Religious Minorities' Migration from Iran

Religious Minorities' Migration from Iran:

A Human Rights Perspective

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The vast land of Iran is home to numerous tribes and minority groups. Indeed, Toyserkani (2006, 67) described the Iranian people as a heterogeneous conglomerate characterized by "racial and ethnic diversity," which came into being through successive waves of migration, war, and political-economic rivalries. Religious minority groups, therefore, have a long history in Iran, each with its own unique set of customs and traditions.

Researchers have long overlooked the importance of conducting a systematic analysis of the social and political worlds of religious minority groups in Iran, especially those groups not officially sanctioned in the Iranian Constitution. Recently, however, a significant number of discourses and amount of research have opened the conversation. The new light shed by such research shows, at the very least, that the Iranian government and its nationalist critics could unify the country by extending the rhetoric of multiethnic accord, thereby shifting to a model of genuine inclusiveness. Yet the government chooses, instead, to continue to use exclusionary policies and division to "unite" the country by focusing on criticizing intellectuals and minority rights activists.

Using an intensive research method, this study aims to provide a holistic account of all of Iran's religious minority communities, tracking historical developments, migration patterns, and changes in social life and identity. It also confirms a widely perceived trend towards migration and assimilation versus previous group survival strategies such as self-isolation and marginalization.

The situation for non-Muslims in Iran has changed dramatically since the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty as a result of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and one of the goals of this publication is to document these changes. Beginning in the 1960s, large numbers of Iranians of all religious backgrounds were already leaving the country for the West (Stewart 2018; Barry 2018). After the revolution, emigration has become an even more common aspiration for religious minority communities. Since 1979, the population of Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian citizens of Iran has decreased by a

third, while the majority Shia Muslim population has more than doubled (Bardají, 2016). And since the year 2000, because of discrimination in the job market, levels of emigration from Iran have risen dramatically among all religious minority groups (Hosseini 2020; Stewart 2018; Barry 2018). In fact, emigration is being encouraged by some of the communities themselves. This is precisely why one key aspect of the current study is to focus on migration, specifically to what extent it has influenced minority groups in Iran and the diaspora alike. This is an area of research that has been largely neglected as a consequence of the growing friction between the communities and the Iranian state (Stewart 2018).

Of equal importance is the goal of documenting the attitudes and interactions of the majority Shia Muslims vis-à-vis minority communities both before and after the 1979 Revolution to see whether they have in any way altered during the last forty years. Against this background, I concur with Barry's view as expressed in his book *Armenian Christians in Iran* (2018), where he suggests that although the pre-1979 Iranian Constitution under the Pahlavi Dynasty was more accommodating to religious minorities, their "ethnocentrism" versus the religious nationalism espoused after 1979 have equally alienated and marginalized the Armenian minority. The current study, where I contrast these two distinct periods, proves that Barry's argument is valid; yet I chiefly disagree with the concept that minority groups were ever, at any point in time, integrated into the society. During my fieldwork, the prevailing sentiment was that all religious minority groups have felt marginalized and isolated from mainstream Iranian society.

Finally, this study explores how the dynamics between the Iranian state and non-Muslim groups have exacerbated religious extremism. At the end of the day, members of these communities are expected to be obedient or face the consequences. The inability to practice their religions freely has led some people to do desperate things. For example, Iranian news agencies have reported that Yārsāni Muslims (also known as *Ahl-e Haqq*) have gone so far as to set themselves on fire as a way to publicly declare their wish to freely express their distinct religion and the beliefs and rituals associated with it (Hosseini 2020).

Context of the study

The *Ja'fari* doctrine of Twelver Shiism was enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Bardají 2016). Since then, the connection between church and state has meant that non-Muslims can never enjoy full citizenship rights unless they convert to Islam. A plausible question arises as to what extent this situation

has condemned non-Muslims to second-class citizenship (Sanasarian 2010). There has always been controversy, but since Islamic law does not allow Muslims to deny Islam, it is not surprising that the Shia majority would come to consider alternative religions as inferior institutions.

Though, three minority religions have been acknowledged in the Iranian Constitution, they are still not recognized and respected as Islam followers are, and other faiths are left at an even further disadvantage. Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution states: "Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only religious minorities who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education" (Sanasarian 2006). In other words, only those who believed in "revealed" books (*ahl al-kitāb*) such as the Bible were granted the status of *dhimmis* (protected person)[1], with limited rights under the Islamic rule (Sanasarian 2000).[2] This left all the other faiths—Yārsānis, Sabean Mandaeans, Baha'is, Babis, Azali, and the like—officially unrecognized and unprotected against ongoing discriminatory practices. The term "Christian" only included the Armenian, Assyrian, and Chaldean communities; other Christians, such as the Sabean Mandaeans, were not recognized as "People of the Book" (Edalatnejad 2009).[3] Not only arbitrary, this omission cuts against the United Nations' (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states that everyone should have the right to political representation (Moinipou 2018). There are several studies regarding the sources, developments, and difficulties that religious minorities faced at the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (Izady 1992, 42). There is no justification that shows the

[1] Dhimmi means protected person. It pertains to the state's obligation under Sharia to protect the individual's life, property and freedom of religion, in exchange for loyalty to the state and payment of the jizya tax. Dhimmi refers also to those non-Muslims who live in an Islamic state and receive legal protection.

