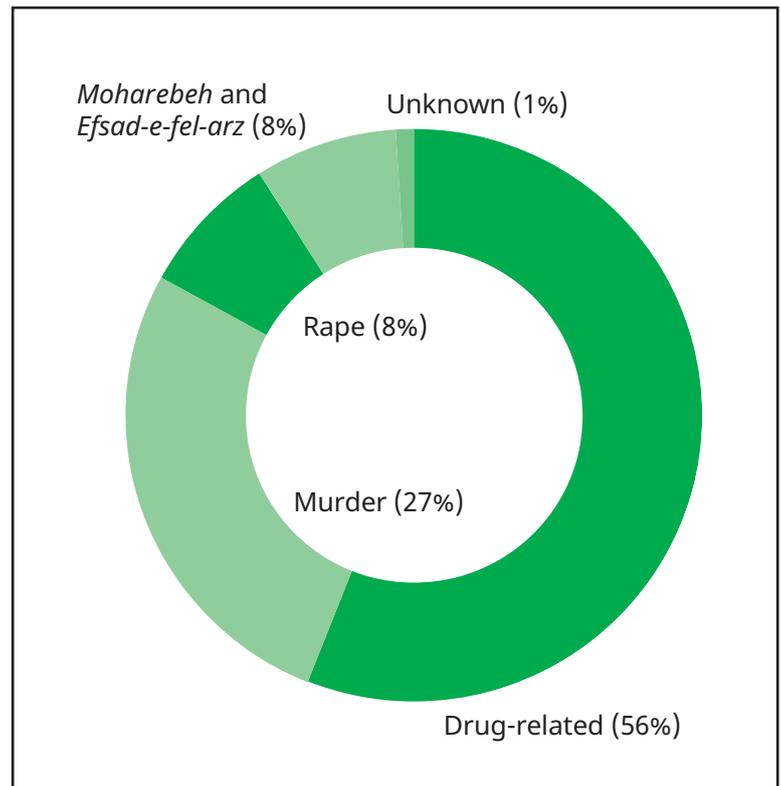
Province	Drug charges	All other charges	Total
Alborz	29	87	116
Ardebil	0	11	11
Bushehr	0	1	1
Charmahal-Bakhtiari	0	1	1
East Azerbaijan	9	25	34
Esfahan	14	7	21
Fars	3	8	11
Gilan	14	5	19
Golestan	2	2	4
Hamedan	4	2	6
Hormozgan	7	5	12
Ilam	2	5	7
Kerman	1	16	17
Kermanshah	6	15	21
Khorasan Razavi	11	19	30
Khuzestan	0	1	1
Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad	0	2	2
Kurdistan	0	2	2
Lorestan	10	7	17
Markazi	3	1	4
Mazandaran	1	14	15
North Khorasan	0	2	2
Qazvin	8	4	12
Qom	11	3	14
Semnan	8	0	8
Sistan-Baluchestan	20	12	32
South Khorasan	17	4	21
West Azerbaijan	33	24	57
Yazd	0	2	2
Zanjan	5	3	8

Source: Abdorrahman Boroumand Center.

cuted were convicted on the basis of confessions allegedly obtained under torture and ill treatment.⁶⁸ Many were held for months, some for more than two years, in solitary confinement, and convicted in brief, unfair trials in which they were denied the right to a lawyer, the right to put forth a proper defense and other judicial safeguards.⁶⁹

Indiscriminate killings

In addition to forming a disproportionate share of those sentenced to death through the judicial system, minorities are also the victims of indiscriminate killings by Iranian security forces. This is an issue particularly in the border provinces, where many members of minorities work in smuggling due to the lack of viable employment alternatives. For example, the Baloch Activists Campaign estimates that at least 100 people are killed every year in anti-smuggling operations in Sistan-Baluchestan province, some of whom are innocent bystanders.⁷⁰ Similar tactics are used against couriers working in the Kurdish-majority border areas.

Figure 6: Executions in 2016 by charge

Source: Iran Human Rights.

Case study: Indiscriminate killings of Kurdish *kulbaran*

The *kulbaran* are border couriers that carry goods into Iran on their backs or the backs of mules. This practice has been part of the informal economy of impoverished parts of the Kurdish provinces of Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Ilam and West Azerbaijan for decades, although some *kulbaran* operate with a license. Faced with high unemployment rates and threats to traditional farming activities as a result of landmine contamination, many Kurds turned

to smuggling commodities such as tea, tobacco and fuel across the border.⁷¹ However, efforts by Iranian officials to tighten border security have resulted in hundreds of deaths or injuries to *kulbaran* over the years, as border patrols have taken a 'shoot first, ask questions later' approach to enforcement. Rarely have these *kulbaran* been found to have been carrying illicit goods.

According to a Kurdish human rights monitoring group, in 2016 border security forces killed 51 *kulbaran* and injured 71 others, with two victims being under the age of 18.⁷² In addition, authorities made arrests of *kulbaran*, confiscated their goods, and

shot dead hundreds of horses.⁷³ In mid-2016, Iranian authorities reportedly announced they would issue more licenses to *kulbaran*, which would allow them to carry out their activities legally.⁷⁴ However, killings and injuries of *kulbaran* increased in 2017. In the first 10 months of 2017, 57 *kulbaran* were killed and 120 injured.⁷⁵

In one reported incident in October 2017, border police shot one *kulbar* and stripped dozens more of their clothes, leaving them in the mountains in Sardasht.⁷⁶ The Iranian security forces' targeting of *kulbaran* is in violation of both domestic and international laws, which prohibit the use of lethal force except as a last resort.

Landmines

Another of the most acute dangers posed to Iran's ethnic minority groups is the prevalence of landmines in areas they live in. The five western border provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Ilam, which have Kurdish majority populations, and Khuzestan, which has an Arab majority population, have continued to see deaths and serious injuries from landmine explosions nearly 30 years after the end of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. An estimated 20 million landmines were placed in Iran during the war and in the course of internal armed conflicts between the Islamic Republic and Kurdish non-state combatants in the 1980s. According to a 2014 report published by Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor, over 10,000 Iranians, including a notable number of children, have been victims of landmines since 1988.⁷⁷ Iran has not joined the Ottawa Convention on the banning of landmines, despite pledging to consider doing so during its second Universal Periodic Review.

The group Iran Without Landmines documented 79 landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW)-related casualties in 2017, including nine children.⁷⁸ Of these incidents, 17 resulted in deaths

and 62 in serious injuries, such as loss of limbs. Ilam province accounted for the highest number of civilian deaths in 2017. The group also documented 56 casualties in 2016, of which 18 were deaths and 38 serious injuries. The majority of victims are ethnic minorities, particularly Kurds.

