briefing

minority rights group international

Seeking justice and an end to neglect: Iran's minorities today

By Nazila Ghanea and Binesh Hass

> *'I think to myself what a time it has become that my right to live and my life should collect dust in the courts in this order and that pardon. And my mother should answer the phone with fear, switch on her television with trepidation and await the day when the death of her child becomes a shadow of fear over the lives of others … Indeed, what a strange time it has become, darling.'*
> – Farzad Kamangar, 23-year-old Kurdish teacher and poet, Evin Prison, 19 January 2010. Executed 9 May 2010.[1]

Violations of minority rights in Iran take place within a wider, well-documented context of human rights violations, and intolerance of dissent and difference. Against this background, this briefing reflects on the historical and current situation of Iran's ethnic, religious and linguistic minority groups, which are typified in Iran by their lack of political power and influence. It also considers the new popular and political consciousness that is emerging in Iran in regard to human rights in general, and minority rights in particular, following the political debates leading up to the disputed 2009 elections, and the popular protests that came afterwards. This shift may represent an opportunity for members of minority groups in Iran at long last to enjoy equal citizenship rights, educational and economic opportunities, and the right to maintain their cultural identity.

Background

Iran is home to a large number of minority groups, whose members' identities cut across various ethnic, linguistic and religious lines. Unfortunately, most of these groups are subject to state-sanctioned discrimination of varying degrees, some of which has been well-documented by UN human rights bodies, expert reports, academic studies and media sources.[2] We also acknowledge that other identity groups in Iran as well as minorities face violations of their rights, and that any one person can face multiple forms of discrimination as a result of belonging to different identity groups at the same time. The obvious case in this respect is that of women who are also identified with an ethnic and perhaps religious minority identity.

The rights that apply to persons recognized as belonging to minorities include those captured in Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

> *'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.'*

©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/KAVITAGRAPHICS

As Iran ratified the ICCPR in 1975, it is legally obliged to ensure the enjoyment of these rights by persons belonging to such minorities.

It should be noted that the term 'minority', or *aghaliyat* in Persian, is avoided by many Iranians belonging to minority groups, out of a fear that it may label them as not being fully Iranian and deserving of equal rights, or as being separatist.[3] Furthermore, in its Islamic usage, the term tends to be used to refer to non-Muslims, rendering ethnic identities invisible. As such, it is ironic that the common understanding of the term 'minority' in Iran implies a reduction of rights, whereas in the international human rights context it supports the accumulation of rights specific to minorities in addition to the continued application of all other human rights.[4]

Ethnic minorities in Iran

Iran has an estimated population of just over seventy million.[5] The state's censuses have not collected data on language or ethnicity for over three decades, however, making it very difficult to gauge the country's linguistic and ethnic composition. The last time data on ethnicity and language were collected was in 1976, during the second Pahlavi monarchy (1941–1979). The nationalism espoused by this regime left little room for any form of ethnic representation that could have lent itself to political expression. This meant that the Pahlavi state had a vested ideological interest in portraying the country as largely homogeneous and principally Persian. Accordingly, it put Persians at 51 per cent of the population, Azeris at 25 per cent, and so on.[6] These statistics were not verified independently, but they continue to be circulated uncritically by many.[7] The Federal Research Division of the US Library of Congress has its own estimates, published in 2008, putting Persians at 65 per cent, Azeris at 16 per cent, Kurds at 7 per cent, and so on, with no mention, however, of how these numbers were calculated. Other US government statistics, meanwhile, differ from those of the Library of Congress and also include no notes on how the figures were calculated.[8] In short, any statistical report on Iran's ethnic makeup ought to be read cautiously. Verifiable and independently assessed disaggregated data on minorities in Iran would require a political climate and systematic machinery which is currently far out of reach.[9] Nevertheless, a broad ethnic profile of the country can be deduced from the following table on 'ethnic concentration' in the country's provinces, submitted by the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2008 (although this gives no indication of the actual numbers of people belonging to each minority in the different areas included in the table).[10]

The representation of the country's ethnic composition detailed in the table above can be considered incomplete. For instance, many ethnic groups have been left out altogether, and if we assume that these delineations were made on the basis of a province's majority (or near majority), then the Lors should not be included in Khuzestan (where they constitute a very small minority), and, by the same measure, neither should Azeris be cited as a group in Kurdistan. If, however, the intention was to be inclusive, i.e. to list the ethnicities of a given province, then one wonders what was made of Iran's other ethnic groups: Gilakis and Mazandaranis, Armenians, Assyrians, Georgians, Qashqais, Afghans, and Talysh amongst others.

Table 2: The Islamic Republic of Iran's 2008 Representation of Ethnic Concentration:

Province	Ethnicity
West Azerbaijan	Azeri & Kurdish
East Azerbaijan	Azeri
Ardabil	Azeri
Sistan and Baluchistan	Baluch
Golestan	Turkman
North Khorasan	Kurdish, Turkman
Khuzestan	Arab, Lor
Chehar Mahal and Bakhtiyari	Lor
Kohkiloye and Boyer Ahmad	Lor
Lorestan	Lor
Elam	Lor, Kurdish
Kermanshah	Kurdish
Kurdistan	Kurdish & Azeri
Zanjan	Azeri

SOURCE: UN CERD: INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION: EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH PERIODIC REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES DUE IN 2006: ADDENDUM: ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN, UN DOC. CERD/C/IRN/20, HTTP://WWW2.OHCHR.ORG/ENGLISH/BODIES/CERD/DOCS/ADVANCEVERSIONS/CERD-C-IRN-20.DOC
NOTE: SPELLINGS FOR PROVINCES ARE THOSE GIVEN IN THE ORIGINAL SOURCE DOCUMENT.

Historical context

The fact that Iran is bordered by Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey and Iraq, and has six more Arab neighbours across the Persian Gulf to the south, informs the ethnic profile suggested in this table. Notwithstanding the incomplete nature of the data that is available on minorities in Iran, ethnic minority groups are doubtless considerable in size, and their relationships with the state in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been marked by, at times, violent oppression. In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, Reza Shah (first of two Pahlavi monarchs, 1925–1941) advocated 'the total destruction of tribal life and culture,'[11] with forced sedentarization often taking 'very brutal and, in some cases, genocidal form[s],'[12] in the account of one author. Reza Shah also sought to erase non-Persian heritages from Iran by banning minority languages from schools, in the arts (e.g. theatrical performances), religious ceremonies and in books.[13] 'Persianisation', as it came to be known, also involved changing Azeri, Kurdish, Baluch, Arab and Turkmen geographic names to Persian ones, and forcing parents to give Persian names to their children.[14]

When Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in 1941, at the behest of the wartime Allies who were occupying the country, state-sanctioned oppression of Iran's non-Persian peoples decreased. Most if not all of the country's nomads (the Qashqai, Bakhtiari and others) attempted to return to their nomadic lives, but did so with considerable bitterness after two decades of systemic violence against their peoples. This bitterness was not limited to Iran's nomads. Grievances relating to structural discrimination (for instance in regard to employment opportunities), the free use of local languages like Azeri and Kurdish, and the suppression of minority cultural practices, were widespread and contributed to rebellions in the northwest of the country. In December 1945, the Azeris revolted and established an autonomous state of their own with the help of the Soviet Union. The Kurds did the same in their region in January 1946, also with the support of the Soviets. Neither of the new states lasted beyond 1946, however, when Soviet troops withdrew from the region, allowing the national army to return and mete out punishment to combatants and non-combatants alike. The south of the country was no more peaceful, with organized tribal uprisings by the Qashqais and their allies in the 1940s, as they sought to reassert their claims to self-determination in the political vacuum left by Reza Shah's abdication. Tensions between different ethnic groups continued throughout the twentieth century, with most grievances centring on the freedom to teach minority languages in schools, appoint representatives of minority groups to municipal government authorities, establish non-Persian language media, and receive equal treatment in public services and courts of law. All of these grievances remained significant throughout the second Pahlavi monarchy (1941-1979) – which responded heavy-handedly on the pretext that communists were once again plotting against Iran – but they did not translate into utter rebellion as they did in the mid-1940s.

