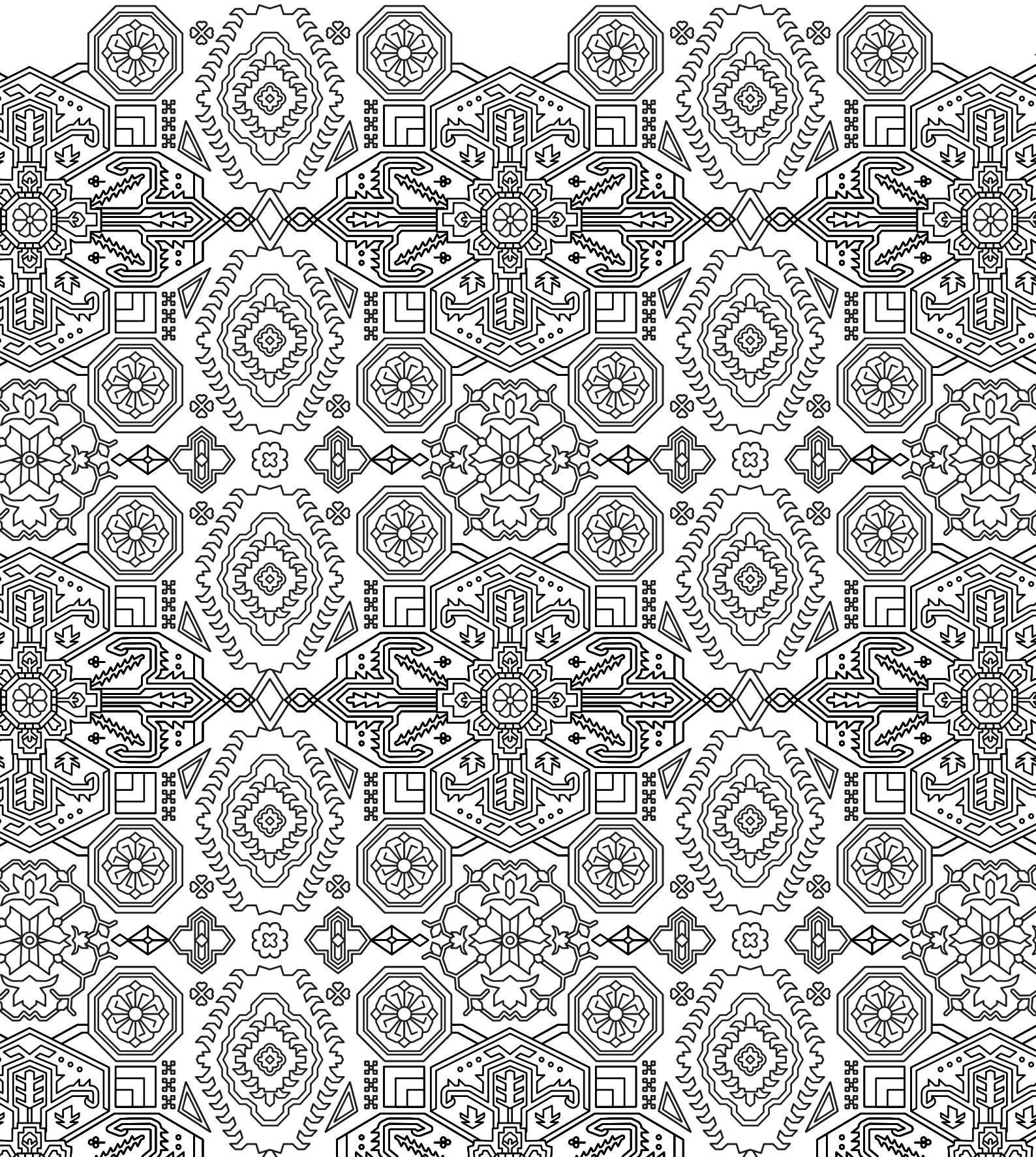
NATIONAL FABRIC

IRAN'S ETHNIC MINORITIES



NATIONAL FABRIC

Iran's Ethnic Minorities

-

A Small Media Report

PROJECT LEAD:
James Marchant

RESEARCHERS:
Ahmed Al-Rawi
Kyle Bowen
Hewa Salam Khalid
Leila Noghrekar
Valeria Spinelli
Monireh Sulemani