For example, on December 2017, a landmine explosion in Sush injured a 15-year-old Kurdish boy who had been made homeless and internally displaced after a major earthquake in Kermanshah.⁷⁹ On 10 November 2017, two soldiers, 21-year-old Daniel Biranvand and 24-year-old Rasoul Asadi, were injured by a landmine in the Ilam province.⁸⁰ On 14 November 2017, a border guard, Abbas Kazemi, was killed in a landmine explosion in Bane, in the Kurdistan province.⁸¹ On 22 November 2017, Edris Mahmoodi, a 27-year-old Kurd, lost his leg due to a landmine in Kanizard in Sardasht.⁸²

Rights groups point out that the government's approach to demining has been insufficient and mismanaged.⁸³ Indeed, officials staged a ceremony in February 2013 to celebrate the end of de-mining operations in Kermanshah, and in January 2014 the Ministry of Defense announced the government had finished clearing mines in most parts of

Khuzestan province.⁸⁴ Yet casualties have continued in both regions. On 20 October 2013, Iranian parliamentarian Omid Karimian said that de-mining operations failed because the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces sub-contracted the task to ‘companies that either lack competence or due to other reasons are not performing their job properly.’⁸⁵ Moreover, there has been consistent refusal by authorities to seek the assistance of international organizations specializing in de-mining. Some officials and experts have concluded that, at the rate thus far, mine-clearing operations will take approximately 50 more years.⁸⁶

Government support and rehabilitation of land-mines victims has also been insufficient. A 1994 law, amended in 2010, mandates payment of salaries or benefits to war refugees or people who returned to their homes in war-torn areas of the country and had become disabled as a result of coming into contact with explosive materials. However, victims who were not recognized by a special commission as disabled ‘veterans’ are only entitled, upon the commission’s approval, to negligible allowances afforded by the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF) or the State Welfare Organization (SWO).⁸⁷ The law does not provide for legal procedures for appeal of the commission’s decisions. In other words, the commission decides cases unilaterally. Another problem for victims is the prolonged procedure for investigating cases. This has left civilian victims with no financial assistance to cover medical or other costs before a decision is made on their status. Even in the case of a favorable decision, the assistance provided is not retroactive. Costs incurred between the moment an accident takes place and the date of the decision are not reimbursed.

Minority languages

Language rights have long been an issue of discontent for many of Iran’s ethnic minorities. Despite the constitutional provision permitting the use of minority languages in media and literature, in practice authorities have harshly restricted the use of languages other than Persian in all aspects of public life. Moreover, the right to mother tongue education for minority children has never been legally recognized nor guaranteed in practice. Although some positive changes with regards to language education have been introduced under

Rouhani’s administration, their impact remains unclear and uneven.

The suppression of minority languages dates back to the first Pahlavi regime, when use of the Persian language was imposed across Iranian society. Scores of geographical place names were changed from minority languages into Persian.⁸⁸ One Azerbaijani Turk journal documented 500 examples of geographic place names changed from Turkish to Persian between 1937-2006.⁸⁹ This appears to show that the changing of geographic names continued after the Revolution, although it is unclear whether these examples include the renaming of streets after martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war, which also affects Persian geographic names. However, ethnic minorities continue to be prohibited by civil registry officials from giving their children names in their own languages.

The Iranian authorities have also repressed minority language publications and cultural associations for many years. For example, a report by an Azerbaijani Turk rights organization in 2015 stated that it was difficult to obtain a license for books written in the Azerbaijani Turkish language and that private publications and institutions devoted to the language faced pressure by security organizations.⁹⁰ In June 2017, intelligence officials in Mashhad confiscated a book about the Kurmanji Kurdish because it was written using the Latin alphabet.⁹¹ However, according to the Iranian government, ‘members of the ethnic and linguistic groups other than [Persian] are free to not only speak their own languages but also to publish in and teach such languages in their own schools’: it claims that in 2016 there were 15 periodicals published in Arabic, three in Azerbaijani Turkish, one in Kurdish, five in Armenian, one in Assyrian, and four in Zoroastrian languages in Iran.⁹²

In recent years, minorities advocating for greater linguistic and cultural freedoms have been arrested, detained and even executed. For example, Hadi Rashidi and Hashem Shabani, founders of an Arabic-language and cultural institute called Al-Hiwar, were executed in January 2014 on charges of *moharebeh*.⁹³ Several others associated with the institute were sentenced to imprisonment. Alireza Farshi, an Azerbaijani Turk activist who founded an online campaign in support of International Mother Language Day, was sentenced to 15 years

in prison in February 2017 on national security-related charges.⁹⁴

During his 2013 election campaign, Rouhani pledged to introduce Kurdish, Azerbaijani Turkish, Arabic and other minority language education in schools and universities ‘in full implementation of Article 15 of the Constitution.’⁹⁵ After the election, Rouhani’s Special Assistant for Ethnic and Religious Minorities and the Minister of Education facilitated debates and discussion between government bodies on linguistic rights.⁹⁶ In mid-2015, the government announced that a four-year Kurdish language and literature programme would be introduced at the University of Kurdistan in Sanandaj.⁹⁷ A similar programme at Tabriz University for the Azerbaijani Turkish language was announced for 2016.⁹⁸ Previously, Azerbaijani Turkish was only offered as an optional course and not as a degree. Promises were made to introduce Baluchi language courses at the state university in Sistan-Baluchestan in 2015, although this does not yet appear to have materialized.

Much more is needed to facilitate children’s access to minority language education at the primary and secondary education levels. Lack of access to mother tongue education, particularly at the early primary level, has been shown to be a factor in the relatively low academic performance and high dropout rates of ethnic minority students compared to Persian students.⁹⁹ There are strict limits on the usage of Kurdish and other minority languages in Iranian schools. For example, in 2012 the Ministry of Education reportedly circulated a memo in Kurdish-majority areas forbidding the use of Kurdish by teachers and administrators in public spaces and schools.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, a Azerbaijani Turk rights activist told CSHR that the Education Ministry has reminded Turkish teachers for years through private communications that the use of the Turkish language is forbidden inside schools.

As of 2015, however, some private schools in Saqez City, Kurdistan, have started providing Kurdish language and literature classes as an elective, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency.¹⁰¹ In June 2016, the Rouhani administration announced that schools in some provinces would teach Kurdish and Turkish language and literature. However, little is known about the prevalence or content of these classes.

Religious freedom

As detailed earlier, Iran’s Constitution names the Twelver Ja’fari School of Shi’a Islam as the state religion. Although the Constitution affords various degrees of recognition to other branches of Islam and other religions, in practice the authorities’ record towards religious minorities is uneven. Treatment has ranged from periodic harassment and restrictions on Sunni Muslims and adherents of the three recognized minority religions, to outright persecution of members of non-recognized religions and individuals accused of proselytization.

Sunni Muslims, for example, have reported restrictions on their ability to build mosques in Shi’a majority areas, including Tehran.¹⁰² Authorities also periodically close Sunni mosques or prevent Sunnis from gathering for congregational prayers. For example, in July 2016, 18 members of parliament complained in a letter to the Ministry of Interior that a Sunni prayer hall had been closed in Eslamshahr and that Sunnis had been prevented from gathering for Eid-al-Fitr prayers in a number of other mosques and prayer rooms in Tehran.¹⁰³ In June 2017, authorities closed a Sunni mosque in the Yaft-Abad neighbourhood of Tehran.¹⁰⁴ In August 2017, security forces beat and detained 13 Arabs for performing a Sunni congregational prayer in public.¹⁰⁵ The following month, in September 2017, more than 35 Arabs were detained during Eid-al-Adha to prevent them from organizing marches and celebrations.¹⁰⁶

The authorities have also reportedly attempted to crack down on Shi’a Muslims who have converted to the Sunni branch of Islam, especially in Khuzestan. According to an advocacy group chronicling violations against Sunnis, in February 2014 more than 20 Sunni converts were arrested at a Qur’an and Arabic language study group in Ahwaz city, while in July 2014 10 Sunni converts were arrested for either preaching Sunni teachings or holding congregational evening prayers during Ramadan.¹⁰⁷ In November 2014, a further 16 converts were arrested, again during a Qur’an class in Ahwaz.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, Sunni activists have complained that the government sends large numbers of Shi’a missionaries during the month of Ramadan to attempt to convert Sunnis, especially in Baluchi areas.¹⁰⁹

Interview with Shahin Helali, an Azerbaijani Turk human rights defender

Judging by previous attempts to introduce minority language courses at the university level, Azerbaijani Turk human rights defender Shahin Helali is skeptical that the new majors introduced under the Rouhani administration will be properly resourced and continued. Helali relayed his personal experience taking a Turkish language course back in 2000-2001 during Khatami's first presidential term, when several universities offered it as an elective.