The monarchy collapsed in February 1979 in a popular revolution that can, in part, be captured by its most popular slogan: *Shah beravad, har che mikhahad beshavad –Let the shah go and let there come what may*.[15] For the minority ethnic groups that supported the revolution, and indeed for the revolution's supporters in general, this slogan would prove costly.[16] Ayatollah Khomeini (1979–1989), who had become the undisputed leader of the revolution, was not at all sympathetic to the idea of greater autonomy and freedom for Iran's minority populations.[17] In March 1979, he formally authorized the use of the military to suppress Kurdish uprisings in the provinces of Western Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, Arab unrest in Khuzestan, and the resistance of Turkmens in the northeast, all of which led to considerable bloodshed. No one knows how many perished in these struggles, but estimates are in the thousands.[18]

The situation today

The overall situation today in regard to Iran's ethnic minorities is somewhat less bloody than it was in the 1980s, though the mass denial of minority rights persists, within a wider context of pervasive human rights abuses in Iran. Among minority communities, latent discontent has often developed into organized protest movements.

Azeris

In May 2006, a state-owned weekly ran a cartoon that depicted a cockroach uttering the English equivalent of 'huh?' in Azeri whilst in conversation with a Persian-speaking boy. The cartoon, drawn by an ethnic Azeri whose 'joke' was seemingly misinterpreted,[19] was enough to trigger waves of protests. Initially mobilized on university campuses in Tabriz, the provincial capital of East Azerbaijan, the gatherings soon led to other protests in regional cities and towns, resulting in the closure of many shops and bazaars, and the gathering of tens of thousands of people on the streets and ultimately in front of the parliament in Tehran.

The government responded by shutting down the weekly and jailing its cartoonist and editors.[20] The protestors wanted apologies from the Minister of Culture and the local authorities that had cracked down violently on the protests (which were given), and a further apology from President Ahmadinejad (which was not).[21] At the end of May 2006, they crafted a resolution that included a brief historical narrative of the 'unjust and discriminatory distribution of national resources, political power, and socio-cultural status among ethnic and religious minorities in Iran since 1925.'[22] They also included a list of eleven specific demands relating directly to the Azeri minority that, amongst other things, included recognition of Azeri-Turkic as an official language and the right to use and teach

it in schools; the right to a free press and media in Azeri-Turkic; and the right to organize cultural events, NGOs, political parties and trade unions. According to both a 2010 report by the International Federation for Human Rights and to interviews by the BBC with Azeris living in the border area with Azerbaijan in 2010, restrictions on the use of the Azeri language, Azeri-language media and other forms of cultural expression are still in place, and Azeris continue to face social, economic and political marginalization.[23]

Arabs

In April 2005, the province of Khuzestan, home to most of Iran's Arabs,[24] also witnessed widespread protests, this time centring on a leaked secret letter allegedly written by former Vice President Mohammad Abtahi. The letter briefly outlined a policy to radically alter the province's demographic makeup by moving Arabs (especially those with higher education) to other parts of the country, whilst moving non-Arabs into the region, the end in mind being a reduction of the province's Arab population to a third of what it was in 2005.[25] The authenticity of the letter was never proven and Abtahi and the Khatami administration (1997–2005) adamantly denied authorship.

Apocryphal or otherwise, the letter led Arabs of Khuzestan to mobilize and give voice to long-held grievances against the state, in much the same way Azeris would a year later. When the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing visited Iran in 2005, he reported that in Ahwaz, Khuzestan's capital, 'thousands of people [were] living with open sewers, no sanitation, no regular access to water, electricity and no gas connections', despite the fact that the province has been the cornerstone of Iran's massive oil wealth for more than a century.[26] That Khuzestan furnishes much of Iran's wealth but receives very little of it for local development has been the single greatest source of grievance amongst Iranian Arabs. This antagonism is only further enflamed by large government development projects (like the Dehkhoda sugar cane plantation) that have uprooted and displaced upwards of 200,000 to 250,000 Arabs, with compensation for confiscated land being as little as one-fortieth of market value.[27] Perhaps more troubling is that the government does not offer jobs in these projects to local Arabs. Instead, it prefers to plan and build new cities like Shirinshahr for non-Arabs brought to the province from places including Yazd in central Iran, an initiative with obvious implications for Abtahi's abovementioned denial.[28] In February 2006, Amnesty International reported that government-directed migration of non-Arabs into Khuzestan is linked to economic policies that offer zero per cent interest loans to migrants, but not to Arabs.[29]

The province is also beset by other problems resulting from a century of deliberate neglect and underdevelopment: higher illiteracy, lower life expectancy and higher unemployment rates than the rest of country are just three examples.[30] In regard to economic inequality, Khuzestan is only outdone by Sistan-Baluchistan, another province where ethnic minorities constitute the bulk of the population, where unverifiable reports put 76 per cent of the population below the poverty line, in stark contrast to the national rate of 18 per cent.[31]

Kurds

Kurds in Iran share many of the same grievances and rights violations as their Azeri and Arab counterparts.[32] What distinguishes the so-called Kurdish question, however, is the scale of the violence involved. From almost the moment of its establishment, the Islamic Republic has had to contend with armed resistance movements such as the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (KDPI or PDKI) and *Komala*, although both these groups have reportedly ceased armed conflict in favour of advocating a federal solution. In 2004, however, another Kurdish group, the Kurdistan Independent Life Party, with purported ties to Turkey's PKK, was involved in another cycle of armed conflict that has, according to local government authorities, led to hundreds of deaths on both sides.[33]

This sort of bloodshed continues as an outcome of decades of mistrust and betrayal. When the KDPI, for example, attempted to negotiate with the government, this resulted in the assassination of its leader, Dr Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, in Vienna in 1989, and of his successor, Dr Sadeq Sharafkandi, two of his colleagues and a supporter in Berlin in 1992.[34] Another notorious incident occurred in July 2005 when Shivan Qaderi, a 25-year- old Iranian Kurd, whom locals described as an opposition activist, and the authorities as a smuggler and criminal, was shot dead along with two others and had his body bound and dragged by the police through the streets of Mahabad, in the province of West Azerbaijan.[35] Qaderi's mutilation prompted six weeks of protests across Kurdish regions that resulted in dozens of deaths, thousands of arrests, and the closure of a number of Kurdish news outlets that had been reporting on the protests.[36] According to locals, cases akin to Qaderi's are frequent and protests of one form or another common. In August 2010, for example, the mother of Behmen Mesudi set herself on fire in front of Orumiyeh Prison after her son was tortured and then beaten to death by a prison guard.[37] As of the beginning of 2011, up to 20 Kurdish prisoners are believed to be awaiting execution in Iran, including several political prisoners.[38]

Baluchis

At the opposite end of the country, in the almost-forgotten province of Sistan-Baluchistan, the human rights situation is similarly troubling. Home to the mostly Sunni Baluchi people, the province is reportedly the poorest of Iran's provinces. Here, it is alleged that human rights have been systematically violated in a way unseen in other parts of the country.