LEAD DESIGNER:
Isabel Beard

DESIGNER:
Richard Kahwagi

EDITOR:
Bronwen Robertson

We would also like to thank all the contributors to this report who, for security reasons, have chosen to remain anonymous.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE
smallmedia.org.uk

QUESTIONS? GET IN TOUCH
contact@smallmedia.org.uk

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2014 Small Media published *Heretics: Religious Minorities in Iran*, a report tracing the growth of Iran's digital faith communities. It revealed some bold and imaginative innovation on the part of religious minorities in Iran, who were making use of digital platforms ranging from Facebook, through to Skype and ICQ chat services to bypass government restrictions on freedom of religion and express their faith online.

In *National Fabric* we shift our focus to ethnic and linguistic minority communities living in the Islamic Republic today. We've found these groups to be similarly well-organised, active, and ingenious in their efforts to counteract state discrimination and develop open spaces for cultural and political dialogue.

The situation facing Iran's ethnic minorities varies dramatically across the country—at the same time as the Rouhani government begins to make concessions to Kurdish demands for language rights in education, the Baloch people continue to endure exclusion and the militarisation of their homeland, and Afghan refugees are being forced to deal with widespread discrimination from both the government and wider society.

But minority communities and sympathetic Iranian anti-racism activists are pushing back, and have worked hard to cultivate digital community spaces and campaigns for social action. Some initiatives are being set up to resist the dominance of the Persian language, others to educate users about minority folklore, build cross-border networks, and even to assist refugees on their march westwards.

This report does not claim to give voice to the entire range of ethnic diversity in Iran. Some communities are not represented in this report—the Lurs, the Gilani, the Turkmen, and the Talysh, to name but a few. Our objective is not to present a comprehensive overview of the human rights situation of ethnic minorities in Iran, but rather to showcase some of the ways that minority communities in Iran are creatively resisting state discrimination, and highlighting areas in which they may need additional support.

Although there are some indicators of positive change for ethnic minority rights under Rouhani, countless problems still remain. This report clearly demonstrates that digital activism and online community-building can play a key role in improving the situation of minority groups, and urges human rights defenders to be proactive in offering tangible support and encouragement to digital activists.

James Marchant
Research Manager
Small Media
15 September 2015

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“Islam has no borders.”

-

AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH KHOMEINI

-

IRANIAN CONSTITUTION OF 1979

ARTICLE 11

In accordance with the sacred verse of the Koran "*This your community is a single community, and I am your Lord, so worship Me*" [21:92], **all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran have the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples**, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world.

ARTICLE 15

The official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as textbooks, must be in this language and script. However, the use of **regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed** in addition to Persian.

ARTICLE 19

All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; and **color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege.**

ARTICLE 20

All citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, in conformity with Islamic criteria.

INTRODUCTION

Sitting at the crossroads of the Middle East, the wide Central Asian steppe, the mountains of the Caucasus, and the Indian subcontinent, Iran has found itself settled by a diverse array of tribes and peoples over the centuries. Living alongside the majority Persians are the descendants of Arab and Turkic invaders, the native Kurds of the country's northwest, and the Baloch peoples of the windswept southeastern mountains, amongst many others. Although these populations have mingled and mixed over centuries, they retain strong regional identities, cultural traditions, and a rich linguistic diversity.

Although Persian is the most widely-spoken language in the country, and the language of government, literature, and popular culture, it is estimated that only around 60% of Iranians speak it as their mother tongue. Throughout Iran, languages such as Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic, and Baloch remain the languages of daily life despite numerous attempts over the past century to repress them.

Ever since Reza Shah Pahlavi came to the throne in 1925, the Iranian government has attempted to bring the country's minority communities into line, and force them to conform to a narrow conception of Iranian identity. Though the post-revolutionary Constitution of 1979 promised equal rights for all of Iran's minority communities, these have proven to be empty words.

