

An Overview of Religious Minorities In Iran after the Revolution Includes A Brief Review of Statistical Data and Illustrative Examples.

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the status and experiences of religious minorities in Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, with a particular focus on the Yarsan community. The study explores the socio-political dynamics that have shaped the lives of these minorities, who, despite being officially recognized in the Iranian constitution, often find their rights and freedoms severely restricted in practice. Through a mixed-method approach that includes interviews with migrants from religious minority groups, consultations with experts, a thorough literature review, and an analysis of available statistical data, this research sheds light on the systemic challenges these communities face. The paper delves into the impact of government policies, societal attitudes, and the legal framework on the religious, cultural, and social integration of these minorities both within Iran and in the diaspora. Key findings suggest that while the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran offers some degree of recognition to certain religious minorities, the gap between constitutional rights and their practical implementation is substantial, leading to widespread discrimination, social exclusion, and economic marginalization. This situation has driven many members of these communities to emigrate in search of greater freedom and security. The case of the Yarsan, in particular, illustrates the profound struggles of religious minorities in maintaining their cultural identity and practicing their faith amidst pressures to conform to the dominant religious norms. The paper argues for the urgent need for policy reforms that ensure the protection and promotion of minority rights, and for international advocacy to address the plight of these communities. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on religious freedom, human rights, and the socio-political challenges facing religious minorities in the Middle East.

Keywords:*Religious minorities, Iran, Yarsan community, Islamic Revolution, constitutional rights, social integration, discrimination, emigration, human rights, Middle East*

Introduction

Religious freedom in Iran has always been subject to significant changes depending on the government and has always been defined by Iranian culture, religion, and politics. However, in recent centuries, there has been a profound transformation regarding some religions and their followers."¹ According to the current constitution, the official religion of the country is Islam, and the sect is Twelver Shi'ism. Other Abrahamic religions, such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Mandaism, are recognized and are free to perform their religious ceremonies within the limits of the law. Despite this recognition, the actions of the Iranian government create a threatening environment for some religious minorities.² It can be argued that, from the outset of the 1979 Revolution to the present day, not only Baha'is, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, but also Sunni Muslims and other Islamic sects such as Yarsanism, Gonabadi Dervishes, and even Shiites known as National-Religious or Religious Intellectuals, have not been immune from harassment and suppression. Many of these individuals, particularly Jews, Christians, and Baha'is, have been forced to seek refuge abroad, either through emigration or asylum. What is interesting is that the Islamic sect in Iran has been under more pressure than other Abrahamic and Iranian religions.

Iranian religion has been shaped by numerous cults and sects throughout the country's history. Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion during the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), the Parthian Empire (247 BCE - 224 CE), and the Sassanian Empire (224–651 CE). In 651 CE, during the era of the Rashidun Caliphate, Iran was conquered and Islam spread as the dominant religion. Sunni Islam was the dominant sect of Islam prior to the Mongol invasion of Iran. During

¹ The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

² International Religious Freedom Report 2006.

the Ilkhanate and Timurid eras, however, Sunni Islam was weakened, while Shia Islam gained strength. Eventually, with the rise of the Safavids in Iran, Shia Islam became the dominant and official sect.

The 2011 census revealed that the religious situation in Iran was as follows: The majority of Iranians (99.98%) adhere to the Islamic faith, with a small minority (0.02%) belonging to other recognised minorities, including Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. A survey conducted by the World Values Survey revealed that 96.5% of Iranians consider themselves Muslim. However, the actual representation of the religious divide in Iran is disputed due to the fact that atheism and other religions are not officially recognised by the government.³ According to data published by the CIA World Factbook, 90 to 95 percent of Iranian Muslims identify themselves as Shia, which is the main sect in Iran, and about 5 to 10 percent identify⁴ themselves as Sunni or Sufi. Furthermore, Judaism, Christianity, and the Zoroastrian religion are also recognised and supported, with special representatives in the parliament. Nevertheless, an online survey conducted by the Goman Institute in August 2020 revealed that a considerably smaller proportion of respondents (40%) identified as Muslim, while approximately 22% did not ascribe to any particular religious affiliation.⁵

The following text provides an overview of my research activities. It should be noted that this is not an article or part of a larger project. Instead, the focus will be on the situation of minorities in Iran, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of the rightful. These experiences demonstrate that the pressures and repressions faced by these individuals have also persisted in their migration and in the countries of origin, with a gradual impact on their personal and social integration and struggle. This research aims to understand the challenges and experiences of religious minorities, particularly the Yarsan community, in Iran. Given the sensitive nature of the subject and the constraints imposed by the Iranian government, a multi-faceted approach was employed to gather and analyze data. The methodology includes interviews with migrants, consultations with experts, literature reviews, and analysis of statistical data from various sources.

Methodology

-Data collection methods

1-Interviews with migrants:

Participants: The main data of this study was derived from semi-structured interviews with Yarsan migrants and other religious minorities who escaped from Iran. Interviews were held with participants residency in European countries, as well as in Turkey and Iraq, which are home to large Yarsan populations.

Sampling: For sampling, snowball sampling method was used by which participants were identified through referrals.

Process: The interviews were carried out face to face, by phone or by video call, considering the anonymity and safety of the participants. The questions raised in the interviews dealt with the experience of religious persecution, the reasons for migration, as well as the difficulties and challenges faced in the country of settlement.

2-Consultations with experts:

Participants: Experts, academics and human rights activists concerning Iranian religious minorities were interviewed to contextualise the findings and to validate them.

Process: The experts' consultations were done via emails, interviews, and attending conferences and symposia related to the issue.

³ The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency". www.cia.gov. Archived from the original on 12 August 2008. Retrieved 2019-10-22

⁴Human Rights Watch. (2020). "World Report 2020: Events of 2019."

⁵ A survey report on the attitude of Iranians towards religion. August 1399 Archived from the original on October 8, 2020. Retrieved 29 August 2020.

3-Literature review:

Scope: Comprehensive studies and resources concerning Yarsan community as well as other religious minorities in Iran were reviewed. This included academic journals and books, human rights reports and newspapers.

4-Analysis of statistical data:

Sources: Statistical data was obtained from published reports by international organisations, Iranian government publications (despite their potential biases), and independent surveys conducted by institutions such as the Goman Institute.

Challenges: The Iranian government's⁶ reluctance to provide accurate data on religious minorities and the possibility of data manipulation posed significant challenges. In addition, the lack of field access to Iran limited the scope of data collection.

Restrictions

1-Limited access to Iran:

The inability to conduct fieldwork in Iran due to political and security risks limited the direct collection of data from within the country.

Security and confidentiality:

Ensuring the safety and confidentiality of participants was a priority, sometimes limiting the depth of information that could be collected.

2-Bias in government data:

Government statistics were treated with caution due to potential bias and under-reporting of the size and condition of religious minorities.

3-Dispersed diaspora:

The wide dispersion of Yarsan migrants made it difficult to collect a comprehensive data set. Efforts were made to obtain a diverse sample, but representation may still be incomplete.

Limited literature:

The lack of academic work specifically focused on the Yarsan community necessitated reliance on broader studies of Iranian religious minorities and migration patterns.

Additional research objectives

In addition to the above challenges, future research will focus on the interaction, solidarity, organisation and integration process of minority groups, particularly the Yarsan community, in foreign countries. This includes studying their places of worship, community dynamics and integration into host societies. The research will also examine how different ethnicities within the Yarsan groups influence their political and social integration. Observations suggest that Yarsanis living abroad often face political assimilation within different parties, leading to internal cultural assimilation. The pressures they face in Iran are mainly religious, while those outside Iran are more ethnic.

Statistical sources

At present, the most appropriate statistical source for examining the population of the country by religion is the results obtained from the general censuses of population and housing. The results of the study and examination of Iran's censuses from the years 1956 to 2011 show that information about religion has been collected in all these censuses, but

⁶ "Amnesty International. (2021). "Amnesty International Report 2020/21: The State of the World's Human Rights."

the way data is tabulated and the number of tables by religion have varied. Despite the changes in the design of the religion question in Iran's censuses, over 97 percent of Iran's population has been Muslim. The population of the country by religion from 1956 to 2011 is observed in Table 2. The share of religious minorities in the country's population has always had negative growth from 1956 to the present. The reason for the relative decrease in the population of religious minorities is due to the lower population growth among minorities compared to Muslims and the higher rate of emigration abroad among this group. An unnatural increase is observed in the Zoroastrian population in 1986 compared to the years 1956 and 1996, which, based on the studies conducted, was an error that entered the system in some cases. The negative growth of the Jewish population share in the country's population compared to other minorities was more severe, such that the share of Jews in the country decreased from 0.34 percent in 1335 to 0.01 percent in 1390. The decrease in the Jewish population, like the Christians, was more significant in the years after the revolution, and this decline in 1390 compared to 1385 is remarkable. Religious minorities are more concentrated in urban areas and rarely reside in rural areas. In addition, the distribution of religious minorities in all provinces of the country is noteworthy.⁷ Zoroastrians are more prevalent in Yazd, then Tehran and Kerman compared to other provinces, but in other provinces, they comprise about one percent of the total population. Christians live in all 31 provinces of the country; they make up 0.26 percent of Tehran's population, and the lowest number of Christians is in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province with 0.001 percent. The highest share of Jews is observed in Fars province with 0.06 percent. The lowest share is in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. It is worth mentioning that the undeclared and other categories are also significant, with 0.42 percent, equivalent to 315,000 people. In Bushehr province, 30,473 people have not declared their religion, causing the share of undeclared in this province to rise significantly. This situation may be due to the implementation of various development projects, including gas and oil, and the presence of foreign nationals in this province.⁸

Of course, according to an online survey conducted by Goman Institute in August 2019 (2020 AD) inside and outside Iran, a much smaller percentage of respondents (40%) identify themselves as Muslims, and about 22% do not place themselves in any religious category.⁹

In addition to this issue, one of the important issues is that in addition to the pressure of the government and the laws of the Sharia and the oppression of religious minorities, while Iranian society is moving towards a society that avoids religion, but in the discussion of minorities it turns to the same issue of religious oppression in Iran, the issue is completely the opposite and unlike the majority of Iranian people, the issue of belonging to a religious group has become an issue of identity and struggle.¹⁰ In the case of the Religious minorities, the issue is completely reversed and, unlike for the majority of Iranians, the issue of belonging to a religious group has become an issue of identity and struggle. The National Survey of Iranian Values, conducted last year and the results of which were released in confidence by the government, suggests that as Iranian society secularises, religious minorities are becoming more religious because of their isolation. This religiosity is not a Sharia-based religiosity and is mostly a response to government indifference about minorities.¹¹

At the same time, given the understandable reluctance of many citizens to trust government questioners on sensitive and very sensitive issues, it is reasonable to assume that the responses to the recent survey are more conservative than the real views of Iranian society.