Like Iran's Kurdish, Arab and Azeri regions, Sistan-Baluchistan also has a long history of armed and unarmed struggle against the state. Deliberate infrastructural neglect, poor standards of living, disproportionate poverty rates, and state antagonism for regional culture and language remain sources of entrenched discontent.[39] But today's context cannot be understood without reference to what has come to be known as the 'Tasuki Incident'. On 16 March 2006, a convoy of vehicles near the town of Tasuki was attacked by an armed group called *Jondollah*, self-described as a 'campaign for freedom and democracy in Iran [… which seeks] to protect the Baluch people and other religious and ethnic minorities.'[40] The group purports to 'accept the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all other United Nations conventions or resolutions,'[41] but has, since its inception in 2005, taken responsibility for numerous events that seriously undermine its claims. The 'Tasuki Incident', for instance, involved the capture of numerous government officials and the roadside execution of 23 of them who were identified as not being Baluchi. Seven further non-Baluchis were taken hostage, four of whom were killed and the rest released, and the incident was followed by more bombings and killings, some of which the group justified and for which they claimed responsibility.[42]

This violence provided the pretext for the further militarization of the province by government forces and an increase in the number of executions and extrajudicial killings by the state.[43] Between January and August 2007, for example, Amnesty International reports that Iran executed 166 people, 50 of whom were Baluchis, and all but one of whom were executed in the wake of a *Jondollah* attack in February 2007.[44] One member of parliament reported in March 2007 that 700 people were awaiting execution in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan, a number so large and controversial that Baluchi sources report that the provincial authorities were having to send Baluchis to places outside the province to be executed.[45] Most of those who await the death penalty have likely been convicted of crimes related to the drug trade. But it does not pass unnoticed to most observers that capital punishment in Sistan-Baluchistan, as with everywhere else in the country, has been used to 'quell political unrest, intimidate the population and send a signal that dissent will not be tolerated'.[46] At the end of 2010, 11 Baluch prisoners were executed for alleged membership of *Jondollah*, following a suicide bombing on 15 December 2010 at a mosque in Chabahar, in Sistan-Baluchistan. All had been imprisoned prior to the attack.[47]

As important as *Jondollah* has become in understanding the state's relationship with the Baluchi people, it would be a mistake to allow the group's militancy and Tehran's counterinsurgency to obscure other problems found in Baluchi regions. It would likewise be a mistake to conflate all Baluchi protests with *Jondollah*'s activities. This has been the lens through which Tehran views its policy in this region of the country, complete with analogies to the so-called 'war on terror' and al-Qaeda.[48] Indeed, the fallout from the violence has doubtless made it all the more difficult for human rights advocates on the ground and abroad to push for change on the array of iniquities that affect the day-to-day lives of the Baluchi people.

Violations of international and national law

The disregard for national and international law and the severe violations of the economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights of Iranians belonging to minorities are best understood within the broader context of widespread human rights violations. To be sure, the country's prisons have long contained political prisoners and prisoners of conscience who have been subject to abuse, torture and organized killing.[49] What distinguishes the Kurdish, Azeri, Arab or Baluch majority regions is that these abuses are more widespread, more violent and carried out with greater impunity. The stark denial of even low-level minority demands for some linguistic, publishing and educational freedoms have combined with heavy-handed and outright economic and political repression to make Iranian minorities disproportionately vulnerable to human rights abuses.

One should also note that the treatment suffered by Iran's ethnic minorities not only contrasts sharply with Iran's international human rights commitments but also with its own legal provisions.[50] The Iranian Constitution formally provides for the fair treatment of its minorities: Article 3(14) provides for equality of all before the law. Article 15 permits the use of 'local and ethnic languages' and the teaching of 'ethnic literature' in schools, while establishing Persian as the official language. Article 19 states: 'All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights, and colour, race, language, and the like do not bestow any privilege.' As 'the most important and superior legislative document in Iran [… whose] contents […] have priority over all other legal sources',[51] one would expect its provisions to have to have had a traceable impact on the freedoms enjoyed by ethnic minorities in Iran. The historical record, however, suggests otherwise.

Religious Minorities

Iran's Constitution declares the state as Twelver Ja'fari Shi'a Muslim, and describes the nation's conscience and the revolution that engendered it as Islamic. The very mission of the Constitution, the preamble explains, is to 'bring about the conditions under which the lofty and worldwide values of Islam will flourish'. What then does this imply for others who do not share the professed religious identity of the state?

Sunni Muslims

The spirit of Article 19 of the Constitution urges against bestowing privileges on the basis of markers like language

and ethnicity, but in Iran, ethnicity and religion are often linked because they share boundaries. Most of the country's linguistically (as well as culturally) distinct minorities – Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis and Turkmens, for example – practise Sunni Islam. This has meant that in addition to the discriminatory policies that bear directly upon ethnic identity, these groups are doubly affected because of their faith. Article 115 of the Constitution, for instance, reserves the office of the president for an adherent of the 'official religion of the Islamic Republic', which Article 12 makes clear is the Twelver Ja'fari school of Shi'a Islam. In practice, almost all those appointed to government or official positions are adherents of the official religion.

The preclusion of Sunnis – and, indeed, other religious groups – from public office and, more broadly, the public sphere ignores constitutional guarantees. Article 11 discusses the unity of the entire Islamic congregation and obliges the government of Iran to foster this spirit. But Sunnis, for example, do not have a single mosque in Tehran, whose metropolitan population is more than 13 million and which has a sizeable Sunni population. When former President Mohammad Khatami failed to deliver on an election campaign promise to build a Sunni mosque, he later stated that the Supreme Leader had advised against it.[52] In other places, Sunni mosques have been destroyed (most recently the Abu Hanifa Mosque near Zabol, Sistan-Baluchistan, August 2008) or converted into parks (Mashhad, 2002).[53] And these, too, are in spite of constitutional duties like those found at Article 12, which states that the government is obliged to relegate responsibilities like religious schooling and local law to whichever school of Islam constitutes the majority in a given region. In January 2010, there were reports that 19 Sunni clerics had been arrested for spreading Sunni teachings in Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Baluchistan, West Azerbaijan, Ahvaz (Khuzestan), Tavalesh (Gilan) and Khorassan provinces.[54]

Constitutionally recognized religious communities

The Constitution does provide for recognized religious minority status for Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians, all of whom have a long historical presence in Iran. The current Constitution, ratified in November 1979 and amended in July 1989, stipulates at Article 13 that these three groups – and only these three – are 'free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education' within the limits of the law. In addition, the three recognized religious minorities have a representation quota in the Iranian Parliament. But these constitutional protections should not blind us to the reality of their secondary status, and legislated representation has not proven a mechanism for the realization of equality for these communities.

Article 14 specifically enjoins the Muslims of the Islamic Republic to respect the human rights of non-Muslims and to treat them in 'conformity with the ethical norms and principles of Islamic justice and equality.' The affixed qualifier, readily invoked to render both articles ineffectual, follows: 'This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.' Needless to say, conspiratorial activity has been interpreted generously against religious (and other) minorities since 1979.[55]

In addition, the elaborate machinery in day-to-day Iranian society ensures the extreme 'ideologization of Islam'.[56] All Iranians seeking employment or professional advancement, or to enter higher education, are subjected to screening sessions known as *gozinesh*, where they are assessed regarding their loyalty and commitment to the Islamic Republic.[57] Non-Muslims and even Muslims who 'fail' these screenings are either excluded or eventually purged not only from the upper echelons of power, but also from more minor positions of 'influence' in society, such as studying at university[58] or securing university teaching positions.[59]

Religious groups suspected of attempting to convert Muslims, and converts themselves, are particularly vulnerable to spurious charges and find themselves under near-constant surveillance. This leads to particular persecution of Bahá'ís and evangelical Christians,[60] as reflected in the following UK Immigration Tribunal judgment:

> *'It is clear* […] *that even ethnic Christians* [in Iran] *are treated as second-class citizens and can experience quite severe forms of social, legal and economic discrimination. Those who are known converts* […] *would experience all of that discrimination as well.* […] *They are also and importantly subject to a legal regime in which their conversion* [i.e. apostasy] *is at least theoretically punishable with death, and the theocratic nature of the state enables conversion to be seen as both a religious crime against God and a political crime against the very foundations of the state.* [...] *They may also be more liable to be dealt with unfairly for ordinary offences.'* [61]

As of the end of September 2010, a Christian pastor, Yousef Nadarkhani, had been sentenced to death on charges of apostasy, according to the International Federation for Human Rights. In a further indication of the dangers facing Christian converts, in January 2011 the governor-general of Tehran Province, Morteza Tamaddon, described 'Evangelical proselytising Christians as a deviate [sic] and corrupt tendency' and reported that 'their leaders had been arrested in the Tehran province and more will be arrested in future'.[62]

Members of religious minority communities – whether non-Muslim or Muslims of schools other than Twelver

Ja'fari Shi'a – have all also been subject to illegal land confiscation, employment loss and discrimination, debilitating restrictions on the exercise of their faith, arbitrary arrest and detention, bureaucratic discrimination, abductions, and an array of other difficulties that seriously undermine the legal position of the regime apropos of its own constitution.[63] The persecutions are also known to have intensified since 2005, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad commenced his first presidential term.[64]

Bahá'ís

The persecution of minority religions – or, in fact, any Iranian minority – is most pronounced in the case of the Bahá'ís. This religious minority group does not enjoy the constitutional guarantees that are formally afforded to Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, nor, indeed, any legal protection under Iran's Islamic laws. Officially, they are considered heretics who constitute a political opposition and not a religious community, thereby attempting to undercut protestations to respect international laws and conventions on the freedom of religion. In 1985, for example, in a press release by the Islamic Republic's Permanent Mission to the United Nations, 'Bahá'ísm' is referred to 'not specifically as a religious cult but rather a political party committed to the United States and Israel and devoted to furthering their predatory goals in Iran.'[65] Such statements continue to be echoed today, recently by Hossein Shariatmadari, a close confidant of the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the managing editor of the conservative state-run paper *Keyhan*, who branded Bahá'ís as terrorists and Israel's fifth column. Mohammad Javad Larijani, the Secretary General of Iran's High Council for Human Rights, reiterated the same as the head of Iran's delegation at the 2010 UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review.[66] He denied that Bahá'ís suffered from any violations of human rights and claimed that they were, on the contrary, economically flourishing, and that the country tolerated them in spite of their 'cultish' traits and espionage activities for Israel and the United States.[67]

These and other similar statements made by various government officials and senior clerics have long been the basis for the regime's organized efforts against this minority.[68] Between 1978 and 2005, 219 Bahá'ís were summarily killed by revolutionary courts on account of their faith, with the case of Bahman Samandari taken as the exemplar of the 'summary trial'.[69] He was arrested on 17 March 1992 and executed the next day, whilst the international community was in session at the UN Commission on Human Rights, considerations of due process, legal counsel and the like being obviously redundant, as far as the Iranian authorities were concerned.[70]

Iranian authorities have often denied that the Islamic Republic's policy towards Bahá'ís is because of their religion and indeed have sought opportunities to frame them politically. A recent case is the ongoing detention since 2008 of the informal leadership of the Iranian Bahá'í community. They have been sentenced to ten years' imprisonment on charges of conspiring against the Islamic Republic, and their lawyers – drawn from Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi's The Defenders of Human Rights Center – have also been subject to intimidation, imprisonment, and attacks on their person by state agents.[71] In January 2010, three Bahá'ís were arrested, allegedly in connection with the Green Movement, the popular uprising that swept Iran in the aftermath of the disputed presidential election of June 2009.[72] This protest movement saw millions of Iranians – irrespective of ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic identities – take to the streets, where thousands were arrested and scores killed by state authorities.[73] As regards the specific arrest of the Bahá'ís, Tehran's state prosecutor declared that 'they were not arrested because they are Bahá'í, but for playing a role in organising the Ashura protests, […] for having sent pictures of the unrest abroad [… and because] arms and ammunition were seized in some of their homes'.[74]

Conclusion: what next?

This briefing has focused on the main ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities in Iran, but it is important to bear in mind that there exist many others (among Muslim minorities, the Ismaelis for example), as well as freethinking Muslims who object to a narrow definition of who, according to the regime, represents a 'convinced Muslim believer'. And this is to say nothing of atheists, whose low visibility has allowed them for the most part to avoid discrimination and persecution. Furthermore, the Iranian Constitution's emphasis on the Qur'anic injunction of 'enjoining the good and the forbidding of evil'[75] has had far-reaching implications for a wide range of individual and group identities – for homosexuals in Iran,[76] for political activists, for human rights defenders, and especially those promoting equality for women – against the background of intolerance of all perceived difference and deviance from an ever-narrowing norm of 'Iranian'. Further attention also needs to be given to differentiating between the demands of the various minority communities in Iran, and their treatment, analysing why Iranian minority policies have shown such a sharp distinction, for example, between certain freedoms granted to religious minorities against those granted to ethnic minorities, the quota of representation allocated for the smaller recognized religious minorities but not for ethnic minorities, and why the treatment of various religious minorities and ethnic minorities is so varied.[77]

Despite this dismal picture of repression and marginalization, the future for Iran's minority situation should not be considered as utterly gloomy. Since the disputed presidential elections of June 2009, there has been a notable growth in human rights consciousness within Iran and its diaspora. The three weeks of political campaigning

preceding those elections and exchanges during Iran's first televised presidential debates were already suggestive of a marked cultural shift, affording political space for considering equality for minorities and respect for differences. Whilst that political window of opportunity was firmly shut when President Ahmadinejad won a second term (2009–2013), the debate has not ended and has in fact mushroomed in the extensive, internet-based global Persian media, and amongst the increasing number of Iranian activists and thinkers both within the country and abroad.

The religious space for debate on this matter had already been opened by the 2008 religious edict (*fatwa*) of the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri (1922–2009), the deposed heir to Ayatollah Khomeini, regarding Bahá'ís. For the first time in Iranian history, a very senior religious authority and political figure explicitly asserted that Bahá'ís should enjoy citizenship rights in Iran.[78] The significance of this was not for them alone, since it would be popularly assumed that if even Bahá'ís can be afforded rights, then it is all the more so for other religious and ethnic minorities.[79] This certainly would have posed a serious challenge to the regime's calculated minority policy,[80] even if Ayatollah Montazeri had not become the figurehead of Iran's internal and civic opposition movement (which of course he did).[81]

This religious platform allowed supporters of the presidential candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, to chant slogans in the streets of Tehran in May and June 2009 calling for the rights of all Iranians, including the Dervish, Kurds and Bahá'ís. His press office confirmed Karroubi's own support for equal citizenship rights – even for Bahá'ís – through his spokesperson, Dr Jamileh Kadivar, who is renowned in her own capacity as a former member of parliament and human rights activist.[82] Since then, the debate has remained very much alive in academic circles, media debates and the blogosphere.[83] Whilst the Supreme Leader and President of Iran continue to attempt to suppress calls for equality and rights, such debates continue, and are in fact bringing more and more numbers into their fold. For the first time ever, the minorities question has entered the Iranian political parlance and is recognized as integral to the questions of Iranian democracy and freedom.

This dramatic cultural shift cannot be overstated. It suggests a growing support base for questions of human and minority rights which will eventually have to be addressed by the Iranian government. Whereas the international community has condemned Iran for its human rights record and treatment of minorities both before and since the 1979 revolution,[84] this condemnation is now being echoed and reinforced from within Iran on an unprecedented scale. The realization of these long-held ideals of respect and dignity for all, irrespective of difference, are now on the agenda for all Iranians, whether belonging to minorities or the majority population.