INTERNATIONAL LAW AND MINORITY RIGHTS IN IRAN

Languages are being repressed, activists are being arrested and executed without due process, entire regions are missing out on economic development, and in some areas settlement policies are being implemented in order to squeeze out centuries-old communities.

Things haven't been good for Iran's minorities for decades, but the situation went from bad to worse under the Ahmadinejad administration. As we'll show later in this report, his government intensified the campaign of censorship against minority language literature, stepped up Iran's military campaigns in Balochistan and Kurdistan, and oversaw the imprisonment and execution of unprecedented numbers of minority activists and rebels.

This sustained assault on minority rights has taken place in flagrant violation of international law, which maintains that mother tongue education, and cultural and political autonomy for ethnic minority communities are fundamental rights that must be respected in free and fair societies.

UNITED NATIONS

/// UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS — (1948)

2.1 Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

/// INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS — (1976)

1.1 All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

1.2 All peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice to any obligations arising out of international economic co-operation, based upon the principle of mutual benefit, and international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.

1.3 The States Parties to the present Covenant, including those having responsibility for the administration of Non-Self-Governing and Trust Territories, shall promote the realization of the right of self-determination, and shall respect that right, in conformity with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations.

2.1 Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

26 All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

/// DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO NATIONAL OR ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES — (1992)

1.1 States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.

2.1 Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (hereinafter referred to as persons belonging to minorities) have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.

2.5 Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain, without any discrimination, free and peaceful contacts with other members of their group, with persons belonging to other minorities, as well as contacts across frontiers with citizens of other States to whom they are related by national or ethnic, religious or linguistic ties.

4.2 States shall take measures to **create favourable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions and customs**, except where specific practices are in violation of national law and contrary to international standards.

4.3 States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, **persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.**

4.4 States should, where appropriate, take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage the knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory. Persons belonging to minorities should have adequate opportunities to gain knowledge of the society as a whole.

2013 CHARTER OF CITIZENS' RIGHTS

3-21 All Iranian citizens have **the right for their cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities to be recognized** and they should be afforded legal protection without any discrimination.

3-22 The Government is obligated to facilitate **free use of regional and ethnic languages and dialects in addition to the Persian language** with cooperation from the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), keeping the national unity and the totality of the Iranian identity intact.

3-23 All Iranian citizens have **the right to the necessary tools for their full participation in all aspects of their specific group's cultural life**, including the establishment of institutions, organizations, and associations, holding meetings, observing religious [deen] and ethnic rituals, and cultural customs and traditions, within the framework of laws and regulations.

3-24 The Government is obligated to **preserve all historical and cultural monuments and heritages throughout the country**, regardless of to which different ethnic, cultural and religious groups they belong.

Before the Islamic Revolution, Iran signed and ratified several UN redundant treaties that set out international standards for anti-discrimination and the protection of minority communities, including: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976a), the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976b).

After the events of 1979 and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War the following year, Iran suspended its dialogue with the UN, only resuming it in 1993 (Human Rights Committee, 1993). Documentation provided by the United Nations since then demonstrates how the question of Iran's adherence to international human rights standards—in particular, its treatment of minorities—has consistently been a matter of concern for the UN Human Rights Committee. The Committee has repeatedly asked Iran to amend its civil code and constitution to protect ethnic minority groups, and adhere to the principles of the international covenants to which it is bound (Ibid).

Iran's treatment of ethnic minorities has also been a subject of discussion during the UN's Universal Periodic Review process. At the first round of the UPR in 2010, 5 recommendations relating to racial and ethnic discrimination were made to Iran, with a further 15 being made in 2014 (UPR Info, 2015). Of these 20 recommendations, none have been accepted by Iranian authorities.

In November 2013, shortly after being elected to the presidency, Hassan Rouhani published a 'Charter of Citizens' Rights', outlining the legal protections to be afforded to Iranians under his administration. In the charter, he draws upon existing constitutional guarantees of equality for all, promising the protection of cultural and linguistic rights for all of Iran's citizens.

