

# **Voices of the Marginalized**

Ethnic Minorities in the Islamic  
Republic of Iran

September 2025



# Executive summary

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A primary goal of Volunteer Activists (VA) is to raise global awareness of critical issues in Iran, particularly those involving local civil society organizations (CSOs). Acknowledging the voices of marginalized groups in Iran not only honors their struggle for improved rights but also enhances international awareness and support, which can significantly aid these communities in their efforts. With established connections in Iran, VA is well-positioned to provide essential information.

This report focuses on the challenges faced by indigenous ethnic minorities residing in Iran's borderlands. Often, discussions about Iran evoke a singular association with Persian identity. However, Iran is a diverse tapestry of various ethnic groups, including Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and others.

The report analyzes the Islamic Republic of Iran's policies toward ethnic minorities, emphasizing documented violations of their rights, including into the current presidency of Masoud Pezeshkian.

By uncovering these often-overlooked voices, the report aims to illuminate the struggles and aspirations of these communities, advocating for greater recognition and rights within the framework of the Islamic Republic.

The complex and multifaceted landscape of Iranian ethnic minorities necessitated thorough research to accurately depict the current issues and challenges they face based on their ethnicity. To ensure that the perspectives presented reflect the views of ordinary Iranians in border regions, VA conducted in-depth interviews and conversations with local activists who are dedicated to improving the lives of these communities. These discussions not only provided valuable insights but also empowered the activists by amplifying their voices and experiences. Additionally, VA worked closely with human rights organizations in Iran, further enhancing the depth of the findings. To ensure transparency and accessibility, the research includes ample references to academic and other sources, with claims corroborated whenever possible.

From our research, several significant insights regarding the challenges faced by ethnic minority groups in Iran have emerged:

Ethnic minorities in Iran experience discrimination across multiple dimensions, including in socio-economic, political, cultural, linguistic and environmental spheres.

Despite the diversity among various ethnic groups, they often encounter similar issues and challenges.

From a legal standpoint, the insufficient attention to collective rights and, at times, religious laws may weaken the position of ethnic minorities.

Additional findings from this report can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Takeaways from his research

1. Environmental degradation due to developmental projects instigated by the central government underlines the livelihoods of ethnic minorities in borderlands.  
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2. Protesters from non-Persian backgrounds are dealt with much more harshly by security officers and courts while prison life in borderlands with ethnic minorities is harsher than in Persian areas.  
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3. Tens of thousands of children in Sistan and Baluchestan province are unable to obtain birth certificates, putting them at risk of being considered illegal in the country of their birth.  
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4. Holding other religious views than those of the Shia government, increases the chance of ethnic minorities getting marginalized and discriminated against.  
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5. The coming to power of president Pezeshkian has highlighted conflicting views over the usage of native languages in Iran.  
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6. Many (members) of Iran's ethnic minorities would like education to be in their native language as a means to preserve their identity and to boost children's success at school.  
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7. (State) companies that carry out activities in borderlands often overlook the interests of locals, including by hiring Iranians from predominantly a Persian background or by giving ethnic minorities the worst types of contracts. Besides this, environmental damage is not being addressed.  
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8. Due to greater levels of unemployment and poverty, populations in borderlands from ethnic minority groups may turn to illegal activities such as cross-border smuggling.  
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9. Prejudices surrounding non-Persian Iranians need to be addressed and not be reinforced through national tv.  
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10. Local activists can play a crucial role in supporting their communities by engaging with them and advocating for their rights.  
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11. Rather than viewing it as a threat, the Iranian government could identify strengths and celebrate the country's ethnic and cultural diversity. Policies should be implemented to ensure that ethnic minorities have the same opportunities and rights as Persian Iranians.  
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12. International organizations can help Iran's ethnic minorities by drawing attention to their plight in international forums and by demanding that their legal rights are more safeguarded.  
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# Introduction



A detailed examination of the world's borderlands reveals some striking contrasts. While these regions are often rich in valuable resources, they frequently experience significant poverty compared to areas closer to government centers. Additionally, borderland populations often face discrimination, especially when their ethnic backgrounds differ from those of the dominant groups in more central regions. This discrimination can become even more pronounced if their religious beliefs diverge from those of the prevailing ethnic population.

This report focuses on the situation of Iran's borderland communities. While Iran is often synonymous with Persian identity, it is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups, including Baloch, Turks, Kurds, and Arabs. This rich tapestry of ethnicities is exemplified by the background of Iran's current president, Masoud Pezeshkian. Raised by a Turkish Azeri father and a Kurdish mother in the borderland region of East Azerbaijan, Pezeshkian is not just fluent in Persian (Farsi), but also in Turkish and Kurdish. His rise to power prompts several important questions: Does the current political landscape indicate that there are no significant issues related to the representation and circumstances of these communities? Have earlier struggles for emancipation been resolved, or do challenges still persist?

These inquiries are crucial for several reasons. Iran remains a developing country despite its aspirations for global recognition. As highlighted in our [Labor Reports](#), Iran's struggling economy and soaring inflation have led to widespread poverty. If the center-periphery divide prevalent in many countries also exists in Iran, borderland populations may be particularly vulnerable.

Second, marginalized and discontented ethnic minorities in border regions can contribute to both internal and regional strife. Neighboring Syria serves as a cautionary example, highlighting the potential consequences of neglecting the needs of marginalized groups. A lack of solidarity and cohesion between central and peripheral areas can exacerbate societal fractures, making it essential to address these disparities to foster national unity and stability.

Given these complexities, it is imperative to examine the status of ethnic minorities in Iran in greater detail to understand the underlying issues and

dynamics at play. This analysis will not only illuminate the challenges faced by these communities but also inform potential pathways for improvement.

To achieve this, the goals of this report are three-fold:

- Investigate the legal protections and status of ethnic minorities in Iran.
- Compare their situation to that of Persian Iranians.
- Identify problems and propose potential solutions.

### Methodology & Justification

Iran is a vast country. Meanwhile, research must be conducted within a specific timeframe. Therefore, rather than attempting to be exhaustive, this report aims to provide a general overview of the conditions faced by ethnic borderland populations. Previous reports on this topic exist, but this report explicitly seeks to offer a grassroots perspective. To achieve this, we consulted with ethnic minority activists affiliated to local CSOs (see also Table 2).

The findings from these efforts are presented through various case studies, while a broader context is provided using statistics, such as the Human Development Index (HDI).

It is crucial to recognize that discussions surrounding ethnic communities in Iran can be highly contentious, particularly regarding population figures, due to a lack of government statistics. To promote openness and transparency, this report will at times delve into these discussions. Whenever possible, sources will be provided in English to facilitate reader access and enhance the transparency of this research. In addition to academic reports, secondary resources may include newspaper articles and reports from human rights agencies in Iran. Social media have also served as a significant source of information, alongside laws and international treaties relevant to ethnic minority rights. This report is structured as follows to

Table 2: Organizations that contributed to our data collection efforts:

[Association for the Human Rights of Azerbaijanis in Iran \(ArcDH\)](#)  
[Bramsh \(Voice of Balochistan Women\)](#)  
[Hana Human Rights Organization](#)  
[Karun Human Rights Organization \(KHRO\)](#)  
[Kurdistan Human Rights Network \(KHRN\)](#)  
[Kurdistan Press Agency \(Kurdpa\)](#)  
[Mukrian News Agency](#)  
[Organization for Defending Free Flow of Information in Iran \(DeFFI\)](#)  
[Rasank News](#)  
[Turkmen Human Rights Activists \(Tuhra\)](#)

meet the outlined goals: The next chapter offers essential background on Iran's ethnic diversity, setting the stage for a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Chapter Three then examines the legal rights of ethnic minorities, highlighting the protections and challenges they face. Building on this foundation, Chapter Four explores the socio-economic implications of the center-periphery divide in Iran, revealing how it affects access to resources and opportunities for these communities. Chapter Five shifts focus to the societal marginalization that ethnic minorities may experience, due to linguistic restrictions and cultural discrimination. Chapter Six explores the advocacy efforts of ethnic minorities aimed at changing their circumstances and examines the government's responses to these initiatives. Finally, the concluding chapter presents recommendations for ethnic minority activists, the Iranian government, and the international community to address these critical issues.

Meanwhile, terminology and definitions around ethnic minorities can be sensitive or politically charged. For that reason, Appendix I explains some of our positions on these matters. It is also important to note that naming individual representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) we spoke with can pose risks to their safety. Therefore, their contributions to this report may be expressed in more general terms, such as „according to activists,“ or by referring to their organization as a whole rather than identifying individuals.

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# Iran's Ethnic Landscape



*Iran boasts a diverse array of ethnic groups, each playing a vital role in the country's economy and social fabric. This chapter focuses on ethnic minorities in border regions, while also highlighting the dominant Persian population. In addition to estimated population figures, the discussion will include their geographic locations and other key characteristics.*

\* Mirheidar, D., Gholami, B., & Mirahmadi, F. S. (2013). "Critical Analysis of Iran's Ethnicity Maps." *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 9(31), 1–30. Accessible from <https://journal.iag.ir>

Understanding the distribution of ethnic groups in Iran and their population sizes is more complex than it may appear. This complexity arises not only from the significant impact of urbanization on demographics but also from the fluidity of the concept of ethnicity itself. In Iran, demography is a politically charged issue. The Iranian government excludes ethnic background from its population census, leading to a lack of clarity regarding the distribution of ethnic groups across the country\*. Furthermore, traditionally, the political elite in Tehran have engaged in land appropriation in peripheral regions, sometimes coupled with policies that promote the settlement of Persians in these areas. Many activists representing ethnic minorities argue that these „colonization“ practices persist today and are often accompanied by attempts to obscure—and lower—the true size of indigenous ethnic populations in these provinces.

Despite these challenges, it is possible to broadly identify the main indigenous groups in Iran's periphery and provide estimates of their populations. Before delving into this, it is crucial to examine the Persian population to better understand the dynamics between the larger Persian political and economic elite in Tehran and other central regions of the country in relation to Iran's ethnic minorities in the periphery.

### Persians

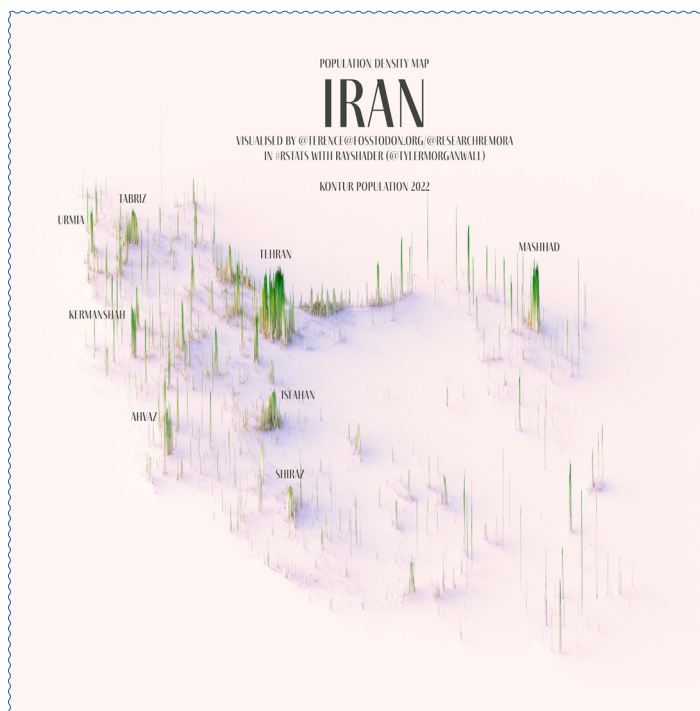
Although located in the Middle East and largely surrounded by Arab states, Persians represent a distinct ethnic group. Their language, Persian, is commonly referred to as Farsi. Persians also have their own calendar (Solar Hijri). In terms of cultural events, Nowruz (New Year) and the Yalda festival are important while most Persian adhere to Shia Islam.



The Persian population predominantly resides in major urban centers like Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz, as well as in central regions and Fars province.

Given that Persians have historically dominated Iran economically, politically, and linguistically (see text box), it is often assumed that they constitute a significant majority of the country's population.

Population density map of Iran based on the Kontur population database, by [@researchremora](#)



### Historic Roots of Persian Supremacy

Several studies referenced in this report show that Iran's ethnic divide has emerged through a historical process. Following Iran's Constitutional Revolution in the early 20th century, and with the subsequent formation of the modern nation-state, particularly during the Pahlavi era, which witnessed a surge in antiquity revivalism, Persian identity was established as the dominant national identity. During the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, there was a concerted effort to revive and promote Persian traditions, arts, and literature, often linking them to the pre-Islamic era. This revival was exemplified by the 2,500-year celebration of the Persian Empire in 1971, which showcased Iran's historical grandeur and aimed to instill national pride. The Shah's regime emphasized a narrative that celebrated Persian history as a cornerstone of Iranian identity. Moreover, the establishment of a modern, centralized state granted structural privilege to the Persian (Farsi) language over all others—a policy that continued after the 1979 Revolution. This continuity has ensured that Persian culture remains dominant in shaping Iran's national identity. The centralized and exclusionary nation-building process, along with other contributing factors, have deepened perceptions of inequality and injustice among ethnic minorities, including under the Islamic Republic.

\* "Iran" Minority Rights Group. Updated 2017. Accessible from <https://minorityrights.org>

\*\* Shaffer, B. (2021). "Iran Is More Than Persia: Ethnic Politics in the Islamic Republic." FDD Press, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington, DC, p. 18. Accessible from <https://www.fdd.org>

These statistics are based on an internal Iranian study titled "Assessment and Evaluation of National Public Culture Indicators (Non-Official Indicators): National Report" (project director: Mansour Vaezi, Ketab Nashr Publishing Institute, 2012).

\*\*\* Hassan, H. (2007). "Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities" Library of Congress. Accessible from <https://apps.dtic.mil/>

† Iran Statistics Center (2024). "Iran's population in 2024 is estimated at around 86 million." Accessible from <https://amar.org.ir>

‡ . "Deputy Minister of Education announced: 100 hours of Persian language training for bilingual preschool children," ISNA, 13 October 2012. Accessible from <https://www.isna.ir/>

For instance, the Minorities Rights Groups estimated that Persians, also known as Fars, made up 61% of Iran's population\*.

However, other sources indicate that Persians are not necessarily the majority in Iran. According to statistics cited by political scientist Brenda Shaffer in her article *Iran is more than Persia* (2021) the ethnic composition of Iran's population is as follows\*\*:

Table 3: Ethnic Composition of Iran according to Shaffer (2021)

| Ethnic group      | Percentage of total population |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Persian (Fars)    | 47%                            |
| Turk              | 23%                            |
| Gilaki and Mazani | 9%                             |
| Kurd              | 8%                             |
| Lur               | 7%                             |
| Arab              | 2%                             |
| Baloch            | 2%                             |

Another frequently cited source when it comes to the numbers of Iran's ethnic minorities is a report prepared for the United States Congress by Hassan (2007), providing approximate percentages for Iran's ethnic and religious minority populations\*\*\*. Although since then Iran's population has grown from around 70 million to over 86 million†, the proportional distribution of ethnic groups has likely remained relatively stable.

Table 4: Ethnic Composition of Iran according to Library of Congress (2008)

| Ethnic group             | Percentage of total population |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Persian (Fars)           | 51%                            |
| Azerbaijani Turk (Azeri) | 24%                            |
| Gilaki and Mazandarani   | 8%                             |
| Kurd                     | 7%                             |
| Arab                     | 3%                             |
| Lur                      | 2%                             |
| Baloch                   | 2%                             |
| Turkmen                  | 2%                             |
| Other                    | 1%                             |

Therefore, according to available data, Persians do not comprise more than a ~50% percent of Iran's population. This view is reinforced by statements of Hamid-Reza Haji Babaei, Minister of Education during Ahmadinejad's second presidential term (2009–2013). He stated during his tenure that 70% of schoolchildren across Iran are bilingual and that even after completing their first year of elementary school, their mother tongue has not yet transitioned to Persian‡.