[2] Among the most important rights of recognized minority groups is their representation in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, as defined in Article 64 of the Iranian Constitution, according to which the Assyrians and Chaldeans elect one representative together, while each of the Zoroastrians, Jews, and the Armenians from the south and north elect one representative, respectively. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Parliament_religious_minority_reserved_seats

[3] Perhaps the delegates relied on the well-known legal opinions in Shiite *fiqh*, going back to the period of Sheikh al-Tusi, to deny the legitimacy of Sabian Mandaean Christians Zabibzadeh. [2014]. Shi'a authorities in the age of the major occultation part 4: Sheikh Tusi [trans. Ahmadi, M.]. https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-15-no-3-autumn-2014/shiite-authorities-age-major-occultation-part-4-sheikh-tusi/shiite. Accessed 18 October 2016; The term *ahl al-kitab,* or People of the Book, refers to followers of scripture-possessing religions that predate the Quran.

decision of the representatives to only recognize certain groups to be either moral or humane.

The legal provisions that allow for discrimination against non-Muslims do not end with the Iranian Constitution. Even the Islamic Civil Code does not show any favor towards religious minority groups. For example, according to Article 881, a non-Muslim (*kuffar* in the Persian text, which means unbeliever) is not allowed to inherit property from a Muslim. The same article states that if a non-Muslim dies and there is even one Muslim among his beneficiaries, this individual (regardless of his or her degree of relationship to the deceased) will be awarded the entire inheritance, thus cutting out all non-Muslim members of the family.[4]

The double standards continue as one looks closely at the Islamic Penal Code and, even more so, at the punishments (*qisas*) for murder.[5] The issue of blood money (financial compensation paid to the victim or heirs of a victim in cases of murder, bodily harm, or property damage) was changed in the early 1980s by the Iranian Parliament (*Majlis*) with the Expediency Council's approval.[6] The change provides retribution for a Muslim who commits murder only if the victim was a Muslim, thus depriving even officially sanctioned non-Muslim groups of justice. And things get even more complicated for the unofficial groups (Sanasarian 2000, 6; Simpson and Yinger 1965). Judgments have been applied inconsistently on purpose to give officials leeway to do as they please. In addition, non-Muslims being prosecuted in the Iranian court system face immense discrimination because the testimony of non-Muslims against Muslims is not accepted, and non-Muslims are therefore rendered unable to advocate for themselves.

Discrimination does not end with the legal aspect, as employment is another area in which non-Muslims face discrimination. One compelling example concerns the iconic profession of the Iranian Mandaeans of Khuzestan—the art of goldsmithing. Since so many young Mandaeans now lack the financial resources to initiate a career as jewelers, they might instead think about starting a smaller or different type of business, such as a greengrocer or fishmonger, which are also common professions in Khuzestan. Mandaeism or Mandaeanism, also known as Sabeanism, is a monotheistic and Gnostic religion with dualistic cosmology. Yet, due to an unspoken impression that Muslims will not buy anything from a Sabean Mandaean because they are considered *unclean*, many young people avoid starting such a business and remain unemployed. As a result, many in the

[4] https://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/iran/Iran-04.htm. Accessed 20 Nov 2016.
[5] https://iranwire.com/en/features/7386;
https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a8240.html.
[6] https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmfaff/142/142.pdf

Sabean community are suffering increasingly poor economic conditions (Amirteimour 2017, 44).

This is despite protections set out in Article 28 of the Constitution, which states: "Everyone has the right to choose any occupation he wishes, provided it does not infringe on the rights of others and is not contrary to Islam and public interests. It is the government's duty to provide all citizens with employment opportunity, and to create equal conditions for obtaining employment, with consideration of society's need for different professions."[7] The reality is that many governmental agencies will not employ people belonging to religious minority groups. Even employment in the military is no longer an option. In the past, the former Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, often praised the sacrifices of those minority families whose children fought in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980; however, the Islamic Republic now bans non-Muslims from enlisting in the army.[8] Even worse, in the past four decades, the Islamic government has executed, imprisoned, and stolen the businesses of citizens following the Baha'i faith (Amanat 2011).[9] By depriving non-Muslims of employment, the government further contributes to their impoverishment and marginalization.

The Iranian regime employs four main strategies to assume control over non-Muslims: population transfer, subjugation, extermination, and assimilation. Iran's predominant strategy, assimilation, is the process by which a society's minority groups come to resemble the majority group and assume its values, beliefs, and behaviors.[10] In Iran, this strategy is most effectively employed by the state through schooling and language restrictions. Children are taught Muslim history, culture, and traditions exclusively in the Persian language, although for many children it is not their mother tongue. As a result, non-Muslims are highly underrepresented in higher levels of education (Sanasarian 2000; Hosseini 2020). In fact, from the onset, children of all minority groups feel the discrimination and pain of being different from the rest (Crocker and Major 1989, 609).[11] Mohsen Haji-Mirzaei, Iranian

[7] https://www.helplinelaw.com/law/iran/constitution/constitution03.php

[8] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/878219/Iran_-_Military_Service_-_CPIN_-_v2.0_-_April_2020.pdf

[9] With regard to the Baha'is' presence in Iran, Amanat (2011) argues that the emerging Islamic world has given rise to a rapid rate of economic expansion, eliminated rigid class distinctions, broadened social mobility, enhanced migration trends, and assisted the evolution of the Baha'i obligatory prayer (*salaat*).

[10] https://institute.global/policy/ideology-and-irans-revolution-how-1979-changed-world

[11] Crocker and Major (1989) define stigmatized social groups as "social categories about which others hold negative attitudes, stereotypes and beliefs, or which, on

Minister of Education, recently announced: "If pupils declare they are followers of other religions than the official religion of our country, this should be considered propaganda and they should be banned from school."[12] This announcement shows the Iranian government is seeking to instill fear-based cultural conformity in children.

Amicarelli (quoted in Pretorius 2012, 2) goes in depth into how assimilation has been imposed by the state and discusses examples of minorities who have faced difficulties when attempting to practice religious education in public schools. Some recognized minority groups have gone so far as to open separate educational facilities so they can practice and teach their religion in semi-safety. Yet these "facilities" tend to be in someone's home or basement, and the curriculum is mainly religion—clearly not ideal. Sanasarian (2000, 74) describes the restrictions imposed on the use of native languages by minority groups, for instance, some can only speak their languages in officially designated minority villages and cities. Due to these restrictions, Kurdish, a previously popular and culturally common language, is now a dying language because it has become difficult for younger generations to practice (Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2020). When it comes to unrecognized religious groups, public expressions are highly discouraged and closely monitored by Iranian authorities.