Are these latest promises any more substantial than those offered up after the 1979 Revolution?

This report checks in on the progress made by the Rouhani administration in fulfilling its obligations to Iran's ethnic and linguistic minority communities, and in ensuring equality for all of Iran's citizens.

The problems facing Iran's minority communities are immense, but they have shown great resilience and imagination in their use of new technologies to counter discrimination, construct safe community spaces, and defend their cultural identities. This report highlights these groups' greatest successes in using technology to combat state persecution, while noting the obstacles that remain to the development of their digital ecologies.

MINORITIES AND THE STATE IN MODERN IRAN

The relationship between the central government in Tehran and the ethnic minority communities on Iran's periphery is complicated, and coloured by decades (and centuries) of strife, conquest, and collaboration. The policies of the Islamic Republic don't exist in a vacuum, and many of the ideas put forward by leading politicians—on language policy, national unity, or cultural identity—are either inherited from, or direct responses to ideas put forward decades before by the nationalistic Pahlavi regime.

This section will offer a brief run-down of Iran's handling of minority communities throughout the twentieth century, and describe how today's ethnic and linguistic tensions are rooted in the actions and ideologies of Iran's former rulers.

BOWLER HATS AND BAYONETS – IRANIAN NATIONALISM IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Iran was a fragmented country at the dawn of the twentieth century, only nominally held together by the decadent and politically-disengaged Qajar dynasty. The central government was essentially powerless outside (and sometimes even inside) Iran's major cities, with tribal federations and local warlords holding influence across vast swathes of the countryside. The imperialist powers of Britain and Russia often used these local leaders as political pawns, leveraging their power to carve out spheres of political and economic influence (Cronin, 1997: 206).

This state of affairs continued until the ascendance of Reza Khan Pahlavi to the throne in 1925, after his military coup deposed the last of the Qajar monarchs. Reza Shah was a far more energetic leader than his predecessors, and set about transforming Iranian society into a homogenous European-style nation-state, by severing the old ties of language, tribe, and faith, and cultivating a 'modern' sense of Iranian identity.

Reza Shah's methods were often brutal. Mother-tongue education in minority languages was outlawed, all public administration was conducted in Persian, and the Pahlavi state undertook a massive effort to disperse and resettle the nomadic tribes that continued in their centuries-old way of life (Ibid: 210). Any resistance to this political project was crushed—the government undertook bloody crackdowns in Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and the tribal regions, and the military was purged of officials who were perceived to harbour ethnic or tribal loyalties (Majd, 2001: 196-99).

But the government was also prone to wildly eccentric policies that sought to symbolically dispel minority identities and create a new national image: in 1928 Reza Shah authorised the Dress Laws Act, which mandated the wearing of Western-style suits and bowler hats by all Iranian men (excluding the clergy). The idea was that the external cultural differences of Iran's ethnic groups would be nullified, and that all Iranians would be brought together by their common state of dress (Chehabi, 1993: 225).

This didn't turn out to be the case...

DECLARATIONS OF INDEPENDENCE – ETHNIC UNREST IN LATE PAHLAVI IRAN

In 1941 Reza Shah was deposed in a joint British-Soviet intervention to secure Iran's oilfields for the Allied war effort, and when the war ended, the occupiers were reluctant to leave. Hoping to annex Iranian Azerbaijan into the USSR, Stalin ordered Soviet forces to remain in the province after the end of the war, preventing the government from reasserting control.

The newly-crowned Mohammad Reza Shah was young and timid, the Iranian military had melted away, and the state was about as feeble as it had been under the Qajars. The Soviets didn't govern in the occupied territories, but their occupation created a vacuum that was filed by two separatist states: the Azerbaijani People's Government, and the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad. Led by left-wing nationalists, these administrations sought autonomy from Iran's central government, and promoted the development of minority languages and literature after Reza Shah's lengthy period of cultural repression. But this period of cultural freedom wasn't to last forever.