While the Luris, or Lurs, are a distinct ethnic group with their own language and customs, many identify themselves as Persian. The absence of a neighboring country with a similar ethnic group may have contributed to this perception. The same largely applies to the Gilaki and Mazani populations.

When considering the number of Iranians who identify as Persian, the perspective shifts, making Persians a majority group within the total population. If one adopts a wider definition of “Persians” that also includes the Gilaki, Mazani, and Luri populations, then, departing from the figures cited in Brenda Shaffer’s report, the percentage of Persians in Iran increases to approximately 63%.

Not all of these populations firmly identify as Persians, which calls for caution in labeling Persians the majority group. What holds firmly is that, regardless of the exact numbers, Persians are the predominant ethnic group in Iran’s political and economic spheres. This dominance has deep historical roots, including significant influences from the previous Shah regime.

### Understanding Our Focus: Excluded Populations

In addition to the ethnic minority groups highlighted in this report, several other minority groups reside in Iran, including Afghan migrants. However, our analysis will focus exclusively on indigenous ethnic minority groups, excluding migrant populations. Some groups that are indigenous or have long-established roots will also be omitted. The reasons for these exclusions vary. For instance, Jews and Assyrians are recognized as religious minorities under Iranian law, granting them a distinct status. Furthermore, as previously noted, some ethnic communities, including the Lurs and Gilaki, primarily identify as Persian. Consequently, discussions about ethnic minority rights are less common among these groups, making them less relevant to the focus of this report.

### Turks

After the Persians, the Turks are the largest ethnic group in Iran, making them the country’s largest ethnic minority. The Turkish population in Iran, primarily known as Azeris or Azerbaijanis, predominantly reside in East Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan provinces as well as parts of Ardabil and Zanjan provinces. Azeri Turks speak Azerbaijani Turkish, a Turkic language that shares similarities with Turkish spoken in neighboring Turkey.

Besides rich cultural traditions, a notable aspect of Azerbaijani culture in Iran is the passion for football, exemplified by the popular club Tractor Sazi (commonly referred to as Tractor). Based in Tabriz\*, Tractor is one of the most successful and well-supported football clubs in Iran, with a large fan base that reflects the pride and identity of the Azerbaijani community. The club’s matches often serve as a platform for expressing regional pride and cultural identity, drawing significant attendance and support from fans.

As with the Persians, there is controversy surrounding the exact numbers of the Turkish minority in Iran. Minority Rights Group cites Azerbaijani Turks at 16%, while Shaffer (2021) and Hassan (2007) estimate their population at 23% and 24%, respectively. This discrepancy can be partially explained by whether language is considered the primary identifying factor. If language is not the key criterion, some analyses may exclude the Turkmen and the Qashqais, viewing them as a separate ethnic group.

Indeed, while some Turkmen identify as Turkish, many consider themselves more

\* Tabriz is the capital of East Azerbaijan Province in northwestern Iran and one of the largest cities in the country.



Tractor FC's 50th anniversary celebration, 29 November 2020.  
Source: <https://www.tarafdari.com>

Turkmen primarily reside in the northeast of Iran, notably Golestan Province and parts of North Khorasan. Their culture is shaped by nomadic traditions, with many continuing to practice pastoralism and seasonal migrations.

Map of Iran's provinces. Accessible from: <https://wikipedia.org>

broadly as Iranian. The same goes broadly for the Qashqais.

Nonetheless, some activists contest the estimates of around one-quarter of the population that both Shaffer and Hassan provide. They argue that a significant portion of Tehran's population is of Turkish origin. If the Turkish-Azeri migrants in Tehran, Karaj, and other areas are included with those from historically Turkic provinces, the total Turkish population in Iran could be as high as 27% to 30%.

### Kurds

Kurdish communities are mainly concentrated in the provinces of Kurdistan, Ilam, and Kermanshah, where they make up the majority of the population, as well as in West Azerbaijan and parts of North Khorasan. Their religious affiliations are more diverse compared to other ethnic groups.





While the majority of Iranian Kurds are Sunni Muslims, a significant portion are Shi'a, and there is also a minority that adheres to the Yarsan faith. Yarsanis both believe in one God and reincarnation. Other, smaller religious communities include Zoroastrians, Christians, and Yazidis, with some Yazidis fleeing from Iraq having joined the Kurdish Yazidi community.

The Kurdish spoken by Iranian Kurds includes several dialects, such as Kurmanji and Sorani, which means they cannot always understand each other. The Iranian government has historically been cautious about granting autonomy to Kurdish regions, unlike neighboring Iraq, leading to tensions and demands for greater rights among Kurdish activists.

Kurdish culture is vibrant with traditional music as well as poetry. Similar to the Persians, the Kurds celebrate a Newroz (New Year).

Nowruz celebrations in the cities and villages of Kurdistan are marked by large public festivals that showcase Kurdish cultural symbols. These festivities include fire-lighting, collective dancing, and epic songs, often accompanied by political slogans. In contrast, Persian celebrations of Nowruz tend to focus more on family gatherings, traditional meals, and rituals such as Haft-Seen, which involves setting a table with seven symbolic items. While both cultures celebrate the arrival of spring, the Kurdish observances emphasize communal expression and cultural identity. Additionally, differences in timing may arise due to variations in the calendar used, with some Kurdish communities observing Nowruz according to local traditions that may not align perfectly with the Persian calendar.

### Arabs

The Arab population in Iran primarily resides in the southwestern region, particularly in Khuzestan Province. In addition to sharing a border with Iraq, Khuzestan is renowned for housing abundant natural resources, including the majority of Iran's oil reserves. Besides the central and southwestern parts of Khuzestan Province, Arabs also reside in parts of Bushehr and Hormozgan provinces. A significant portion of Iran's Arab community lives in and around Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan Province, making it a central hub for the population. Based on this, Iranian Arabs often refer to neighboring areas as 'Great Ahvaz'.

Source: [www.irna.ir](http://www.irna.ir)



Residents of Ahvaz (in Khuzestan province) typically speak a dialect closely related to Iraqi Arabic, whereas Arab communities in the southern regions—particularly in Bushehr and Hormozgan—speak Gulf Arabic dialects. Arab culture in Iran to a great extent reflect their historical ties to the broader Arab world, whilst also incorporating some Persian, Iranian and other elements.

According to some local government officials and several unofficial studies, Iran's Arab population ranges between 3.5 and 4 million, which amounts to 4% of the national population. Other figures estimate Iran's Arab population at between 2% and 3%. This claim is contested by Arabic activists who argue that the real number is significantly higher. Since 1925—when the Shah abolished the autonomous status of the Ahwaz region—Iran is alleged to have pursued policies aimed at erasing Arab identity and reshaping the region's demographics, including by systematically underreporting the Arab population.

They substantiate this claim by pointing to Yousef Azizi Bani-Torof's work, as well as the Ilam Center for Ethnic Studies and research by Ali Naameh Al-Helou from the 1960s. These sources estimate the Arab share of Iran's population at 8%, 10%, and 11–12%, respectively. These figures are unofficial analyses that may have political biases and lack academic reliability. For instance, the data from the Ilam Center stem from field interviews conducted with local residents in 132 locations throughout Ahwaz between 2019 and 2022.

\* Alboshoka K. (2023), "Political Geography of Ahwaz." Dialogue Institute for Research & Studies. Accessible from <https://astudies.org>

Another source is Political Geography of Ahwaz (2023) written by human rights activist Kamil Alboshoka\*. The book offers field-based analyses of the demographic and cultural situation of Arabs in Iran, including estimates of the Arab share of the population by province and city in the "Greater Ahwaz" region, including to demonstrate inconsistencies in Iran's official demographic statistics.

### Baloch

The Baloch primarily inhabit Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Iran's second largest province in the southeast, bordering Pakistan [19]. Additionally, they reside in eastern Hormozgan, southern Kerman, southern South Khorasan, and parts of Golestan and Mazandaran provinces.

These regions—especially Sistan and Baluchestan—are generally not resource-rich (and certainly not in the Iranian context) and have limited agricultural potential due to severe aridity. Instead, Baloch culture is marked by pastoralism and trade.

In addition to their unique language, the Baloch are known for their colorful traditional attire, found mainly in southeastern Iran and parts of Pakistan. Men and women alike wear traditional jewelry, including handmade necklaces, earrings, and bracelets that reflect Baloch cultural motifs. Balochi clothing symbolizes cultural pride and artistic expression. Furthermore, the majority of Baloch are Sunni Muslims, alongside a Shi'a minority.

As noted by most of the sources used in this chapter, the Baloch, like the Arabs, make up about 2 to 3 percent of Iran's total population. Estimates from Balochi ethnic rights activists indicate that by the end of 2021, around 2.5 million Baloch lived within Iran. With Iran's estimated population at approximately 85 million in 2021, this confirms that Baloch people constituted roughly 3 percent of the country's population.

To conclude this chapter, Table 5 provides an overview of the ethnic communities highlighted in this report and the regions they inhabit.

**Table 5: Ethnic Minorities and Regions They Inhabit**

| <b>Ethnic group</b> | <b>Regions in Iran</b>                                                     | <b>Geographical location</b> | <b>Borderland</b> | <b>Countries bordered</b> |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Turks               | East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanzan, parts of Tehran         | Northwest                    | Partially         | Turkey, Azerbaijan        |
| Kurds               | Kurdistan Province, Kermanshah Province, parts of Ilam and West Azerbaijan | West                         | Yes               | Iraq, Turkey              |
| Arabs               | Khuzestan Province, Hormozgan Province, parts of Bushehr Province          | Southwest                    | Yes               | Iraq                      |
| Baloch              | Sistan and Baluchestan Province, parts of Hormozgan Province               | Southeast                    | Yes               | Pakistan, Afghanistan     |

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# Ethnic Minorities under Iranian Law



*The extent to which a government has room to maneuver is influenced, at least in part, by existing laws. This chapter examines the legal frameworks in place regarding the protection of ethnic minorities in Iran.*

It is widely recognized that Iran operates as an authoritarian state; however, this characterization does not negate the existence of laws or their significance. Consequently, it is imperative to examine these legal frameworks. When analyzing the legal frameworks affecting the rights of ethnic minorities, it is notable that protections are primarily guaranteed through individual human rights rather than collective rights as ethnic communities. Additionally, Iran's adherence to Sharia law can compromise individual rights.

Individual Rights

One of the primary ways in which the rights of Iranians from ethnic minority backgrounds are safeguarded under Iranian law is through the principle that all citizens are equal.

Most human rights treaties that emphasize individual rights while also defending the rights of individual members of ethnic groups were drafted between 1945—the end of World War II and the defeat of Nazism—and the late 1970s, a period that coincides with the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in Iran..

Iran signed many of these, a process that began under the Imperial State of Iran led by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941 to 1979). In addition to the UN Charter for Human Rights, the first major treaty recognizing that all individuals are equal regardless of their ethnic background, Pahlavi's regime also signed various other treaties that ensured equality for all citizens under the law, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (see Table 6).

Table 6: Key Treaties Signed by Iran that Aim to Secure Equality Under the Law

| Year | Document                                                            | Description                                                                          | Impact in Iran                                                                 |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1965 | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination | Aimed to eliminate racial discrimination and promote equality among all races.       | Promoted legal equality and protection against racial discrimination in Iran.  |
| 1966 | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights                | Ensured rights such as equality before the law, freedom of expression, and assembly. | Reinforced legal protections for individuals, promoting civil rights in Iran.  |
| 1966 | International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights      | Focused on rights related to work, education, and an adequate standard of living.    | Aimed to ensure social equality and access to basic rights for all citizens.   |
| 1989 | Convention on the Rights of the Child                               | Established rights for children, including protection from discrimination.           | Aimed to secure equal rights and protections for children.                     |
| 2006 | Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities               | Ensured rights for persons with disabilities, including accessibility and equality.  | Aimed to enhance the legal status and rights of individuals with disabilities. |

The new Islamic regime under Ayatollah Khomeini continued this trajectory, which is perhaps not surprising. Upon assuming power, Khomeini emphasized the importance of equal rights.

In a televised address on April 1, 1979—announcing the establishment of the Islamic Republic and thanking the public for their participation in the referendum—he stated:

*“I say to all members of the nation: in Islam, there is no distinction between the rich and the poor, between the white and the black, between different groups—Sunni and Shi’a, Arab and non-Arab, Turk and non-Turk. The Qur’an recognizes superiority only in terms of justice and piety\*... Wealth is no measure of merit... All are equal in rights. The rights of religious minorities will be upheld; Islam honors all segments of society. Kurds and other groups—all the existing groups with different languages—are all our brothers... We are all part of one nation and one religion... We are brothers with the Sunnis, and none of us should act as masters over others.”\*\**

\* The Holy Quran, Surah al-Ḥujurāt (49), Verse 13.

\*\* Ruhollah Khomeini, “Radio/TV Message to the Nation and Declaration of the Islamic Republic.” *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, Vol. 6, pp. 461–462, April 1, 1979. Accessible from <https://www.imam-khomeini.ir>

In line with this perspective, Iran’s new theocratic regime did not just not withdraw from the treaties signed under the Shah but also ratified a few new ones (see once more table 6).

Moreover, the principle of equality among all citizens, regardless of their background, was enshrined in the Iranian constitution adopted on October 24, 1979. This principle is particularly emphasized in Article 19:

- Article 19: The people of Iran, regardless of their ethnic group or tribe, enjoy equal rights; and color, race, language, and the like do not bestow any privilege.

In addition to Article 19, other articles also reflect this principle, including Article 3:

- Article 3: The abolition of all forms of undesirable discrimination and the provision of equitable opportunities for all [people of Iran], in all material and intellectual fields.

Overall, the principle of individual rights can be said to be firmly entrenched in Iran from a legal perspective, offering a basis for protection of ethnic minorities.

### Collective Rights

This is far less true for their collective rights, however. Since the 1970s, there has been a growing acknowledgment that, to effectively protect ethnic minorities, it is equally crucial to explicitly secure their collective rights, including cultural and linguistic rights, in order to preserve their cultural heritage and identities. This new awareness culminated in various treaties aimed at safeguarding these rights. However, fearing movements for increased autonomy or even secession, the Islamic Republic has been reluctant to commit to such legal protections. For instance, it never signed the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities (1992), among other treaties.

Additionally, although Iran is a founding member of the International Labour

Whilst both the Charter of the United Nations (signed on June 26, 1945, in San Francisco), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) were important in terms of protecting human rights, they lack any direct reference to „minority rights“, as do the majority of human rights instruments from the area following soon after World War II.

Organization (ILO) and has ratified multiple ILO conventions, it did not sign its Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989). This convention aims to protect the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, ensuring their rights to land, resources, and cultural identity.

#### International Agreements on Ethnic Minority Rights Not Signed by Iran

1. **Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (ILO Convention No. 169):** This convention aims to protect the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, ensuring their rights to land, resources, and cultural identity.
2. **Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities (1992):** This declaration emphasizes the rights of minority groups to enjoy their culture, practice their religion, and use their language.
3. **Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995):** This treaty aims to protect the rights of national minorities and promote their cultural, linguistic, and religious identity.
4. **UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005):** This convention aims to protect the diversity of cultural expressions, including those of ethnic minorities, and promote their cultural rights.

Additionally, although Iran is a founding member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and has ratified multiple ILO conventions, it did not sign its Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989). This convention aims to protect the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, ensuring their rights to land, resources, and cultural identity.