In other words, in such surveys, many opponents of the government's or conventional views are naturally reluctant to express their true opinions.

⁷Amnesty International. (2021). "Amnesty International Report 2020/21: The State of the World's Human Rights.

⁸ General Population and Housing Census (2015)". The website of the country management and planning organization of Qom province. 10 December 2016 Archived from the original on 30 November 2016.

⁹ Archive of Goman Institute, Census and Online Survey of Iranians in the year 2020

¹⁰United Nations Human Rights Council. (2019). "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

¹¹[A survey on the survey of the values of Iranians.](#)

Some of these people may even refuse to be interviewed in the first place in order to avoid unnecessary risks. In particular, the face-to-face interviews took place in the atmosphere following the violent suppression of nationwide protests in Iran, known as the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement.

In addition to all these considerations, there is of course a more important uncertainty, namely the degree of impartiality in the conduct of government polls. In fact, whether or not the pollsters have made an effort to increase the proportion of favourable responses to the government. This ambiguity is natural in the current situation in Iran. There are many problems in accessing information and statistics on the status of religious minorities. The fear created by the government and the flight from the revelation of religious thought and vocation cause the research on the status of religious minorities and the status of beliefs in the society to fall into error.

Summary of the situation of religious minorities in Iran

After the Islamic revolution of 1979, the proportion of religious minorities in Iran's total population declined significantly. While the Muslim population of Iran has doubled between 1977 and 2016, the population of religious minorities and those who do not wish to declare their religion has remained almost constant during this period, showing that a large proportion of non-Muslims have emigrated from Iran.

Religion	Decreased share of the population
Zoroastrian	50%
Jewish	95%
Christian	53%
Other minorities	61%

Source: Iran Statistics Center

The table above shows that, given the population growth in Iran between 1956 and 2016, the proportion of minorities in society has fallen dramatically. The graph below shows that most of the decline in the share of minorities in the total population occurred after the revolution and in the 10-year interval between the 1976 and 1986 censuses.

In the 60-year period from 1956 to 2016, among the three religions - Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity - listed in Iran's official statistics as the country's "major minorities", the Jewish community has become smaller than the followers of the other two religions.

According to Iranian censuses from 1956 to 2016, the largest group of religious minorities in Iran were Christians. The population of this group in 1956 was about 113 thousand people, which was equivalent to six tenths of the total population of the country.

After the revolution, the proportion of Christians in Iranian society, which was experiencing a demographic explosion, decreased, and although the Muslim population more than quadrupled during this period (from 18 million to 79 million), the Christian population did not increase significantly, remaining at around 130,000.

According to the 1956 census, around 65,000 Jews lived in Iran that year. Today, the number of Jews is less than 10,000. Statistics show that in 1986 the population of Iranian Jews was about 60% lower than it had been 10 years earlier - the last census before the revolution. They left Iran.

After the Iranian Revolution, the execution of Habibollah Elghaniyan, the head of Tehran's Kilimian Association and a famous financier, by the verdict of Sadegh Khalkhali, had a great impact on the emigration of Jews from Iran.¹²

Elghaniyan, who was arrested on 27 February 1979 after returning from America, was accused in a court without a lawyer of "committing crimes" such as "spying for Israel" and "assisting in the brutal murder of the Palestinian people" and was shot. Mr Elghaniyan was the owner of the Plasco building and several other businesses in Iran. In the late 1990s, 13 Jews were arrested in Shiraz on charges of spying for Israel and America. They included five businessmen, a rabbi, two university professors, three teachers from a Jewish school, a butcher and a 16-year-old teenager. Iran accused these

¹² My grandfather's life in Tehran: from poor ghetto to big business to death squad, Elghanian Shahrzad, 2021, P21.

people of spying for Israel and of being linked to the Mossad, Israel's secret service. They were sentenced to prison, but under international pressure they were all released.

Statistics show that after the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Zoroastrians are the only minority that has witnessed an increase in population. But in the following years, this community has become smaller to the point where today the population of Zoroastrians in Iran is about the same as the followers of this religion 60 years ago. Bahais are another religious minority in Iran. However, there are no accurate statistics on the number of followers of this religion in Iran. Dian Alaei, the spokesman for the Baha'i community, told BBC Farsi that there are an estimated 300,000 Baha'is in Iran.¹³ The Iranian government does not recognise the Baha'i faith and in recent years has been accused by human rights organisations of harassment and mistreatment of its followers. In 2019, the World Baha'i Community announced a new wave of clashes between the Iranian government and Baha'is, including the arrest of 90 Baha'is and the closure of Baha'i businesses. The arrest and execution of several Baha'i followers at the beginning of the revolution led to a wave of their emigration outside Iran. There are no accurate statistics for other minorities, for example there are no official and accurate statistics on the population of the Yarsan community in Iran, but the internal sources of the Yarsan minority have estimated their population at 3 million people. They live mainly in the Kurdish regions of western Iran, especially in Kermanshah, but they also have a significant population in many regions of the country, including Tehran, Kalardasht, Shahryar, Karaj, Hamedan, Qazvin and Azerbaijan. The difficulty of this estimate is also due to the fact that the Ahl al-Haqq religion was not included as a religious option in any of the official censuses. In addition, many Ahl al-Haqq followers have identified themselves as Muslims, making it difficult to separate this population from Muslims. The number of followers of Ahl al-Haqq ranges from several tens of thousands to two million in different sources.

Iranian Jews

Jews in Iran are the second largest Jewish population in the Middle East. Baha'is and Christians are the two largest non-Muslim minorities in Iran. The Baha'is, historically the largest minority in Iran, have faced significant persecution throughout their existence in Iran. According to the first official census of Iran in 1335 (1956), the Jewish population of Iran was calculated to be less than 65,000. The last census in Iran before the 1979 revolution recorded a Jewish population of about 60,000, a slight decrease from the census twenty years earlier. The first census in Iran after the revolution took place in 1365 (1986). This census showed that the Jewish population in Iran had fallen by a significant 60 per cent to almost 25,000. This statistic represents a decline of 40,000 Jews in ten years. In general, based on official statistics, the Jewish population of the country has decreased from 0.34 per cent in 1335 to 0.01 per cent in 1390 (2011). The Islamic Republic's policy towards religious minorities, including Jews, in the years following the 1979 revolution is considered the main cause of these migrations and the decline in the Jewish population. The execution of Habib Elghanian, the head of the Jewish community in Iran, was one example of this new policy.¹⁴

The official government statistics of post-revolutionary Iran in 1385 (2006) estimated the number of Jews at 9,252. Similar statistics in 1390 (2011) calculated the Jewish population of Iran at 8,756. Meanwhile, statistics for 1395 (2016) put the number of Jews at 9,826. Estimates from the Jewish community in Iran also suggest a population of between 10 and 12 thousand.¹⁵

Jews in Iran are mainly concentrated in the cities of Tehran, Shiraz (about 0.06% of the city's population), Isfahan, Kermanshah, Yazd and Kerman. It is estimated that half of Iran's Jewish population, about 5,000 people, live in Tehran. Although official statistics from 1390 show that the highest concentration of Jews is in the provinces of Fars, Tehran, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Yazd, based on internal information from the Jewish community, the Jewish population of other cities in Iran can be roughly estimated as follows:¹⁶

¹³ Aghdami, A. (2019, February 12). Has the Islamic revolution made religious minorities flee from Iran? BBC Persian. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-47205770> .

¹⁴ "Iranian Jews Living in U.S. Have Complex Feelings About Mideast Crisis". Fox News. August 7, 2006.

¹⁵ Iran young, urbanised and educated: census. Agence France-Presse. Retrieved on 2012-08-15.

¹⁶ Amnesty International. (2020, May). Amnesty International calls for the release of all prisoners of conscience worldwide.

City	Jewish Population-Persons
Shiraz	2800
Isfahan	1000
Kermanshah	100
Kerman	60
Sanandaj	40
Hamadan	30
Yazd	30
Miandoab	20

The lowest density of Jewish population in Iran is estimated to be in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province. According to several Iranian Jews, a number of significant issues, including migration, have affected their community life. Migration has posed challenges for Iranians both abroad and within the country. In the years before and after the revolution, although Israel was the main religious destination for Jewish migrants, Iranian Jews showed less enthusiasm for living there than other Jews.

There are several reasons for this:

Iranian nationalist feelings among Iranian Jews.

Discrimination against Eastern Jews by the Israeli government.

The provision of more suitable living conditions in the United States.