Recommendations

To the Iranian government:

- Allow persons belonging to religious minorities freedom of religion or belief and allow minority religious communities to build centres of worship.
- Free all minority rights activists, human rights defenders, journalists and others who are currently imprisoned for their peaceful advocacy of minority rights.
- Immediately desist from the use of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
- Uphold the equal treatment and non-discrimination provisions contained in the Iranian Constitution.
- Recognize minority languages as official languages, affirm the right to their use and support the teaching of minority languages in schools.
- Implement the right of minorities to a free press and media in their own languages.
- Affirm the right of minorities to express their culture and ensure that cultural events can occur.
- Implement the right of members of minority groups to equal opportunity of employment and equal access to financial support offered in connection with regional development initiatives.
- Address development-related issues concerning minorities, including equal access to education and healthcare.
- Desist from *gozinesh* screening sessions, or at least not use these as a basis for discriminatory treatment.

To the United Nations and its member states:

- Continue the annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning violations of human rights in Iran, including in regard to the situation of its minorities.
- Appoint a UN expert to address the situation of human rights in Iran.
- The UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance should request a visit to Iran under its standing invitation to the Special Procedures in order to report on the situation of human rights in that country, and particularly the plight of its minorities.
- Other governments should use effective opportunities to express concern for the situation of Iran's minorities, including in bilateral trade contracts.

Notes

1 'A letter from Farzad Kamangar: It is a strange time, my flower', 22 January 2010, Persian2English, retrieved September 2010, http://eastkurd.blog.co.uk/2010/01/22/it-s-a-strange-time-my-flower-a-letter-from-farzad-kamangar-7854690/page/2/

2 These reports come from a broad group of independent sources. See supplementary reference list.

3 See, for example, Amnesty International's interview with Sunni Baluch cleric, footnote 57.

4 See McDougall, G., *Specific Groups and Individuals: Minorities: Report of the Independent Expert on Minority Issues*, UN doc. E/CN.4/2006/74, 6 January, para. 84, 2006, retrieved September 2010, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/sessions/62/listdocs.htm

5 Report submitted by the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN Human Rights Committee: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Third periodic reports of states parties, Iran, UN doc. CCPR/C/IRN/3, 31 May 2010, para. 1, retrieved November 2010, http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/427/76/PDF/G1042776.pdf?OpenElement

6 *General Census of Population and Households: 1976*, Statistical Centre of Iran, 1976, Tehran.

7 For example, by Hassan, H. D., *CRS Report for Congress: Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, 25 November 2008, retrieved September 2010, http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34021.pdf

8 *Country Profile: Iran*, Library of Congress – Federal Research Division, May 2008, retrieved September 2010, http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Iran.pdf; Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, Iran profile, retrieved January 2011, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html

9 More recent studies have, for example, shown interesting sociological trends in terms of religiousity and religious affiliation. One study notes that: 'the establishment of a theocratic regime in Iran has led to the transformation of the nature of faith, marked by a noticeable shift from "organized" to a more "personalized" religion, in which the emphasis is placed on beliefs rather than on practices.' Abdolmohammad Kazemipur, A. and Rezaei, A., 'Religious Life Under Theocracy: The Case of Iran', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2003, pp. 347–361. In-depth studies would be able to detect if self-identification on ethnic, linguistic or other grounds show similar shifts. See also: Kazemipur, A. and Goodarzi, M., 'Iranian Youth and Religion: An Empirical Study', *Middle East Critique*, vol. 18., no. 2., 2009, pp. 161–176.

10 As many observers have rightly pointed out, the information provided by the government in Tehran is highly politicized. The Baluch population, for example, is significant in the provinces of Hormuzgan as well as Kerman but, as Human Rights Watch documented in 1997, '[t]he administrative and political districts were arranged so as to avoid the creation of any Baluchi majority provinces, thus preventing locally elected officials.' HRW reports further that since the mid-1990s, 'a systematic plan has been set in motion by the authorities to specify the region by changing the ethnic balance of major Baluchi cities such as Zahedan, Iranshahr, Chahbahar and Khash.' See 'Religious and Ethnic Minorities Discrimination in Law and Practice', Human Rights Watch, September 1997, vol. 9, no. 7., retrieved September 2010, http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6a8240.html

11 Katouzian, H., *The Persians*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 213.

12 Bayat, K. 'Riza Shah and the tribes: an overview', in S. Cronin (ed.), *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 217. See also Breseeg, T. M., *Baluch Nationalism: Its Origin and Development*, Karachi: Royal Book Company, 2004, p. 296.

13 Swietochowski, T., *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 122.

14 *Ibid*.

15 Katouzian, *ibid*., p. 320, whose translation is *Let him [the shah] go, and let there be floods afterwards*.

16 Katouzian has also written at length about the consistency of this sort of political ethos throughout Iran's long narrative. See, for example, Katouzian, H., *Iranian History and Politics, the Dialectic of State and Society*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

17 See Menashri, D., 'Khomeini's Policy toward Ethnic and Religious Minorities', in M. J. Esman and I. Rabinovich (eds.), *Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in the Middle East*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988, pp. 216–217, quoted in *Murder at Mykonos: Anatomy of a Political Assassination*, Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, New Haven: IHRDC, 2007, p. 5, retrieved September 2010, http://iranhrdc.org/english/pdfs/Reports/murder_at_mykonos_report.pdf

18 Many of the organisers for these and other movements later became victims of what became known as the chain assassinations, whereby agents of the Islamic Republic eliminated a number of prominent activists both within the country and abroad. The Mykonos Affair, which involved a ruling by Germany's highest criminal court, and the Vienna murders are especially notable. For more on this topic, see Sahimi, M., 'The Chain Murders', *PBS Frontline: Tehran Bureau*, 14 December 2009, retrieved September 2010, http://www.hudson-ny.org/144/the-chain-murders-of-iran

19 The cartoonist, Mana Neyestani, has offered his interpretation of events in Persian at the following blog: http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=114760155206649&topic=286

20 'Iran Azeris protest over cartoons', BBC News, 28 May 2006, retrieved January 2011, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5024550.stm.

21 Amnesty International reported that, 'Hundreds, if not thousands, were arrested and scores reportedly killed by the security forces, although official sources downplayed the scale of arrests and killings.' See *2007 Annual Report for Iran*, Amnesty International, retrieved September 2010, http://www.amnestyusa.org/annualreport.php?id=ar&yr=2007&c=IRN

22 Tohidi, N., 'Iran: regionalism, ethnicity and democracy', *OpenDemocracy*, 28 June 2006, retrieved September 2010, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/regionalism_3695.jsp

23 International Federation for Human Rights, *The Hidden Side of Iran: discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities*, Paris, FIDH – International Federation for Human Rights, 2010, retrieved January 2011, http://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/IrandiscrimLDDHI545a.pdf; 'Azeris feel Iranian pressure', BBC News, 16 February 2010, retrieved January 2011, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8516682.stm.

24 For more on the Ahwazi Arabs see 'The Plight of the Ahwazis', *Unrepresented Peoples and Nations Organization*, 28 January 2005, retrieved September 2010, http://www.unpo.org/article/1848

25 The original letter and translation are available in Appendix 1 of the following report: *Human Rights and the Ahwazi Arabs*, Ahwazi Arab Human Rights Organization, July 2006, retrieved November 2010, www.hic-mena.org/documents/dossier.pdf.

26 Kandoori, M., 'Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living', UN doc., E/CN.4/2006/41/Add.2, 21 March 2006, retrieved September 2010, http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G06/119/30/PDF/G0611930.pdf?OpenElement. For an interview by Kandoori on this topic, see 'Interview with Human Rights Special Rapporteur, Miloon Kandoor', *IRIN*, 9 August 2005, retrieved September 2010, http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=25364

27 *Op. cit.*, Kandoori interview.