#### Supremacy of Islamic Law

Another significant limitation on the rights of ethnic minorities is linked to Iran's two-tier legal system. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, adopted in 1979, explicitly states that the country is an Islamic Republic. This designation means that laws and governance are based on Islamic principles, including Sharia law.

From a legal perspective, this theocratic system can create obstacles to the protection of ethnic minorities. First, the preamble of the constitution emphasizes the importance of defending Islamic values, particularly those of Shia Islam, in shaping the country's legal and political framework. This focus can disadvantage ethnic minorities, many of whom do not adhere to the state religion. Furthermore, since criminal law in Iran is entirely shaped by Sharia law linked to Shia Islam, members of ethnic groups that do not believe in Shia Islam may find themselves in a vulnerable position. For example, this legal framework can facilitate persecution for offenses such as "causing moral corruption on earth".

Second, according to Iran's interpretation of Sharia, the concept of 'minorities' in its constitution is framed entirely in religious terms. For instance, Christians

### Ethnic group predominant religion(s)

**Turks:** Islam (predominantly Shia), with some Sunni Muslims.

**Kurds:** Islam (predominantly Sunni), with some Shia Muslims and Yazidis.

**Arabs:** Islam (predominantly Shia), with some Sunni Muslims.

**Baluchi:** Islam (predominantly Sunni), with some Shia Muslims.

and Jews are granted certain rights and representation in parliament. However, there is no mentioning of the need to protect ethnic minorities, which can hinder these groups from effectively demanding their rights, particularly in areas related to cultural or linguistic preservation.

Additionally, the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) asserts that the ultimate interpretation of laws is primarily the responsibility of selected (Shia) clerics, with the highest authority being held by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Additionally, this doctrine prevents non-Shia Muslims from holding government positions, thereby harming their individual rights. In the case of non-Muslim religious minorities—such as the Yarsanis—this extends even to ordinary government jobs, including teaching and clerical positions.



Iran's Supreme Leader is responsible for ensuring that all state actions align with Islamic principles and the directives of the ruling clerical establishment. He possesses ultimate power over all branches of government, including the military and judiciary. As such, he holds authority that supersedes that of the president. Picture source: <https://www.khabaronline.ir>

The doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* plays a central role in screening candidates for public sector employment. Introduced after the 1979 Revolution, the system is designed to ensure ideological loyalty to the Islamic Republic and adherence to the doctrine of Shi'a *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist). It evaluates candidates based on their religious beliefs and political convictions. The Constitution's emphasis on commitment to the principles of the Islamic Republic and the official state religion for the presidency and other high-ranking posts further reinforces these discriminatory structures.

Finally, Iranian officials often invoke Islamic laws to justify the restriction of individual human rights, claiming that such rights are imposed by purportedly hypocritical Western governments. While this offers considerable room for maneuver—especially in cases where these ethnic minority rights are perceived to conflict with Islamic law (Shari'a) or the laws of the Islamic Republic—even supporters of the regime acknowledge that individual human rights have gained traction in Iran and cannot be overlooked by the government.

Overall, the Iranian Constitution and other laws provide significant protection for ethnic minorities, particularly regarding individual rights even though loopholes exist. The effectiveness of this legal protection ultimately hinges on the level of implementation and adherence to the spirit of these laws, however. Unfortunately, as the next two chapters will illustrate, there is a considerable gap between the principles of equality outlined in the Iranian Constitution and the everyday realities faced by ethnic minorities in Iran's border regions. Despite

# Socio-Economic Marginalization



*Iran's official claim that all citizens have equal rights and protections under the law, ethnic minorities in border regions often endure treatment akin to second-class citizens. This chapter highlights key socio-economic disparities and their impact on the daily lives of these minorities.*

Iran's political and economic elite is predominantly composed of Persian Iranians, which grants this group a dominant position in the national economy. As a result, economic activities and development plans frequently prioritize Persian interests. Consequently, the most developed regions of Iran are typically those primarily inhabited by Persians, while the least developed and poorest areas are located in borderlands where ethnic minorities reside. This pattern is evident in several key characteristics that often reinforce one another:

### Poorer Infrastructure

While Iran is classified as a developing country, which inherently limits its infrastructure development, it is evident that citizens belonging to ethnic minorities in border regions are significantly worse off than their Persian counterparts in central areas. For example, roads and railways are either less prevalent or poorly maintained in the periphery. This lack of infrastructure not only creates inconvenience but also hampers trade and associated services.

Moreover, the absence of governmental infrastructure extends to healthcare and education. Border regions inhabited by ethnic minorities often have fewer hospitals, medical centers, and schools. A particularly poignant example is the situation faced by numerous Baluchi women. In many remote villages across Balochistan, women lack access to basic hygiene products like sanitary pads, leading to a range of health issues.

Even more concerning, poverty, harsh terrain, and a lack of transportation to urban centers prevent many women from giving birth in hospitals. The consequences are telling: of the 227,000 maternal deaths recorded nationwide, 70,000 occurred in Sistan and Baluchestan Province.

Even getting water is an issue. A 2017 report indicated that nearly 3,000 villages



\* Amnesty International Annual Report 2018: Middle East & North Africa — Iran. Accessible from <https://www.amnesty.org/>

\*\* “Unemployment Map of Provinces Spring 2024: Sistan & Baluchestan at the Peak” EcoIran, 11 July 2024. Accessible from <https://ecoiran.com/>

Also National Statistics Agency report, spring 2024. Accessible from <https://amar.org.ir/>

in Sistan and Baluchestan relied on tanker deliveries rather than piped water. This situation is not only inconvenient but also creates dangerous circumstances when villagers attempt to collect water from natural water sources — a practice known as “Hotak.” Several villagers have drowned or been attacked by wildlife. A widely publicized incident in July 2019 involved 10-year-old Havva Raeisi, who was attacked by a crocodile while washing clothes in the local river, resulting in the loss of an arm.

Many villagers also report a lack of access to electricity. Meanwhile, educational opportunities for children are limited, and upon completion finding a job may be hard\*. According to the Statistical Center, Iran’s highest unemployment rate was recorded in Sistan and Baluchestan Province at 12.3% in spring 2024\*\*, rising to 12.5% by fall.

While the challenges in remote parts of Sistan and Baluchestan Province are particularly severe, other ethnic minorities studied in this report face similar issues of receiving inadequate infrastructural investment and services, and more generally, being overlooked or sidelined by the government. Religious discrimination can play a role in this disparity. For instance, while officially permitted, Sunni schools encounter greater difficulties in obtaining governmental permission and typically receive far fewer resources than state schools. This issue extends beyond Sistan and Baluchestan Province, affecting, for instance, also (Sunni) Kurds. Ethnic minority members adhering to non-Muslim faiths may face even greater discrimination.

### Less economic opportunities

Meanwhile, in areas with significant economic investment from the central government or affiliated companies, locals—especially those belonging to ethnic minority groups—do not always benefit. As center-periphery studies indicate, much of the generated revenue tends to flow back to the center.

Take Khuzestan. Despite the province’s crucial role in Iran’s national economy through its oil industry, Arab residents see little of the wealth generated in their own region and continue to live in poverty. Local employment opportunities are often limited, as companies frequently rely on staff brought in from outside. These are typically housed in exclusive compounds and provided with comprehensive welfare systems. The Oil Welfare Services Organization offers elite schools, top-tier healthcare, and private recreational facilities, while many ordinary citizens in Khuzestan lack access to even basic services. This creates what some call a ‘parallel society’ or ‘economic apartheid.’

Public officials confirm the employment challenges faced by residents. Mohsen Heidari Alekasir, representative for Khuzestan Province in the Assembly of Experts of the Leadership, noted in 2018 how Khuzestani Arabs hold only 5% of official positions, despite constituting the majority. He emphasizes that one of the main challenges for Khuzestan’s youth is non-local hiring: even well-educated local applicants struggle to secure jobs with oil companies that source their staff from elsewhere. Earlier on, namely on July 19, 2017, Abdollah Sameri, former parliamentary representative of Khorramshahr, bitterly observes how:

“Ahwaz provides over 60% of Iran’s budget, yet ... we [as Arabs] are sidelined



\* Abdollah Sameri quoted in a statement, 19 July 2017. Accessible from <https://rasanah-iiis.org>

\*\* Reported by Iran International, quoting Karun Human Rights Organization, 18 June 2023. Accessible from <https://iranintl.com>

\*\*\* “Which indicator reflects the economic situation of society? | The misery index or the inflation and unemployment rate?”, Amar Fact. Accessible from <https://amarfact.com>

when it comes to the distribution of positions.”\*

In other regions, such challenges are also prevalent.

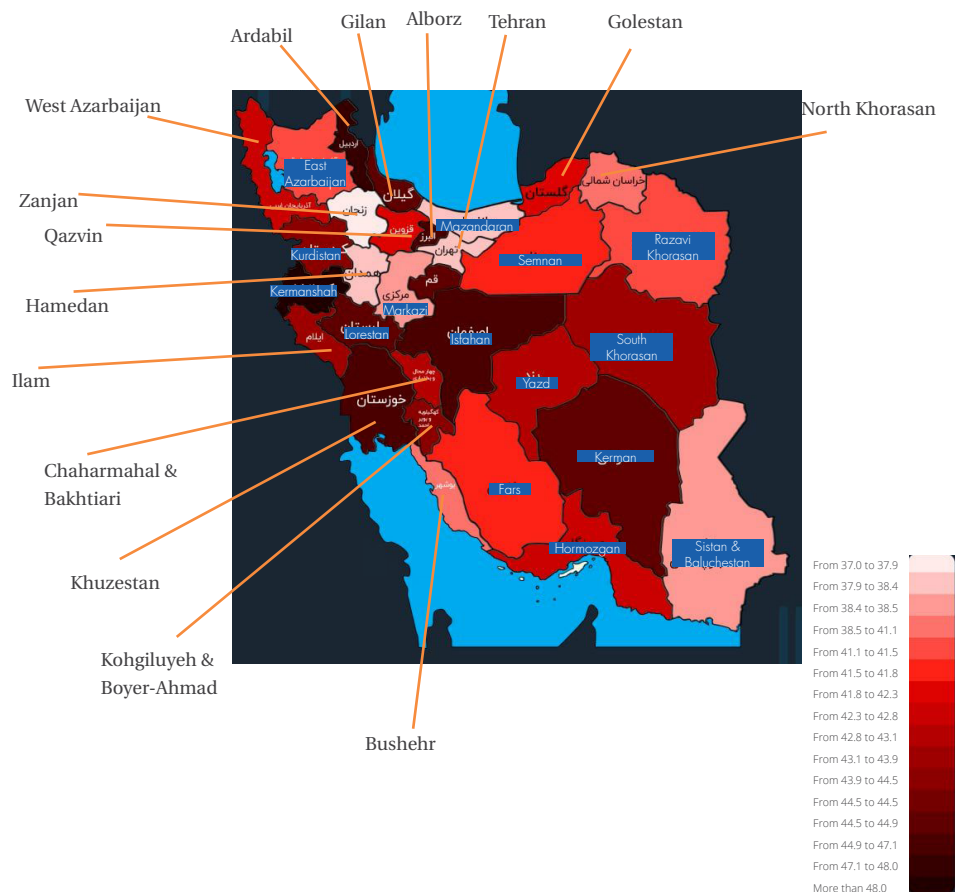
Ethnic minorities may also face easier dismissal. On June 17, 2023, approximately 100 Ahwazi Arab workers suddenly lost their positions at the National Iranian Oil Company to be replaced by Baji security force personnel recruited from elsewhere as sanctioned by the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC)\*\*. They were never informed of the reasons for their dismissal, nor did they receive their overdue wages—let alone any financial compensation.

### Misery Index Scores

The “Misery Index” confirms the existence of economic discrimination between Iran’s peripheral, ethnically non-Persian-speaking regions and its central areas. Calculated by adding the annual inflation rate to the seasonal unemployment rate, the index offers an insight into a region’s overall economic health. The provincial Misery Index for the summer of 2024 shows a national average of 41.7\*\*\*. As illustrated in the infographic below, Zanzan Province, predominantly inhabited by Persians, had the best performance with a score of 37. Tehran Province, the second highest, recorded a Misery Index of 37.9, followed by another Persian-majority province, Isfahan, with a score of 47.1. In contrast, Kermanshah Province had the highest Misery Index at 48, which is 6.3 points above the national average, making it the most economically distressed province during that period. Other provinces with significant ethnic minority populations also followed this trend.

Misery Index of summer 2024

Map from EcoIran, accessible from <https://cdn.ecoiran.com>



\* See: Kamil Alboshoka, Political Geography of Ahwaz, Dialogue Institute for Research & Studies, 2023. Accessible from <https://astudies.org/>

\*\* “Law on Supporting Families and Youthful Population,” enacted 19 Nov 2021, Research Center of the Iranian Parliament. Accessible from <https://rc.majlis.ir>

\*\* “Everything About the 2025 Birth Loan + FAQs,” Kandoo blog. Accessible from <https://vblog.kandooen.com>

### Demographic policies

Ethnic minority activists frequently highlight another factor contributing to higher poverty levels in border regions compared to other areas of the country: biased demographic policies. For instance, the Iranian government not only fails to register ethnic backgrounds but is also alleged to miscalculate the population numbers of regions predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities. This perspective is sometimes echoed by provincial politicians. In an interview in 2024, Saeed Ka’bi, the governor of Karun County (Kut-e Abdollah), stated that while the official population of the county stands around 160,000, the actual number likely reaches 250,000. He added that this underreporting has resulted in reduced government funding for the region, exacerbating various social problems\*.

Another bias may be observed in the state allocation of birth loans, particularly concerning Sistan and Baluchestan Province. The 2021 “Law on Supporting Families and Youthful Population” stipulates the provision of interest-free birth loans (“Qarz al-Hasanah”) upon childbirth to help cover child-related expenses. To encourage population growth, the amounts increase with each child: 100 million rials for the first child, 200 million for the second, 300 million for the third, 400 million for the fourth, and 500 million rials for the fifth and any subsequent children\*\*.

However, Clause D of Article 1 makes access to these benefits conditional. The fertility rate in the father’s or child’s province should not be higher than 2.5. Since the fertility rate in Sistan and Baluchestan Province is around 3.5, Baloch families are effectively denied access to this support, even though they are in urgent need of assistance\*\*\*. In 2014, the Director General of the Office for Family Health, Population Control indicated that one quarter of all children born in the province experiences stunting and malnutrition. Sunni Baloch activists therefore perceive this as a governmental tactic aimed at curbing or even halting population growth in the Sunni-majority region of Sistan and Baluchestan.

The Balochistan Human Rights Group highlights that while the 2021 “Law on Supporting Families and Youthful Population” promotes higher birth rates in Shi’a-majority regions, in Sistan and Baluchestan Province contraceptive pills were given to illiterate mothers at both rural and urban health centers. Activists argue that this practice is part of a broader strategy to suppress the growth of Sunni communities. Although the distribution of contraceptive pills is not inherently negative, the lack of accompanying proper explanation may deprive women who wish to have children.

An other way in which governmental demographic policies make life hard in borderlands, and once more particularly in Sistan and Baluchestan Province, is by not providing birth certificates. Tens of thousands of Baloch children remain invisible to the Iranian state, namely those born to Iranian mothers and fathers, usually Afghans, who reside illegally in Iran. This situation arises from the traditional practice in Iran where nationality is primarily passed through the father.