Even today, there is a large population of Jewish Iranians living in various cities in America. Some Iranian Jews who immigrated to Israel in the years before and after the revolution believe that there is a generally negative view of the Islamic Republic and sometimes of the Jews of Iran. In other words, the existence of a certain amount of discrimination has led a number of Jewish families who went to Israel from Iran to decide to immigrate to America or Canada after living there for a few years. In the last two decades, the general situation of the Iranian Jewish community, like that of the majority Muslim society, has changed. It seems that the government's sensitivities towards Jews have diminished, and on the other hand the level of public culture has increased, and perhaps this has led to an improvement in 'individual interactions' between Muslims and Jews in Iranian society. One of the Iranian Jews, who does not want his name published, says of the current living conditions of Jews in Iran:

"Right now, the Jews of Iran are in a stronger situation than they were in the first two decades of the revolution, both in terms of governmental control and in terms of society. These conditions are the result of the efforts and endeavours of all members of the Iranian Jewish community to gain public trust and establish respectful social relations with the Muslim community and the government body, so that many ordinary people in Iran today have a great desire to work and do business with Jews, because they have more trust in the Jewish community."

But another point that is important to note in examining the general conditions of Iranian Jews is their appeal to Iranian intellectuals to try to improve the cultural situation.

In the years following the revolution, speeches have been made both on official television under the control of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in political circles such as the Islamic Council, which many consider to be an insult to the Jewish religion.

One of the Jews says in this regard:

"A huge amount of cultural goods are produced in Iran, which always present a false image of Judaism to the public because of the political conflict and hostility with Israel. Right now, one of the main concerns of the Iranian Jewish community is to explain to people the difference between extreme Zionism and pure Judaism, as well as the difference between radical fundamentalist Islam like al-Qaeda and Iranian Shia. Muslims should know this difference, which is why many Jewish-Iranian intellectuals have devoted some of their energy to defending Judaism."

Unfortunately, due to the distortions and insults of Judaism by the Islamic government of Iran, as well as their failure to inform themselves about the original religion of Judaism, under the pretext that this is considered propaganda of Judaism, many people have a misunderstanding about the Sharia and our principles.

Of course, this perception and type of view towards the Jews of Iran and the issue of Israel was not and is not the common opinion of all the Jews of Iran.

One of the critics of the Islamic Republic's policy towards Israel says:

“The diplomatic relations that Israel has recently established with some Arab governments in the region have made a part of the Iranian Jewish community happy, because on the one hand, the economic benefits resulting from these interactions work for the Jewish Iranians living in Israel and make their lives run better, and on the other hand, by being present in the UAE and some strategic points in the Persian Gulf, Israel can also be close to Iran to prevent its rulers from occasional threats and possible attacks on Israel, which is our holy place.”

Assyrians and Chaldeans

The world population of Assyrians does not exceed one and a half million. The Assyrian population is mainly concentrated in Iraq, Türkiye and Iran due to a long historical background,¹⁷ and in the United States due to migration in recent decades. Christians in Iran, including Assyrians and Armenians, live in all provinces of Iran, but the highest population densities of these Christian groups, due to their history and historical sites, are mostly found in the cities of Tehran, Isfahan, Alborz, and East and West Azerbaijan. The highest concentration of Assyrians in Iran is mainly in the cities of Urmia and Salmas. Because of this concentration, many Armenian churches are located in these cities and surrounding villages. The population of Christians in Iran, including Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans and Protestants, was about 113,000 in 1335 (1956),¹⁸ according to official Iranian government statistics, or about 0.6 per cent of Iran's population at the time. This population was almost the same as the Christian population of Iran in 1390 (2011), which was estimated at about 117,000. This population reached about 130,000 in 1395 (2016). Regarding the population of Assyrians and Chaldeans in Iran, it can be said that due to extensive migration to Western countries in recent decades, both before and after the 1979 revolution, the current population of Assyrians and Chaldeans in Iran is estimated to be around 15,000. Based on the results of some years of participation in the elections to the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the population of Assyrians and Chaldeans has been estimated to be as high as 22,000, of whom about 10,000 live in Urmia. The Assyrian population in Iran is estimated to be between 10,000 and 20,000. The Chaldean population is also estimated at around 4,000. Although the first presence of Catholic priests dates back to eight centuries ago, it was not until the third decade of the 19th century that the way of Catholic missionaries, such as priests and Protestant missionaries, was seriously opened to Iran. These missionaries built hundreds of schools and hospitals in Iran's large and small cities and trained many medical and educational personnel. Homa Natiq, a historian and professor at Tehran and Sorbonne universities, has written extensively about the role of missionaries in establishing modern schools and advancing knowledge in Iran in the book "French cultural record in Iran, 1837-1921". Soon after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, pressure on Iran's Christian community increased dramatically, from the expulsion of missionaries to the confiscation of property, including church-owned hospitals, and the killing of converts. Meanwhile, William Burden, the archbishop of Catholics in Iran, was expelled from the country in 1982. It took 9 years for Ignazio Bedini from Italy to fill William Burden's vacancy. For the past six years, the Reverend Jack Yusuf has held this responsibility on an acting basis until the election of Dominic Mathieu as Archbishop.

The Zoroastrians

The proportion of all religious minorities in Iran's population has been steadily decreasing over the past few decades. Different sources report different statistics for the population of Iranian Zoroastrians, and there is no consensus on the matter. Even Iran's official statistics give conflicting figures for this minority group, without explaining the rapid increases and decreases in their population. According to the census, the Zoroastrian population was less than 20,000 in

¹⁷ Wan-Bruinessen, M. (2014). *The Sociology of the Kurdish People* (E. Younesi, Trans.). Tehran: Paniz. (Original work published 1994, Pp. 40-41).

¹⁸ Tzilivakis, Kathy (10 May 2003). "Iraq's Forgotten Christians Face Exclusion in Greece". Athens News. Retrieved 7 April 2012

1956, more than 20,000 in 1966, less than 20,000 in 1976, but nearly 40,000 in 1986. This is in contrast to the significant decline in the populations of most religious minorities in the years following the revolution. Iran's official statistics estimated the Zoroastrian population at less than 30,000 in 1996, around 20,000 in 2006 and around 25,000 in 2011. Finally, the 2016 national census reported the number of Zoroastrians as 23,109. These statistics indicate that the population of Iranian Zoroastrians has remained stable in the 60 years since the first official census, despite the country's population growth, suggesting widespread emigration of Zoroastrians from Iran.¹⁹

The Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America reported that the population of Iranian Zoroastrians was around 15,000 in 2012. Emigration in recent years has been a factor in the declining population of Zoroastrians in Iran. However, their numbers are also declining worldwide, mainly due to low birth rates and the fact that children born of a marriage between a Zoroastrian and a non-Zoroastrian are not considered Zoroastrian.

The highest concentration of Zoroastrians is currently in Tehran. After Tehran, the largest populations are in the cities of Yazd, Kerman and Shiraz (around 100 people), Isfahan (40-50) and Ahvaz. There are also a few Zoroastrians in Bandar Abbas, Gilan and Rasht. In the early years after the revolution, Zoroastrian families lived in other cities such as Zahedan and Ahvaz. At that time, the number of Zoroastrian families in Ahvaz was significant, mainly due to marriages between new Zoroastrians (born Muslims) and traditional Zoroastrians, as well as the conversion of others to Zoroastrianism. At present, however, only a few Zoroastrians live in Ahvaz.

Zoroastrian villages have always existed in Yazd. Today these villages are mostly uninhabited, but during certain festivals or religious ceremonies Zoroastrians usually return to these villages. The village of Mazraeh Kalantar in Yazd was a Zoroastrian village, and the entrance to this village has a Faravahar symbol. The village of Sharifabad in Yazd was also a Zoroastrian village and currently has no permanent Zoroastrian residents; it is only visited for ceremonies. The village has a number of Muslim residents.

The villages of Hassanabad and Zainabad are other villages visited for Zoroastrian ceremonies. In Kerman there are villages with a similar situation. The villages of Jupar and Kan Goshan also have no permanent residents and are only visited during ceremonies.

At various times, Zoroastrians were forced by powerful Shia clerics to pay taxes or 'jizya' to the government for what was called 'living safely in Islamic territory'. During these years, until the Qajar period, strict laws were enforced against Zoroastrians, forbidding them to trade, travel or even leave their homes on rainy days.

Ardeshir Khazeh, an Iranian Zoroastrian who died in Bombay, India, in 1987, writes in his memoirs of his childhood in Iran that Muslims considered them impure: "We were not even allowed to walk on agricultural land because it was believed that we would contaminate their crops. When I was six years old and the distance between the shop and home was too far for me, I sneaked across Muslim land one day to get home earlier, but I was caught. They tied my feet to a pole and no amount of crying helped."²⁰

This section presents a brief overview of the research conducted by the Arian Zoroastrians themselves on the migration of this group.

In his article entitled "Chronic Motives of Migration", Payam Pourjamasb categorises migration motives into two distinct categories: internal and external. Based on genetic science data, he reaches the following conclusion: "Migration behaviour can be considered a genetically dependent behaviour." In fact, the legacy of our parents' migration from Yazd and Kerman to Tehran has been transmitted to us in a manner that may inform our current decision to migrate. He concludes by stating that in order to improve the situation, it is necessary to create an attractive environment in society where individuals can play a role and be involved in the process.²¹

¹⁹ "Selected Results of the 2016 National Population and Housing Census" (PDF). Statistical Center of Iran, p. 20. ISBN 978-600-409-149-7. Retrieved on July 3, 2019.

²⁰ Khazeh, A. (2021). *Memoirs of Ardashir Khazeh* (A. Mrazban, Ed.). Tehran, Iran: Hiromba Publication. Pp. 25-29.

²¹ Pourjamasb, P. (2019). *Perspectives on Migration: The Beginning of a Journey*. Chehreghnama, California, 18.