28 *Ibid*.

29 *Iran: New Government Fails to Address Dire Human Rights Situation*, Amnesty International, 16 February 2006, retrieved

September 2010, http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/010/2006/en/bd1cac6f-d45e-11dd-8743-d305bea2b2c7/mde130102006en.html

30 For a photographic essay of Khuzestan's underdevelopment and poverty, see 'Inja afreeqa nist, inja qalb-e tapande Iran, Khuzestan ast' [This is not Africa, this is the beating heart of Iran: Khuzestan], 5 February 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.eyeranians.com/archives/500

31 See, for example, statements by Mohammad Reza Sarawani, Deputy of Social Affairs in Sistan-Baluchistan, as they were reported by the official news agency *Shana* on 31 December 2007. For an estimate of the national poverty rate as of 2007, see Government of the United States of America: Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, 'Population Below Poverty Line', 2010, retrieved September 2010, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2046.html. For a more detailed report on poverty in Iran, see Salehi-Isfahani, D., *Has Poverty Increased in Iran Under Ahmadinejad?*, The Brookings Institution, 5 August 2008, retrieved September 2010, http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2008/0805_iran_salehi_isfahani.aspx

32 See, for example, Yildiz, K. and Taysi, T. B., *The Kurds in Iran: The Past, Present and Future*, London: Pluto Press, 2007, p. 32: 'Many Kurds feel that their region suffers from intentional underdevelopment at the hands of the government.'

33 *Op. Cit*., *Iran: New Government Fails to Address Dire Human Rights Situation.*

34 *Op. Cit*., *Murder at Mykonos: Anatomy of a Political Assassination*. These murders, which later came to be known as the 'chain assassinations' were investigated by Akbar Ganji and Emaddedin Baghi in the daily *Sobh Emrouz*.

35 'Ethnic minorities singled out for attack in Iran', Amnesty International. Index Number NWS 21/009/2005, 35.9, *The Wire*, vol. 35, no. 9, October 2005, retrieved November 2010, http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/NWS21/009/2005/en/57d840c6-d4a7-11dd-8a23-d58a49c0d652/nws210092005en.pdf

36 *Ibid*.

37 'Iran: Kurdish prisoner tortured to death, his mother sets herself on fire', ANF News Agency, 25 August 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/8/irankurd645.htm

38 International Federation for Human Rights 'Iran: dramatic wave of executions and death sentences to repress free expression, political opposition and ethnic affiliation', joint press release, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) /Iranian League for Defence of Human Rights (LDDHI), 6 January 2011, retrieved January 2011, http://www.fidh.org/IRAN-Dramatic-wave-of-executions-and-death.

39 For an extensive report on the condition of Iran's Baluchi community, see *Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against the Baluchi Minority*, Amnesty International, 16 September 2007, retrieved September 2010, http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/104/2007/en/160fb9c4-d370-11dd-a329-2f46302a8cc6/mde131042007en.html

40 'Statement of People's Resistance Movement of Iran (former[ly] Jondollah) to [the] Media and International Community', 19 February 2007, retrieved August 2010, http://jonbeshmardom.blogspot.com/2007/03/statement-of-peoples-resistance.html

41 *Ibid*.

42 Amnesty International reports that '[o]n 14 December 2006, the day before nationwide elections for the Assembly of Experts and local council elections, a bomb in a car exploded in Zahedan outside the office of the Governor-General [of the province], killing the owner of the car, who had reportedly been kidnapped […] The attack was claimed by Jondollah […] On 14 February 2007, a car packed with explosives blew up a bus carrying [government forces] and others, killing at least fourteen people and injuring around thirty […] the attack […] was later claimed by Jondollah. The group apparently stated that the attack was in reprisal for the execution of several members of Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority […].' See *Op. Cit*., *Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against the Baluchi Minority*. Further bombings continue to this day, one of the more recent being the July 2010 bombing of the Grand Mosque in Zahedan, which killed around thirty people and injured hundreds. Iran has long maintained that Jondollah is funded by the United States and United Kingdom, a claim rejected by both states. On 3 November 2010, the US Department of State designated Jondollah a 'violent extremist' terrorist organization. See 'Secretary of the State's Terrorist Designation of Jundallah', U.S. Department of State: Office of the Spokesman, 3 November 2010, retrieved November 2010, http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/11/150332.htm

43 In April 2006, one month after the Tasuki Incident, the Rasoul-e Akram military base was established in Zahedan. Amnesty International reported an estimate of 20,000 to 25,000 troops stationed at the base, but this number is unverifiable. What is undisputable, however, is that Sistan-Baluchistan is heavily militarized, and that this has resulted in an escalation of human rights abuses. In May 2006, the army used helicopter gunships and ground forces to launch a counterinsurgency operation in Baluchi areas near Bam and Nosratabad. The Governor of Bam reported ten deaths, while local Baluchis said at least 18 farmers and shepherds had been killed by the gunships. Amnesty International (2007 report) notes a series of unlawful and seemingly indiscriminate killings by security forces. On 13 June 2007, for example, Vahid Mir Baluchzahi, aged 23, was found dead after having gone missing on 14 February 2007, the day of a Jondollah attack. His body reportedly bore injuries suggesting that he had been tortured. On 16 May 2007, according to eyewitness sources of Amnesty International, security forces opened fire on a car containing children, killing Roya Sarani, aged eleven, and wounding her father, Elyas Sarani. Officials put pressure on the Sarani family to hold a quiet funeral and not allow others to attend. See *Op. Cit*., *Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against the Baluchi Minority*.

44 *Ibid*.

45 See interview with Hossein Ali Shahryari in *Ayyaran*, 17 March 2007. This newspaper has since been closed down.

46 'Iran Executions Send a Chilling Message', Amnesty International, 29 March 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/iran-executions-send-chilling-message-2010-03-30

47 International Federation for Human Rights, 'Iran: dramatic wave of executions and death sentences', *op.cit.*

48 'Iran"executes Sunni militants"', BBC News, 14 July 2009, retrieved August 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8149014.stm. See especially the television confessions of Jondollah's former and now executed leader, Abulmalik Rigi, 'Iran Jundallah leader claims US military support', BBC News, 26 February 2010, retrieved August 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8537567.stm

49 For more on the mistreatment and mass executions of prisoners of conscience in Iran, see, for example, Shahrooz, K., 'With Revolutionary Rage and Rancor: A Preliminary Report on the 1988 Massacre of Iran's Political Prisoners', *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, vol. 20., 2007, pp. 227–61.

50 Conventions that Iran has signed and are relevant to its treatment of minorities include the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and particularly its Article 27; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and indeed all human rights instruments and their provisions on non-discrimination and equality.

51 Abghari, A., *Introduction to the Iranian Legal System and the Protection of Human Rights in Iran*, London: British Institute of International and Comparative Law, 2009, p. 9.

52 Shahzad, S. S., 'Iran's unsung rebellion', *Asia Times*, 17 December 2002, retrieved December 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/DL17Ak03.html

53 For a longer list of destroyed Sunni mosques in Iran and, more generally, detailed grievances from Sunni perspectives, see supplementary reference list.

54 International Federation for Human Rights, *The Hidden Side of Iran: discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities*, *op. cit*.