An article from Etemad Online highlights the plight of Parisa, a Baloch girl

\* Misery of the Undocumented:  
Neither Our Living Nor Our Dead  
Have Identity,” Etemad Online, 1  
Feb 2023. Accessible from [https://  
www.etemadonline.com](https://www.etemadonline.com)

lacking documentation: “The only official document bearing Parisa’s name is her vaccination card... If the court issues a letter, children like her can attend elementary school using this card.” Like many undocumented children, Parisa attends school each day, clinging to the hope that she will one day obtain Iranian citizenship and continue her secondary education.\*

In 2020, an amendment to the Iranian Civil Code allowed Iranian women to confer nationality and citizenship to their children. However, just three years later, Iran’s parliament revoked this provision, citing security concerns that arose during the „Woman, Life, Freedom“ protests. This reversal underscores the precarious status of undocumented Baloch children, who are left in a state of limbo.

Meanwhile, during the three years when in theory these children could get birth certificates, there were significant obstacles. Inadequate civil registration infrastructure in remote areas, sometimes along with reluctant officials, hampered the ability to secure these vital documents. This systemic neglect perpetuates a cycle of severe poverty, reinforcing the impression the Iranian state implements discriminatory demographic policies that marginalize ethnic minorities in border regions.

A Baluch girl holding a placard that  
reads, “I have no birth certificate.”  
Picture source: [Center for Human  
Rights in Iran](#)



The issue of inequality between center and periphery in Iran encompasses a deeper dimension. It is not merely that ethnic minorities in border areas receive less support from the state and are often overlooked by the government; the problem extends further. The government frequently acts as a barrier to local economic life.



### “Kolbari” and “Sukhtbari”

Poverty and limited job opportunities has led to the rise of *kolbari* (human portering) and *sukhtbari* (fuel smuggling) in Iran's border regions, particularly in West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Sistan and Baluchestan. Kolbars, commonly of Kurdish descent, carry untaxed goods across the mountainous Iran-Iraq border, typically into Iran, for minimal income. For the period 2019–2020, their numbers were estimated to range from 80,000 to 170,000\*, and they were believed to constitute a significant portion of the informal economy in these regions. While kolbars try to survive under challenging and often perilous conditions, they are often under attack by the state who views their activities as illegal. Human rights activists report that at least 237 kolbars died between 2019 and 2024, with 39 fatalities occurring in 2023–2024 alone. Of these, 27 were shot by Iranian border guards.

\* “What have we done for Kolbars?”  
IRNA, December 25, 2019.  
Accessible from <https://www.irna.ir>



Kolbari used to be legal but was outlawed in 2017. Picture source: [IRNA](https://www.irna.ir)

Sukhtbars, or fuel smugglers, encounter similar difficulties. Due to substantial price differences in petroleum products between Iran and neighboring countries, fuel smuggling is prevalent, particularly in Baloch-majority areas. Smugglers, often operating heavy vehicles, transport surplus fuel to high-demand areas across the border, covering 500 to 600 kilometers to reach the Pakistan border. They typically sell around 2,600 liters of diesel to Pakistani intermediaries. Like kolbars, their work is fraught with danger. Khatam Hospital reports performing numerous plastic surgeries on smugglers suffering severe burns from vehicle fires and explosions near Sarbaz.

Although fuel smuggling is officially illegal, the Iranian government has introduced programs like the “*Razzaq Scheme*” to assist residents in coping with economic hardship by permitting regulated fuel trading. Nevertheless, border guards sometimes open fire on these informal border traders or cause deadly

\* “Annual report on the situation concerning Baloch citizens who were killed or lost their lives during the year 1401 (2022–2023).” Haalvash, 24 March 2023. Accessible from <https://haalvsh.org>

The destruction of cemeteries and Sunni mosques in major cities and coastal areas of Balochistan has also become increasingly normalized, adding to this impression.

\*\* Kamil Alboshoka, Political Geography of Ahwaz, Dialogue Institute for Research & Studies, 2023. Accessible from <https://astudies.org>

See also: “Ahwazi Uprising: Between Escalation And Repression,” Ahwazna Website, 16 April 2015. Accessible from <https://countercurrents.org>

accidents during pursuits. The Haalvash annual report for 2022–2023 indicated that 82 *sukhtbars* were affected by such actions, resulting in 29 deaths\*. Many of these victims were under 30 and supported multiple families.

### Land Grabs

Another way in which governmental authorities interfere with the livelihoods of ethnic minorities in borderlands is through the systematic violation of their property rights, particularly in Kurdish, Baloch, and Arab-populated regions. According to the Balochistan Human Rights Group, over the past four decades, the government has seized numerous agricultural, residential, and commercial properties belonging to Baloch citizens. This is especially the case in major cities and along the extensive coastline of the Sea of Balochistan, stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to the port of Gwadar—under the pretext of reclaiming “national lands.”

These seizures have often involved the demolition of homes and farms. According to Baloch activists, these actions reflect a broader governmental policy aimed at pressuring Baloch to abandon their ancestral lands.

It is not only Baloch communities that are facing this issue. The Iranian government has altered, or attempted to alter, the demographic composition of Ahwaz through methods such as the permanent and temporary settlement of non-locals, economic migration, forced displacement, and confiscation of Arab lands\*\*. The subsequent loss of land heavily disrupts local agricultural practices and livelihoods.

### Environmental Degradation

Finally, environmental marginalization driven by economic activities initiated by the Iranian government, which primarily benefit the center rather than the periphery, significantly undermines the livelihoods of vulnerable ethnic minorities in border regions. Resource extraction by the state and large commercial companies often leads to severe environmental damage. The plight of the Ahwazi Arabs exemplifies this issue. Desalting factories, essential for removing salt from crude oil during refining, severely hinder agricultural productivity and degrade air quality. Oil pipelines are frequently located nearby residential areas forcing residents to sometimes wear face masks to cope with air pollution.

Despite the substantial financial gains from oil extraction, government efforts to address the resulting damage or provide compensation are lacking.

The construction of large dams by the government and resulting drying up of waterbodies may also affect borderlands. Still, the government’s response to corresponding natural disasters in border regions remains minimal. The alarming drying up of the Hoor al-Azim Wetland and Lake Urmia serve as critical examples of this issue, as outlined in Appendix III.

Overall, the environmental crises caused by government mismanagement and excessive resource extraction, without repair or compensation schemes, significantly undermine the livelihoods, health and economic opportunities for ethnic minorities in borderlands. Combined with biases in resource allocation



Lake Urmia has dried significantly (1984 to 2014). Pictures from [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Urmia)

and the other factors mentioned above, this has resulted in stark disparities in welfare between the center and the periphery. Statistically, this difference is evident in the Human Development Index, where regions predominantly populated by Persian Iranians rank among the top tiers, while areas inhabited by ethnic minorities occupy the three lowest echelons (for statistics based on academic interpretations of the HDI in Iran see Appendix II). Besides other factors, such as the gap in education and income, higher mortality levels in borderlands appear to significantly account for this difference (see the text box below).

### Life Expectancy Gap

Data from the National Organization for Civil Registration in 2023–2024 show that the national average age at death was 66.2 years. Among all Iranian provinces, Sistan and Baluchestan recorded the lowest average lifespan, at just 50.7 years, which is approximately 11 years below the national average (around 66 years). In contrast, Gilan Province had the highest average age at death, at 71.3 years. The 20 year gap in life expectancy can largely be explained by disparities in access to healthcare, nutrition, and general living conditions\*.

\* “20-Year Life Expectancy Gap Between Two Provinces in the Country”, Arman-e Emrooz, April 14, 2025. Accessible from <https://armandaily.ir>

# Societal Marginalization



In addition to socio-economic disparities, ethnic minorities in Iran experience significant societal marginalization. In the border regions where these communities reside, their linguistic and cultural rights are frequently suppressed, exacerbating their marginalization and hindering their ability to preserve their identities. Additionally, in their interactions with the Persian population, they may experience substantial biases that contribute to their political exclusion.

### Linguistic suppression

While Iranian law states that all citizens are equal, in practice, some are more equal than others when it comes to language. For Persians, the ability to use their language freely is a given. Ethnic minorities in Iran, do not enjoy this privilege – including in their own borderlands. Iranian law prohibits the use of any language other than Persian in public life. Beyond this, the use of the own language is not always possible either.

Linguistic restrictions start the moment children enter school. Iranian law stipulates that the primary language of instruction throughout the curriculum is Persian, and this law is often strictly enforced. For example, regarding the Baloch community in Sistan and Baluchestan province, the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) has reported that “the educational system rarely offers instruction in the Balochi language”.

Ethnic minority activists consider this situation highly detrimental. The enforced use of Persian in schools undermines local cultural identity and negatively impacts academic performance. Children whose mother tongue is not Persian often struggle to understand lessons and express themselves, leading to lower school results (and possibly reduced interest in school). This issue is especially pronounced for children from poorer or remote areas with limited exposure to Persian, reinforcing socio-economic inequalities and hindering their future opportunities. Furthermore, such pupils often receive insufficient support to address the challenges of low proficiency in Persian\*\*.

Meanwhile, the (two) hours of weekly lessons in the native language that Iranian law and policies formally mandate do not always occur or are of low quality due to underfunding. This leaves the impression that beyond ‘safeguarding national unity’—the official rationale for the use of Persian in schools—the government also intends to diminish local languages or make them disappear.

In other public areas of life, using the native language is equally challenging. For instance, it is formally required to speak Persian in all governmental offices.

The impact of linguistic suppression in Iran extends beyond public life, infiltrating the private sphere and affecting personal choices. While individuals are technically permitted to speak their native languages at home, any visible adherence to or promotion of these languages can lead to state suspicion of not being sufficiently Iranian, resulting in corresponding sanctions. This occurs despite the constitution stipulating that teaching and practicing other languages is allowed. For example, civil activists in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan who teach Kurdish and Turkish in non-governmental settings on a voluntary basis, including literary and cultural associations, frequently face state repression. Notable instances include the arrests of members of the Nozhin Cultural and

\* “Blood Friday of Zahedan: Convergence of National Rage and Repression in Balochistan”, HRANA (Human Rights Activists News Agency in Iran), September 2023. Accessible from <https://www.hra-news.org>

\*\* “Siwan Ebrahimi, Kurdish-language teacher, imprisoned to serve a sentence”, Kurdistan human Rights, 4 July 2024. Accessible from <https://kurdistanhumanrights.org/>

Social Association in Sanandaj (Kurdistan), which focuses on Kurdish language and literature education as well as environmental awareness, including Zahra Mohammadi, Sivan Ebrahimi, Soma Mohammadi, and Azad Abbasi. Formerly trained teachers in the local language may also be viewed with suspicion, especially when their lessons have cultural dimensions.

When arresting ethnic minorities for promoting their native language and culture, authorities may resort to fabricated charges. According to a report by the Kurdistan Human Rights Network dated July 4, 2025, Kurdish language teacher and Nozhin Association board member Sivan Ebrahimi was sentenced to ten years in prison for “forming a group with the intent to disrupt national security” and one year for “propaganda against the regime.” He received this sentence on December 3, 2023, in Branch 1 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Sanandaj, presided over by Judge Karami. However, the Kurdistan Court of Appeals later acquitted him of the first charge and reduced his sentence for the second to eight months of discretionary imprisonment, after which he was released\*.

\* “Siwan Ebrahimi, Kurdish-language teacher, imprisoned to serve a sentence”, Kurdistan human Rights, 4 July 2024. Accessible from <https://kurdistanhumanrights.org/>

Similar dynamics are evident in other borderlands. According to the Association for Human Rights of Azerbaijanis in Iran, Turkic and Azerbaijani literary associations have repeatedly faced police persecution for defending the Azerbaijani Turkic language and commemorating February 21, *International Mother Language Day*. Police forces have disrupted poetry readings and literacy classes conducted in the Azerbaijani Turkic language, labeling these gatherings as illegal assemblies and propaganda for Pan-Turkism. As a result, poets and writers have been arrested on charges of conspiring to undermine national security.

According to the Freedom to Write Index, in 2024, Iran was the second-biggest jailer of writers in the world, with 43 people in prison, including 13 women. This made Iran the top country for imprisoning female writers globally. A significant portion of those detained were writers from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Picture source: [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)



\*\* “Fifteen Ahwazi Arabs Arrested After Holding an Arabic Poetry Night”, National Democratic Arab Movement–al-Ahwaz, 3 October 2013. Accessible from <https://www.padmaz.org>

Arab poets and writers have also long been targets of lengthy prison sentences, and, in some cases, execution. For example, in October 2013, security forces arrested 15 Arab cultural activists and poets during an Arabic poetry night. These individuals had previously organized poetry gatherings in public spaces but were compelled to move them to private homes due to increasing pressure and prohibitions imposed by security and plainclothes forces\*. The suspicious death of Hassan Heydari, a 27-year-old Arab poet, and the subsequent protests in November 2019 represent another example of repression against poets and crackdowns on poetry gatherings. Heydari was well known among Khuzestani

\* Shahed Alavi, “Ahwazis Protest After Death of a Young Poet; Why Is Hasan Heydari’s Death Suspicious?” IranWire, 12 November 2019. Accessible from <https://iranwire.com>

\*\* “Arrest of Abbas Sahagi, Poet and Cultural Activist Based in Ahvaz,” Human Rights in Iran, 11 November 2019. Accessible from <https://humanrightsinir.org>

\*\*\* “For the First Time, a Khuzestani Arab Is Governor: Who Is Mowali-Zadeh?” Al-Ain Persian, 10 January 2025. Accessible from <https://alainpersian.com>

† “Return of Ahwazi Arabs to Khuzestan!” Instagram page Khuzestan—Part of Iran’s Soul, 31 March 2025. Accessible from <https://www.instagram.com/>

‡ Video and commentary on the Telegram channel of Abbas Akhouni, 26 March 2025. Accessible from <https://t.me/AbbasAkhouni>

§ “Civil Registration Office Opposes Registration of Identity for Three Children in Tabriz,” HRANA, 22 December 2024. Accessible from <https://www.hra-news.org>

¶ “Death of an Ahwazi Woman at the Turkey Border Due to Frostbite,” IranWire, 17 Jan 2022. Accessible from <https://iranwire.com>

Arabs for his popular poetry, which narrated the struggles, aspirations, and daily lives of the people in colloquial Arabic. He was arrested on August 11, 2018, just days after reciting a poem titled “Ya Leytana” (“If Only We”) at an Arabic gathering and was subjected to nearly 40 days of interrogation. Protesters believe that mistreatment during his detention led to his sudden and unexplained death\*. During his funeral on November 11, 2019, several cultural activists from Ahvaz, including local singer Abbas Sahagi, were arrested”.

In addition to direct sanctions, there may also be more implicit pressure on ethnic minority members to cease using their own language. This extends to the highest political echelons. Recently, Mohammad Reza Mavali-zadeh, the first Arabic governor of Khuzestan\*\*\* caused controversy for delivering his Eid al-Fitr greeting in Arabic†. And when a video surfaced in which Pezeshkian speaks Turkish during a meeting with state officials, he faced backlash from Persian-nationalist political circles. Abbas Akhouni, former Minister of Roads and Urban Development, posted on Telegram on April 25: “Mr President! You are currently the President of all Iran, not merely the representative of Tabriz. Therefore, you must speak at public gatherings only in Persian, the official language of the country. Disregarding this matter will ultimately cost the nation dearly.”‡ And when Pezeshkian wanted to read a poem in Turkish during Culture Week in Tabriz in 2025, [officials tried to stop him](#).

Even when not explicitly promoting the own minority language, open adherence to it can lead to complications with authorities. Some non-Persian families have encountered obstacles when naming their children. For instance, the Civil Registry Office in Tabriz initially refused to issue birth certificates for a newly born triplet with the Turkish names Elshan, Elnur and Sevgi. Consequently, they remained undocumented for a prolonged period§. As a result of this repression, unrestricted use of the own language is often a key desire for ethnic minorities in borderlands.