Mojdeh Hamavand In her research, entitled "Migration," she surveys the perspectives of ten migrants, which represents a novel approach. She identifies the reasons for migration as follows: fear of future job and educational opportunities, extensive facilities in the West, lack of civil liberties and human rights in Iran, discrimination against women, the university entrance exam and military service, and religious discrimination. She then proceeds to discuss the problems associated with migration, namely the weakening of family and emotional bonds, as well as the significant linguistic and cultural differences. She offers advice to young Iranians based on the experiences of those she surveyed: it is difficult to return to Iran, so it is important to make informed decisions. Those who have an acceptable quality of life in Iran should not abandon it.²²

Farshad Jamshidi Kalantari and Mehrdad Bastani Elahabadi: Their research, "The Migration Fever in the Zoroastrian Community," which was also presented at the Mantra Conference, surveys the perspectives of 384 individuals from Yazd and Shiraz. The researchers identified the following factors influencing migration: the lack of scientific facilities in the country, the lack of jobs and strict employment conditions, low income and wages, uncertainty about the future, the influence of coordinated migration trends (keeping up with the Joneses), the availability of opportunities for advancement, and the pursuit of higher education. Additionally, the researchers examined the challenges and attributes of Zoroastrian migrants' lives based on online interactions with some migrants. These issues and characteristics include the fact that the process and law governing the return of migrants is not specific. For those with children residing in the West, the decision to migrate is contingent upon their perspective on child-rearing and their children's views. It is important to note that migration research is not comprehensive or all-encompassing.²³

Furthermore, a survey was conducted on the Borsad website, which is the public relations website of the representative body of Iranian Zoroastrians in the parliament (Esfandiar Ekhtiyari).²⁴ The results of the survey, which was completed by 200 users, are as follows:

The following question was posed to the respondents: What are the reasons for the unfavourable current migration trend of Zoroastrians?

The disintegration of the Iranian Zoroastrian community is a significant concern. The survey revealed that 34.5% of respondents cited assimilation of Zoroastrians into society outside the country as a reason for the current migration trend. Additionally, 25.1% of respondents indicated that they were moving away from Iran, which is the cradle of the world's Zoroastrians. Sixteen point six percent of respondents indicated that they were forced to live in undesirable and difficult conditions as a result of their migration. 12.6% The separation of family members and the weakening of family foundations. 11.2% It should be noted that this question presents a negative view of migration to the respondents, which renders the results statistically and scientifically flawed.

The question posed was as follows: What are the primary motivations for Zoroastrian migration abroad?

The most frequently cited reason for Zoroastrian migration abroad was the desire for greater freedom (29.3%), followed by the aspiration for a better life for children (17.6%) and the availability of better and more opportunities (15.1%). The most frequently cited reason for Zoroastrian migration abroad was the lack of employment opportunities and sufficient income (15.1%). A further 12.7% of respondents indicated that the decline in traditions and rituals was a significant factor in their decision to migrate. 11.2% The necessity for planning and effort in order to succeed in Iran: 7.8%

The pursuit of higher education: The remaining 6.3% of respondents indicated that they were motivated by other factors. What are the potential solutions to prevent the current migration trend?

Institutions and associations should plan for the success of each Zoroastrian. This should include informing about the situation of migrants, developing religious culture and paying more attention to traditions as the key to human happiness,

²² Hmavand, M. (2024). Zoroastrians' California Congress. Amordad. Retrieved from <https://amordadnews.com/14329/> on May 5, 2024.

²³ Mordadian, B. (2024). Examining the structure of Zoroastrians in Iran. Amordad. Retrieved from <http://amordad6485.blogfa.com/post/2790> on April 29, 2024.

²⁴ Ekhtiyari, E. (2024). Let's not be indifferent to the migration of Iranians abroad. Barsad. Retrieved from <https://berasad.com/?p=26011> on May 1, 2024.

and finding suitable ways for continuing education. In addition to the aforementioned written works, several studies were presented as posters at the Yazd Migration Conference, and articles and notes have been published on Zoroastrian websites, the Amordad weekly, the Farvahr monthly, and the Payam-e Konkash during the tenure of Mobed Kourosh Niknam. Farshid Ezzati In his essay "Migration," Ezzati presents a positive perspective on migration, arguing that it is a fundamental human right. He also critiques efforts to prevent migration, suggesting that they are misguided. He underscores that the deplorable living conditions in Iran render migration the only viable option. Nevertheless, Ezzati also posits that the right to migrate does not imply that it should be actively encouraged. In his writing, "Migration as a Result of Our Behavior," Khosraviani employs a questionnaire to examine the factors influencing migration, its impact on migrants, its effect on Iranian Zoroastrians, and strategies to combat migration. A total of 162 individuals completed the questionnaire. Despite the scientific and statistical rigour of the questionnaire design, Khosraviani offers an interpretation of the results. The questionnaire sought to identify the reasons and factors underlying the decision to migrate. The factors identified as driving migration include peer pressure, a lack of opportunities for personal growth within Iran, a lack of suitable job prospects, and inadequate educational conditions. The impact of migration on migrants can be described as follows: The integration of migrants into the society of their destination country and the improvement of their quality of life. The impact of migration on Iranian Zoroastrians can be observed in the following ways: The gender imbalance and increased singlehood, as well as the mounting pressure on the remaining Zoroastrians due to the declining population, will ultimately result in the eventual disappearance of the remaining Zoroastrians.

Strategies: The establishment of associations with the objective of enhancing the quality of life in Iran and the dissemination of information regarding the challenges of migration to individuals are two strategies that have been proposed.²⁵

Sohrab Khosraviani: In his writing titled "Migration," Khosraviani categorizes Iranians during the Arab invasion into three groups: those who stayed in Iran and converted to Islam, those who left Iran and remained Zoroastrian, and those who stayed in Iran and remained Zoroastrian. He further classifies the factors of migration or the groups of migrants into three categories: 10% for education, 10% for work, and 80% without a convincing goal. The most important solution Khosraviani suggests is that those who face difficulties in the West should share the realities with people in Iran so they can make informed decisions. The fundamental issue here is that the social conditions of Iranian Zoroastrians do not provide such transparency within their own layers.²⁶

Mahindokht Dehnadi, an expert in communications, conducted a study titled "Examining the Tendency of Zoroastrians Living in Tehran to Emigrate Abroad in 2001." The objective of this research is to examine the factors influencing the tendency of Zoroastrians to emigrate. The objective of this study is to identify the factors influencing the tendency of Zoroastrians to emigrate.

The sample size was 70 individuals.

The sampling method was as follows: The sample was selected at random.

The instrument used was: Questionnaire

Research Method: The results of the survey indicate that the following factors influence the tendency to emigrate:

The factors influencing the tendency of Zoroastrians to emigrate can be broadly categorised into two groups: those related to economic factors and those related to social and cultural factors. The desire to achieve a desirable economic life is a significant factor influencing the decision to emigrate. This is closely followed by the desire to improve the social and educational future of children. Dissatisfaction with the political conditions in Iran is also a significant factor. This is closely followed by the desire to enhance the cultural future of children abroad. The poor employment conditions in most government sectors in Iran for religious minorities is also a significant factor influencing the decision to emigrate. The influence of others who have emigrated is also a significant factor. This is closely followed by the desire to pursue higher

²⁵International Organization for Migration. (2020). "Migration and Information Dissemination: Best Practices. Retrieved from IOM.

²⁶Azadi, P. Mirramezani, M., & Mesgaran, M. B. (2020). Migration and Brain Drain from Iran. Stanford Iran 2040 Project. Retrieved from Stanford Iranian Studies.

education abroad. The general living conditions in Iran are also a significant factor influencing the decision to emigrate. The social inequality between religious minorities and the majority in Iran is also a significant factor influencing the decision to emigrate.²⁷

Sunni Muslims

Although there are no exact statistics, Muslims currently make up nearly one-fourth of the world's population, with more than 90 percent of them being Sunni. Approximately 1.7 billion individuals worldwide adhere to Sunni Islam. The majority of Muslims reside in Asian and African countries, where the majority of followers of this religion are Sunni. Despite the lack of precise figures on the number of Sunnis in Iran, unofficial estimates suggest that their proportion ranges from five to twenty percent.²⁸

Statistics provided by the Islamic Republic indicate that over 90% of Iran's population adheres to Shia Islam, with the remaining 10% belonging to various other religions and sects. However, Molavi Abdulhamid, the Sunni Friday prayer leader of Zahedan, asserts that "our statistical data indicates that the Sunni population constitutes 20 percent of Iran's total population." Sunni citizens are predominantly located in the outskirts of the country and along its borders. Furthermore, they are also present in central cities and regions. For instance, in Tehran, the number of Sunnis exceeds one million.²⁹

1.1. Freedom to Perform Religious Rites and Practices

The Sunni community in Iran, in provinces where they constitute the majority, enjoys a certain degree of freedom to perform religious activities. Nevertheless, this freedom is not universal. In accordance with Article 12 of the Iranian Constitution, Sunnis are entitled to conduct their religious ceremonies and educate their children in accordance with their religious beliefs. Nevertheless, this principle is not effectively implemented in practice. One persistent grievance of the Sunni community is the absence of the right to freely conduct religious activities in Tehran, the capital of Iran. Despite Mr. Molavi Abdulhamid's assertion that the Sunni population in Tehran numbers one million, they lack a single mosque for worship and religious activities.³⁰

The International Quran News Agency has reported that Tehran has 3,439 mosques.³¹ The number of Sunni mosques in Tehran is zero. In contrast, the Fars News Agency reported that Sunnis own nine mosques in Tehran, providing the following locations: 1. The Sadeghiyeh Mosque is situated in Second Sadeghiyeh Square, while the Tehranpars Mosque is located on Delavaran Street. The Qods City Mosque is situated at kilometre 20 of the old road, while the Persian Gulf Mosque is located on Fath Highway. The Al-Nabi Mosque is situated in Danesh Township, while the Haft-Joob Mosque is located on Malard Road. The Vahidieh Mosque is situated in Shahriar, while the Nasimshahr Mosque is located in Akbarabad. Finally, the ninth mosque is located at Three-Way Shahriar. The Raziabad Mosque is situated at the Three-Way intersection in Shahriar. However, Molavi Abdulhamid regards these not as mosques but as prayer rooms, stating that some people have temporarily designated their homes for prayer or have rented a place for prayer. A mosque is a

²⁷Britannica. (2021). How Have Zoroastrians Been Treated in Muslim Iran? Retrieved from Britannica

²⁸ Ahl-e Sunnat Iran. (2017, September 3). Shargh Newspaper. Retrieved on November 1, 2023.