In this study, I particularly strive to define the historical context and socio-religious milieu in which religious minority communities have been coerced to employ methods of appropriation and concealment to survive the deprivation imposed by dominant religious forces. The Yārsāni Muslim community, for example, which Shiite authorities have deemed heretical, has relied extensively on processes and strategies of adaptation and survival throughout the course of its history (Gillani 2013). Until recently, they have reacted by isolating themselves and retreating to remote places where they could practice their creed in peace. But since 1979, they have been subjected to religious persecution by the Iranian state. In fact, an agent from the Ministry of Intelligence is often present during their religious gatherings.

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average, receive disproportionately poor interpersonal or economic outcomes relative to members of the society at large because of discrimination against members of the social category." Negative intergroup contact, such as experienced discrimination, reactively reinforces the devalued minority identity, whereas negative intergroup experiences can result in increased identification with a devalued minority group (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey 1999). The present study shows that positive contact can also lead minority group members to downplay their devalued identity.

[12] https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2019/10/08/in-iran-religious-minority-children-are-to-stay-silent-if-they-want-to-study/?sh=16a943109a1.

Already finding it difficult to live a normal life in Iran, many Yārsāni have resorted to self-concealment—choosing to hide, or sometimes even to renounce certain fundamental differences between their religion and the official religion of Iran.[13] Thankfully, forming communities on social media has allowed them to connect and express themselves freely in a friendly and safe atmosphere (Hosseini 2020).

Extensive migration is taking a severe toll on the remaining communities and is of particular concern to their leaders. According to Barry, who conducted research on migration through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS),[14] many Iranian Armenians were prepared to leave the country with as little as $300 in their pockets, which illustrates their level of desperation. While the population of Armenians remained steady during much of the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979), it began to decline in the years just preceding the 1979 revolution. The massive emigration that has occurred since then, with the population declining from one hundred and fifty thousand in 1979 to thirty thousand in 2014, constitutes the largest exodus of Armenians from Iran since the deportations Shah Abbas conducted in the 1600s (Barry 2019, 249). Barry's research shows emigration as a deeply worrying issue for the Armenian community. As more and more of their young people leave, the future of their community looks bleaker by the hour. Armenians have also lost their sacred and cultural spaces in Iran that were central to their identity for generations (Safarian 2014).

Barry believes there is a generational gap when it comes to the way the Armenian community perceives its identity. Nonetheless, this loss not only harms the Armenian community but also Iran, which is losing the cultural diversity and richness of its distinctive Armenian heritage (Mozaffari 2010, 226), including the significant contributions made by Armenian authors to the contemporary Iranian literature. The unclear future of Iranian Armenians looks similar to the state of other small and declining Armenian communities in the Middle East (Barry 2018; Berberian 2005). Still, many believe that Iranian Armenians will find new ways to creatively adapt to these

[13] Self-concealment (SC) is a psychological construct defined as "a predisposition to actively conceal from others personal information that one perceives as distressing or negative. Self-concealment can be understood as an instance of boundary regulation in the maintenance of privacy. Self-concealed personal information has three characteristics: it is a subset of private information, can be consciously accessed, and is actively concealed from others. The concealed personal information (i.e., thoughts, feelings, actions, or events) is highly intimate and negative in valence" (Larson and Chastain 1990, 44).

[14] This program was originally established in 1881 to assist Jews fleeing from Russia and Eastern Europe to the West. Now the program assists refugees all over the world.

changing circumstances (Safarian 2014).

For Iranian Zoroastrians, emigration has become more appealing with the emergence of special refugee programs including HIAS, which allows migrants to establish residency in the United States in as little as six months. The program has resulted in a steady drain on the population that shows no signs of abating. The younger generation has been leaving in droves reducing the population by half since the 1970s (Foltz 2011). Just like the Armenians, Zoroastrians in Iran appear concerned by the threat that emigration poses to the survival of their community.[15] As Babak Behziz notes, "When eighty percent of us are leaving by turns, [survival] seems like a bit of a pipe dream" (2008).

Methodology of the research

This is the first study of Iran's religious minority communities employing the comparative research on non-Muslim religious minorities in different periods of Iran. The research was conducted using qualitative, empirical, and ethnographic methods. The latter technique consisted of participatory observation and open interviews conducted with 120 members of key religious groups. Some of these interviews took place by online audio calls; others were conducted in person with subjects living in Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad, Kermanshah, and other Iranian cities. I also visited formerly predominantly Zoroastrian villages including Mazraeh-ye Kalantar, the Fire Temple of Yazd where most non-Muslim residents have left for Australia or Aliabad city in Yazd (Stewart 2018). Additional interviews were conducted with Iranian migrants living temporarily in Vienna while on their way to their new homes in the United States through the HIAS program.

I want to highlight that it was mainly my Iranian identity and my fluency in Persian that enabled me to travel through Iran and gain deeper insight into the daily lives of the interviewees. My initial contact with the research

[15] A previous study carried out by Stewart (2018) on Zoroastrian life in Iran showed how the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic affected Zoroastrian religious life and social structures. Stewart discussed many of these developments that have affected the status of the minority for over a thousand years, such as the prohibition of public worship and marriage and the marriage between Muslim men and non-Muslim women, as well as the community's interaction with other minority groups and the discrimination they have experienced in their daily lives. Members of this group still adhere to certain old, traditional norms; for example, the laws of sanctity that do not prohibit religious minorities from drinking in public springs are alive today in the memory of the older generation. Immigration is a topic that Stewart also researched.

participants was made primarily through existing friendships within my community and other minority communities. I also reached out through Facebook and online chat rooms, as well as via telephone. Following up on my first contact, I immediately informed potential participants about my work and the goal of my study. Some were wary I might reveal information to the *Vezarat-e Ettela'at* (the Iranian security service). Many preferred to remain silent because they were afraid of the consequences of speaking out. Given the increasing discrimination in Iran, it is not surprising.