In prison, having a child with a non-Persian name can raise suspicion and lead to additional punishment. Sepideh Qolijan, a political prisoner who served part of her sentence in Sepidar Prison in Ahvaz, documented the plight of Arab women prisoners in her 2020 book, *Tilapia Sips the Blood of the Hawizeh Marshes*. In it, she recounts the story of Makiyeh Neysi, a mother of three who was arrested in November 2019¶ due to her husband’s illegal activities. One of her children was a young boy named Qusay.

“They beat her multiple times, asking why she had named her son after Saddam’s son. But Makiyeh insisted it was a beautiful name in Arabic, with a lovely sound, and she didn’t even know Saddam had a son by that name. They harassed her because her son barely understood Persian—something they treated as a crime. However, Makiyeh’s family lived in a poor neighborhood of Ahvaz, where proper education was lacking.”

Makiyeh died in Sepidar Prison on December 14, 2020, after falling ill and being denied hospital transfer.



\* “One of the Prominent Kurdish MPs Criticizes the Prevention of Nowruz Celebrations in Rabat and Sardasht,” Kurdpa Agency, 27 March 2018. Accessible from <https://kurdpa.net>

\*\* “Nowruz 2024 Celebrations in Kurdistan; Continued Arrests and Case Filings Against Dozens of Kurdish Citizens and Activists”, Kurdistan Human Rights, 17 May 2024. Accessible from <https://kurdistanhumanrights.org>

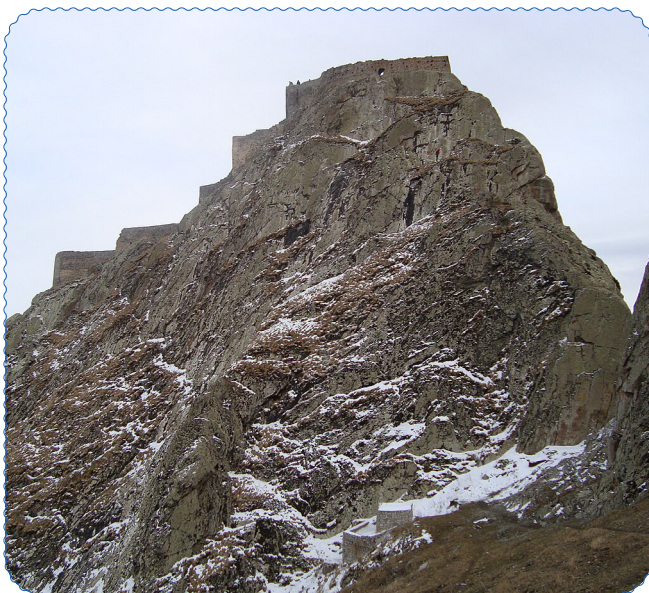
\*\*\* “Abbas Nikravan Released, Detained for Qal’eh Babak Gathering,” HRANA, 12 July 2018. Accessible from <https://www.hra-news.org>

### Cultural suppression

Alongside linguistic repression, ethnic minorities in borderlands often face cultural constraints. For instance, although there are no formal laws forbidding cultural celebrations, authorities frequently ban cultural festivals or order non-attendance, ostensibly out of fear to this could fuel demands for greater autonomy. This occurs despite Article 37 of the Constitution, which states that holding such gatherings—provided participants are unarmed and the event does not violate Islamic principles—does not require permission from any governmental authority.\*

For instance, as mentioned in chapter two, it’s not just Persians who celebrate Nowruz (New Year) so does the Kurdish population. In 2024, under the pretext that Ramadan overlapped with Kurdish Nowruz representatives of the Supreme Leader in Kurdish areas called upon the population not to hold any ceremonies\*\*. Celebrations organized by grassroots popular groups, were nevertheless held in many cities and villages, even starting about a month before the new year and continuing for several weeks afterward. According to the Kurdistan Human Rights Network, at least 38 Kurdish civil activists got arrested as a result.

Azeri Turks also face limitations in organizing their festivals. Since 2000, Azerbaijani activists have sought to hold the annual “Babak Castle” ceremony during the first days of Tir, (late June – early July). This event, held at Babak Castle in East Azerbaijan Province, symbolizes Azerbaijani cultural identity by celebrating Babak Khorramdin’s resistance against (Arab) invaders. Since 2005, the ceremony has faced increased restrictions, with nearly 50 Azerbaijani Turkic activists arrested in June 2018 alone\*\*\*. To this day, authorities deny permits for holding ceremonies at the site.



Cultural marginalization occurs when certain groups are pushed to the periphery of society, often resulting in their cultural practices, values, and identities being devalued or ignored.

Picture of Babak Castle from [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babak_Castle)



Picture of the start of the climb to the Babak Castle from [Iranview.ir](https://iranview.ir)

\* “Baloch Are Arrested for Various Reasons, Among the Most Important as Follows,” Instagram page of Sahab, 29 October 2024. Accessible from <https://www.instagram.com>

\*\* “Leila Hosseinzadeh, former political prisoner, defended her thesis at university without compulsory hijab,” BBC Persian Instagram, 19 September 2023. Accessible from <https://www.instagram.com>

\*\*\* Meysam Badamchi, “When Talking about Pischevari and Qazi Mohammad Becomes a Crime: Leila Hosseinzadeh’s Thesis,” Radio Zamaneh, 23 September 2023. Accessible from <https://www.radiozamaneh.com>

Baloch people have faced similar repression when organizing cultural ceremonies. The *Coordinating Organization of Balochistan Protests* identifies cultural and artistic activities as a key reason for state targeting. In a report on the arrests of Baloch individuals, it states: “Artists and cultural activists who express critical views through artistic programs, sing critical Balochi songs, or work to strengthen Balochi identity are arrested.”\*

### Borderland versus Center

Somewhat ironically, ethnic minorities may experience greater cultural freedom when they are outside their borderlands, where authorities may have a less security-oriented approach. For instance, while large-scale Turkic music concerts are permitted in Tehran, such permits are rarely granted in Tabriz, preventing the majority of Turks from enjoying these events openly.

When it comes to conducting research related to one’s cultural heritage, options may be more limited, especially in case of social media pressure. A notable example is Leila Hosseinzadeh, a former political prisoner, who faced backlash following her master’s thesis defense on September 19, 2023, which was filmed and shared online. During her defense\*\*, she wore a plain dress without a headscarf and honored Qazi Mohammad and Seyyed Ja’far Pischevari, leaders of ethnic movements (Azeri and Kurdish) that emerged in the final years of World War II but were violently suppressed by the Pahlavi regime. This provoked online harassment from radical Persian nationalists, who labeled her a separatist\*\*\*.

Under pressure, the University of Tehran declared her participation in the Masters ineligible. This incident underscored the lack of freedom of expression for non-Persian ethnicities and became a trending topic on Farsi Twitter. In response, Hosseinzadeh remarked, “The situation is tragically comic,” urging readers to understand her tribute by reading her thesis.

### Subliminal Discrimination

In addition to the constraints on the promotion of their language and culture, such as the limitations faced by Azeri Turks in organizing festivals and the challenges of naming children, ethnic minorities in Iran often experience more subtle forms of discrimination in their interactions with the wider Persian society. The experience of subliminal discrimination faced by ethnic minorities in Iran is deeply rooted in societal prejudices and systemic biases that manifest in various aspects of daily life. This discrimination is not always overt but is perpetuated through cultural narratives, media representations, and educational practices that marginalize these communities.

### Prejudices and Stereotypes

One of the most pervasive forms of subliminal discrimination against ethnic minorities is the existence of prejudices. Ethnic minorities may be unfairly labelled as stupid, overly fierce or unproductive or unreliable. For instance, there are a lot of jokes about alleged stupidity of Turkish Iranians. Such stereotypes not only dehumanize these groups but also create a societal narrative that justifies

Just how sensitive the use of minority languages can be is illustrated by the fact that some Persians prefer not to use the common greeting in Persian for hello—*salaam*—opting instead for the less used *dorood* to emphasize their cultural identity and distinguish themselves from Arabic loan words. In addition to wanting to keep their language free from Arabic loanwords, this could also be because the frequent use of Arabic by the country's authoritarian clerical regime has given the language a negative connotation, to the frustration of Iran's Arab population, who may not necessarily share the same views and sentiments as those in power.

\* "Don't Portray Balochistan as Brutal," Shargh Newspaper, 27 May 2022 (re-published at). Accessible at <https://www.magiran.com>

their marginalization. Negative perceptions of minority languages further exacerbate this issue. For instance, the Turkish language may be ridiculed and looked down upon. Meanwhile, Arab may be considered with hostility as the dictatorial clerical regime often uses it, e.g. when quoting from the Koran. When a language is frequently dismissed the cultural identity and heritage of those who speak it gets undermined.

### Media Representation

Caricatures and negative depictions of ethnic groups serve to perpetuate harmful myths and foster a culture of ridicule or suspicion. Problematically, the portrayal of ethnic minorities in (state controlled) television and media sometimes reinforces this. On national tv a recurring trope is the comic portrayal of ethnic characters as social outcasts. One example occurred in *Fitileh*—a comedy originally aimed at children and teenagers, aired on Iran's Channel Two. An episode on November 6, 2015, depicted an Azerbaijani-speaking Iranian brushing his teeth with a toilet brush. Other ethnic groups have also been affected. For instance, in a context where Iran's Arabic population was sometimes targeted after the stampede of pilgrims in Mecca which also included Iranians, comic Akbar Abdi made a crude comment that was widely perceived as racist about Arabs on national tv. In state newspapers such portrayals can sometimes also be found, including once a Turkish speaking cockroach in a cartoon in a children's weekend supplement of a national newspaper. Many Baloch also feel unhappy about their representation on television. Baloch activists criticize the focus on drug and arms trafficking in the portrayal of Sistan and Baluchestan Province in Iranian TV and film, arguing that this depicts a "violent image" of the Baloch.\*

### Educational System

The educational system in Iran further marginalizes ethnic minorities by largely failing to acknowledge their cultural backgrounds or specific circumstances. Schoolbooks predominantly focus on Persian history and culture. When ethnic minority groups are mentioned, it is sometimes in the context of their past (presumed) misdeeds, which can reinforce negative stereotypes (see also the text box below). This lack of representation in educational materials can contribute to a sense of alienation among minority students and diminishes their cultural pride.

### Borderland versus Center

Saeed Paivandi (2008) conducted a notable study titled "Discrimination and Intolerance in Iranian Textbooks," published by the Freedom House Institute and later republished on the website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This report analyzes discrimination against women, as well as religious and ethnic minorities, in 95 textbooks published in Iran between 2006 and 2007. It concludes:

"Iranian textbooks pay little attention to the cultures, traditions, languages, or other issues related to minorities. While direct hostility toward officially recognized religious and ethnic minorities is not openly promoted, these



\* Freedom House. (2008). Country Report No. 58927. Retrieved January 1, 2025, from <https://www.refworld.org>

\*\* Kheiltash, O., & Rust, V. "Inequalities in Iranian Education: Representations of Gender, Socioeconomic Status, Ethnic Diversity, and Religious Diversity in School Textbooks and Curricula." In *Inequality in Education: Comparative and International Perspectives* (Holsinger & Jacob, eds.), Springer, 2008, pp. 392–416 (esp. pp. 410–411). Accessible from <https://link.springer.com/>

\*\*\* U.S. Department of State. 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov>

textbooks consistently present Iranian society as a mono-identity Persian-Islamic community composed of Shia Muslims, effectively denying the presence of Iranians belonging to other religions or ethnicities.”\*

Paivandi further notes that “the textbooks acknowledge the languages and regions inhabited by some recognized ethnic minorities—specifically Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Baluchistan. However, in several cases, they highlight the risks of separatist tendencies among ethnic minority groups and portray their attempts to gain autonomy as a threat to the Iranian government.”

Omid Kheiltash and Val Rust (2008) explored the representation of ethnic minorities in their article titled “Inequalities in Iranian Education: Representation of Gender, Socioeconomic Status, Ethnic Diversity, and Religious Diversity in School Textbooks and Curricula.” This article was published in the book *Inequality in Education: Comparative and International Perspectives* under the auspices of the Comparative Education Research Center at the University of Hong Kong. They discuss the representation of ethnic minorities in Iranian textbooks:

“Iranian education clearly addresses minorities, but this is most often done in the context of religion. Official references to minority groups in Iran tend to refer almost exclusively to religious minorities and virtually ignore ethnic minorities. However, while there appear to be explicit efforts to recognize and address the educational needs of religious minorities, the standard textbooks utilized by the majority of the school-going population, namely, the Shi’a Muslims, give almost no attention to the fact that religious or ethnic minorities are part of the Iranian national population. When they do, the references are usually negative in character. No course or special curriculum modules are found that deal with specific ethnic issues. Kurdish or Turkish people and other ethnic minorities in Iran are not allowed to institute special programs dealing with their respective groups; all programs are uniform throughout the country. All pupils in all areas of the country are judged on a uniform scale, and there is no distinction among them. In addition, the entrance examination for university students cannot take local considerations into account. Authorities cannot consider the ethnic situation in their decision to admit students.”

Today, these patterns are still visible. Meanwhile, the 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom (U.S. government, 2022) cites research titled “Radical Education in Iran,” conducted by the civil society organization Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Curriculums. This research analyzes all new Iranian textbooks from grades 1 to 12 for the 2021–2022 academic year. It describes a dual image of Sunni Arab communities presented across various educational levels: “On one hand, they are depicted as fellow Muslim compatriots and oppressed groups receiving help from the Iranian government, supporting Iran in wars and jihad against foreign forces. On the other hand, bitter memories persist of Arab conquerors and Sunni dynasties that historically ruled over Iranians and Shias.”\*\*\* The latter is important since rather than race it’s often historical animosities often underpin grudges against minority groups.

### *University Admission Practices*

Moreover, the challenging compulsory admission tests for universities, often disregard the cultural backgrounds and living circumstances of ethnic minority children. By failing to recognize the unique challenges faced by these students, the educational system effectively prioritizes the experiences of the Persian majority, further entrenching social inequalities by potentially limiting the access of ethnic minority students to higher education.

### *Underrepresentation in Economic and Political Spheres*

The impact of subliminal discrimination is also evident in the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in (high-level) economic and political positions. Ethnic minorities often face barriers that prevent them from accessing the same opportunities as their Persian counterparts. The stereotypes and prejudices that characterize their experiences can lead to a lack of trust from employers and decision-makers, further entrenching their marginalization. It is telling that some Arabs in Khuzestan feel compelled to change their family names into Persian ones, to facilitate the process of finding a job.\*

\* “Changing Family Names to Find Jobs by Khuzestani Arabs!”, Eqtesad Shafaf, 26 October 2018. Accessible from <https://www.55online.news>

# Advocacy & Government Responses

*Even though protesting can be highly dangerous, members of ethnic minorities in borderlands frequently voice their grievances about their situation. This chapter delves into some of the key demands, as well as governmental responses to these.*

Marginalized and discriminated against in various aspects of life, advocacy by ethnic minorities in Iran's borderlands takes many forms. The ways in which these citizens express their discontent or demand change can vary significantly. Rather than striving for completeness, this chapter will highlight some of the most prominent issues in the socio-economic, environmental, linguistic, cultural, and political rights domains. In doing so, it will also shed light on the methods of protest employed. Following this, the chapter will detail the overall government responses for each domain.

## Advocacy in Various Areas

### Socio-economic

Given the socio-economic gap between the center and its hinterlands, many members of ethnic minorities demand improved economic conditions. These demands take various forms, one of which is the call for better employment opportunities. Borderlanders may seek to achieve this by advocating for jobs with large employers. For instance, in Iran's West Azerbaijan province, villagers in the Takab district [held rallies](#) to protest the lack of local employment at the Agh-Dareh gold mine.