²⁹ Shia and Sunni demographics are incorrect. (2018, September 24). IRNA. Retrieved on October 28, 2023.

30 Increase in Sunni Population in Iran, Molavi Abdulhamid's Response to Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi. (2013, October 26). Al Arabiya News. Retrieved from <https://farsi.alarabiya.net/iran/2013/10/26/%D9%85%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B8%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%85%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%85-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B2%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AE-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF> on November 30, 2023.

³¹ Statistical Look at Mosques. (n.d.). Quran News Agency. Retrieved from <https://iqna>.

ir/fa/news/3766414/%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%DB%8C%DA%A9-%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C on November 2, 2023.

distinct entity from a prayer room. A mosque is a permanent structure that is accessible at all times. In contrast, a prayer room is a temporary space that has been designated for prayer. Sunni Muslims have been compelled to utilise their living rooms for prayer or to rent premises for this purpose. However, they may be evicted from their homes or the rented premises may be demolished after a period of one to two years. He asserts that even these prayer rooms are not tolerated in Tehran and are closed for various reasons. He further notes that, while there is no legal impediment to the construction of a mosque for Sunnis in Tehran, certain prejudices prevent the construction of mosques and even their prayer rooms in the capital from being completed.

Another limitation imposed on Sunnis in Iran is their opposition to holding Eid al-Fitr prayers in Tehran. Annually, as Eid al-Fitr approaches, the question of whether Sunnis are permitted to hold Eid prayers in Tehran arises in the media. However, on the day of Eid, Sunnis are prevented from entering the prayer venue by police forces. On 4 July 2019, Mahmoud Sadeghi, a former representative of Tehran in the 10th parliament, tweeted that, following a period of negotiation, it had been agreed that Eid al-Fitr prayers would be held in the Sunni prayer room in Yaftabad, Tehran. It was reported today that the police prevented the morning prayer from being held. In my attempts to contact officials, I have encountered a number of difficulties. In some cases, they have been unavailable, while in others, they have not responded to my queries or claimed that they are not responsible for the matter in question.

Mr. Farmanian's assertion that "Sunnis today have 15,000 mosques, 500 religious schools, and 100 religious institutions" has been corroborated by numerous other government officials and Shia clerics. For example, Mohammad Hassan Zamani, the head of the Office for Social and Political Affairs of the country's seminaries, asserts that Sunnis have 17,000 mosques and 12,000 seminary students covered by insurance. He further asserts that the Islamic system has also provided support to Sunni seminaries, which has led to a tenfold increase in the number of such institutions. The Islamic Revolution has addressed the issue of social security insurance for Sunni seminary students and clerics. When I was responsible for religious unity, approximately 12,000 Sunni seminary students were insured. This number has since increased significantly. However, an examination of the budget for Shia religious institutions in comparison to Sunni religious institutions reveals that the Iranian government allocates the least resources to Sunni institutions. According to the 2024 budget law, the government allocated a total of 54000 billion tomans to religious institutions. Of this sum, Sunni religious schools received only 88 billion tomans. This figure was reported by Iran Budget, which reviewed the budget for religious institutions.³²

In a city like Tehran, with a population of approximately one million Sunni residents, approximately 40 billion tomans from the annual municipal budget are allocated to Shia mosques. In contrast, the Sunnis receive no funding from this budget, as they do not have even a single mosque in Tehran.

Sunnis are subject to restrictions on the holding of religious ceremonies and are denied government support. Furthermore, the interference of the government and the assignment of their religious affairs to Shia authorities have resulted in significant disruption to their religious activities. For instance, in 2008, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution established an institution designated as the "Planning Council of Sunni Religious Schools" with the objective of overseeing the affairs of these schools. It is noteworthy that the head of the council and the majority of its members are representatives of the Supreme Leader and Shia clerics. In contrast, only three Sunni clerics, primarily those who are members of the Assembly of Experts (whose qualifications are approved by the Guardian Council, thus considered loyal by the government), serve on the council. This action is perceived as a flagrant instance of governmental meddling and an attempt to exert control over Sunni religious institutions.

Baha'is

According to the latest report provided by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran before its dissolution in 1983, the population of Baha'is in Iran was approximately 300,000. Over the past forty years, obtaining any new statistics about this community has been impossible due to the lack of administrative institutions. In all the periods when censuses were conducted in Iran, despite questions related to the religion of individuals being included in the census questionnaires, the option for Baha'i as a religion has never been present, either before or after the revolution. Over the

³² Iran Budget. (2024, April 15). Increase in budget for religious centers in the 1403 budget bill. Retrieved from <https://iranbudget.org/blog/2024-04-15-1403-iran-religious-budget/>

years, as the population of Iran, and consequently the Baha'i community, has grown, some have openly or discreetly identified themselves as Baha'i and joined the Baha'i community. Meanwhile, many Baha'is in Iran, due to increasing pressures they have faced, like other religious minorities in Iran, have migrated to other countries.³³

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Despite the silence of the majority of people regarding the violation of Bahá'í rights in Iran, recent years have seen initiatives from intellectual groups within Iranian society advocating for the civil rights of Bahá'ís. In February 2009, a large group of intellectuals issued an open letter to the Bahá'í community, expressing shame over the ongoing rights violations and the silence that had surrounded these issues.

Moreover, there have been signs of flexibility and respect for the human and civil rights of Bahá'ís from a few clerics or political activists from prominent families. In 2009, Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri issued a fatwa in response to inquiries, recognizing Bahá'ís as "entitled to rights" and deserving of citizenship rights. Additionally, Fa'ezeh Hashemi, daughter of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, defended her visit with Fariba Kamalabadi, one of the seven imprisoned Bahá'í leaders, who was her former cellmate and on leave from prison after eight years. Fa'ezeh emphasized the importance of maintaining human relationships with everyone and stated that she believes many people in Iran suffer from injustice, but "the extent of oppression against Bahá'ís is the highest."

The historical context of persecution against Bahá'ís, as stated in the decree by Qajar king Naser al-Din Shah, aimed at the "eradication" of those who did not accept Shia orthodoxy and established a new faith post-Islam. This new faith challenged the notions of the finality of Prophet Muhammad and the concept of Mahdism.

However, it must be asked whether the historical context of persecution is solely created by governments, or whether the people who either indifferently ignore or actively promote and execute anti-Bahá'í sentiments also play a role. To

³³ Milani, A. (2008). *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979* (Vol. 1, pp. 787–789). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. ISBN 0-8156-0907-8.

illustrate, consider the following scenario: an individual informs their neighbour of the presence of a neighbour who is a Bahá'í. They are Bahá'í. "Avoid contact with them."³⁴

The concept of respecting the civil rights of individuals regardless of their religion or sect has been a topic of discussion for several years. While the formulation and adoption of civil rights legislation is a necessary precursor to the enjoyment of these rights, it is not a sufficient guarantee of their realisation. It is evident that the Iranian government could not have engaged in the widespread violations of the civil rights of minority groups, such as the Bahá'ís, without societal support.

Anti-Bahá'í sentiment in Iranian culture provides the foundation for systematic persecution and discrimination. Ultimately, the Iranian people can ensure the elimination of repression and violence in society by becoming aware of the roots of hostility and excommunication, sensitising themselves to the discriminations occurring around them, and breaking their silence in the face of injustice and rights violations.

The Armenian population of Iran

The proportion of all religious minorities in Iran's population has consistently declined over the past decades. In 1956, the number of Christians in Iran, including Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, and Protestants, was approximately 113,000, representing 0.6% of the country's population at that time. This population was nearly identical to the Christian population in 2011, estimated at approximately 117,000, equivalent to 0.1% of Iran's population. By 2016, this number had increased to approximately 130,000.³⁵

Christians in Iran, including Assyrians and Armenians, are distributed throughout the country, with the highest concentration observed in Tehran, Isfahan, Alborz, and East and West Azerbaijan. This distribution is largely influenced by historical factors and geographical location. The Christian population of Tehran constitutes 0.26% of the city's total population. The lowest concentration of Christians is observed in the Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province, estimated at approximately 0.001%. Iranian Armenians represent the largest Christian community in Iran. According to official statistics from the Islamic Republic, the number of Armenians in Iran is estimated to be approximately 70,000. However, prior to the 1979 Revolution, the estimated number of Armenians in Iran was approximately 90,000. Some Armenians in Iran believe that the actual number of Armenians currently residing in Iran is between 20,000 and 25,000. The government's insistence on presenting a higher population of Armenians may be linked to the presence of two Armenian minority representatives in Parliament and a reflection of respect for diversity in Iran. Nevertheless, a considerable number of Armenians have emigrated to Armenia and the United States since the revolution, and the remaining population in Iran is generally not young.³⁶

2.1.Examples of the ordinary Armenian population's comprehension of the migration phenomenon.

Robert Safarian, a film critic and editor of the Armenian-Persian biweekly Hoys, offers the following commentary on this migration: The disappearance of one of Iran's oldest ethnic-religious minorities has been a topic of discussion in the press and among the Armenian community in Iran for some time. However, the question remains as to how such an important event could have occurred without any mention in the official press. The larger society is disinclined to acknowledge the challenges faced by smaller communities, and as a result, all the commendations at official ceremonies regarding the significant role Armenians have played in the country are merely expressions of flattery. Iranian society is characterised by a strong centralisation, with a lack of interest in peripheral areas. I myself submitted a proposal for a documentary film on this subject to the Center for the Development of Documentary and Experimental Cinema, but after much deliberation and discussion, it was rejected due to concerns about presenting a negative image. The reasons for this migration must be identified. The wave of migrations intensified following the Iranian Revolution. Karen Khanlari, the representative of Armenians in Tehran and the northern regions, has stated that the population of Armenians in the

³⁴ Ghahhari, Keyvandokht. "A Look at the Situation of Bahá'ís in Iran." Deutsche Welle Persian, 2017. Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%84-%D8%B3%D8%B1%DA%A9%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86/a-41066225>.