'A group of us who were running a Turkish student newspaper wrote a letter to the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader at the university and the President of the

university, asking that the Ministry of Higher Education establish Turkish language courses.'

The course was offered at Tehran, Ardabil, Tabriz, and Ahar universities. Helali was a student at Ardabil University at the time. He registered for the course, but quickly found that it fell short of expectations.

'When we arrived to the first class, it was obvious the professor was not an expert in the Turkish language. He knew little about the grammar and other technical aspects of the language. He also did not seem to be an experienced teacher.'

According to Helali, the professor stopped showing up after three or four sessions.

'We students were forced to continue by ourselves. We asked university of-

icials on several occasions whether we would get a new professor, or whether our professor would return, but they kept telling us they were looking into it. We never got an answer or a new professor. We continued teaching each other all semester, but the university never scheduled a final exam. As a result, the course did not count as a credit. They ended the elective after one term.'

Helali explained that the response of the university was odd, considering the high degree of interest in the course.

'So many students took the class – over one hundred. Eventually people from outside the university joined the class too. The demand was high in all universities that offered the Turkish classes. I think officials stopped it because they thought it was a threat to national security.'

Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians benefit from constitutional recognition as religious minorities. For the most part, they are able to peacefully practice their faith, albeit not without some restrictions. According to the Iranian government, there are 284 Christian churches in Iran and 76 synagogues.¹¹⁰ Government employees and conscripts from the three religious minorities are also permitted to take leave on the recognized religious feasts and holidays pertaining to their faith.¹¹¹ Recognized religious minorities are also permitted to run their own schools, and there are reportedly five Jewish, 38 Zoroastrian and 50 Christian schools in Iran.¹¹² However, the Ministry of Education must approve the curriculum and textbooks used in minority schools.

The government's official tolerance of religious minorities does not extend to those engaged in missionary activities. There have been periodic incidents of official harassment of recognized reli-

Figure 7: Christian churches in Iran

Denomination	Number
Armenian Churches	160
Assyrian Churches of the East	61
Assyrian Bible Churches	12
Assyrian Presbyterian Churches	11
Armenian Evangelical Churches	8
Chaldean Assyrian Catholic Churches	7
Adventist Churches	6
Churches of the Assemblies of God	6
Latin Catholic Churches	5
Armenian Catholic Churches	5
Persian-speaking Evangelical Churches	2
Episcopal Churches	1
Total	284

Source: Iranian High Council for Human Rights, 2016.

religious minorities during prayers and social gatherings, especially Christians. Many of these incidents involve gatherings in private homes or 'house churches,' which are informal congregations comprised mostly of converts who are unable to attend formally recognized churches without risk to themselves and the formal church. In July 2017, a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced four members of a house church network to 10 years in prison each, for participating in 'illegal gatherings' and other national security crimes stemming from their promotion of Christianity.¹¹³

Converts, for the most part, are not officially considered Christian and are treated harshly by the authorities.¹¹⁴ Although conversion is not a codified crime in Iran, judicial authorities have used national security laws to impose harsh sentences on converts, including imprisonment and floggings. In January 2017, a Tehran appeals court confirmed a five-year prison sentence for Ebrahim Firoozi, a Christian convert allegedly involved in missionary activities.¹¹⁵ Between May and August 2016, Iranian authorities reportedly arrested 79 Christian converts across Iran.¹¹⁶ The government has also shut down formally recognized churches offering services in Persian and prevented Iranians who are not Christians from entering churches.¹¹⁷

There have also been sporadic violent attacks on places of worship for recognized religious minorities. On 24 and 25 December 2017, unidentified attackers destroyed and desecrated religious items at two synagogues in Shiraz.¹¹⁸

Non-recognized religious minorities are also vulnerable to state persecution. This is most pronounced in the case of the Bahá'í community, which the Iranian government considers to be a heretical sect and oppositional group undeserving of legal protection.¹¹⁹ Between 1978 and 2005, a total of 219 Bahá'í were killed by Revolutionary Courts because of their faith.¹²⁰ The seven members of the national-level leadership of the Iranian Bahá'í community were sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment in 2010. Their sentences were reduced to 10 years in 2015 in line with previous changes to the Penal Code, resulting in four of them being released in 2017 and 2018.¹²¹ Bahá'í are also prevented from attending religious and social gatherings¹²² and their homes are regularly raided, with their religious books and items confiscated.¹²³ In

July and October 2016, several Bahá'í cemeteries were destroyed or vandalized, and police reportedly took no action.¹²⁴ The government has also made concerted and wide-ranging efforts to deny Bahá'í from accessing education and employment merely for being Bahá'í (this is discussed further later in the report).

Gonabadi dervishes, who are Shi'a Muslims who follow Sufi teachings, have reported attacks on their cemeteries and places of worship as well as threats from the security and intelligence services. Moreover, many members of the community have been arrested and sentenced on national security charges over the years. For example, in November 2016 five Gonabadi dervishes arrested in Dezful were charged with disturbing public order and insulting the sacred, among other charges.

On 19 February 2018, members of the Gonabadi order held demonstrations in Tehran following news that an arrest warrant had been issued for their spiritual leader, Dr. Nurali Tabandeh, and the detention of another member of the community who had come to protect him. Plainclothes security agents reportedly descended on the crowd gathered in Dr. Tabandeh's neighbourhood, meeting the demonstrators with direct fire, pellets, tear gas and batons.¹²⁵ The demonstrators responded by using sticks and throwing rocks, and in the ensuing clashes, at least two members of the community were killed,¹²⁶ 200 hospitalized, and between 320 and 500 detained.¹²⁷ Iranian media reports stated that Gonabadi dervishes killed five security agents, including three policemen killed when a bus rammed into them - claims the community denies.¹²⁸

Yarsan and Sabeen-Mandaeans also do not benefit from any official protection and are sometimes targeted. Members of both communities have complained that the authorities deny them permits to build houses of worship. In March 2016, a large group of attackers armed with stones and batons and claiming to be followers of the Supreme Leader attacked a house of worship belonging to the Yarsan community, damaging windows and fixtures. However, other members of the Yarsan community reported being able to perform their rites peacefully in their main holy places, although the government monitored them closely.¹²⁹

Hate speech

Many of Iran's minorities decry the fact that their social, economic and political exclusion is often exacerbated by recurring rhetoric that denigrates minority religions or perpetuates inaccurate and offensive stereotypes about non-Persian ethnic groups. This type of content circulates not only in traditional and social media outlets, but can also be found in educational curricula and sometimes in statements from high-level government figures and religious authorities. When left unchecked, such statements serve to fuel discrimination, exclusion and, in the worst cases, violence against minorities.