Labor activism is also relatively prominent in border regions. In terms of organized labor activism, Kurdistan has a particularly strong tradition. For example, the Kurdish branches of Iran's national teachers' union have been active in advocating for the rights of educators and addressing issues related to working conditions.\*

Labor activism is also relatively prominent in borderlands. When it comes to organized labor activism, Kurdistan has a particularly strong tradition in this regard. For instance, the Kurdish branches of Iran's national teachers' union are among the most active in the country.

Economic demands also triggered widespread protests, as demonstrated by the outrage over rising gasoline prices that erupted across the country in 2019. Meanwhile, the Women, Life, Freedom Movement, which originated in Kurdistan in 2022, became a vital platform for ethnic minorities to voice their aspirations alongside the challenges faced by women. Significant demands emerged for an end to barriers to basic rights in areas such as employment, as well as for increased participation in public and political life for both women and ethnic minorities.

Yet another way in which borderlands seek to fight their socio-economic marginalization is by urging their local politicians to bring their issues to Tehran. For instance, in 2021, in the Iranian Parliament, MP Jalal Mahmoudzadeh from Mahabad in West Azerbaijan Province urged the then Minister of Interior to "[stop killing and injuring kolbars and Sukhtbars](#)," calling for the establishment of "*kolbari* cooperatives" and "cross border initiatives" to address the lack of employment in the region.

\* "Our voices will not be silenced. Special report on the impact of state violence on Iranian teacher movement", Volunteer Activists, 10 December 2023. Accessible from <https://www.volunteeractivists.nl>

### *Environmentally*

On the back of economic development, there has been significant environmental damage in borderlands, while climate change also presents new challenges. Calls for environmental justice resonate throughout the borderlands under discussion, including Iran's Azerbaijan region, which comprises the provinces of East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Ardabil.

The drying up of Lake Urmia is particularly prominent in these discussions. For instance, during football matches, fans of Tractor Sazi, a local team, often display banners and chant slogans to raise awareness about the crisis facing Lake Urmia, urging support from other parts of the country.

Street protests also serve as a major form of activism. On April 24, 2018, during then-President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Tabriz, demonstrators lined the route to Takhti Stadium, holding banners that called for immediate action to save Lake Urmia\*. Further protests erupted on May 23, 2018, in Urmia and Tabriz over the lake's deteriorating condition. To this day, demands for an end to governmental inaction remain a significant concern in the region, frequently expressed through various means, including social media.

\* "Protesters gathered over the drying of Lake Urmia, coinciding with Rouhani's trip to Tabriz," VOA News, 24 April 2018. Accessible from <https://ir.voanews.com/>

### *Linguistic and cultural Rights*

In addition to socio-economic and environmental concerns, activism in borderlands places a strong emphasis on linguistic and cultural issues, with bilingual education serving as a key focus. Teachers frequently spearhead these efforts.



Protest gathering of Marivan teachers on 22 February 2022 – one of the placards reads: "Our language is our identity."

Source: [Telegram channel of the "Coordinating Council of Cultural-Educators' Unions of Iran"](#)

Additionally, there have been protests against the repression of cultural festivals, with ethnic minorities sometimes expressing their dissent by organizing and attending these events despite the restrictions.

Protests against sidelining or perpetuating stereotypes by media may also be an important focus of protests. For instance, in April 2018, Arab protesters gathered outside the Khuzestan IRIB center in Ahvaz to protest a program aired on Iran's state TV. The program featured puppets in traditional clothing representing various Iranian provinces, but the puppet for Khuzestan did not wear traditional Arab attire. Protesters argued that, since the majority of the population in the province is Arab, the puppet should have worn Khuzestani Arab clothing\*\*. Local politicians may join in. The parliamentary representative of Ahvaz wrote to Ali

\*\* "Unrest in Ahvaz Over Television 'Insult' to Khuzestani Arabs," BBC Persian, 29 March 2018. Accessible from <https://www.bbc.com>

\* “Protest Over Removal of Khuzestani Arabs from IRIB Programming,” Saba News Agency, 25 March 2018. Accessible from <https://www.bartarinha.ir>

\*\* “Strong Protest by People of Sistan and Baluchestan Against This Episode of the Series ‘Noun Kh,’” Rokna, 28 April 2024. Accessible from <https://www.rokna.net>

Picture from the TV series *Noon Khe*

Asgari, then head of IRIB, demanding an official apology from him and the program’s producers to the Arab people of Khuzestan.\*

More recently, the TV series *Noon Khe*, which aired in April 2024, sparked protests from Baloch communities, who argued that the show portrayed Baloch people as simpletons always resorting to physical force to resolve their problems.\*\*



### Political Rights

In addition to seeking increased participation for ethnic minorities, including non-Shia groups, there is often a significant demand for democracy and improved human rights, particularly for women, in border regions.

### Government Responses

Government responses to the advocacy of ethnic minorities have varied, but they generally fall into two categories: granting or compromise or suppression with a notable emphasis on the later.

During election campaigns, presidential candidates may adopt bolder stances, directly addressing the concerns of ethnic minorities to appeal to the „ethnic vote.“ This was particularly evident in the case of Pezeshkian who alongside more freedom for women, also pledged to improve the plight of ethnic communities.

### Socio-economic demands

On the whole socio-economic marginalization has been little addressed under Iranian governments in spite of some efforts by governments such as the Makran Coastal Development Project and Razzaq Economic Plan for Sistan and Baluchestan Province.

However, the reach of these projects is often limited; ultimately, they primarily benefit the center and can sometimes involve measures that have negative consequences, such as population displacement. Meanwhile, trade union activists have faced severe persecution. Notably, they are not only arrested more quickly but also typically receive much longer sentences. This is evident in the lengthy sentences imposed on activists from Kurdish teacher trade unions, a [pattern that continues to this day](#).

The government’s response to sometimes spontaneous protests by job seekers



\* “Authorized Kolbari Cards Issued for 62,500 Heads of Households,” Moj News Agency, May 14, 2025. Accessible from <https://www.mojnews.com>

“Pezeshkian Government Issued Cards for Kolbari,” Iran International, May 14, 2025. Accessible from <https://www.iranintl.com>

\*\* Raghieh Rezaei, “Arrest of Khuzestani Arab Poets and Citizens Linked to Assad’s Fall,” IranWire, 10 January 2025. Accessible from <https://iranwire.com/>

“Campaign of Terror Against Minorities in Iran,” Voice of America, 31 January 2025. Accessible from <https://ir.voanews.com/>

in front of companies is mixed. At times, these protests are ignored or met with empty promises, while at other times, they result in arrests, as seen in the earlier-mentioned protests at the Agh-Dareh gold mine.

As pledged during his election campaign in late spring 2024 Pezeshkian did address the challenges faced by *Kolbars*. On May 15, 2025 the official communication channel of the Vice President for Executive Affairs announced that in Kermanshah Province, 62,500 household heads had received authorized *Kolbari* cards. These cards allow holders to legally import up to \$450 million worth of goods into the country each year. While this does not encompass all *kolbars*, it nonetheless represents an important initiative. The government has also specified a list of permitted goods in an effort to distinguish legal cross-border trade from smuggling.\*

### *Linguistic and cultural Rights*

Iranian authorities are generally responsive to complaints from minorities regarding specific discriminatory representations on state television, especially when the protests are substantial. This has frequently led to the cancellation of programs, or directors (or comedians) being compelled to apologize and, in some cases, facing termination. The same goes for controversial cartoons in newspapers.

However, pronounced demands for cultural rights, such as an end to government obstruction of cultural festivals and calls for education in the mother tongue, are often ignored. Meanwhile, literary figures and cultural activists continue to face heavy persecution. For instance, there was a wave of arrests targeting Arab poets, writers, and cultural activists began in January and February 2025. Among those detained were Ehlam Bandar, a cultural activist and bookstore owner in Ahvaz; Milad Bahri, a photographer known for documenting marginalized neighborhoods in Ahvaz; and Saeed Esmaeil, a writer of Arabic children’s books.\*\*

### *Environmental Rights*

When it comes to environmental issues raised by borderland communities, the government’s response has been largely characterized by inaction. Despite recurring protests, petitions, and campaigns over crises such as the drying of Lake Urmia, authorities have failed to take meaningful steps to address these challenges. Occasional promises and symbolic gestures—such as presidential visits or the formation of committees—have rarely translated into concrete measures. Instead, local demands for environmental justice are often met with silence or deflection, leaving affected communities to bear the brunt of environmental degradation and climate-related hardships without substantial governmental support.

### *Political Rights*

When it comes to political representation of ethnic minorities, some steps were made. The longstanding taboo of appointing a Sunni as a provincial governor was broken under Pezeshkian who stated earlier during his presidential campaign:

“We should not allow only a few people and a group to take power and be on the scene. Sunnis, Kurds, and Baluch are all our people. As a Muslim, I believe that

\* “Pejman Tahouri, “What Were Pezeshkian’s 10 Promises on Citizenship Rights and Minorities?” IranWire, 9 July 2024. Accessible from <https://iranwire.com>

\*\* “Pezeshkian on Including Sunnis in His Cabinet: ‘Anyone Who Is Qualified Should Be Used,’” Entekhab, 14 June 2024. Accessible from <https://www.entekhab.ir>

\*\*\* “After Four Decades, a Sunni Kurd Becomes Governor of Kurdistan,” BBC Persian, 18 September 2024. Accessible from <https://www.bbc.com>

† “A Sunni Baloch Appointed Governor of Sistan-Baluchestan,” Radio Farda, 31 October 2024. Accessible from <https://www.radiofarda.com>

‡ “Who Is Arash Zereh’tan, the First Sunni Kurd Governor of Kurdistan after 40 Years?” IranWire, 18 September 2024. Accessible from <https://iranwire.com>

§ “First Sunni Kurdish Governor of Iranian Kurdistan in Four Decades,” Radio Farda, 19 September 2024. Accessible from <https://www.radiofarda.com>

¶ “Death Sentences for Kurdish Women Political Prisoners; What We Know About Verisheh Moradi’s Case,” BBC Persian, 15 Nov 2024. Accessible from <https://www.bbc.com>

¶¶ “Pakhshan Azizi: Life and Humanitarian Aider Among ISIS War Survivors,” BBC Persian, 22 Jan 2025. Accessible from <https://www.bbc.com>

every human being has power.”\*

And: “Anyone who is qualified should be used.”\*\*

In line with this stance, Masoud Pezeshkian’s cabinet appointed two Sunni muslims —Arash Zereh’tan Lahouni (a Kurd)\*\*\* and Mansour Bijar (a Baloch)†— as governors of Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchestan provinces, respectively. Media outlets highlighted the historic nature of these appointments with headlines such as “An appointment that breaks a 46-year taboo of a Sunni Kurdish governor”‡ and “First appointment of a Sunni Kurd as Governor of Iranian Kurdistan after four decades”§, underscoring the exceptional nature of such moves for minorities who are not only non-Persian but also do not adhere to the official state religion. While this are hopeful developments, the exclusion of non-muslim religious minorities continues.



Arash Zereh’tan Lahouni was appointed Governor of Kurdistan Province under Pezeshkian’s cabinet.

Picture source: [rouydad24.ir](https://rouydad24.ir)



Mansour Bijar was appointed Governor of Sistan and Baluchestan Province under Pezeshkian’s cabinet.

Picture source: [nournews.ir](https://nournews.ir)

Meanwhile, calls for democracy and adherence to human rights, including enhanced rights for women, are not only ignored but also severely repressed by Iranian authorities. While demonstrations advocating for these rights face repression across Iran, this is especially pronounced in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. The presence of a substantial military force on standby in border regions further facilitates the suppression of potential large-scale protests. A particularly stark example is the brutal crackdown on the Women, Life, Freedom movement – which originated in Kurdistan and has also served as a platform for advocating better access to rights for both women and ethnic minorities.

An example of this occurred in 2024 when two Kurdish women activists, Pakhshan Azizi and Verisheh Moradi, were sentenced to death on charges of “baghi” (armed rebellion) for alleged affiliations with armed opposition groups.¶ In fact, Azizi had spent ten years working in refugee camps, aiding women and children affected by the war with ISIS in Syria and Iraq, before being charged with “baghi” and sentenced to death.¶¶ An other poignant example constitutes Roya Hashemati, a Kurdish woman from Sanandaj. She was arrested for defying compulsory hijab

\* “Who is Roya Heshmati?” Tabnak, 9 January 2024. Accessible from <https://www.tabnak.ir>

\*\* “22 Civil Activists in Support of Roya Heshmati Condemned Compulsory Hijab and Flogging,” Iran International, 18 January 2024. Accessible from <https://www.iranintl.com>

\*\*\* “Execution of Someone Connected to Organised Libertinist Currents,” Mizan Online, 6 January 2024. Accessible from <https://www.mizanonline.ir>

† Radio Zamaneh Instagram, 26 January 2025. Accessible from <https://www.instagram.com>

laws and for appearing unveiled on the streets of Tehran. Branch 1091 of the Ershad Judiciary Complex sentenced her to 13 years and 9 months in prison, a fine of 1.25 million tomans, and 74 lashes. On appeal, the prison sentence was overturned, but the flogging and fine were upheld.<sup>\*</sup> The flogging sentence, carried out on January 3, 2024, provoked widespread condemnation from women’s rights activists and supporters of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement<sup>\*\*</sup>.

In response to the backlash, the judiciary-affiliated Mizan News Agency claimed: “Ms. Hashemati was at one point affiliated with an organized network abroad and received payments to promote immorality in busy public areas of Tehran in extremely indecent ways. Following her arrest and investigation, it was proven that she had taken organized action in exchange for money from abroad.”<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

There was also relentless repression of Baloch activists, linked to the movement. For instance, As hundreds of Baloch (Sunni) worshippers emerged from the Musalla of the Grand Makki Mosque of Zahedan, security forces opened fire. Further details on government responses to the Women, Life, Freedom movement re detailed in Appendix IV.

In short, in spite of his pledges towards ethnic minorities, under president Pezeskian, who came into office on July 28 2024, the worrying juridical discrimination of ethnic minorities, both in terms of the likelihood of arrests and the severity of sentences has continued. For instance, as our [recent Labor Report indicated](#), Kurdish teacher trade unions continue to be disproportionately targeted. This is also visible when it comes to the arrests of cultural figures.

Take journalist Zhina Modares Gorji—member of the Sooch photography collective and the women’s group Zhivano, host of the Zhi podcast, and owner of the Zhira bookstore. She forced to report to prison on November 3, 2024, to begin serving a 16-month sentence.<sup>†</sup> One of the charges against her was “forming an illegal group,” stemming from her involvement with Zhivano.

Meanwhile, Azeri Turkish activists continue to face relentless persecution and imprisonment. In a recent open letter written from prison, some of them called upon Pezeshkian to halt the state’s fabrications against them, highlighting their arbitrary arrests without proper legal representation, lack of access to lawyers, and insufficient insight into the presumed evidence against them. They also pointed to the severe physical and mental pressure they faced while being placed in solitary confinement. Unfortunately, they did not receive a response. Additionally, Pezeshkian took no action to overturn the death sentences of Pakhshan Azizi and Verisheh Moradi.