³⁵ Gurovants, Nazar. Armenians of Iran. Translated by Dajet Boghosian, Tehran, 1968, pp. 161, 318.

³⁶ Gurovants, Nazar. Armenians of Iran. Translated by Dajet Boghosian, Tehran, 1968, pp. 161, 330.

country is decreasing, with the current community numbering around 60,000 to 70,000. This represents a significant decline from the 180,000 Armenians who were resident in Iran during the 1980s. Khanlari attributes these migrations to economic conditions and sanctions, rather than political reasons. However, alternative estimates suggest a considerably lower figure, between 30,000 and 40,000. Despite the lack of precise statistics, a number of indicators point to a high level of migration. These include the sale advertisements of household items in Majidieh, Narmak, and Behjatabad, the decrease in the number of Armenian school students from 10,000 to 3,000, and the closure or merging of some schools. One reason for the accelerated migration is the facilitation of migration conditions through organisations such as HIAS, which aid minority migrations. This migration can be achieved with a payment of \$3,000 per person and a one-year wait. Following registration and a period of approximately one year, migrants proceed to Vienna, where they may remain for a further two to six months. The initial \$3,000 covers living expenses in Vienna, and the application is almost certain to be accepted. The conditions for migration are so favourable that those who choose not to migrate must provide a rationale for their decision.

Gonabadi Dervishes

The precise number of Gonabadi Dervishes is unclear, and there are no official sources that provide an accurate figure. Some Dervishes have asserted that their group's population exceeds several million. The same sources estimate that the population of the Dervishes was approximately one million prior to the Iranian Revolution. The largest concentrations of Gonabadi Dervishes are currently located in the cities of Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Mashhad. Nevertheless, the Gonabadi Dervishes also maintain Hosseiniehs (places of gathering) or assemblies in smaller cities. These Hosseiniehs existed prior to the revolution, but have subsequently been closed down in the years following it. Currently, all these Hosseiniehs are closed, and the Dervishes' gatherings are held in the homes of trusted individuals. Some locations where the Dervishes had Hosseiniehs include Bandar Abbas; Mahan Kerman (the shrine of Shah Nematollah); Bidokht (the burial place of Hazrat Majzooob Ali Shah and some other leaders). Other cities with a presence of Dervishes include Tonekabon, Qazvin, Semnan, Kerman, Quchan, Zahedan, Zabol, Lar, Shesh Deh (Fasa), Ardabil, Ahvaz, Kermanshah, Aligudarz, and Kish.

The Gonabadi (Nematollahi) Dervishes self-identify as Shia Muslims, which places them within the majority of Muslims in terms of shared beliefs. They espouse the belief in the existence of a single God and recognise figures such as Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad as prophets. Additionally, they regard the Quran as a holy text, although they interpret Islam in a distinct manner. They consider themselves to be followers of both Sharia (Islamic law) and Tariqa (the Sufi path). Nevertheless, the Gonabadi Dervishes diverge from other Sufi groups in their specific rituals and beliefs.³⁷

The Gonabadi Dervishes have a distinctive understanding of religious authority within the Islamic tradition. They only consult legitimate religious authorities, namely individuals who meet the criteria for religious leadership. During the "Occultation" of the Imam of the Age, the "Qutb" (spiritual leader) and the Sheikhs are regarded as the guides for the Dervish community. The Gonabadi Dervishes place great emphasis on the concept of love, rather than on the study of laws and jurisprudence. This emphasis is reflected in the Dervishes' belief that the individual's spiritual path should be based on love for creation and service to it. Consequently, the Gonabadi Dervishes, in common with certain other Sufi orders, are discouraged from secluding themselves, but rather encouraged to engage in productive work and service to others, which are considered fundamental to their desired behavioural models.

Yarsan, Ahl-e Haqq

The Yarsan religion is distinct from the Ali-Illahi and Hurufi sects; however, the Yarsanis are mistakenly labelled as devil worshippers. Notably, Henry Rawlinson,³⁸ in his journey to Poshtkooh, referred to the Yarsanis as Ali-Illahi. Similarly, Henry Binder, in his travels to Kermanshah province, praised the followers of the Yari faith as quiet, friendly

³⁷ Nur Bakhsh, J. (Ed.). (1975). *Sharh-e-Loma'at* by Shah Nematollah Vali Kermani. Tehran: Nematollahi Khanqah Publications.

³⁸Hosseini, B. (2019, July 16). The Yarsan Minority in Iran: Centuries of Living in Secrecy and Discrimination. BBC Persian. Retrieved November 10, 2023, from <https://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-49007136>

and forgiving people, and he considered the Ahl-e Haqq to be associated with the Ali-Ilahi spectrum.³⁹ Although many consider the Yarsanis to be a sect of Twelver Jafari Shi'a Islam, the Islamic Republic does not even grant the Yarsanis the rights it provides for Shi'a in its constitution. The Yarsanis are not recognised as Shi'a and are therefore deprived of all their political and social rights, even as Shi'a.⁴⁰

The exact number of Ahl-e Haqq followers in Iran is unknown. This difficulty in estimation arises from the fact that the Ahl-e Haqq religion has not been an option in any of the official censuses. In addition, many Ahl-e Haqq followers identify themselves as Muslims, making it difficult to distinguish them from the Muslim population. According to various sources, the number of Ahl-e Haqq followers ranges from tens of thousands to two million.

Ahl-e Haqq followers are mainly concentrated in Iran, especially in the western regions. They live mainly in cities such as Kermanshah, Qazvin, Lorestan, East Azerbaijan, Zanjan and Hamedan, but are also present in other cities such as Tehran, Rudehen, Karaj, Shahriar and Khorasan. They also live in other countries in the region, including Turkey, Iraq, Albania, Afghanistan and Syria, mainly among the Kurdish populations of these countries.

Ahl-e Haqq followers, like other Iranian citizens, have contributed to the development of Iran and have fulfilled their civic responsibilities. During the Iran-Iraq war, 788 Ahl-e Haqq were killed in Kermanshah province alone; 1,598 were wounded and 134 were taken prisoner.⁴¹

Ahl-e Haqq followers have mostly inherited their beliefs by being born into families that have been practicing the religion for a long time. As a result, they are most likely to belong to one of the families that have followed the Ahl-e Haqq faith for many years. Some of these families include the Shah Ebrahimi, Seyed Mostafa, Zanouri, Baba Yadgari, Ali Qalandari, Haji Baveysi, Khamoushi, Mirsouri, Shah Hiyasi, Atashbegi and Babaheidari families. However, new individuals can also become 'followers' of the faith and consider themselves to be Ahl-e Haqq.⁴²

Ahl-e Haqq followers mainly speak their local languages, which are mainly Kurdish, Luri and Turkish. The works considered 'holy' by the followers of Ahl-e Haqq, also known as 'Kalâm' or 'Sermugo', are mainly in Kurdish or Turkish. These works have led the followers of this faith, wherever they live, to learn the language of these texts in order to connect with their sacred scriptures. It is worth noting that many Ahl-e Haqq works are not publicly available. The most common dialect in Ahl-e Haqq works is the Kurdish "Gorani" dialect.⁴³

Based on the beliefs of the Ahl-e Haqq faith and the teachings of Islam, this faith is considered heretical and is not officially recognized. Consequently, they do not have the freedom to practice their religious and doctrinal matters or to promote their beliefs and doctrines, and many of the rights and privileges available to other officially recognized religions are not granted to this faith. For instance, they cannot have marriage and divorce offices according to their teachings, implement inheritance rules other than the official country regulations, or establish schools. Furthermore, according to Article 14 of the Civil Service Employment Law, followers of this faith and similar ones are prevented from being employed in government positions. In contrast, officially recognized religions are free in these matters and personal status and religious teachings⁴⁴. Followers of this faith practice their rituals and ceremonies in secret. Throughout history, they have avoided participating in political activities. Nevertheless, over the centuries, they have experienced numerous instances of pressure and persecution, mostly from Muslims or governments. They state that after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the pressure on the Yarsan community has increased, and followers of this faith have faced many deprivations and discriminations.

³⁹ Binder, H. (1991). *The Travelogue of Henry Binder: Kurdistan, Mesopotamia, and Iran* (K. Afsar, Trans.). Tehran: Farhangsara Publications (Yassavoli). (Original work published 1370 [Iranian Calendar]; p. 408).

⁴⁰ Jeyhounabadi, N. (1984). *Shahnameh Haqiqat* (p. 12). Introduction by Mokri.

⁴¹ Minorsky, V. (1999). *Three Research Articles on the Ahl-e Haqq Faith* (p. 38).

⁴² Binder, H. (1991). *The Travelogue of Henry Binder: Kurdistan, Mesopotamia, and Iran* (K. Afsar, Trans.) (1st ed.p. 403). Tehran: Farhangsara Publications (Yassavoli).

⁴³ Mardani, M. (n.d.). *A Brief Overview of the Ahl-e Haqq Doctrine* (p. 3).

⁴⁴ Hashemi, S. M. (1999). *Fundamental Rights of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (pp. 183-193). Tehran: Dadgostar Publications.

Discrimination and pressure

Ahl-e Haqq followers face numerous restrictions because they are not officially recognised as a minority under the Islamic Republic's constitution. As a result, they continue to be denied civil rights such as employment in government offices, representation in parliament, holding key positions, and pursuing higher education. In the years since the revolution, their religious and spiritual identity has been denied, and the oppression of this group has taken various forms, including the dissemination of hate speech against them in the official media.

The laws of the Islamic Republic do not prohibit education or employment for religious minorities, and being Muslim is not a requirement for education or employment. Article 28 of the constitution states: "Everyone has the right to choose any occupation, provided that it does not contradict Islam, the public interest or the rights of others. The government is obliged to create equal opportunities for employment and the necessary conditions for everyone according to the needs of society for different occupations".