Members of Iran's clerical ruling establishment, with its strongly Shi'a identity, often display contempt for minority religions. Adherents of non-recognized religions, who enjoy no legal protection, are particularly vulnerable to attack. For example, leading Shi'a scholars and grand ayatollahs have released decrees against the adherents of the Yarsan faith and forbid Shi'a to marry them.

Some of the worst vitriol, however, is reserved for Iran's Bahá'í community, which is the subject of denigration and condemnation up to the highest levels of government. The official position of the Iranian regime is that the Bahá'í faith is a 'man-made religion' and a political movement disguising itself as a spiritual community. In May and June 2016, a wave of hateful statements against the Bahá'í community made by 169 religious, judicial and political leaders attracted condemnation from both the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the Special Rapporteur on Iran.¹³⁰ Since the most holy Bahá'í site is in Israel, Bahá'í are constantly portrayed as Zionists or fifth columnists for Israel in the Iranian media.¹³¹ Bahá'í organizations have documented over 30,000 anti-Bahá'í media items since the start of the Rouhani administration, some of which accuse the community of sexual perversity.¹³² Bahá'í advocates also maintain that official school textbooks openly vilify the Bahá'í faith and teach distorted information about the community's history and beliefs.¹³³

Ethnic minorities have also borne their share of racist rhetoric. In November 2015, protests erupted in many cities in Azerbaijan, as well as Tehran, against the TV programme 'Fitileh', which

featured a comedy sketch in which an Azerbaijani Turk father and son mistook a hotel toilet brush as a toothbrush.¹³⁴ July and August 2016 saw renewed protests after the publication of an article in the Tarheh No newspaper which Azerbaijani Turks considered offensive.¹³⁵

In the case of Arabs, racist stereotypes are fuelled by geopolitical factors, especially Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia and its tumultuous relationship with other Arab countries in the region. April 2015 witnessed an outpouring of racist abuse against Arabs after rumours circulated that two Iranian pilgrims had been sexually assaulted by airport security in Saudi Arabia.¹³⁶ In 2015, Iranian state media aired racist comments from a famous comedic actor, in which he equated the value of Arabs to going to the bathroom and mocked the appearance of Arabs.¹³⁷

Political representation

As a means of ensuring representation for religious minorities, Iran's Constitution reserves five parliamentary seats for adherents of recognized religions. This includes one seat for Zoroastrians, one for Jews, one for Chaldo-Assyrian Christians and two for Armenian Christians. The government cites this as a positive example of the rights it grants to minorities, claiming that it results in a higher per capita representation of religious minorities in the parliament as compared to Muslims.¹³⁸ However, these seats are both a floor and ceiling, as members of recognized religious minorities are not allowed to run for other seats in parliament. Additionally, some members of parliament representing minorities have been known to take overtly pro-government stances.¹³⁹ Moreover, when this limited measure is assessed alongside the wider representation of minorities in political life more generally, a much less favorable picture emerges.

Minorities are underrepresented in high-level political positions in the Islamic Republic. In some cases, the exclusion of minorities is legally enshrined. According to the Constitution, candidates for president must be adherents of the official religion of the country, which excludes Sunnis and religious minorities from holding the post. Likewise, adherents of religions other than Shi'a Islam

cannot serve as Supreme Leader or become members of the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council or the Expediency Council.¹⁴⁰ While this has not prevented some ethnic minorities from reaching high-level positions (notable examples being Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who are both Azerbaijani Turks), it clearly excludes Sunnis and other religious minorities. Many judicial positions are also out of bounds for non-Shi'a Iranians, as well as women.¹⁴¹

However, even when there are no legal barriers to the appointment of minorities, exclusion persists. There has not been a Sunni minister, deputy minister or governor general since the Islamic Revolution.¹⁴² Despite high expectations from Sunnis in the aftermath of Rouhani's re-election in May 2017 that he would change this pattern, Rouhani failed to include a single Sunni in his new cabinet.¹⁴³ Rouhani also did not appoint any members of ethnic minorities to the posts of province governors. Moreover, in November 2017, two of Rouhani's campaign managers who had been campaigning for greater inclusion of Sunnis in government reportedly received warnings from the Intelligence Ministry to stop their advocacy. The two had been part of a committee formed to advocate for participation of Sunnis, which the Intelligence Ministry also demanded to be dissolved.¹⁴⁴

Rouhani did, however, create the new post of Special Assistant to the President for Ethnic and Religious Minorities' Affairs. However, Ali Younesi, the former Minister of Intelligence who was appointed to the post, is not a member himself of either an ethnic or religious minority. At the county level, however, the Rouhani administration appointed some executives drawn from the ethnic

and religious minorities found in those counties. Indeed, for the first time in the Islamic Republic, the Rouhani administration appointed two Sunni women (one Turkman and one Baluchi) as county executives during his first term.

Despite these positive examples, underrepresentation of minorities remains the dominant trend at the provincial and local government levels. In September 2017, protests erupted in Ahwaz after the results of municipal elections showed that only three out of 13 seats on the municipal council had been won by Arab candidates, which many suspected was the result of fraud.¹⁴⁵ The Baluchi, Kurdish and Turkmen minorities are also underrepresented in high- and medium-ranking political posts.¹⁴⁶

There has also been recent controversy surrounding the eligibility of religious minorities to serve on city and village councils. Article 26 of the Law on the Formation, Duties and Election of National Islamic Councils allows candidates from any of the constitutionally recognized religions to run for membership in city and village council. However, the head of the Guardian Council declared ahead of local council elections in May 2017 that religious minorities could not run for election in Muslim-majority constituencies.¹⁴⁷ A Zoroastrian candidate who was re-elected to Yazd city council, Sepanta Niknam, received a court order suspending his membership after a complaint from an unsuccessful Muslim candidate.¹⁴⁸ The speaker of parliament called the suspension illegal and in November parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of an amended bill upholding the right of religious minorities to run for city and village council membership.¹⁴⁹ In December, however, the Guardian Council rejected the bill.¹⁵⁰

6

Violations of economic, social and cultural rights

Over recent years, the Iranian government has devoted considerable attention to tackling poverty, with Rouhani declaring poverty the greatest evil in Iranian society in a 2014 speech. Despite significant progress, however, the results of poverty reduction have not been evenly distributed. As a general rule, areas inhabited by minorities are disproportionately underdeveloped when compared to Persian-majority provinces. This is the result of a clear and long-term pattern of neglect by the central government.

Standard of living

Sistan-Baluchestan, where the Baluchi ethnic group forms the majority of the population, is Iran's poorest province,¹⁵¹ with the majority of the population living below the poverty line – 64 per cent and 77 per cent in urban and rural areas respectively (Figure 8). The province performs poorly on many key development indicators: as well as having the highest illiteracy and infant mortality rates in the country, an estimated two thirds of the province lack access to clean drinking water.¹⁵² Despite the fact that the province is rich in gas, oil, gold, and marine resources,¹⁵³ the government's investments in economic development have not taken into account or benefited local Baluchis.¹⁵⁴ Some Baluchis have few viable livelihood alternatives other than becoming involved in the drugs trade, which thrives in the province due to its porous borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Figure 8: Percentage of population under poverty line, selected provinces, 2014

Province	Urban	Rural
Country-wide	33.4%	40.1%
Azerbaijan East	36.72%	25.06%
Azerbaijan West	38.65%	27.85%
Bushehr	45.62%	38.49%
Fars	32.55%	42.9%
Kermanshah	32.15%	35.36%
Khuzestan	32.22%	26.07%
Kurdistan	52.12%	48.97%
Lorestan	49.5%	56.08%
Sistan-Baluchestan	63.95%	76.53%
Tehran	17.43%	26.31%

Source: Center for Social Welfare Studies, 2015.