Being a non-Muslim Iranian gave me an advantage; I could conduct reliable research in my native language and develop trust with the interviewees, who easily identified with me and trusted me. I was able to understand their individual narratives and dialects, interpret their body language, and capture not only what was said but also contextual subtexts, obscure words, and ideas participants were hesitant to express. For instance, if participants were planning to travel to Iran, they would withhold controversial responses so as not to draw any attention to themselves.

Rapley (2004, 26) claims that the aim of the research interview is not to form truth; rather it provides an important medium to determine how interviewees manufacture, preserve, and discuss special and sometimes inconsistent truths to achieve clear answers that can be carefully applied to a more general context. This qualitative approach provides a better understanding and more accurate perception of a subject because it allows for the analysis of words instead of numbers (Bryman 2004, 266). I followed Bryman's suggestion and thus strived to understand what participants were sharing, paying close attention to their word choices. These thoughts led me to question the participants in different and more generative ways. I was particularly eager to know if the participants felt a sense of close relation with each other.

In addition to my unique connection with the interviewees, the comparative and contrasting character of this study—contrasting the situations both before and after the Islamic Revolution—brings new light to the field. It opens many avenues for understanding both the changes and continuities occurring within the groups. It also highlights the significance of the social polemics arising from the specific appropriation of religious elements and the socio-religious adaptations of groups facing existential threats from dominant external forces (Davies and Thate 2017). The methodology applied was time consuming but necessary to acquire the data. It was imperative to document the dramatic changes minority groups in Iran have experienced, especially because many of them might gradually cease to exist due to migration, assimilation, and the ongoing discriminatory practices they face.

Implications for the future

Modern Iranian history has been a constant fluctuation between extremes: nationalism gave way to extreme religious loyalty, which in turn gave way to prejudice. The Iranian regime and some of its nationalist critics, constituting two different segments of one dominant elite, share a fear of regime change. As already mentioned, instead of promoting solidarity and building an Iranian national identity, they focus on criticizing ethicists and minority rights activists (Moghadam 2002). Their fear is obviously exacerbated by pressure from the West. However, this pressure is certainly also being exploited by the state to sustain nationalism and legitimize contempt for minority rights. Policies imposed by the West are certain to affect how the state and scholars deal with minority groups in the future (Elling 2013).

Article 14 of the Constitution states that "the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity and to respect their human rights."[16] Even so, as we dive deeper into the policies and lifestyle in Iran, we will see that the limited protections for recognized minority groups have been written up for aesthetic purposes only and are not actually implemented. Given that the recognized groups face such a deplorable situation, it is hard to imagine the hardships unrecognized groups must experience. The implications of the research are clear: even if a person belongs to a recognized religious minority community, life in Iran is severely controlled and restricted, though even more so for those who are a part of unrecognized religious minority groups.

International organizations and institutions including the UN have repeatedly condemned Iran for its human rights violations and have reminded it of its obligations as a signatory to the UDHR and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.[17] In a recently published report, Amnesty International emphasized that in Iran, "freedom of religion and belief continues to be systematically violated."[18] Javaid Rehman, the UN's special rapporteur for Iran, has consistently raised concerns regarding human rights violations against minorities in the country.[19] Iran's government has responded that it requires Muslims to act with respect toward non-Muslim

[16] https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b56710.html.
[17] https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26852&LangID=E.
[18] https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/.
[19] https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26870&LangID=E.

people because Islamic law codifies respect for human rights.[20] More recently, the president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani , has expressed official support for upholding the rights of ethnic and religious minority groups.[21] Unfortunately, despite these reassuring words, there has been no change in the lives of non-Muslims. Let us hope that this situation changes before it is too late.

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CHAPTER 2

FRAMING THE CONTEXT OF HISTORY, POLITICS, AND RELIGION

Abstract

This chapter provides a concise historical overview of how the minority groups featured in this study have functioned in Iran from their inception until the time of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 CE. It aims to deliver a basis for comprehending how the standing of religious minorities in Iranian society has evolved over time, how the rise of Islam affected each of the various groups, what their responses to the resulting historical and political developments have been, and how they have contributed to Iran's culture and economy. The values, traditions, and unique rituals associated with each specific religion are also discussed as they shed light upon the discrimination these communities have endured throughout history and up to the present day.

The Zoroastrian Community

I begin this study of religious minorities in Iran with a faith that was once the dominant religion: Zoroastrianism. One of the first religions in recorded history, some scholars date its origin as far back as 1,000 BCE. We know for certain that by the sixth century BCE, Darius the Great declared Zoroastrianism the official religion of the Persian Empire (Boyce 1979). The roots of this ancient faith are still intertwined with Iranian culture today as the prophet Zoroaster spoke and taught in the Persian language— and the Dari dialect, the primary language of the Zoroastrian sacred texts, is the official language of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the first language of the majority of its citizens.

The Zoroastrians worship a supreme being, Ahura Mazda (the Wise Lord), and firmly consider themselves monotheists. According to the cosmology of the Zoroastrians, humanity is engaged in a battle between

benevolence and destruction— truth and falsehood. Adherents are called upon to act on the side of benevolence and truth. Zoroastrian doctrine is explicitly disapproving of self-denial, fasting, or other expressions of asceticism; joyfulness is the sacred imperative. This doctrine is embodied through the many festivals Zoroastrians hold at their temples and holy sites throughout the year where an eternal flame, the symbol of ultimate purity, is continually kept burning (Boyce 1979).