According to Article 30 of the constitution, "the government is obliged to provide free education and training for the entire nation up to the end of secondary education and to expand free higher education to the extent necessary for the country to achieve self-sufficiency".

Like the Yarsanis, Mandaeans in Iran have to hide their religious identity. Sahi Khamisi, a Mandaean writer and researcher, says: "Our co-religionists live in a state of fear and anxiety. Many have changed their surnames to find work, but they still haven't succeeded and have been forced to emigrate to other cities and eventually other countries.

Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi's fatwa banning the consumption of food offerings by Ahl-e Haqq followers is another example of organised discrimination against them. This religious decree was issued in response to a question about the "religious ruling on the food offerings of Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsan religion)" and was published on Makarem Shirazi's official website. According to the fatwa, "if they (Yarsan followers) deny the essentials of Islam, it is not permissible to use their food".⁴⁵

They do not have the right to officially perform marriage ceremonies according to their rites and cannot enforce inheritance laws based on their beliefs. They also perform their religious ceremonies informally and secretly in jamkhanas. If they do not select the "Islam" option on official forms for university admission and government employment, they face various educational and professional disadvantages.

In 2004, armed clashes between the police and a group of followers of the "Atashbegi" branch of the Ahl-e Haqq sect from the village of Uch Tapeh in Miandoab resulted in the arrest of several followers. They were tried and sentenced to death. The Court of Appeal later commuted the death sentences of Sahand Alimohammadi and Bakhshali Mohammadi to 13 years' imprisonment and exile in Yazd prison, but upheld the death sentences of Ghasemzadeh and Younes Aghayan. As a result, the death sentence of Ebadollah Ghasemzadeh, the uncle of Younes Aghayan's wife, was carried out in 2008, and only Younes Aghayan remains on death row.⁴⁶

In June 2013, Kiumars Nakat, an Ahl-e Haqq prisoner, had his beard forcibly shaved in Hamedan prison. In protest against this action, Hasan Razavi, a member of the Ahl-e Haqq faith, set himself on fire in front of the Hamedan Governorate on 4 June 2013 and died a few days later. On 5 June 2013, Nikmard Taheri, another Ahl-e Haqq follower, set himself on fire and died in protest against the pressure on the Ahl-e Haqq. Nikmard Taheri was buried in the city of Sahneh.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Makarem Shirazi Website. (2024, January 10). Fatwas Related to Ahl-e Haqq, Istifta'at. Retrieved from <https://old.makarem.ir/main.aspx?mid=391234>

⁴⁶ BBC Persian. (2013, July 27). Another Self-Immolation by a Yarsan Follower, This Time in Baharestan Square. Retrieved July 28, 2013, from https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/07/130727_u07_mf_yarsan_suicide_burnt_parlement_tehran

⁴⁷ Radio Zamaneh. (n.d.). From self-immolation of citizens to self-organization of Yarsani activists. Retrieved from <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/511108>

On 5 August 2013, following the self-immolations of Hasan Razavi and Nikmard Taheri, another Ahl-e Haqq supporter named Mohammad Ghanbari, a resident of "Qara Dash Takestan village", set himself on fire in front of the Islamic Consultative Assembly and died the same day.

On 7 April 2014, an Ahl-e Haqq soldier named Hekmat Safari committed suicide in a military garrison in the city of Qorveh for allegedly "insulting the Yari faith and putting pressure on its followers". There have been other cases of self-immolation by Ahl-e Haqq followers in recent years in protest at the restrictions, oppression and limitations imposed on the community. These include the self-immolations of two brothers named Mehdi Fazoony and Ehsan Fazoony. Following these protests, the "Advisory Council of Yarsani Civil Activists" was formed shortly after these self-immolations to pursue the civil rights of this religious minority. In 2015, the only Jamkhana of Ahl-e Haqq followers in the city of Eslamabad-e Gharb was attacked and vandalised by several people, resulting in broken windows and damaged facilities. The attackers chanted slogans against Ahl-e Haqq followers and also assaulted some of their followers. In December 2014, Amir Rajabi, an Ahl-e Haqq prisoner in Zahedan Central Prison, was placed in solitary confinement and subjected to pressure for refusing to shave his beard.

The Islamic Penal Code stipulates that the punishment for a Muslim who commits murder is retribution (qisas) if the victim is also a Muslim. However, if the victim belongs to an officially recognised non-Muslim religious minority, such as Zoroastrians or Christians, the penalty for the murderer is diya (blood money).⁴⁸ The situation is much more complicated for non-Muslim minorities such as the Yarsanis, Mandaeanes and Baha'is, who are not officially recognised by law. For example, if someone kills a Yarsani, the law is unclear on the punishment, leaving it to the discretion of judges in Iran to acquit the murderers by declaring these minorities mahdur ad-dam (those whose blood can be shed with impunity). In recent years, human rights violations against the Yarsani minority and insults to their beliefs and customs have repeatedly led to protests by their followers, who have sometimes resorted to self-immolation to express their grievances. Examples include the self-immolations of several Yarsanis in front of the Islamic Consultative Assembly six years ago in pursuit of their rights, and the protest self-immolations in front of the Hamedan Governorate some seven years ago following the shaving of a Yarsani prisoner's moustache.

Despite consistently avoiding political activities, the legal and social pressures and discrimination inside Iran have made life increasingly difficult for them. According to Siavash Hayati, Yarsanis have no social, administrative, or political status due to not being recognized in the constitution, and their identity is denied: *"Our children are forced to resort to hypocrisy and pretense to be able to study or enjoy the minimums. The reasons for migration are identity, social, cultural, and economic issues. Previously, our children, who had no place in government and administrative institutions, would go into engineering fields and factories to make a living. However, economic crises have limited this option as well. Culturally, the Yarsan community differs from Islamic customs and jurisprudence, and the imposition of non-traditional clothing and the escape from social restrictions lead to migration."*

Reza Shahmoradi, a Yarsani civil activist, says, *"It's impossible to find a document in Iran where someone has written that they are Yarsani. Even in marriage or property transactions, we don't write it. Despite all this secrecy, we are still not given educational and employment opportunities. I took the entrance exam and was accepted into teacher training. Although I had written 'Islam' as my religion, I was rejected locally for being Yarsani after the selection process. We essentially have a dual personality in Iran, and these limitations and denials of our identity lead to widespread migration and the decline of the Yarsani population."*

Confrontation with Sunnis

In mid-November, 'Mullah Hamid Faraji', a radical jihadi preacher, spoke out against the followers of the Yari (Yarsan) faith during a congregational prayer sermon at a mosque near Sarpol-e Zahab, a district in Kermanshah. Describing Yari

⁴⁸ Haji Dehabadi, A. (2013). Assessment of changes in the Islamic Penal Code of 2013 regarding retribution and blood money for women. Women's Studies Journal, 10-15. Tehran University (Farabi Campus), September 2013.

(Yarsan) followers as infidels, devil worshippers and outsiders, he said: "Yarsanis are not our brothers, and only Islam can bring brotherhood."⁴⁹

As the protests escalated, Mullah Hamid retracted his remarks in a video posted on social media. In the video, he claimed that enemies of the Islamic Republic of Iran had distorted his words to sow discord and strife between us [Muslims] and them [Yarsanis], and that his original intention was to refer to 'Jews, Christians and Zionists'.

A civil rights activist says: "By highlighting and allowing the free activities of such individuals, even from mosque pulpits, the Islamic Republic is implying that without the control and security of the Islamic Republic, the past of the Yazidi Kurds in Shingal would be their [Yarsanis] future. This is a systematic indoctrination that suggests that if individuals with such dangerous beliefs gain power during a period of political turmoil, they will treat the Yarsanis as ISIS has treated the Yazidi Kurds in Shingal.

Meanwhile, a source familiar with Mullah Hamid Faraji, who confirmed his cooperation with the security apparatus in Kermanshah, told IranWire: "He used to be the prayer leader in a village near Paveh in Kermanshah and was very poor financially. Within a few years, however, he acquired considerable wealth and now owns a large greenhouse between Sarpol-e Zahab and Qasr-e Shirin.

According to this source, Mullah Hamid has very close links not only with the Islamic Republic's intelligence and security forces, but also with 'Mullah Krekar', and is considered by the people of the region to be one of his closest associates. Mullah Krekar, known as the "Bin Laden of the Kurds", is the leader of the armed group Ansar al-Islam, which was formed in 2001 after splitting from the Islamic Movement. For years, Mullah Hamid has been openly active as one of the main organisers of the al-Qa'ida network in these areas, personally responsible for propagating, inciting, organising and sending young people from the "Javayeti" region of Oraman to join al-Qa'ida and ISIS jihadist groups. According to this source, one of Mullah Hamid's children was a member of ISIS and reportedly blew himself up in Syria.

However, Mohammad Reza Dehlagi believes that the city of Kermanshah and its surrounding areas, known as the main hub and stronghold of the Yari (Yarsan-Ahl-e-Haqq) community, are known as the city of seventy-two nations and are fundamentally unfamiliar with such factors and elements. He does not deny the temporary impact of these provocations but believes that "even after the 1979 revolution, the balance of social life among Yarsanis, Shiites, Sunnis, Jews, and Baha'is was not disrupted, and no one tried to weaken the other. Because acceptance of diversity and multiplicity is part of the cultural essence of the people of Kermanshah and the social life of the people throughout the history of this region."