Research by the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization found that in Khuzestan, the source of most of Iran's oil wealth, very large numbers of Arabs live in informal housing settlements, often as a result of displacement, lacking functioning sewage systems, electricity, clinics, schools and other basic services.¹⁵⁵ Inhabitants of large cities are affected by recurrent power cuts and irregular access to gas.¹⁵⁶ Like Sistan-Baluchestan, the province suffers from low literacy rates and high rates of infant mortality and child malnutrition.¹⁵⁷

The effects of poverty and marginalization have manifested themselves in high rates of drug use in the province. Government figures show that more than 80,000 people in Khuzestan suffer from drug addiction as of 2013, although actual numbers could be higher.¹⁵⁸ There are reportedly large numbers of women suffering from drug addiction, but this is not reflected in official figures.

Khuzestan is also believed to have one of the highest rates of suicide due to the poor social and economic conditions affecting the local population.¹⁵⁹ In August 2017, an Ahwazi Arab man named Jassim Moramazi committed suicide by self-immolation because of the shame and frustration he felt due to his inability to provide for his wife and child. This was only one of several suicide cases involving Ahwazi Arab male breadwinners reported that month.¹⁶⁰ In Izeh, Khuzestan province, the suicide rate has also been increasing in recent years, with economic problems and the high unemployment rate believed to be among the main reasons.¹⁶¹

The province of Ilam also has one of Iran's highest suicide rates, which is connected to the overall un-

derdevelopment of Kurdish-majority provinces.¹⁶² Following a visit to Iran in 2005, the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing stated that living conditions in Kurdish-majority areas were poor, with neighbourhoods characterized by open-air sewage and uncollected garbage.¹⁶³ Poor living conditions in Kurdish regions are connected to a history of forced resettlement and land confiscation,¹⁶⁴ as well as inadequate reconstruction efforts following the end of the Iran-Iraq war.¹⁶⁵

Healthcare

The overall underdevelopment of many provinces in which ethnic minorities live, as discussed in the previous section, means that many are unable to access adequate healthcare services. For example, in Sistan-Baluchestan, the under-provision of health clinics in remote and rural areas has contributed to the province's below-average life expectancies.¹⁶⁶ The province also has one of the highest under-five mortality rates in the country, surpassed only by Kurdistan (Figure 9).

Making matters worse, these same provinces are marked by acute healthcare challenges, chief among which is air pollution linked to industrialization. In 2011, the World Health Organization named Ahwaz as the most polluted city in the world, with an annual average of 372 mg of suspended particles per cubic meter.¹⁶⁸ The Kurdish cities of Sanandaj and Kermanshah are also among the most polluted in the world.¹⁶⁹ According to environmentalists, the pollution in Khuzestan is linked to the Iranian government's long-term policies of river diversion, dam construction and drying of marshes for oil excavation, which have led to the rising incidence of toxic dust storms in the region.¹⁷⁰ This in turn has led to an increase in respiratory illnesses and cancer. According to the results of a 2010 study, 9.8 per cent of children aged 13-14 in Ahwaz were suffering from asthma.¹⁷¹ The government's use of low-grade gasoline and the prevalence of petrochemical factories are also factors in the high levels of air pollution in many Iranian cities.¹⁷²

Provinces home to ethnic minorities are also suffering from adverse health effects stemming from the legacies of the Iran-Iraq war. In Khuzestan, residents of some towns are experiencing higher than normal rates of skin, heart and kidney ail-

Figure 9: Under-five mortality rates, selected provinces, 2015 (per 1,000 livebirths)

Province	Mortality rate
Azerbaijan East	17.0
Azerbaijan West	25.8
Bushehr	17.6
Fars	26.3
Kerman	20.2
Khuzestan	18.7
Kurdistan	30.3
Kermanshah	22.6
Lorestan	15.8
Sistan-Baluchestan	26.7
Tehran	15.0

Source: *The Lancet*.¹⁶⁷

ments due to improper disposal of chemical and biological materials remaining from the war.¹⁷³ Thousands of Iranian Kurds living in areas along

the Iraqi border are also suffering from long-term, severe effects of Iraqi chemical weapons attacks perpetrated during the war.

Case study: Treatment and rehabilitation for victims of chemical weapons attacks

The June 1987 attack on Sardasht, the capital of the Western Azerbaijan province, was the first deliberate chemical attack against Iranian civilians by Iraqi forces during the Iraq-Iraq war. It was followed by many similar attacks, including one a month later in July 1987 on the town Zardi-ye Dalahoo in the Kermanshah province. Like much of the border region impacted by the Iran-Iraq war, the residents of Sardasht and Zardi-ye Dalahoo are overwhelmingly Kurdish in population. In just those two locations, thousands of people are believed to be suffering lasting health problems from exposure to chemical weapons. Local advocates have said that the government has grossly neglected much of the long-term damage

done to the local population and environment. This marginalization is perceived by many victims to be connected to the fact that they are Kurdish or Sunni, living outside major power centers and predominantly from lower economic strata.

It was not until June 2010 that Iran's parliament took a clear step in the right direction by passing the Law to Identify and Support Victims of Chemical Weapons. The Law created a medical commission within the official Foundation for Martyrs' and Veterans' Affairs charged with identifying chemical weapons victims and working with the parliament to provide them with financial and medical support.¹⁷⁴ The parliament's Social Commission receives reports every nine months from the Commission and allocates funding based on the findings of the report. However, the Commission has been slow and ineffective at making determinations on applications for support. According to the non-governmental Association of Chemical Victims of

Sardasht, the Commission has only identified 20 per cent of the victims of Iraqi chemical weapons attacks, and of these victims only 5 per cent received any compensation.¹⁷⁵

Consequently, June and July 2017 saw an upsurge in local mobilization to demand increased government attention to mitigating the health and environmental impacts of the chemical attacks. In conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the Sardasht and Zardi-ye Dalahoo attacks, activists organized a seminar on the legacy of the Sardasht attacks, a commemorative march, and a symbolic funeral for chemical victims. Activists also issued a public letter to President Rouhani, which was published by state media.¹⁷⁶ Several government officials have since publically pledged to do more to address the needs of victims in Zardi-ye Dalahoo and elsewhere. However, progress on the government's legal obligations in this area is an ongoing issue.

Education

Domestic legislation and international norms guarantee the right of all Iranians to receive an education. However, both legal and practical constraints serve to circumscribe minorities' ability to access education.