Although the credit is often obscured, many fundamentally Zoroastrian concepts are incorporated as central tenets in the world's major religions, including Islam. Foundational ideas such as heaven, hell, judgment day, angels, and demons can be directly credited to this ancient Persian religion (Frye 1996). The pursuit of wisdom, another imperative belief of the Zoroastrians, produced a vast store of written texts and led not only to a cultural blossoming but the development of philosophical ideals such as free will and reason that led this beyond the Zoroastrian religion (Lewis 2001). Over the centuries, due to reasons we shall further explore, the number of Zoroastrians was nearly erased in Iran. Nevertheless, their unique cultural achievements were not effaced but rather absorbed by the greater Muslim culture. Indeed, much of what is thought of today as the glories of Islam's golden age can be attributed to the Zoroastrians (Lewis 2001).

Zoroastrianism was the predominant faith in Persia for more than a thousand years, until the Muslim conquest of 633–54 CE. Victory by the invading Muslims resulted in the imposition of both Islamic rule and Arabic cultural practices. Umar, the first Muslim caliph to reign in Persia, was known as a liberal ruler who recognized the Persians as *dhimmis* and granted them limited rights. Under his rule, conversion to Islam was neither required nor forced. Even so, initially there was strong popular resistance to the new overlords, with multiple rebellions and uprisings staged but then successfully quelled. While scholars dispute a popular belief amongst the people of Azerbaijan that the prophet Zoroaster himself lived in the area, it was certainly a Zoroastrian stronghold by Sassanian times (224–651 CE). In the early ninth century, Babak Khorramdin led an uprising against the Muslim armies— an event later eulogized by both Iranian nationalists and Azeri ethnologists, albeit for different purposes (Frye 1996, 45).

Circumstances became even worse for Persian Zoroastrians with the advent of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736 CE). These leaders originated the Twelver school of Shia Islam and imposed it on the Iranians as the official faith of the state. Conversion was forced, and Zoroastrian places of worship were demolished. Society fundamentally contributed to the downtrodden living conditions of Iran's Zoroastrians during this era (Karaka 1884, 54). Zoroastrians were forced to wear special clothes identifying them as

minorities and were barred from their sacred fires and the rivers where they had worshiped for centuries. The Safavids, during their 235-year reign, essentially succeeded in destroying the once dominant Zoroastrian culture, while at the same time co-opting and absorbing its most valued achievements (Frye 1996).

After the Safavids, the fortunes of the Zoroastrian community in Iran continued to decline. Beginning in 1779, under early Qajar rule, the population dwindled to less than ten thousand people, and priests were no longer able to maintain their authority on matters of doctrine and ritual. Zoroastrians were subjected to discrimination, harassment, and slaughter (Choksy 2006, 330). Life was essentially a constant struggle to maintain their religious beliefs and practices, to survive economically, and to prevent their numbers from declining even further (Stewart 2018, 53). Lack of any tangible political, economic, or military pressure inside Iran deprived the country of any significant relations with foreign governments through the first part of the nineteenth century, leaving the Zoroastrian minority less protected and significantly weaker. Likewise, they were subjected to physical pressure, insecurity, and countless legal, social, and economic constraints imposed on them by the dominant regime. (Stewart 2019, 56)

By 1853, the situation began to change, however, with the formation of the Society for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Zoroastrians in Persia— an organization based in Bombay that galvanized financial support from wealthy Parsis for their coreligionists in Iran (Ringer 2009, 551). A council of Zoroastrian priests (*Mobedan*) ensured that the internal governance of the community acquired a more formal structure than before, thereby strengthening its status. The work done in Iran by the famous scholar and civil rights activist Maneckji Limji Hataria (1813–90) documented Iranian Zoroastrian traditions that were not the same as those practiced in India and attributed them to the influence of Islam and Arab culture. His research underscored that, despite centuries of discrimination and marginalization, the Zoroastrian community had survived by adapting. Not only did Zoroastrians share segments of a common identity with the dominant group, but they also retained their individuality and fended off assimilationist efforts. This is characteristic of the aspirations of various ethnic groups to fight for their rights by stressing the "native position of their own group" (Nowicka 2009, 15). This is particularly critical when a group lacks their own state organization, such as has been the case for Zoroastrians.

A significant political development was the establishment in 1907 of the Tehran Zoroastrian Council (*Anǧoman-e Zartoštiyān-e Tehrān*) to support the community in Iran's capital city, where the community's population had dipped to only five hundred according to the 1912 census (Kestenberg-

Amighi 1994, 147–49). However, the biggest advancement for Iranian Zoroastrians came after the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) and the establishment of an Iranian parliament, which led to the election of Jamshid Bahman Jamshidian (1850–1932) as the Zoroastrian representative. For the first time since the advent of Islam in Iran, Zoroastrians were given a voice within the apparatus of central government.

The Jewish Community

The Jewish community has been present in Iran and Mesopotamia for more than two thousand five hundred years, after first being transported there as captives following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Their lives were controlled by a number of different warring regimes over many turbulent centuries of invasion, conquest, and chaos (Lewis 1984, 46). Over the centuries, Iranian Jews upheld the traditions of a culture unique amongst the rest of the Jewish world. While retaining distinctive religious and cultural practices, the Jewish people were, in many ways, well-integrated into Mesopotamian society, and for centuries, Babylonia was the epicenter of their culture. Their social and political treatment waxed and waned with political changes in the region, but they always constituted a significant minority.