55 For a discussion see Sanasarian, E., *Religious Minorities in Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

56 Mayer, A. E., *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1991, p. 134.

57 *Gozinesh* affects almost every person who does not subscribe to the mainstream political ideology of the Islamic Republic. The full brunt of these ideological screenings, however, are felt most directly by the country's minorities, whose vulnerability is illustrated by one Sunni cleric from Sistan-Baluchistan: "If a Baluchi wants to open a shop, he must first go to the government and get his political beliefs thoroughly examined by the [Revolutionary Guards] and intelligence services. They ask: have you done anything for the Islamic Republic? Did you fight in the Iran–Iraq War? Do you believe in the velayat-e faqih [i.e. the doctrine in Iran that places the Islamic jurist at the apex of the country's political power]? Sunnis don't believe in [this doctrine] – it is against our beliefs, and because we don't believe in [lying], we must answer the truth. The result is that Sunnis don't get the permit to open the shop, they don't get jobs, they don't get places in university – unless they agree to become informers for the intelligence services […] They treat us like the Untouchables of India […] We are Iranians by passport and by nation, and so we want our rights as Iranians. We want our rights in Baluchistan […] We want to be allowed to work, to have our own people in the police.' See *The Iran Brief*, Amnesty International, no. 35, June 1997, retrieved September 2010, http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php ?id=ENGMDE131042007&lang=e

58 Students deemed politically active or otherwise undesirable are regularly suspended or expelled from university. See 'Iran: Stop Punishing Student Activists', Human Rights Watch, 30 September 2003, retrieved September 2010, http://www.hrw.org/ en/news/2003/09/30/iran-stop-punishing-student-activists, and *Denying the Right to Education*, Human Rights Watch, October 2006, retrieved September 2010, http://www.hrw.org/ backgrounder/mena/iran1006.

59 The Islamic Republic has consistently purged the country's universities of professors whose allegiance to the state and its ideology has been considered less than earnest. See 'Purge of Independent-Minded Professors Underway', International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 19 April 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/04/purge-of-professors and 'Fears as Iran professors retire', BBC News, 22 June 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/5107214.stm.

60 'It is clear that those religious minorities that are essentially cultural, ethnic associations who have long resisted or forbidden conversions into the faith have generally suffered less in Iran, with those with a previous history of Muslim conversions being repressed most.' Ghanea, N., 'Ethnic and Religious Groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran', UN doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.5/2003/WP.8, 5 May 2003, pp. 19–20, retrieved September 2011, http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/AllSymbols/09521F127B6419D0C1256D250047D9E6/$File/G0314153.pdf?OpenElement

61 *FS and Others (Iran – Christian Converts) Iran v. Secretary of State for the Home Department*, 17 November 2004, CG [2004] UKIAT 00303, para. 163, retrieved September 2010, http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?docid=42c934fb4&page=search

62 International Federation for Human Rights, 'Iran: dramatic wave of executions and death sentences to repress free expression, political opposition and ethnic affiliation', *op.cit.*

63 Over the past two decades – i.e. since reports have become more readily available – several Christian pastors have been 'found' dead by state officials: Haik Hovsepian Mehr, Mehdi Dibaj, and Tateos Michaelian in 1994; Mohammad Bagher Yusefi in 1996; Ghorban Dordi Tourani in 2006; and a number of others since. Ghanea, N. *Human Rights, the UN and the Bahá'ís in Iran*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 2003. Pp. 136 ff. For further reports on persecution of Christians, see supplementary reference list.

64 In fact, a marked deterioration in the human rights situation in general has been observed. See EU Presidency Declaration on EU–Iran Human Rights Dialogue, 20 December 2005, Brussels, EU Council Ref CL05-343EN, para. 2, retrieved September 2010, http://europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article_5505_en.htm

65 Press Release, Islamic Republic of Iran, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, 'Bahá'ísm Per Se No Ground For Persecution', Ayatollah Mousavi, 27 November 1985. See also, *A Faith Denied: The Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran*, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2006, footnote 297 and accompanying text.

66 See 'Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Islamic Republic of Iran', UN Human Rights Council, UN doc. A/HRC/14/12, 15 March 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/IR/A_HRC_14_12_Iran.pdf

67 See archival video material for the Human Rights Council: Seventh Universal Periodic Review, 8–19 February 2010, Geneva, Switzerland, retrieved September 2010, http://www.un.org/webcast/unhrc/archive.asp?go=100215

68 In 1991, a secret memorandum of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council was formulated at the request of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The document, which bears his handwriting and the signature of another senior cleric, Hojatoleslam Seyyed Mohammad Golpayegani, Secretary of the Council, states that the government should ensure that the 'progress and development of the [Bahá'í] shall be blocked.' The document (see original in the appendix to the document cited below) outlines a number of policies to this end, including denying them positions of influence; denying them employment if they identify themselves as Bahá'í; expelling them from university 'either in the admission process or during the course of their studies once it becomes known that they are Bahá'í'; and ensuring that they are educated in schools 'with strong religious ideolog[ies].' The official response from the Iranian government at the time was that the document was a forgery, though, as with the Abtahi memo, the facts on the ground seem to point to veracity of the document. See *Discrimination against religious minorities in Iran*, Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme [FIDH], Paris, August 2003, retrieved September 2010, http://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/ir0108a.pdf

69 *The Bahá'í Question: Cultural Cleansing in Iran*, Bahá'í International Community, September 2008, New York, pp. 62–63, retrieved September 2011, http://question.bahai.org.

70 Disregard for due process and the law in general is systemic in Iran and not limited to the state's treatment of its minorities. One especially exacerbated case, however, is that of the Baluchi people, which the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported are especially vulnerable to summary trials and executions. See, for example, the following report from August 1998 which cites an interview by a government official in the state's *Ettela'at* newspaper (25 February 1998) endorsing orders to execute suspected militants upon capture: 'Question of the violation of human rights and fundamental freedom […]: Report of the sub-commission under commission on human rights resolution 8 (XXIII): Declaration on the Islamic Republic of Iran', UN doc. E/CN/Sub.2/1998/NGO/32, 24 August 1998, retrieved September 2010, http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/TestFrame/e8fd3e68a3e4b563802566880051d10e?Opendocument.Some observers have noted that as a result of these orders, one in three executions in Iran are of the Baluchi people.

71 The Defenders of Human Rights Center, also known as the Centre for the Defence of Human Rights, is addressed in Kassir, S., 'The campaign against Iran's Bahá'ís', *Now Lebanon*, 21 September 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx ?ID=202759&ref=nf#ixzz10kVZjyVv. For background see also Ghanea, N., and Taefi, V., 'Dissident Watch: Fariba Kamalabadi', *The Middle East Quarterly*, vol. XVI, no. 3, Summer 2009, retrieved Septemeber 2010, http://www.meforum.org/2403/dissident-watch-fariba-kamalabadi. As of

November 2010, Mohammad Seifzadeh and Nasrin Sotoudeh are also being prosecuted for acting against national security by founding the Defenders of Human Rights Center. See: 'Prominent Attorney Mohammad Seifzadeh Sentenced to 9 Years in Prison', Rahana, 1 November 2010, retrieved November 2010, http://news.kodoom.com/en/iran-politics/prominent-attorney-mohammad-seifzadeh/story/1277741. See also 'Concern for Nasrin Sotoudeh', UK Mission to the United Nations, 12 November 2010, retrieved November 2010, http://ukun.fco.gov.uk/en/news/?view=News&id=63578682

72 For a further discussion see: Ansari, A. M., *Crisis of Authority: Iran's 2009 Presidential Elections*, London: Chatham House, 2010.