In the case of religious minorities, entrance requirements prevent minorities from registering for university unless they claim to belong to one of the recognized religions. University admissions regulations established by the Supreme Council of

the Cultural Revolution state that students must be from one of the four recognized religions.¹⁷⁷

Moreover, a declaration from the Secretariat of the Central Students Selection Board (CSSB) issued in June 2010 stated that 'students following man-made religions and unofficial minorities do not have the right to study in the universities and if they are currently enrolled, they should be reported to the [CSSB].'¹⁷⁸ Sabeian-Mandaeans, Yarsanis and other unrecognized minorities have had to declare themselves as Christian or Muslim on their applications forms in order to access higher education as applicants are reportedly re-

Figure 10: Literacy rates, selected provinces, 2016

Province	Literacy Rate
Country-wide	87.6%
Azerbaijan East	84.7%
Azerbaijan West	82.0%
Bushehr	89.2%
Fars	88.8%
Kermanshah	84.5%
Khuzestan	86.3%
Kurdistan	81.5%
Lorestan	83.0%
Sistan-Baluchestan	76.0%
Tehran	92.9%

Source: *Statistical Centre Iran, 2016.*

quired to subscribe to an officially recognized religion.¹⁷⁹ Minorities have been dismissed once their religious affiliation becomes known. For example, in early 2017 the authorities prevented a lawyer from the Gonabadi Sufi order from continuing his university education.¹⁸⁰

Bahá'í are the religious minority most severely affected by the denial of the right to education, in part because their religious code prohibits them from misrepresenting their faith. The 1991 government memorandum about the Bahá'í, previously mentioned, contains the instruction that '[t]hey must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís.¹⁸¹ As a result of government restrictions on access to university education, some community members founded the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education in 1987, many of whom were later imprisoned.¹⁸² According to the Bahá'í International Community, up to now hundreds of Bahá'í students are prevented from accessing university education on a yearly basis. Despite meeting all entrance requirements, some receive automated messages stating that their files are incomplete, preventing them from completing the enrolment process. Others who manage to enrol are dismissed from university once it becomes known that they are Bahá'í.¹⁸³

In the case of Iran's ethnic minorities, especially Baluchis, Arabs and Kurds, challenges in accessing education are linked to the overall underdevelopment and impoverishment of their areas. In Sistan-Baluchestan, for example, many school buildings are substandard mud structures that pose safety risks for students.¹⁸⁴ To make matters worse, schools are few and far between in remote areas,

and many families cannot afford the cost of transportation.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, many have no access to government offices in order to obtain official identification documents, which are required to register for schooling. According to a statement made by an MP from Sistan-Baluchestan in June 2017, official figures show that 25,000-30,000 children in the province did not receive an education that year, but actual figures could have been closer to 120,000.¹⁸⁶ In Ahwaz, children also reportedly have to travel long distances to receive an education,¹⁸⁷ and many schools are in makeshift facilities.¹⁸⁸

The factors above lead to high dropout rates and lagging educational attainment indicators. Among Ahwazi Arabs, for example, the dropout rate is reportedly 30 per cent at the elementary level, 50 per cent at the secondary level and 70 per cent for high school.¹⁸⁹ Literacy rates are lower in Sistan-Baluchestan than in any other province (Figure 10).

Girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys, a problem compounded by the lack of female teachers, distances to schools, early marriage, participation in agricultural labor, and cultural and religious prejudice.¹⁹⁰ In a 2017 interview with Iranian state media, a Ministry of Education spokesperson said that only 40 to 50 per cent of girls complete their high school education in many border provinces.¹⁹¹ Dropout rates for girls are 60 per cent by the fifth grade level in Sistan-Baluchestan.¹⁹²

Documentation and access to services

An estimated one million Iranians do not have birth certificates or other proof of citizenship, 400,000 of whom are children.¹⁹³ While other ethnic groups can be affected, this problem disproportionately affects the Baluchi minority. Baluchi citizens without proof of citizenship face barriers to accessing social assistance and public services such as health care and education.¹⁹⁴ These Baluchis also have difficulty obtaining utilities such as water, electricity and telephone services.¹⁹⁵ They are also at risk of legal statelessness.¹⁹⁶

Traditionally, Baluchis in Iran, particularly the older generations, had little interaction with the state and its institutions. As such, many Baluchis did not register their births and marriages or real-

ize their need for official identification cards or proof of citizenship. Many children are affected because new births of Baluchi citizens cannot be easily registered when the fathers and grandfathers do not themselves have proof of citizenship.¹⁹⁷ Other factors that contribute to the problem include a lack of birth certificate registration offices in small cities and villages, a lack of transportation to the larger cities and a large number of unregistered Baluchi marriages.¹⁹⁸ The government, unfortunately, has never instituted policies to reach marginal and isolated communities to ensure proper registration of marriages and births.

In 2013, an expedited process for birth certificate applications was introduced in Sistan-Baluchestan for applicants believed likely to be Iranian. In January 2016, the governor of Sistan-Baluchestan stated that the province would not have any Baluchi without birth certificates by the end of the

year.¹⁹⁹ According to the Director of the Sistan-Baluchestan Birth Certificate Office, 24,000 individual birth certificates were issued by November 2017.²⁰⁰ In addition, in February 2017 the Iranian Cabinet instructed the Ministry of Education to issue a special card for Baluchi children without birth certificates so they could register and attend school. Reportedly, over 20,000 such children registered for school in the province and 19,000 were allowed to attend.²⁰¹ However, on 2 July 2017, the head of the Sistan-Baluchestan MPs' Association reportedly told state media that approximately 36,000 children could not attend school because they were without proper identification.²⁰²

Nonetheless, thousands of Baluchis remain without official documentation. The overall process state officials have suggested to establish proof of citizenship is very burdensome and administrative offices are difficult for rural Baluchi to physically

Case study: Nationality rights for children of Iranian mothers and non-Iranian fathers

Another factor circumscribing ethnic minorities' right to nationality is the presence of laws that discriminate against a mother's ability to pass citizenship to their children. According to Article 976-2 of the Iranian Civil Code, children born inside or outside of Iran are Iranian nationals if their fathers are Iranian. Mothers cannot transfer their nationality to their children. However, under Article 976-5, a person born in Iran to a father of foreign nationality, and who maintains residence in Iran for at least one year immediately after reaching the age of 18, is eligible to obtain Iranian nationality with an administrative petition.²⁰⁴

Thousands of children living in Iran born to Iranian mothers and non-Iranian fathers have not been granted Iranian citizenship. Many are the children of marriages between Afghan refugees or migrants and Iranian women. Such marriages are particularly common within the Baluchi community, which is spread between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Children of these marriages are effectively rendered stateless by the law and have limited access to state benefits, health, and education, as well as the rights to vote and hold public office.²⁰⁵

A 2006 legal reform added a condition permitting children of Iranian women born in Iran to apply for citizenship upon reaching the age of 18 only if they formally abandoned their father's nationality.²⁰⁶ However, the Guardian Council affirmed upon finalization of the law that

permanent resident children were nonetheless entitled to some state entitlements, such as public education.

In 2016, parliamentarians drafted a bill creating more stringent standards for children to gain citizenship upon reaching 18, but also opening citizenship to children born outside of Iran to Iranian mothers.²⁰⁷ In January 2017, Mohammad Javad Fahthi, a Member of Parliament for Tehran, criticized the bill, stating that citizenship laws should not be based on gender and that children born to Iranian mothers should be able to obtain Iranian nationality on an equal basis with those born to Iranian fathers.²⁰⁸ In August 2017, the parliament suspended debate on the bill to allow the Rouhani administration to submit its own version, which parliamentarians plan to reconcile with the existing draft.²⁰⁹

access. Local experts claim that many Baluchis wanted to apply for state identification cards but faced insurmountable administrative hurdles. The collection of the necessary documentation is simply unachievable for most low-income Baluchis, either because of bureaucratic complexity or because the documents do not exist. State officials reportedly told a number of Baluchis that they could produce a DNA test establishing a familial link to another Iranian citizen with proof of citizenship.²⁰³ However, considering the costs associated with DNA testing and the fact that such testing likely requires travel to Tehran, this option is far beyond what most Baluchis could afford.