The span of time between Cyrus the Great and the Muslim conquest of Persia (633–54) has been described by scholars as time of alternating discrimination against and indifference towards its Jewish minority (Lewis 1984). However, when the Sassanids rose to power in the early third century CE, they took a hardline position towards all religions other than Zoroastrianism, and the practice of Judaism was suppressed (Lewis 1984, 54). Thus, it was not surprising that the Jewish community at first cheered the arrival of the Muslim Arabs who laid siege to the Persian Empire; however, the Jews soon found themselves consigned, along with their former oppressors, the Zoroastrians, to second class *dhimmi* status by the Muslim caliph and forced to pay special taxes (*jizyas*) (Lewis 1984). But things got much worse for the Iranian Jewish community under the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736) and its hardline Twelver Shia doctrines. Many Islamic and several Jewish sources document that it was actually this era when the rise of anti-Semitism began in earnest; Iranian Jews were persecuted, oppressed, and violently forced to convert (Fischel 1936, 273). In particular, Yeroushalmi (2009) refers to Jewish persecution under the reign of Shah Ismail I (1501–24), persecution which became more acute under Shah Abbas I (1581–1629) and reached its peak under Shah Abbas II (1642–66). In studying ancient sources, including public and local chronicles; geographic and historical

monographs; and the travel accounts of tourists, ambassadors, and traders, history shows how the relationship between Iranian Jews and their rulers devolved.

To a great extent Shia scholars under the Safavids, created the perception of Iranian Jews as undesirable religious people. The period was marked by the imposition of various restrictions, including on their manner of dressing and choice of trade; as a result, Jews only had access to low-level, mostly service jobs. Neither were they allowed to build houses that were taller than those of their Muslim neighbors (Sarshar 2002). Lewis (1984) described how "Shiism assigns great importance to the issues of ritual purity . . . non-Muslims, including Jews, were deemed to be ritually unclean . . . so that physical contact with them would require Shias to undertake ritual purification . . .. Thus, Persian rulers, and to an even larger extent, the populace, sought to limit physical contact between Muslims and Jews. Jews were not allowed to attend public baths with Muslims or even go outside in the rain or snow, ostensibly because some impurity could be washed from them upon a Muslim." Because of this change in perception, Jews became treated much differently than in the past, and they were thought of in a much lower standard.

According to Moreen (1981b, 124–25), Iran's clerical class and its courtiers severely oppressed the Jewish community, mainly through forced conversion to Islam. In fact, it was the punishment used most often to deal with an apostate in the community or someone otherwise undermining the established order. Abbas II, the seventh king in the Safavid dynasty, gave the Jews the choice to either convert or leave the country. Many Iranian Jews chose to convert and keep up appearances; however, at heart they remained faithful to their religion and its sacred rituals (Moreen 1981a).

During the Qajar era (1736–1925), severe persecution of the Jews continued. Many Jewish synagogues were destroyed, and their rebuilding was rarely allowed because they were just terrorizing them or because they tried to eradicate their places of worship and, ultimately, eradicate their faith. Jews lived in abject poverty and at times were even threatened by angry mobs. Meanwhile, the forced conversions continued. Despite this climate of limited opportunity and social restriction when circumstances allowed, the Jews made significant contributions to the Iranian economy (Yeroushalmi 2009, xxxii). Based on the McLean report, which takes into account the entire population of Iran, Jews have played an important role in the development of the overall business environment in the country. Some were involved in trade and owned small businesses. According to the report, many Jewish businessmen were based in the cities of Kermanshah, Hamedan, Bushehr, and Khorramshahr. In general, the Jews living in these four cities had

a fairly good economic situation (Algar 1991, 731). Their position was aided in part by Western business representatives who were getting involved in the commerce of the Middle East. Even so, the privileges that other minority groups such as the Armenians enjoyed, including tax exemptions, were never extended to the Jewish community (Yeroushalmi 2009, 259; Gregorian 1974, 652; Chaqueri 1998, 3).

Even in the midst of persecution, Jews were able to create a permanent income because the expansion of the wine trade helped create a permanent income for the Jews. Because wine was forbidden under Islam, the Persian Gulf wine trading market soon became their exclusive monopoly (Yeroushalmi 2009, 41). Jews took advantage of the opportunity and developed Iran's trade capacity, which in the long term benefited the whole country's economy (Yeroushalmi 2009). The trading partnerships established by the Jewish communities in Basra (one of the largest merchant ports in the Persian Gulf) as well as in Bombay in India, helped to improve the situation of the Iranian Jews, especially those in Bushehr and Shiraz. Of course, one cannot disregard the role of foreigners in their financial empowerment (Sassoon 1926–27, 438) since they were the ones trading with Jews.

The second half of the nineteenth century was marked by increasing contact between Iran and the West, which resulted in the Iranian Jewish diaspora taking an interest in the fate of their fellow Jews in Iran. Gathering support from Jewish communities in Europe, India, and Iraq helped improve the situation of the Iranian Jews to some extent (Fischel 1981, 17). Furthermore, during the second half of the nineteenth century, Iranian Jews were amongst those who worked hard for the establishment of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, an international Jewish organization aimed at protecting the rights of Jews around the world. Yet, despite the promises made by the monarchs of the time, by all accounts, the Jews' standing in the country still did not significantly improve until the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925.

Although no systematic documentation and study on the conversion of Iranian Jews to Islam and other religions (chiefly Baha'ism and Christianity) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exists, the scattered written and oral evidence suggests that while the conversion to the Baha'i religion continued and increased between 1870 and 1920, the conversion to Islam abated towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Greater measures of security and state protection were afforded to the Iranian Jewish people, mainly as a result of the interventions and activities of Jewish leaders and organizations in Europe. These measures appeared to have been amongst the main factors leading to a decline in the number of forced and voluntary conversions to Islam.