Discrimination against ethnic minorities also persists within prison life. Qoliyan highlights the stark disparities between prisons in central regions of Iran and those in peripheral areas in her previously mentioned biography:

“There are deep gaps here... As someone who was in Evin Prison and will serve the rest of my sentence there, I can say that once in Evin, the water was cut for one day, and there were protests until the issue was fixed. But in Sepidar Prison, the water was cut for two weeks, and no one cared. I don’t mean to say that Evin is free of discrimination—far from it—but the discrimination in Sepidar is of a completely different magnitude. A woman in Sepidar is denied the most

\* Shahd Alavi, “Tilapia gulps down the blood of Hoor al-Azim; Sepideh Gholian’s accounts from prison” IranWire, 22 May 2020. Accessible from <https://iranwire.com>

Hossein Mohammadzadeh & Saeed Khani, “Historical and Social Foundations of Ethnic Divide in Iran,” Iranian Journal of Social Studies, 2018, Vol. 12(3). Accessible from <http://www.jss-isa.ir/>

\*\* “Sanandaj: Zhina Modarres Gorji Jailed for 16 Months,” Kurdistan Human Rights Network, 23 October 2024. Accessible from <https://kurdistanhumanrights.org>

basic rights. She isn’t even allowed to see her husband in conjugal visits or her children. That would be possible in Tehran prisons. Sakineh Segour’s child was labeled ‘Daeshi’ [ISIS-affiliated] before even being born—only because her mother was under opaque and unjust national security charges and had been in pre-trial detention for two years.”\*

In line with Iran’s systematic discrimination of both women and ethnic minorities, female prisoners from an ethnic minority background may face particularly harsh conditions. On the morning she reported to prison, Kurdish political prisoner Zhina Modares Gorji posted on Instagram: “Today, I’m going to a prison where marginalization and discrimination are threefold—the Sanandaj Women’s Prison. Marginalization and discrimination based on gender, class, and ethnicity.”\*\*

Overall, governmental commitment to improving the plight of ethnic minorities in Iran appears to mainly involve token policies, rather than engaging with the underlying issues of inequality, discrimination, and systemic injustice that these communities face.

# Analysis & Way Forward

In spite of the Iranian constitution's assertion that all citizens are equal regardless of ethnic origin, ethnic minorities—particularly those living in border regions—continue to face severe and systemic marginalization. This is driven not only by state neglect and repression but also by institutionalized discrimination across multiple domains. Such inequality manifests in enduring socio-economic disparities, as highlighted by Human Development Index (HDI) data, and in the suppression of linguistic and cultural rights that erode the identities and heritage of minority communities. Religious discrimination further deepens these challenges, as many ethnic minorities follow faiths that differ from the state-sanctioned religious doctrine, leading to additional layers of exclusion and persecution.

Discriminatory practices—often compounded by religious and cultural bias—also contribute to the widespread underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in positions of political power. Their voices and interests remain largely unheard in key decision-making spaces. Moreover, the regions these communities inhabit are frequently neglected or actively harmed by environmental degradation and lack of investment, which worsens their socio-economic struggles and restricts opportunities for development.

The continuation of such marginalization is not only deeply unjust but also poses a growing threat to national cohesion. From a human rights perspective, addressing these injustices is imperative. Without meaningful reforms and a genuine commitment to equity, the cycle of exclusion will persist—undermining the country's long-term social and political stability and potentially fueling broader instability across the region, particularly in neighboring areas with shared ethnic and cultural ties.

As discussed in the introduction, many ethnic minorities continue to identify strongly as Iranian and do not seek secession. Instead, they advocate for greater cultural recognition, including the right to use their own languages in state institutions such as schools, or even in poetry and literature. However, if the state continues to suppress these demands—often more harshly than it punishes other forms of dissent—while labeling them as separatist threats, this dynamic may eventually shift, with serious consequences.

To offer constructive paths forward, the next section will present specific recommendations to the Islamic Republic of Iran, ethnic minority activists within Iran, and the international community.

## Recommendations

### *Recommendations for the Iranian Government*

#### **1. Recognizing Ethnic and Cultural Diversity**

Recognize the country's ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity as a source of strength rather than a threat. In line with this collective rights need to be recognized more, e.g. by signing relevant international treaties.

#### **2. Guaranteeing Mother-Tongue and Multilingual Education**

Beyond teaching mother tongues as subjects, ethnic communities demand



education in their native languages, a demand backed by international documents, such as UNESCO's 1999 Declaration on Multilingual Education. In line with these principles, multilingual education should be the goal. This would include instruction in Persian as the national language, alongside the native languages of non-Persian ethnic groups, and at least one international language, such as English.

### **3. Eliminating Structural Discrimination in Employment, Development, and Public Services**

End discriminatory practices in budget allocation, resource distribution and employment opportunities while also aiming for environmental reparations and an end to the confiscation of lands in borderland regions.

### **4. Guaranteeing Freedom of Expression, Associations, and Peaceful Assembly for Ethnic Activists**

The right to form cultural, civil, and political associations, as guaranteed by both international standards and the Iranian Constitution, must be protected for all citizens, including members of ethnic communities. The government should stop arresting and imprisoning ethnic activists, local journalists, and teachers of native languages.

### **5. Ending the Securitization of Ethnic Groups' Demands**

End security and judicial crackdowns on ethnic activists. Differentiate between peaceful civic engagement and acts of violence, and shift from repression to meaningful and constructive dialogue.

### **6. Enhancing Political Participation of Ethnic Groups**

Balanced and meaningful participation of ethnic groups must be ensured across all levels of governance, from local councils to the national parliament and other senior institutions. Discriminatory practices in local government appointments and the exclusion of local and native figures from political roles must come to an end.

### **7. Educate Media Personnel on Stereotypes**

Provide training for television staff and media personnel on the importance of avoiding harmful stereotypes and promoting accurate representations of ethnic minorities. This can help combat negative portrayals and foster a more inclusive media landscape.

### **8. Ending Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System**

Judicial impartiality must be upheld at all levels to ensure equal treatment under the law for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity.

### **9. Compliance with International Commitments on Minority Rights**

Iran must uphold its commitments under international agreements it has already signed, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, by submitting transparent and regularly

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updated reports to the relevant monitoring bodies. In addition, Iran should consider ratifying key international instruments that protect minority rights, such as the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities.

#### **10. Encourage Anonymous Job Applications**

Implement policies that promote anonymous job applications to combat "everyday racism" and ensure that all Iranians have equal opportunities in the job market, regardless of their ethnic background.

#### **11. Establish an Equality Advisory and Support Service**

Create an Equality Advisory and Support Service to provide guidance and support for individuals facing discrimination, helping to address grievances and promote equality in various sectors.

#### **12. Register Ethnic Minority Status in Censuses**

Include the option to register ethnic minority status during national censuses. This data can inform resource allocation and policy-making, ensuring that the needs of all communities are recognized and addressed.

### ***Recommendations for Ethnic Group Activists in Iran***

#### **1. Expanding Social Bases in Local Communities**

Ground your advocacy in local languages, cultures, and lived experiences. By amplifying community narratives on issues like mother-tongue rights, educational inequality, or economic discrimination, you help strengthen local voices and build broader support.

#### **2. Leveraging Existing Legal Provisions for Collective Rights**

While the Iranian government tends to avoid signing international treaties focused on collective (ethnic minority) rights, some treaties already signed, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, contain provisions that protect collective rights. For instance, Article 27 of the covenant states:

**“In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.”**

Activists could leverage these existing frameworks to advocate for the rights of their communities effectively.

#### **3. Creating Effective Local Narratives**

Develop narratives emphasizing historical injustices, cultural resistance, and minority rights. Using indigenous symbols and terminologies can enhance the impact of your messages.

#### **4. Building Coalitions with Other Marginalized Groups**

Form alliances with other ethnic, cultural, women's rights, labor, and environmental activists. Unity among marginalized groups increases collective power and enhances the reach of your message.

#### **5. Networking for Solidarity**

Establish links and collaboration networks with civil society organizations inside and outside Iran. Such solidarity networks facilitate knowledge and experience exchange, amplifying your voices globally.

#### **6. Monitoring and Documenting Human Rights Violations**

Record detailed information about human rights abuses, arbitrary detentions, discrimination, and violence. Safely publish this information where possible. Monitoring and documenting abuses are powerful tools for domestic and international pressure.

#### **7. Amplifying Ethnic Iranian Voices Globally**

Beyond local levels, establish effective relationships with international human rights organizations, media outlets, and minority rights groups. Use reports, online and offline events, and multimedia resources to amplify your voices internationally.

### ***Recommendations for the International Community***

#### **1. Advocating for Ethnic Rights in International Forums**

Hold the Iranian government accountable in international and regional forums to fulfill its commitments regarding the rights of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups, even if these obligations are primarily outlined in treaties focused on individual rights.

#### **2. Creating Safe Communication Channels with Ethnic Activists**

Effective and secure communication with ethnic activists inside and outside Iran allows the international community to hear voices suppressed for decades. Such communication must emphasize trust, individual security, and cultural sensitivity.

#### **3. Developing Secure, Multilingual Digital Platforms**

Digital communication tools should support local languages like Kurdish, Balochi, Arabic, Turkish, and Turkmen whilst also incorporating encryption technologies and privacy safeguards to protect users from government surveillance.

#### **4. Targeted Sanctions Against Perpetrators of Ethnic Repression**

Sanction individuals and institutions directly involved in the organized repression of ethnic minorities, including security forces and local officials, can reduce rights violations.

### **5. Supporting Field Research and Monitoring Mechanisms**

Fund research documenting racial, linguistic, and economic discrimination faced by minorities. Supporting civil society groups developing monitoring systems for cultural and social rights violations can hold the Iranian government accountable.

### **6. Pursuing Legal Actions Against Minority Rights Violations**

The international community must call on international legal bodies to document systematic abuses of ethnic minorities' rights in Iran and bring cases to international legal forums.

### **7. Capacity-Building for Civil Activists and Local Institutions**

Providing training, technical resources, and financial support to ethnic civil society and cultural organizations strengthens their resilience against assimilation policies and preserves cultural identities.

### **8. Increasing Global Visibility of Minorities**

International bodies should use their access to media channels and official forums to amplify marginalized ethnic Iranian voices globally, highlighting local narratives of oppression, discrimination, and resistance.

### **9. International Awareness Campaigns**

Launching multilingual global campaigns can raise international awareness about systematic repression of, and discrimination against, Kurds, Balochis, Arabs, Turks, Turkmens, and other ethnic minorities in Iran.

### **10. Incorporating Iranian Ethnic Issues into UN Agendas**

International bodies should urge UN agencies and special rapporteurs to prioritize Iranian ethnic minorities' issues and violations of the basic rights of ethnic minorities in periodic reports.

### **11. Calling for Accurate Ethnic Data in Iran**

The international community should call on Iran to provide accurate statistics regarding the country's ethnic composition, as recommended by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in its 2024 human rights report.

# Appendix I: Terminology Choices

The discussion surrounding the term "minority" in Iranian law and society is complex. In the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the term is primarily reserved for officially recognized religious minorities, excluding non-Persian ethnic groups. This distinction highlights the limited application of the term within the Iranian legal framework.

In a broader context, the term "minority" is widely recognized in contemporary human rights documents. It generally refers to groups that experience marginalization in legal, political, cultural, and economic rights. Iran is home to various ethnic-linguistic and religious minorities, with the emergence of ethnic minorities as a political category closely linked to the nation-state formation process that began in the early 20th century. This process predominantly shaped a national identity centered around Persian ethnicity, leading to the marginalization of non-Persian cultures and languages.

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### State Reluctance and Civil Society Responses

States often avoid using the term "minority" to prevent international intervention in what they consider internal affairs, particularly regarding minority rights. Historically, the relationship between states and minority groups has taken various forms, including elimination, forced assimilation, tolerance, protection, and promotion.\*

In Iran, civil society activists have contested the use of the term "minority." For example, a report by Amnesty International\*\* on the repression of Azerbaijanis in Iran faced backlash for labeling them as a minority. Critics argued that referring to a large population as a minority carries derogatory implications. Others contended that the minority/majority framework is flawed, suggesting that the Iranian government oppresses all groups equally.

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### Defining Minority in Contemporary Social Sciences

A researcher from Amnesty International defended the use of the term "minority," explaining that it does not necessarily refer to a numerically small group. Instead, it encompasses groups that are socially, politically, or economically subordinate, regardless of their demographic size. This definition aligns with the understanding adopted by volunteer activists in the report "Ethnic Minority Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran."\*\*\*

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### Terminological Sensitivities

The report navigates sensitivities surrounding the terms "qowm" (ethnicity) and "qowmiyat." Due to the misuse of these terms by right-wing groups, identity-based activists are cautious about their application. The report adopts a middle-ground approach, using "qowmi" and "ethnic" interchangeably, with a preference for "ethnic."

In legal and theoretical discussions, the term "national minority" is used to align with United Nations human rights terminology. The report clarifies that the use of "qowm" does not imply tribalism or carry negative connotations.

\* Moussa Abou Ramadan, "The Definition of Minorities in International Law," Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2013. Accessible from <https://books.openedition.org>

\*\* "Iran – Release Azerbaijani Turk Minority Rights Defenders and Stop Suppressing Cultural Gatherings," Amnesty International, 11 August 2018, Index Number: MDE 13/8889/2018. Accessible from <https://www.amnesty.org>

\*\*\* Raha Bahreini, "Who Is a Minority and What Rights Do They Have?" BBC Persian, 15 August 2018. Accessible from <https://www.bbc.com>



\* Meysam Badamchi, "Azerbaijani and Kurdish Ethnonationalism within Multicultural Perspective: A Comparative Study of Iran and Turkey," *Türkiye İran Araştırmaları Dergisi / Turkish Journal of Iranian Studies (TIAD)*, Year 1, No. 1, January 2022, p. 77.

\*\* On the use of the term nationality by Iranian opposition identity-based activists—e.g., in phrases like "Congress of Iranian Federal Nationalities"—see: Asghar Shirazi, "The Complexities of Decentralization from the Central Government," *Naqd-e Eqtesād-e Siyāsī (Political Economy Critique)*, January 21, 2024. Accessible from <https://pecritique.com>

### Non-Persian Nationalities and Historical Context

Some ethnic rights activists prefer the term "non-Persian nationalities," which reflects the historical governance of Iran as a system of "mamālek-e maḥruseh" (protected domains) before the rise of the centralized nation-state. This historical context is crucial for understanding the shift in power dynamics toward Persian centralism.\*

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### Terminological Clarifications for Turkic Groups

The report also addresses the terminology used for Turkic groups in Iran. Activists often object to the term "Azeri" due to its historical associations with Persian nationalism. Instead, they prefer "Azerbaijani." However, the term "Azerbaijani" is also the official designation in the Republic of Azerbaijan, which is politically distinct from Iranian Azerbaijan. The report adopts a middle-ground approach, using "Turk," "Azerbaijani Turk," and "Azeri Turk" interchangeably, while clarifying that the use of "Azeri" does not imply erasure of their Turkic identity.\*\*

## Appendix II: Human Development Index according to province

\* Wikipedia entry “Human Development Index”. Accessible from <https://fa.wikipedia.org>

\*\* Mohammad Javad Salehi, Ranking Provinces by HDI and Human Capital, Higher Education Planning & Research, 2018, 24(1), 27–49; see also Namaki et al., “Disparity in Regional Development...” Studies of Transition States and Societies, 2021, 13(1), 54–76

The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite measure used to evaluate and compare development levels across different regions. It combines three key indicators: life expectancy, average years of schooling, and per capita income. When a region scores higher in these areas—meaning people live longer, receive more education, and earn more—it is considered to have achieved a higher level of human development\*. Life expectancy is a statistical measure that estimates the average number of years a person is expected to live, based on current mortality rates within a given population.