He says: "In a specific timeline, the Islamic Republic eliminated wise and influential Sunni scholars such as 'Mullah Mohammad Rabiei,' who was politically savvy, to replace the wise with hated and infamous elements. In other words, the presence of individuals like Mullah Mohammad Rabiei, who was extremely prudent and wise and did not align with the dominant government policies, was an obstacle that needed to be removed. His presence strengthened the spirit of solidarity and social cohesion." Mullah Mohammad Rabiei, a prominent Kurdish cleric and author of *The Shopkeepers of the Path*, was appointed Sunni Imam of Kermanshah in 1979. After strongly criticising the "Imam Ali series" at the Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran, he was assassinated on 3 December 1996. His assassination was classified as part of the chain murders of the 1990s. Mohammad Reza Dehlaghi, continuing his remarks on the severe repression of the Yarsanis and their forced assimilation into the dominant religion, believes that the Yarsanic faith has always been in danger of being distorted. He sees the term "Ahl-e Haqq", which the Islamic Republic has tried to generalise as the name of the Yarsan faith, as one of the examples of this distortion.

"Why should we be the Ahl-e Haqq and others not? In fact, this term was invented and popularised by the Islamic Republic's cultural apparatus because the regime's strategic policy is to distort and obscure the true essence of the Yarsan faith by changing its name. Moreover, through agents such as Mullah Hamid, they also attribute terms such as Ali-Illahi, Nusayri, Satan-worshippers and Shiite extremists to the Yarsanis.

⁴⁹ Faraji, M. H. (2021, May). Remarks by Mullah Hamid Faraji [Video]. YouTube, IranWire. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/embed/-fgqa5EaM4U?wmode=opaque>

Mohammad Reza Dehlaghi, who has lived in Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan region of Iraq for fourteen years because of his civic activities, believes that the situation of Yarsanis was much better under the Pahlavi regime than under the Islamic Republic:

"Because even then, if you went to a government office, no one would ask if you were a Yarsani or not. Often they even treated the Yarsanis better. But the era of the Islamic Republic was a dark, very troubling and insulting time for the Yarsanis. With the further establishment of the Islamic Republic after the revolution, a significant part of the Yarsanis had to leave their homes and flee".

He continued:

"Kermanshah is the frontline of the Yarsanis' struggle against the enemies of freedom and the coexistence of religious minorities. Our faith is the Yarsanian faith, not enmity, hatred and revenge. We invite everyone to be Yarsan".

Some examples and witnesses

Ali (Alireza) Moradi is now 55 years old and remembers those days (The early days of the Islamic Revolution) : "We were border residents. We received information that the new Islamic government would not tolerate the Yarsanis and would not allow religious ceremonies. They said they would shave off our moustaches. Fear grew and gradually people started to leave Iran.

Having a long moustache is very important to many men who follow the Yarsan religion and is deeply linked to their beliefs. This may come as a surprise to readers in 2020, who may wonder why the government cares about people's moustaches. But even in recent years, in 2013, prison officials in Hamedan shaved the moustache of a Yarsan prisoner to humiliate him. Several people protested this insulting act by setting themselves on fire. Such actions against minorities were much easier in the late 1970s due to the lack of internet and information systems.

Hekmat Safari, a Yarsani soldier, also committed suicide with his service weapon. To date, several followers of the faith have been dismissed from their jobs because of their beliefs. Yarsanis practise their rituals and customs in secret and avoid political activity.

Mehrabi, the spokesman for the Yarsan Democratic Organisation, said that in recent years the Yarsanis had endured various insults, including the forced shaving of their moustaches. "Mr Younesi recently held a meeting with Yarsani elders and asked them to either align themselves with Shia Islam or find a way to become Shia. About three or four years ago, the Yarsanis officially requested that the Yarsan faith be recognised in the constitution of the Islamic Republic.

According to this Yarsani follower, some Yarsani elders are in contact with government officials. The officials of the Islamic Republic are trying various methods to bring them under the umbrella of Shia Islam to ease their burden. The government has even bribed some of the Yarsani Seyeds and religious leaders with money and pressure. As a result of these pressures and threats, several thousand Yarsanis decided to cross the borders with their families at the beginning of the revolution to see what the fate of the Islamic government would be. Ali Moradi says: "In 1980, I was about 15 years old. Three months before the start of the Iran-Iraq war, several hundred people in two caravans left Iran from near the Azgaleh border. Some had left before us. About four to five thousand Yarsanis went to Iraq when the war suddenly started".

Ali Moradi, one of the Yarsanis, also says: "In Iran we have two identities: our true identity and the one we are forced to present under the oppression of the country's official religion, which means we have to identify ourselves as Muslims.

Ali Moradi has served on Jyväskylä's school board in the past and is currently a member of the city's local court council. In Iran, however, a Yarsani cannot even attend university if they declare their religion. He and other Yarsani followers who can live freely in Europe and practice their religious rituals hope that one day they can be just as free in Kermanshah and the beautiful "Dalahou".

Shahab made this decision because his religion and beliefs are not recognised by the laws of the Islamic Republic. According to Article 13 of the 'Constitution of the Islamic Republic', Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are recognised as the only religious minorities in Iran, and other religious minorities are not recognised.

Meanwhile, followers of the Yarsan faith are considered one of the largest religious minorities in Iran. They trace the origins of their religion back several thousand years and believe it originated on the Iranian plateau. They perform their religious ceremonies and rituals in places of worship called 'jamkhaneh'.

Another Yarsani, who recently became a Muslim, cited a lack of information and awareness about the Yarsani faith and the absence of a comprehensive religious book to answer his religious questions as reasons for his conversion. He says: "Such questions stem from the restrictions imposed by the Islamic Republic on Yarsani followers. Even getting permission to print religious books and providing adequate access or correct information about their religious duties is restricted. Although some Yarsani religious books are available in certain bookstores, no publisher is allowed to print such books. The compilers or authors, mostly from the Yarsani community, print or publish these religious books at their own expense and in limited quantities.

Unemployment and poverty imposed by the Islamic Republic are among the factors that have made the Yarsanis one of the most disadvantaged social groups in Iran. Discrimination against this religious minority in employment has led most of them to turn to self-employment and agriculture. However, the harsh economic conditions and recent droughts have left many of them living in extremely poor conditions.

A Yarsani living in the town of Sahneh tell: *"We have been protesting in various ways to achieve justice, eliminate various discriminations and prevent media disrespect without having the means and tools to defend ourselves. In 2013, three of our young people set themselves on fire in front of government offices and parliament, shouting for justice amidst the flames and sacrificing their lives for their rights".*

He added: "After these tragic events, decentralised and scattered activities to achieve civil rights among the Yarsani people have continued in a more cohesive manner."

Many Yarsanis (Yari) live in Kermanshah Province, where they face more sensitivity and restrictions. In addition to this province, they live in the provinces of Azerbaijan(West and East) , Zanzan, Hamadan, Lorestan and northern regions of Iran such as Kordkuy.

Followers of this faith can also be found scattered in cities such as Tehran, Shiraz and other cities in Iran. Many young Yarsanis, due to such pressures, decide to emigrate from Iran—a migration that is often fraught with numerous challenges and dangers for them. The lack of information and unfamiliarity of human rights groups with this issue make the residency process more difficult for Yarsani migrants.

Many of those who cannot migrate are forced to hide their beliefs and personal convictions and call themselves Muslims to obtain the most basic civil rights.

Since there are no official statistics on this matter in Iran, only time series data can be used for evaluation at broad geographical levels.

Conclusion

The methodology employed in this study - combining interviews, expert consultations, literature review, and statistical analysis - provides a comprehensive and holistic view of the challenges faced by the Yarsan community in Iran. Despite the inherent limitations of each method, this multifaceted approach has allowed for a nuanced understanding of the Yarsanis' experiences, particularly with regard to the impact of religious discrimination and migration on their lives. The findings reveal that while the Iranian government exerts significant pressure on the Yarsanis to religiously assimilate into Shia Islam, political groups abroad often attempt to incorporate them into specific ethnic identities, complicating their efforts to preserve their unique cultural and religious identity.

In addition, the study sheds light on the broader issue of religious freedom and minority rights in Iran, demonstrating that the pressures faced by the Yarsan community reflect the broader struggles of various religious minorities under the Islamic Republic. Preliminary research suggests that Islamic groups, particularly those that deviate from mainstream Shia Islam, face even greater pressures than other minorities. These groups are often rejected, marginalized, or forced into isolation, with members forced to deviate from their beliefs due to intense scrutiny and repression by both security and religious institutions of the state.

In addition to government pressure, these groups face significant social pressure. State-sponsored propaganda labeling these religious communities as "deviant sects" has permeated Iranian society, fostering a climate of intolerance and hostility that further accelerates the emigration of these communities. This hostile environment not only isolates these groups within Iran, but also distances them from other Iranians in the diaspora after they emigrate, exacerbating their sense of alienation and loss.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on religious freedom and minority rights in Iran and beyond by highlighting the complex interplay between state policies, societal attitudes, and the lived experiences of religious minorities. The research underscores the urgent need for policy reforms that protect the rights of all religious communities in Iran and ensure their ability to maintain their cultural and religious identities without fear of persecution. As such, this study calls for increased international attention and advocacy to address the plight of religious minorities in Iran, and underscores the importance of upholding human rights and religious freedom in the face of growing authoritarianism and intolerance.

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Tables

Table.1

Religion	Approximate Population	Percentage of Total Population	Sources
Zoroastrians	25,271	0.03%	Statistical Center of Iran (2011)
Jews	8,756	0.01%	Statistical Center of Iran (2011)
Christians (Armenians and Assyrians)	117,704	0.15%	Statistical Center of Iran (2011)
Bahá'ís	Around 300,000	0.36%	UN estimates and independent sources
Yarsanis	Around 1,000,000	1.2%	Unofficial estimates
Mandaeans	Around 5,000	0.006%	Unofficial estimates
Sunni Muslims	Around 5-10%	Approximately 4-8 million	CIA World Factbook and independent sources

Table.2

Year	Total Population	Muslim Population	Muslim Percentage (%)
1976	33,708,744	33,540,200	99.5
1986	49,444,510	49,247,732	99.6
1996	60,055,483	59,877,316	99.7
2006	70,495,782	70,354,290	99.8
2011	75,149,669	75,135,599	99.98