The Iranian government quickly reasserted itself after the Soviet withdrawal in 1946. After a short period of low-intensity armed resistance, the Azerbaijani People's Government negotiated a peace settlement with Tehran, including provisions for Azeri-language education and the retention of 75% of tax revenues raised in the province. Tehran backed out of the deal soon after, and directed the armed forces to retake Iranian Azerbaijan by force—more than 500 Azerbaijanis were killed in the ensuing violence, or executed by Iranian forces in the months after the regional government's collapse (Cottam, 1979:128).

This bloodshed was intended to send a brutally clear message to Iran's ethnic minority populations: there was to be no negotiation with those who sought a more nuanced, egalitarian and multi-ethnic basis to Iranian identity. To be Iranian was to be culturally Persian: minority communities had to either accept this, or relinquish their rights.

The increasingly authoritarian tendencies of Mohammad Reza Shah, and the fearful atmosphere created by the SAVAK secret police force suppressed ethnic dissent for the majority of Mohammad Reza Shah's later reign. As the Shah's position became more uncertain in the late 1970s, however, groups such as the Azeris and the Kurds began to make their voices heard again.

On December 12 1977, protests broke out to commemorate the anniversary of the establishment of the Azerbaijani People's Government. The unrest continued into early 1978, culminating in a military crackdown that claimed the lives of scores of protesters (Shaffer: 80-83). The following year,

the Shah was forced into exile, and the Islamic Republic began to consolidate its power. On Iran's margins, however, the ghosts of Mahabad and the Azerbaijan People's Government were stirring...

THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME – NATIONALISM IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

Despite the ideological gulf between the Pahlavi state and the Islamic Republic, the ways in which each regime attempted to transform society were quite similar in many ways. The education system remained an absolutely central tool for central authorities in propagating their message and instilling in the nation's youth a sense of Iranian identity, which in practice meant the continued denial of mother-tongue education in ethnic minority-majority regions of Iran (Zamani, 2014). The state also launched an invasive campaign of cultural transformation, regulating clothing and language, and cracking down on 'un-Islamic' expressions of ethnic identity amongst minority groups such as the Qashqa'i Turks (Beck, 1992: 39).

The nation-building efforts by state elites in the Islamic Republic have not been limited to the advancement of traditional Islamic notions of identity, though. The cultural and literary advancement of ethnic and linguistic minorities has been repressed in a manner comparable to that under the Persian-supremacist Pahlavis—although some minority language publications have been tolerated, minority journals and newspapers have been published in disproportionately low numbers compared to Persian-language publications (Small Media, 2015). During the Ahmadinejad period, non-Persian publishers were pursued very aggressively by government censors, and sometimes forced to take their work underground (AllHumanRightsIran Südwind, 2014: Youtube).

Even during the liberal days of Khatami's presidency minority cultural organisations such as the Ahwazi Arab Al-Hiwar Institute were denied official state recognition, allowing the Ahmadinejad administration to crack down harshly a few years later (IHRDC, 2014: 9). By the end of the Ahmadinejad era, ethnic minority cultural activism had been essentially pushed out of the public sphere.

Have things improved under Rouhani? It depends where you're looking. Whereas some minority communities have managed to wrangle government concessions on key issues of cultural policy and language, others remain marginalised, impoverished, and shut out of public life.

This report will take each of Iran's largest minority communities in turn, assess the extent to which Rouhani has lived up to the obligations set out in his People's Charter, and demonstrate the strength of these communities as they craft vibrant new spaces in which the narrow political and cultural orthodoxies of the Islamic Republic are being deconstructed, and alternative models of federalism, devolution, and cultural diversity are being put forward in their place.