Employment

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and the provision forbidding the investigation of individual beliefs, in Iran discrimination in access to employment is institutionalized through the practice of *gozinesh*, a mandatory screening process that anyone seeking employment in the public or para-statal sector must undergo.²¹⁰ *Gozinesh* involves assessing prospective employees' adherence to Islam and their loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Its basis is found in the 1995 Selection Law, Article 2 of which lists the following criteria for the selection of employees:

1. Belief in Islam or one of the religions stipulated by the Constitution;
2. Practical adherence to Islam's rulings;
3. Belief in and adherence to *Velayat-e Faqih*, the Islamic Republic and the Constitution;
4. Not being morally corrupt;
5. Not being a member of, or sympathizer with, political parties, organizations and groups that are declared illegal or will be declared illegal by the competent authorities, unless their repentance is known;
6. No criminal record; and
7. No drug addiction.

Note 1: Recognized religious minorities are governed by their own regulations, but they must not openly breach the Islamic rulings.

Note 2: Invalids of the war will be given priority, and in case of shortage of capacity, other priorities will be taken into consideration e.g. record of work for revolu-

tionary organizations, record of participation in Friday and mass prayers, wearing of chador (full body-length veil) for women.

The *gozinesh* process is administered by the Supreme Selection Council as well as the Ministry of Intelligence, which is responsible for investigating applicants' former political views and their degree of repentance from them.²¹¹ The *gozinesh* criteria not only bar adherents of non-recognized religions from seeking employment, but also disadvantage Sunnis and anyone who holds views contrary to the official values of the Islamic Republic.²¹²

Employment in the armed forces is also constrained by the constitutional requirement that the military be Islamic, committed to Islamic ideals and be formed of those loyal to the Islamic Revolution and its values. Although recognized religious minorities are required to perform mandatory military service alongside their Muslim counterparts, they are forbidden from holding positions of authority over Muslims and cannot pursue a career in the military after their mandatory service period is over.²¹³ Members of the Yarsan faith have protested being forced to shave or trim their moustaches, which they grow for religious reasons, during their military service.²¹⁴ The distinctive appearance of Yarsan men also opens them up to discrimination in the state sector more broadly, with members of the community reporting that their ability to advance beyond low-level jobs is limited.²¹⁵

In the case of the Bahá'í minority, exclusion from wide-ranging fields of employment is official state policy and part of a larger campaign of persecution targeted against the community. This policy finds its basis in a 1991 memorandum issued by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and signed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which calls for Bahá'í to be dealt with in such a way 'that their progress and development shall be blocked' and further states that 'employment shall be refused to persons identifying themselves as Bahá'ís.' According to one estimate, around 10,000 Bahá'í were fired from public sector jobs after 1979, not to mention all those prevented from being recruited in the state sector ever since.²¹⁶ The authorities also deploy a range of tactics to

prevent Bahá'í from earning an income in the private sector, including refusal to issue commercial licenses, harassment of Bahá'í business owners and confiscation of land and merchandise.²¹⁷ A letter issued by a government office in 2007 called for Bahá'í to be excluded from a list of 25 trades and occupations and to be prohibited from high-earning businesses.²¹⁸ Between June and November 2016 alone, the authorities shut down at least 150 Bahá'í-owned businesses.²¹⁹ In April 2017, the authorities shut down 18 shops for being closed on a Bahá'í holy day.²²⁰

Members of ethnic minorities also face barriers to seeking employment, and unemployment rates within their communities are disproportionately high. This is undoubtedly linked to the discrimination they face on account of their ethnic and/or religious identity (in the case of Sunnis) as well as the overall lack of meaningful employment opportunities in their areas. According to government data, out of the top 20 Iranian cities with the highest unemployment rates, 18 are in Arab, Kurdish and Baluchi areas.²²¹

In Khuzestan in particular, home to Iran's largest oil and gas reserves, unemployment rates among Arabs are incommensurate with the region's natural wealth. Oil and gas companies overwhelmingly hire employees from outside of the Ahwaz area instead of from the local Arab population, despite repeated demands to impose a quota on foreign companies compelling them to hire local labour. As a result, many Arabs are forced to make a living by working in the informal sector.²²²

According to an official publication issued by Iran's High Council for Human Rights in 2016, the government has taken some recent steps to increase Sunni representation in the labour force. The document states that 'a noticeable number of managerial jobs have been taken unprecedentedly by native and Sunni labor forces' and cites examples including managerial and executive posts in the Chabahar Free Zone, governors and sheriffs. It also claims that 'a new phase of recruiting Sunni labour forces in armed and police forces has started.'²²³ However, it is clear that much more needs to be done to reverse the effect of entrenched discrimination in the labour market and ensure that Iran's ethnic and religious minorities are afforded the same opportunities as others.

Figure 11: Unemployment rates, selected provinces, 2017

Province	Unemployment rate (Male)	Unemployment rate (Female)
Country-wide	10.4%	21.8%
Azerbaijan East	8.8%	16.0%
Azerbaijan West	7.6%	7.3%
Bushehr	11.2%	11.6%
Fars	11%	24.5%
Kerman	8.1%	25.5%
Kermanshah	1.4%	23.8%
Khuzestan	11.7%	28.5%
Kurdistan	8.8%	27.8%
Lorestan	9.6%	24.2%
Sistan-Baluchestan	13.6%	14.8%
Tehran	10.1%	25.4%

Source: Statistical Centre Iran, 2017.

Development-driven displacement

Development-driven displacement is a long-standing grievance for several of Iran's ethnic minorities. Large-scale development projects in Arab, Baluchi and Kurdish areas have involved land confiscation and forced evictions of the local population, and inward population transfers from outside the region. Moreover, employment opportunities in new development projects have been offered to migrant workers at the expense of the local population.

For example, government development projects in Khuzestan, including the Dehkhoda sugar cane plantation, displaced at least 200,000 - 250,000 Arabs, as reported by the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing in 2005. The compensation given for confiscated land was reportedly far below market value.²²⁴ These policies were coupled with low interest loans and new housing developments to attract migrant workers, neither of which were available to the local population.²²⁵ In April 2005, mass protests erupted in Khuzestan after a letter allegedly written by former Vice President Mohammad-Ali Abtahi was leaked, purporting to reveal a deliberate government policy of altering the demographic balance in Khuzestan by moving non-Arabs into the area.²²⁶

Forced evictions have also affected Kurds and Baluchis in large numbers.²²⁷

Case study: The Chabahar Port Development Plan

In August 2007, the Ahmedinejad government launched the Chabahar Development Plan to expand the southern port city of Chabahar in Sistan-Baluchestan province. This plan is part of a decades-old effort to exploit Chabahar's economic potential. The government first established the area as a free trade and industrial zone in 1992.