A number of social and economic factors contributed to the spread of the Baha'i faith among Jews during the Qajar era. Hamedan and Arak, the two important conversion centers, both experienced rapid economic expansion in the latter part of the nineteenth century—the former with the opening of Basra trade in 1865 and the latter as a carpet distribution center in the 1870s. They attracted many young Jewish immigrants, many from communities such as Kashan with declining economies. New occupations and work environments and the loss of family support often led to new challenges to conventional beliefs. Fewer restrictions in their choice of neighborhood meant less communal control and a breakdown of traditional bonds that had been preserved within the constraints of the ancient Jewish neighborhood (*maḥalleh*).

A community of affluent and Westernized Iraqi Jews further reinforced Hamedan's cosmopolitan nature (Sahim 2014). The establishment of a number of European-style schools, including some by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, helped open horizons and introduce doubts about traditional norms and values. However, conversions were less widespread in other Jewish communities affected by the forces of change, such as Kermanshah and Yazd, and rare in Isfahan and Shiraz, where Jews experienced little social mobility.

A more fundamental change in the condition of the Jews was the prevalence of the doctrine of ritual "impurity" (*nejāsat*), present in Sunni Islam but more emphatically so in Shiism and more strictly applied to the Jews. This doctrine had consequences well beyond restricting social interactions and, by the Qajar period, created major economic obstacles for the Jews, who were banned from having shops in the bazaar in many urban centers, and contributed to a gradual decline in the Jews' socioeconomic status. Trends towards cultural participation became more restrained and limited to occasional participation in Sufi orders where Jews were more accepted (Soroudi 1990, 164–65).

The Armenian Christians

As with the Zoroastrians and the Jews, Christianity's roots in Iran can be traced back to the very beginning of Persian civilization (Price 2002). According to the New Testament, ancient Persia was a locus for some of the earliest Christian converts, including the three Christian groups exclusively sanctioned in the Iranian Constitution as "People of the Book": the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, and the Armenians (Miller 2014). Each of these ethnoreligious groups had its own unique rituals, creeds, and complicated history with Islam, as well as with the feuding Catholic and Orthodox empires.

The Armenian Christians experienced a fusing of identities because of their Christian roots and Iranian culture.

Armenians have lived in symbiosis with Iranians for more than two thousand years. They first arrived in Iran in the fourth century BCE, and they have been an integral part of the Iranian nation-state ever since. The first wave of Armenian migration to what is now Iran included roughly three hundred thousand Armenians who spread from their homeland further north into the Salmas, Khoy, Maku, and Qarcheh districts of northwestern Iran beginning in the nineteenth century (Waterfield 197, 60). Subsequently, the Armenians gradually moved to the center of the Azerbaijan region and began to settle in the city of Tabriz (Mirzoyan 2010, 109).

From ancient times, Persians and Armenians were deeply interconnected through cultural, political, and religious exchange as well as through intermarriage of their royal houses. The first Armenians followed the Persian Zoroastrian religion and shared many other cultural commonalities. After the Armenians' conversion to Christianity, however, the Sassanids began to persecute their former fellow Zoroastrians (Frye 1996). Thus, as with the Jews, the Islamic conquest of 633–54 at first brought the Armenian Christians hope for better treatment. Declared *dhimmis* along with the Jews and Zoroastrians, Armenian Christians were likewise required to pay *jizyas* and were ostensibly given protected status.

Studying the socioeconomic influence of the Armenian Christians in the Safavid era can help explain the economic and industrial structure of Iran (Minasan 2004). The Safavids, who imposed Twelver Shiism beginning in 1501, were a bit more tolerant of the Armenian Christians than they were of the other religious minority groups; but this was for financial reasons. Over the centuries, Armenian Christians had become known as talented merchants, and their fluency in European languages, gained through their Christian contacts in the West, gave them an advantage in foreign business. Shah Abbas Safavid, known as Abbas the Great (1571–1629), wanted to take advantage of this, so beginning in 1603, when the war between the Safavids and the Ottomans was at its peak, Abbas forced the relocation of the Armenian Christians to Isfahan, the capital city of Persia at the time. There they established the neighborhood of New Julfa. This displacement is thought to have been carried out in order to internationalize Iran's economy (Rahimieh 2014, 19). Abbas was interested in co-opting the experience of Armenian entrepreneurs to dominate the silk trade, the supply of which he had monopolized by conquest. Because some Europeans could only communicate with Abbas in their native tongues, the Armenians played a significant role as translators. It did not take long before the Armenians were handling most of the trade in the country, and they soon established businesses all over

Europe and Asia (Bournoutian 1994). Some Armenians who had been forced to relocate to New Julfa chose to leave Iran over time; others remained and learned to adapt while still managing to maintain their ethnic identity (Kuortti 2007, 3). Sanasarian states that the Armenians were masters of adaptation (2000, 149). By adapting, they became integrated instead of assimilated (Berberian 2005, 287–89). Eventually the Armenian Christians would be allowed to organize their own separate administrative unit, were granted their own bishop, and turned New Julfa into a rich cultural and religious center (Gregorian 1974).

However, in the later Safavid period, under Shah Sultan Hussein (1694–1722), the formal policy was shifted to one of forced conversions. These factors became the first main motivation for many Armenians to leave Iran. In the eighteenth century, a significant number of Armenians migrated to Constantinople, Smyrna, and Aleppo, as well as to European and Asian countries such as Italy, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, India, Burma, and Indonesia (Bayburtyan 1969). From the middle of the eighteenth century, as the population of the Armenian community in Iran declined, the ranks of Armenian communities in Europe quickly expanded.

In 1906, many of the remaining Armenians joined those in Iran who demanded a constitution. Iranian Armenians, such as Yeprem Khan and Keri, played a significant role during the Iranian constitutional movement and they are still considered national heroes in Iran today. Armenian contributions to Iran's intellectual and political life were substantial. According to Gheytanchi, modernization equaled nationalization in Iran (2007, 173). Globalization, in addition to ensuring the compactness of the entire world, also contributed to the rapid increase in the self-awareness to Iran of the whole state (Robertson 2004).