According to a study by Mohammad Javad Salehi, the Human Development Index (HDI) rankings for Iran's 31 provinces in 2014 (1393 SH) are listed below. The table, expanded by VA, also includes information on the ethnic and religious makeup of each province:

Table S1. Provincial Rankings by Human Development Index\*\*

| Province                   | Human Development Index (HDI) | Rank | Major Non-Persian Ethnic Group (where identifiable) | Major religion |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Tehran                     | 0.814                         | 1    |                                                     | Shia           |
| Semnan                     | 0.780                         | 2    |                                                     | Shia           |
| Bushehr                    | 0.779                         | 3    |                                                     | Shia           |
| Yazd                       | 0.767                         | 4    |                                                     | Shia           |
| Isfahan                    | 0.765                         | 5    |                                                     | Shia           |
| Mazandaran                 | 0.756                         | 6    | Mazani                                              | Shia           |
| Qazvin                     | 0.746                         | 7    |                                                     | Shia           |
| Markazi                    | 0.745                         | 8    |                                                     | Shia           |
| Fars                       | 0.738                         | 9    |                                                     | Shia           |
| Gilan                      | 0.737                         | 10   | Gilak                                               | Shia           |
| Qom                        | 0.734                         | 11   |                                                     | Shia           |
| Khuzestan                  | 0.731                         | 12   | Arab, Lor                                           | Shia           |
| Zanjan                     | 0.716                         | 13   | Turk                                                | Shia           |
| East Azerbaijan            | 0.714                         | 14   | Turk                                                | Shia           |
| Kerman                     | 0.713                         | 15   |                                                     | Shia           |
| Alborz                     | 0.712                         | 16   |                                                     | Shia           |
| Razavi Khorasan            | 0.712                         | 17   |                                                     | Shia           |
| Hormozgan                  | 0.705                         | 18   | Arab                                                | Shia           |
| Kermanshah                 | 0.703                         | 19   | Kurd                                                | Shia           |
| Hamedan                    | 0.702                         | 20   | Turk                                                | Shia           |
| Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari  | 0.701                         | 21   | Lor                                                 | Shia           |
| Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad | 0.698                         | 22   |                                                     | Shia           |
| Ardebil                    | 0.694                         | 23   | Turk                                                | Shia           |

| Province               | Human Development Index (HDI) | Rank | Major Non-Persian Ethnic Group (where identifiable) | Major religion |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Golestan               | 0.693                         | 24   | Turkimen, Mazani                                    | Shia, Sunni    |
| South Khorasan         | 0.689                         | 25   |                                                     | Shia, Sunni    |
| North Khorasan         | 0.685                         | 26   |                                                     | Shia           |
| Ilam                   | 0.681                         | 27   | Kurd                                                | Shia           |
| Lorestan               | 0.68                          | 28   | Lor                                                 | Shia           |
| West Azerbaijan        | 0.663                         | 29   | Turk, Kurd                                          | Shia, Sunni    |
| Kurdistan              | 0.658                         | 30   | Kurd                                                | Sunni, Shia    |
| Sistan and Baluchestan | 0.689                         | 31   | Baloch                                              | Sunni, Shia    |

Sunni-majority provinces are concentrated near the bottom of the Human Development Index rankings, with Sistan and Baluchestan and Kurdistan placed 30th and 31st, respectively.

Another study, conducted by researchers at the University of Kurdistan and the University of Urmia (see Table 6 below), found that the provinces of Tehran, Alborz, and Mazandaran had the highest Human Development Index scores, which are based on life expectancy, education, and average income. On the other end of the spectrum, Sistan and Baluchestan, Kurdistan, and North Khorasan ranked lowest.

In both studies, provinces with large ethnic minority populations—such as Sistan and Baluchestan (Baloch), Ilam and Kurdistan (Kurdish), West Azerbaijan (Turkic and Kurdish), Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad (Luri), and Golestan (home to a Sunni Turkmen minority)—consistently rank lower than other regions. In contrast, provinces with predominantly Persian and Shi'a populations tend to occupy the top spots, with the capital, Tehran, leading the rankings. Turkic-speaking provinces in Azerbaijan fall somewhere in the middle. For instance, East Azerbaijan ranks 13th in one study and 14th in the other, while Ardabil comes in at 23rd and 24th, respectively.

Table S2. Ranking of Provinces by Human Development Index\*

| Province        | HDI   | Rank | Province                   | HDI   | Rank |
|-----------------|-------|------|----------------------------|-------|------|
| East Azerbaijan | 0.594 | 13   | Fars                       | 0.649 | 8    |
| West Azerbaijan | 0.421 | 26   | Qazvin                     | 0.619 | 10   |
| Ardebil         | 0.441 | 24   | Qom                        | 0.637 | 9    |
| Isfahan         | 0.693 | 5    | Kurdistan                  | 0.362 | 30   |
| Alborz          | 0.866 | 2    | Kerman                     | 0.447 | 23   |
| Ilam            | 0.406 | 27   | Kermanshah                 | 0.458 | 21   |
| Bushehr         | 0.559 | 14   | Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad | 0.397 | 28   |
| Tehran          | 0.994 | 1    | Golestan                   | 0.467 | 20   |

\* Davood Jamii, Kiumars Irandoost, Alireza Jamshidi, "Spatial Analysis of HDI and Its Determinants in Iran," Regional Planning Quarterly, No. 43, Dec 2021; compare with University of Urmia researchers: Mousavi & Bayramzadeh, "Spatial Analysis of Regional Inequality Trends in Iran," Geographical Studies Quarterly (Sephehr) No. 131, Fall 2024

**Appendix II:**  
**Human Development Index**

| Province                  | HDI   | Rank | Province   | HDI   | Rank |
|---------------------------|-------|------|------------|-------|------|
| Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari | 0.515 | 17   | Gilan      | 0.664 | 7    |
| South Khorasan            | 0.45  | 22   | Lorestan   | 0.425 | 25   |
| Razavi Khorasan           | 0.617 | 11   | Mazandaran | 0.787 | 3    |
| North Khorasan            | 0.366 | 29   | Markazi    | 0.608 | 12   |
| Khuzestan                 | 0.536 | 15   | Hormozgan  | 0.499 | 18   |
| Semnan                    | 0.678 | 6    | Yazd       | 0.734 | 4    |
| Sistan and Baluchestan    | 0     | 31   | —          | —     | —    |

## Appendix III: Waterbodies in Borderlands under Threat



### **A Silent Crisis: Environmental Degradation of the Hoor al-Azim Wetland**

The drying of the Hoor al-Azim wetland, located in the Khuzestan region along the Iran-Iraq border, has disproportionately affected Iranian Arabs, who make up the majority of the local population. Covering about 120,000 hectares at the terminus of the Karkheh River, Hoor al-Azim is Iran's largest border wetland. In August 2023, the ISNA news agency reported that the wetland is "silently dying" due to various state and industrial interventions, including continuous oil drilling, road construction by oil companies, water transfer schemes, prolonged drought, and the denial of adequate water supply. Additionally, the construction of the Karkheh and Gotvand dams has significantly reduced the region's water supply, while ongoing oil drilling has further harmed the wetland's biodiversity.

The Karkheh and Gotvand dams were constructed in Khuzestan Province during the 1990s and 2000s. Public opinion on these dams is sharply divided, reflecting broader tensions regarding government policies. One major issue is the increasing salinity of household and agricultural water, believed to result from engineering flaws in the dam projects. A significant error in the Gotvand Dam's construction involved salt domes near the reservoir, which became submerged and raised water salinity. Critics argue this was due to a failure to follow environmental regulations, as the dams were built without proper evaluations. Meanwhile, state media continue to claim that the salt formations were not detected during initial geological surveys.

The drying of the wetland has also led to the disappearance of fish populations, which were once a major income source for local Arab communities, and has caused rising temperatures and recurring droughts. Oil pollution and the wetland's degradation have triggered severe dust storms, disrupting the lives and livelihoods of local communities.

Madani documented\* how water shortages have sparked waves of nonviolent protest in the region. They note that the issue is significant from a national security standpoint, given the province's geographic and political position, as well as its demographic makeup. The Arab population, due to their proximity to Arabic-speaking countries, frequently compares their living conditions to those of their neighbors, which reinforces the idea that their underdevelopment stems from the anti-Arab policies of Iran's central government.

\* Saeed Madani Ghahfarokhi, "Peaceful Demonstrations: Water Protests in Khuzestan; A Case Study of an Uprising," 2023. pp. 75–76.

### **Lake Urmia: A Crisis of Misguided Policies and Environmental Degradation"**

The primary cause of Lake Urmia's drying over the past three decades has been misguided agricultural and food self-sufficiency policies implemented within the framework of a "resistance economy." These policies led to the construction of large dams on all rivers flowing into the lake, resulting in an expansion of cultivated land from 300,000 hectares to 680,000 hectares. Proponents of these policies justified their actions by asserting that fresh river water should not be mixed with the salty water of Lake Urmia. However, the restoration project initiated by Hassan Rouhani's administration (2013–2021) has largely been unsuccessful, with reports suggesting that part of its budget was squandered on religious events, such as sending pilgrims to Iraq for the Arbāeen ceremony.

Studies indicate that human factors, including dam construction, excessive

extraction from deep wells, and exploitation of basin waters, account for approximately 70% of Lake Urmia's drying, with the remaining 30% attributed to natural factors such as reduced rainfall and climate change. Extensive dam construction within the basin is a significant contributor to this crisis. Some ethnic activists allege that organizations affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have played a major role in these projects, citing a 2019 statement from the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters, which claimed that the organization built 55% of the country's dams. By 2017, 23 dams had been constructed within the Lake Urmia basin, with an additional 41 either planned or under review.

A 2022 study by Sajedeh Dinparast and Arastoo Yari found that the drying of Lake Urmia has triggered serious social, economic, and environmental crises in surrounding villages, leading to rising poverty and declining employment levels. The researchers recommended creating recreational zones near the lake to attract visitors and developing factories for processing and packaging the lake's salt for export, which could generate local jobs and mitigate migration due to worsening water scarcity.

One pressing environmental concern linked to the lake's drying is the emergence of salt dust storms. As the lakebed dries and salt is exposed to the wind, these storms negatively impact the health of local residents, livestock, and wildlife. The airborne salt particles can cause respiratory and skin problems in both animals and humans while also damaging crops and natural vegetation.

**Appendix IV: Supression of Ethnic Minorities  
during the Women, Life, Freedom movement**

## Appendix IV:

### Suppression of Ethnic Minorities

\* "UN Fact-Finding Mission: Institutionalized discrimination against women and girls was a driver and enabler of human rights violations and crimes against humanity during the recent protests," Iran Liberal, March 11, 2024. Accessible from <https://iranliberal.com>

\*\* "Iran – Profiles of 324 Identified Victims of the November 2019 Protests," p. 7, Amnesty International, Nov 16, 2021 (Document Ref: MDE 13/2308/2020). Accessible from <https://fa.amnesty.org/>

"They shot our children. Killings of minors in Iran's 2019 November protests", Amnesty International, March 2022. Accessible from <https://www.amnesty.org>

\*\*\* "What are the provisions of the UN Human Rights Council resolution on Iran?" Euronews Persian, 25 November, 2022. Accessible from <https://persi.euronews.com>

† Milad Pourissa, "Zahedan's Bloody Friday Massacre: A Crime That Did Not Go Unpunished," BBC Persian, 30 September, 2023. Accessible from <https://www.bbc.com>

‡ "95 People Killed During Friday Protests in Zahedan," Anadolu Agency, 9–10 October, 2022. Accessible from <https://www.aa.com.tr>

\$ "Important Statement by the Sistan and Baluchestan Security Council Regarding Zahedan's Black Friday," Donya-e-Eqtasad, 28 October, 2022. Accessible from <https://donya-e-eqtasad.com>

¶ "Annual report 1402 (2023-2024) on human rights violations in Balochistan: 1,464 killed and detained," Haalvash, 2 June 2024. Accessible from <https://t.me/haalvsh>

Following the state killing of Mahsa (Jina) Amini (a 22-year-old Kurdish woman) by Tehran's morality police, a wave of mass protests swept across Iran. The government responded with brutal force. According to human rights organizations, at least 551 people were killed, including 68 children under the age of 18\*.

During the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests from fall 2022 to spring 2023, ethnic minorities—especially Kurds and Baloch—faced some of the harshest repression. In recent years, the Islamic Republic has responded to nationwide uprisings with disproportionate violence in regions inhabited by non-Persian groups. Amnesty International's report, "They Shot Our Children", published in March 2020, includes a section titled "Geographic Distribution of Killings." It documents 324 identified victims from the 2019 protests, killed in 37 cities across eight provinces: Alborz, Isfahan, Fars, Kerman, Kermanshah, Khuzestan, Kurdistan, and Tehran. Suburban counties around Tehran recorded the highest toll, with at least 176 deaths. Khuzestan and Kermanshah, both with significant ethnic minority populations, followed with 59 and 31 fatalities\*\*.

The human rights violations committed during the crackdown on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests were so severe that the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on November 24, 2022, at the height of the uprising. The resolution expressed deep concern over the worsening human rights situation in Iran, especially with regard to women and children. It condemned the violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations by state forces and mourned the deaths of at least 304 people, including 41 children, as well as the widespread arbitrary arrests. The Council called on the Iranian government to take immediate steps to prevent extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, gender-based and sexual violence, arbitrary detentions, and the torture of peaceful protesters. It also urged an end to the systemic discrimination against women and girls in both public and private life. Furthermore, the resolution highlighted concerns over the "preventive detention" of civil society activists, which aimed to deter or block their participation in or organization of peaceful protests\*\*\*.

One of the bloodiest days of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests was "Zahedan's Bloody Friday" on September 30, 2022. On this day, as hundreds of Baloch worshippers emerged from the Musalla of the Grand Makki Mosque of Zahedan, security forces opened fire from the rooftop of Zahedan's Police Station No. 16.† The Baloch Activists Campaign published a list of names, reporting 95 deaths—including several children aged 12 to 17—and around 300 wounded‡. Despite this, the government's provincial Security Council issued a statement claiming only 35 deaths, "including some worshippers at the Musalla, people killed near the police station, armed individuals killed in citywide clashes, and innocent citizens murdered by thugs in various areas."§ The discrepancy in these figures suggests an attempt by the authorities to downplay the scale of this humanitarian tragedy.

According to data provided by the [Balochistan Human Rights Group](#), nearly 120 individuals—mostly students and teachers from religious schools—were arrested in 2022. In 2023, the Haalvash news outlet reported that 171 Baloch citizens were executed. Of these, 133 (77 percent) were for drug-related charges, 19 percent under retributive justice (qisas), and 2 percent for political offenses¶. A joint report by Iran Human Rights (based in Norway) and Ensemble Contre la Peine

\* "Iran Executed at Least 834 People in 2023; Highest Number Since 2015," Radio Farda, 11 March, 2024. Accessible from <https://www.radiofarda.com>

\*\* "Annual Report: At Least 138 Kurdish Prisoners Executed in Iran," Kurdistan Human Rights Network, 10 October, 2024. Accessible from <https://kurdistanhumanrights.org>

\*\* "Annual Human Rights Report on Kurdistan, 2022," Kurdistan Human Rights Network, 24 April, 2023. Accessible from <https://kurdistanhumanrights.org>

de Mort (France) found that out of 834 people executed in Iran in 2023, at least 167—20 percent of the total—were Baloch.\* Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Human Rights Network estimated that between October 10, 2023, and October 9, 2024, a total of 138 Kurdish prisoners were executed, including 15 convicted on political charges such as "corruption on earth" (efsad fel-arz)\*\* . The network also reported that during the 2022 uprising, at least 122 Kurdish citizens were killed and another 1,761 arrested\*\*\*.

### About us

Volunteer Activists (VA) is a nonprofit, non- governmental organization based in the Netherlands. From 2001 to 2007, VA operated inside Iran as the largest capacity building organization in the country. From 2012, the VA team continued its activism from Amsterdam following security threats. Assisting Iranian CSOs through research-informed capacity building is one of the primary activities of VA. Other specializations include: facilitation of information exchange among civil society activists, advocacy and expansion of democracy and human rights and peace building - both within Iranian society and communities in the MENA region.

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