The recent expansion of the port of Chabahar is seen as a key part of the plan to develop an International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a sea ship, rail and road route for moving freight between India, Iran, Afghanistan, Russia, Central Asia and Europe. The government has called it the biggest development project in the history of the Islamic Republic, with the first phase alone costing the state an estimated US\$350-700 million.²²⁸ Work on the project has continued under President Rouhani. In May 2016 President Rouhani and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed a series of agreements that included billions of dollars of Indian investment into industries in the Chabahar free zone, such as aluminum smelter and urea plants.²²⁹

The Chabahar Development Plan has been accompanied by official rhetoric about the 'civilizing' dimension of the project, touting its potential to bring sustained development to severely neglected Sistan-Baluchestan province.²³⁰ In a 2014 speech, President Rouhani said the city of Chabahar would have to go through drastic and rapid development with the hope of becoming the industrial heart of the country.²³¹ In May 2017, Behrouz Aghaei, the head of the Ports and Maritime Organization in Sistan-Baluchestan, said the development of Chabahar would improve the economic situation of local inhabitants by creating jobs in airports, railroads, hotels and other parts of the tourism sector.²³²

However, Akbar Torkan, head of the committee for Free Trade Zones, implied in February 2017 that movement of the population in Sistan-Baluchestan is also another prominent part of the development plan. Torkan revealed plans to increase the population of the south coast, which includes parts of Sistan-Baluchestan province, from 1.5 million to 5 million people.²³³ He explained that the prospect of 50,000 job opportunities in the south would help the government ease the mobilization, and stated that 'a committee has been established to determine...what additional support is needed to create civilization in the

area.'²³⁴ Given that the population of Chabahar is currently just 283,000 and the population of Sistan-Baluchestan province 2.7 million, it is unclear what types of population movements the authorities have in mind in order to realize demographic plans in Chabahar.

Despite the optimistic official rhetoric surrounding the Chabahar Development Plan, representatives in Sistan-Baluchestan province have claimed that the project has so far failed to deliver on its promises to provide employment opportunities and other benefits for the local population. In a July 2017 interview, Mohammad Naim Amini Fard, a member of parliament from Sistan-Baluchestan, stated that the Chabahar Development Plan had yet to improve the living conditions of locals since it lacked the needed infrastructure to guarantee prosperity.²³⁵ In April 2017, Abdolghafur Irannejad, another member of parliament from the province, reportedly complained in a letter to the Minister of Health that local candidates were not being considered in the government employment exam.²³⁶ Finally, referring to the launch of a major tourism project in November 2016, Chabahar's Governor Ahmad Ali Mohebbati, Chabahar Governor, stated that 'national projects should support local projects, but this is not what is happening in Chabahar.'²³⁷

7

Conclusion and recommendations

Despite high expectations that President Rouhani would bring about changes to long-standing patterns of repression and marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities, progress on major campaign promises remains marginal nearly five years after his initial election. By and large, minorities continue to be disadvantaged when it comes to enjoyment of civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights.

To reverse the pattern of ongoing discrimination against Iran's minorities, the Iranian government should identify concrete ways to implement its stated goals of combating discrimination and inequality. This means that all minorities should be able to not only express and educate themselves in their mother tongues, but also engage in peaceful activism without fear of arrest, practice their religious, cultural and social activities freely, and participate in public affairs on an equal basis with others. Moreover, the government should ensure that economic development policies are directed towards addressing the wide disparities that currently exist in access to healthcare, education and employment.

Recommendations

To the Iranian government:

- Amend all articles in the Islamic Penal Code which discriminate on the basis of religion or belief.
- Release all minority activists imprisoned for their peaceful advocacy of human rights.
- Repeal or amend vaguely-worded articles in the Islamic Penal Code which allow for the conviction of minority rights defenders and other peaceful activists.
- Protect the right of all defendants to a fair trial and respect due process standards, including by ensuring that the accused have access to a lawyer immediately after arrest and until trial, and access to an interpreter during court proceedings.
- Ratify the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
- End the use of the death penalty for crimes not meeting the 'most serious' threshold according to international standards.
- Cease the indiscriminate killings of border couriers and take measures to regularize their work.
- Join the Ottawa Convention on the banning of landmines and improve landmine clearance efforts in contaminated areas.

- Introduce mother tongue education for minority languages at the primary school level.
- Protect the freedom of religion or belief of all Iranians, including the freedom to change one's religion or belief.
- Extend the constitutional and legal recognition afforded to Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians to include all religious minorities.
- End repression and discrimination against Bahá'í and reverse policies that prevent them from accessing education and employment.
- Take measures to prevent the dissemination of content inciting hatred towards ethnic and religious minorities.
- Take measures to increase the representation of minorities in high-ranking political positions, especially in areas in which they form the majority.
- Allocate sufficient budgetary resources to alleviate poverty and improve infrastructure in peripheral provinces.
- Improve the provision of medical treatment to Kurdish victims of chemical warfare through better implementation of the Law to Identify and Support Victims of Chemical Weapons.
- Ensure that all Iranians have equal access to education regardless of religion, belief, ethnicity, language, or other characteristics.
- Introduce simplified and appropriate procedures to allow all those deprived of citizenship rights to obtain their documentation.
- Amend nationality laws to allow women to pass on their citizenship to their children.
- Reform the process of *gozinesh* and any other policies which condition access to employment on the basis of individual beliefs, in line with the Constitution.
- Publish demographic data on the ethnic and religious composition of the Iranian population with a view to measuring progress in combating discrimination and ensuring equality.
- Ensure that new development projects prioritize the recruitment of local labour, especially in minority areas.
- Establish an independent, national human rights institution in line with the Paris Principles, responsible for receiving complaints of human rights violations.
- Permit the UN Special Procedures, including the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, to enter the country for monitoring visits.

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Rights Denied: Violations against ethnic and religious minorities in Iran

In brief

While the repression and human rights violations by the Iranian government are well documented, less attention is paid to the specific situation of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities. From hate speech and police intimidation to denial of fundamental rights and opportunities, Iran's minorities are routinely denied equal access to justice, education, employment and political participation.

While Iran's Constitution guarantees religious freedoms, it only extends these rights to Islam and three other recognized religions – Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism – leaving practitioners of other faiths, including Bahá'í, Sabeen-Mandaeans and Yarsanis, with no guaranteed protections. At the extreme end, members of religious minorities – in particular, Iran's sizeable Bahá'í community – have been vilified, arrested and even executed on account of their beliefs. They are frequently punished harshly with broad charges of threatening public morality or national security, resulting in long prison terms and even death sentences.

Ethnic minorities, including Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks and Baluchis, have been treated as second-class citizens, targeted on the basis of their identity and sidelined from education, health care and other basic services. Minority-populated regions such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan remain underdeveloped and excluded, with higher poverty levels and poorer health outcomes. These inequalities have contributed to profound discontent and resentment, reflected in the arrests of thousands of peaceful demon-

strators in these regions. Prison data shows that at least three quarters of Iran's political prisoners are from ethnic minorities.

Despite some limited gestures of conciliation since the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, hopes of a more inclusive and rights-based approach to Iran's ethnic and religious minorities have yet to be realized. For this to be achieved, Iranian authorities will need to embark on a more comprehensive process of reform: this should include equitable economic development and political representation for minorities, as well as the lifting of all restrictions on their religious and cultural rights.

This report recommends:

- The release of all minority activists imprisoned for their peaceful advocacy of human rights.
- Extending the constitutional and legal recognition afforded to Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians to include all religious minorities.
- Taking measures to increase the representation of minorities in high-ranking political positions, especially in areas in which they form the majority.
- The introduction of mother tongue education for minority languages at the primary school level.
- The allocation of sufficient budgetary resources to alleviate poverty and improve infrastructure in peripheral provinces.

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