In order to actively participate in Iranian political and intellectual life, the Armenians embraced Iranian culture, but, at the same time, continued to practice their own religion and preserve their beliefs (Berberian 2005, 295). Iranian Armenians were able to maintain two parallel identities—a specifically Christian identity for themselves and a broader Iranian identity for the ruler in power (Berberian 2005, 294). While the Armenians called for religious reform as a precondition of their cooperation with the Constitutional Revolution, ultimately this consideration was not granted. Still, they chose to work with their Shia counterparts in various social and political movements. As a result, they strengthened their status as a minority group and grew more aware of their legal and human rights and the necessity for social justice (Cohen 1995, 5).

The Sabean Mandaeans

Mandaeism is another one of the oldest religions in the world and is considered to be the last of the ancient Gnostic faiths originating in the late 1st century among both Jews and Christians to still have practicing adherents (Buckley 1994). The composite term *Sabean Mandaeans*—which combines *al-Sābe'at al-Mandā'īyūn* (Arabic) and *Sābe'īn-e Mandāyī* (Persian)—indicates difficulties in denoting the faith because it refers back to two historically distinguishable traditions. The word *Sabean* is the term by which Persia's Muslims identify the followers, while the word *Mandaean* is the name adherents call themselves. Upon looking more deeply, however, it is possible to find a shared historical ground for both words. Linguistically, the word *Sabean* derives from the root *s-b-gh* in Arabic. The verb signifies in the first form "to dye, to bathe, to immerse" and in the second form "to baptize (by immersion)." Consequently, the noun denotes "Baptists," and the faith is named three times in the Quran (II, 62; V, 69; and XXII, 17). This places the Sabean Mandaeans in the company of Jews and Christians, with whom they share the designation of "People of the Book" (Bosworth et al. 1995, 675).

The Mandaeans venerate four prophets: Adam, Seth, Sam (son of Noah), and John the Baptist (Nashmi 2005; Arabestani 2016; Haidar 2013). Flowing fresh water is central to their faith and plays a crucial role in Mandaean purification rituals. Mandaeans believe that via ablution—baptism, they connect with God and their sins are cleansed. For this reason, Iranian Mandaeans have traditionally lived in the southern regions of the country, especially in cities such as Ahvaz, where Mandaean clerics performed religious rites along the Karun River. The white ceremonial robes they wear, called *rasta*, are symbols of purity. Mandaeans claim to treat male and female believers equally in all social and religious issues. For instance, both have equal rights in issues like inheritance and child custody. However, holding the Sabean Mandaean ethno-religious identity is not easy. It is impossible to delineate between being part of the faith and part of the family; if an adherent abandons the religion, they then cease to be part of the ethnic group. However, the Mandaean community cannot forbid its members from marrying non-Mandaeans, a practice that is especially common amongst Mandaeans in the diaspora (Lupieri 2001, 5).

The Mandaean literature is at least eighteen hundred years old (Massoud 1998). The *Ginza Rba* (Great treasure) is the most important holy book of the Mandaeans and tells the story of the world's creation and the evolution of humanity (Abdalmoleh 1995). It also contains important matters related to divinity, religious commandments, the afterlife, and holy instruction from

the prophets (Elhami 2000). The writings are in the Mandae language, which belongs to eastern Aramaic languages and has its own alphabet (Häberl 2009). Regarding the Gnostic dimensions of the Mandaean faith, dualism is often identified as the most essential foundation. According to Mandaean cosmology, the life of the spirit represents good while the material world represents evil—yet it is not completely evil. The reason is because matter is dependent on light for its creation and continuation, the same light that by its very nature manifests the good (Massoud 1998, 55).

Some researchers have located the oldest evidence of the Mandaean tradition in the pre-Christian period. Non-Mandaean scholars of religion have put forth several ideas about the location where the first Mandaean community emerged, believing its original birthplace most likely to have been either Jordan-Palestine or Syria-Palestine (Rudolph 1969, 213–14). According to one study: "the ancestors of the present-day Mandaeans were originally situated in the Transjordan in view of the Haurān mountain range. They had their spiritual home in heterodox circles of Judaism" (Rudolph 1969, 213). The Mandaean language shares properties with dialects from the western part of Syria, which shows that they probably migrated eastward at some point. (Jacobsen 1976). Mandaeans have traditionally engaged in the professions of goldsmithing and blacksmithing. In particular, Mandaean jewelry in gold and silver is renowned, while Mandaean silverwork was famous even in the nineteenth century throughout Europe. Their work with gold and silver and also their blacksmith products have allowed researchers to identify pre-Christian evidence.

There has long been suspicion amongst Iranian Muslims regarding the true nature of the Mandaean faith. For instance, in some of the Persian translations of the Quranic verses in which Sabeans are mentioned, the word Sabean is translated as star worshipper. As a result, some fundamentalists look at the Sabean Mandaeans as pagans. Nevertheless, the Mandaeans themselves believe strongly in the monotheistic nature of their faith (Baker 2007). Perhaps the fact that they keep their rituals, practices, and beliefs secret (Esmaili et al. 2016) helps pave the way for such misconceptions.

Being a minority group, the Mandaeans have always been under the threat of identity elimination (Arabestani 2016). They were massacred by the Arabs in the fourteenth century; forced to convert to Christianity by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century; and compelled to practice circumcision by Muslims in the nineteenth century (Drower 1937; Kraeling 1929). They also experienced violence as a minority ethnic group from other, more dominant ethnic communities. Struggling to preserve their Mandaean identity, they carefully maintained their religious texts, continued to practice their customs and rituals, and isolated themselves in order to protect their religion