73 Sahimi, M., 'Martyrs of the Green Movement', Tehran Bureau, 7 April 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/04/martyrs-of-the-green-movement.html

74 Though citizen journalism has been one of the hallmarks of the Green Movement, this allegation would seem to be unfounded and opportunistic. Like any state subject to strife from within or outside its borders, the Islamic Republic has been prone to seeking scapegoats to distract the public from pressing concerns. Numerous and crude examples of this can be found time and again, and they often target the minorities. See, for example, 'Iran arrests banned Bahais over protests', France24, 8 January 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.france24.com/en/20100108-iran-arrests-banned-bahais-over-protests

75 For a discussion of the implications of this as well as other Islamic injunctions, such as that of impurity for minorities see: Ghanea, N., 'Phantom Minorities and Religions Denied', *Shia Affairs Journal*, vol. 2, 2009, retrieved September 2010, http://shiaaffairs.org/index.php/journal/article/view/4

76 See, for example, *A Report Regarding Queer Rights Violations in Islamic Republic of Iran*, Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees, 19 June 2010, Toronto.

77 Ghanea, N., 'Ethnic and Religious Groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran', UN doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.5/2003/WP.8, 5 May 2003, retrieved September 2010, http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/AllSymbols/09521F127B6419D0C1256D250047D9E6/$File/G0314153.pdf?OpenElement

78 See Memarian, M., 'Ayatollah Montazeri clarifies his position on Bahá'í faith', *Mideast Youth*, 17 June 2008, retrieved September 2010, http://www.mideastyouth.com/2008/06/17/ayatollah-montazeri-clarifies-his-position-on-bahais; 'Ayatollah Montazeri proclaims Bahá'ís citizens of Iran', *Mideast Youth*, 22 May 2008, retrieved September 2010, http://www.mideastyouth.com/2008/05/22/ayatollah-montazeri-proclaims-bahais-citizens-of-iran; and in Persian: 'Pirvan-e farqeh bahaiyat va hoquq-e shahrvandi', Ayatollah Montazeri's Official Website, 14 June 2008, retrieved September 2010, http://www.amontazeri.com/farsi/pop_printer_friendly.asp?TOPIC_ID=27

79 For a contrasting view, see Choksy, J. K., 'Montazeri's Limited Tolerance of non-Muslims', *The Huffington Post*, 21 December 2009, retrieved September 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jamsheed-k-choksy/montazeris-limited-tolera_b_399857.html

80 Ghanea, N., 'Ethnic and Religious Groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Policy suggestions on the integration of minorities through participation in public life', UN doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.5/2003/WP.8, retrieved September 2010, http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/AllSymbols/09521F127B6419D0C1256D250047D9E6/$File/G0314153.pdf?OpenElement

81 'Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri: Iranian cleric', *The Times*, 21 December 2009, retrieved September 2010, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6963162.ece

82 Farsnews Background report on Dr Jamileh Kadivar, 'Iran: Kadivar profile', 24 February 2000, retrieved November 2010, http://www.fas.org/news/iran/2000/000224-iran1.htm

83 Note, for example, Hojjatoleslam Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari's thoughts: 'Free-thinkers (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) enjoy equal rights with others within the framework of law, and all can be present and participate in the state and legislative and political activities; in such a system there are no second-class citizens. This is so because an Islamic government is necessarily "national", that is to say, when people live within defined geographical boundaries and enjoy common rights to the land, this means that all are members of one nation and all enjoy equal social rights.' Mir-Hosseini, Z., and Tapper, R., *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2006, p. 99.

84 In August 2010, the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urged the government of the Islamic Republic to conciliate its discriminatory practices with the international laws and conventions the country is party to. See 'Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Islamic Republic of Iran', UN doc. CERD/C/IRN/CO/18-19, 27 August 2010, Geneva, retrieved August 2010, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/docs/co/CERD-C-IRN-CO-18_19.doc. In December 2009, the United Nations General Assembly passed its seventh consecutive resolution condemning the human rights situation in Iran, with specific mention of the perilous situation for minorities. This continued the longstanding concerns of the UN's Human Rights Commission and Sub-Commission, as expressed in their annual resolutions between 1980 and 2002.

Supplementary references

On human rights violations in Iran

- Amnesty International, 'Human Rights in [the] Islamic Republic of Iran', retrieved August 2010, http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/iran/report-2009
- Human Rights Watch, 'The Islamic Republic at 31', 11 February 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2010/02/11/islamic-republic-31-0
- Human Rights Watch, 'Iran: Freedom of Expression and Association in the Kurdish regions', 9 January 2009, retrieved September 2010, http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/01/08/iran-freedom-expression-and-association-kurdish-regions
- Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 'A Year Later: Suppression Continues', 12 June 2010, http://www.iranhrdc.org/httpdocs/English/pdfs/Reports/A%20Year%20Later.pdf, retrieved August 2010. An invaluable set of other reports by IHRDC are accessible here: http://www.iranhrdc.org/httpdocs/English/reports.htm
- Minority Rights Group International, 'Iran Overview', April 2009, retrieved August 2010, http://www.minorityrights.org/5092/iran/iran-overview.html
- United Nations: Report of the Secretary-General, 'The Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran', UN doc. A/65/370, 15 September 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=a%2F65%2F370&Lang=E

On the situation of Sunni Muslims

- Al-Baluchy, S. A. R., 'The Dismal Reality of Ahlus Sunnah in Iran', theMajlis, undated, retrieved September 2010, http://books.themajlis.net/node/36
- Baloch Human Rights Council, 'Baloch Human Rights Council condemns Iranian regime's barbaric acts in Balochistan', 28 November 2008, retrieved September 2010, http://www.thebaluch.com/documents/BHRC_statement.doc
- Borr, R. H., 'The destruction of another Sunni mosque in Iran and its consequences', *Global Politician*, 27 August 2008, retrieved September 2010, http://www.globalpolitician.com/25159-iran

On the situation of Christians

- CBN News, 'Iran Authorities Arrest 15 Christian Converts', 6 August 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2010/August/Iran-Arrests-15-Christian-Converts-/
- Cole, E., 'Iran Arrests 9 Christians for Evangelism, Reports State Media', *The Christian Post*, 16 September 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.christianpost.com/article/20100916/iran-arrests-9-christians-for-evangelism-reports-state-media
- DeCaro, J. C., 'Iranian Christians Detained in Ahvaz', *Worthy News*, 5 September 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.worthynews.com/9184-iranian-christian-detained-in-ahvaz
- *Mideast Youth*, 'Interview with Iranian Christian activist on persecution of Christians in Iran', 13 August 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.mideastyouth.com/2010/08/13/podcast-interview-with-iranian-christian-activist-on-persecution-of-christians-in-iran
- Mission Network News, 'Iran a "free" nation?', 21 September 2010, retrieved September 2010, http://www.mnnonline.org/article/14750

On the situation of Jews

- Cohen, R., 'What Iran's Jews Say', *The New York Times*, 22 February 2009, p. A27, retrieved January 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/23/opinion/23cohen.html

working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

minority rights group international

Seeking justice and an end to neglect: Iran's minorities today
© Minority Rights Group International, February 2011

Dedicated to Iranians belonging to minorities and the countless human rights defenders, lawyers, reporters, and citizen journalists, without whom impunity would know no bounds.

Acknowledgements This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Minority Rights Group International and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.
Authors: Nazila Ghanea and Binesh Hass. Commissioning Editor: Joanna Hoare.
Copyeditor: Rebecca Lee. Production Coordinator: Kristen Harrison. Typesetter: Kavita Graphics.

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities worldwide, and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities. MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. MRG is registered as a charity, no. 282305, and a company limited by guarantee in the UK, no. 1544957.

ISBN 978 1 907919 07 7. This briefing is published as a contribution to public understanding. The text does not necessarily represent in every detail the collective view of MRG or its partners. Copies of this study are available online at www.minorityrights.org. Copies can also be obtained from MRG's London office.

Minority Rights Group International 54 Commercial Street, London E1 6LT, United Kingdom
Tel +44 (0)20 7422 4200 Fax +44 (0)20 7422 4201
Email minority.rights@mrgmail.org **Website** www.minorityrights.org