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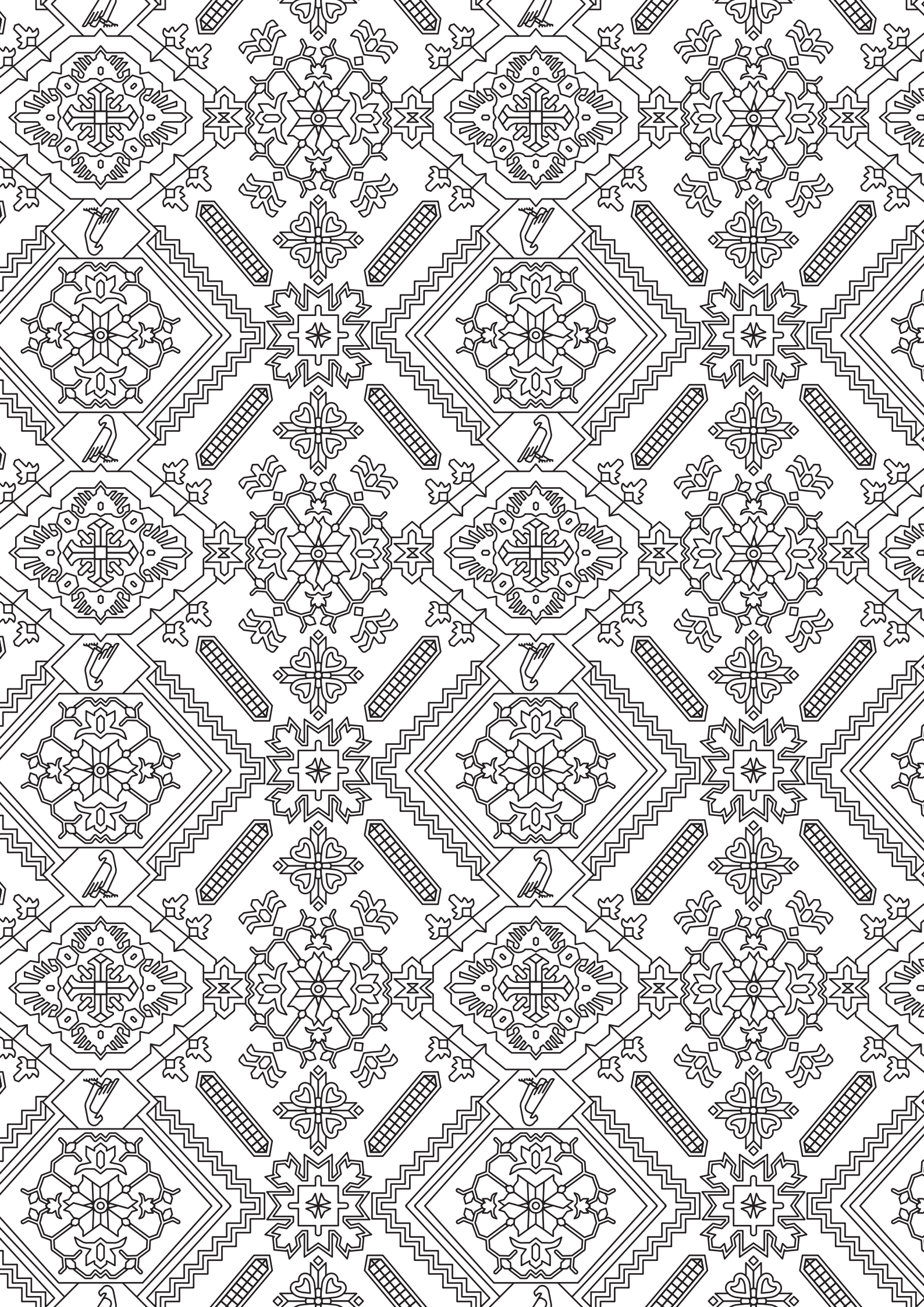


AFGHAN REFUGEES

Unlike the other groups featured in this report, the Afghan community isn't native to Iran—rather, they make up one of the largest refugee populations in the world today, numbering at 3 million people (only 950,000 of whom are officially recognised). Afghans have fled their homeland in several waves, starting with the Soviet invasion in 1979, continuing through a number of protracted civil wars, and with a final exodus triggered by the 2001 US invasion.

Up until the early 1990s, Iran's track record on supporting Afghan refugees was generally excellent, with refugees being given access to education and healthcare services of a quality far beyond that which they would have received in their war-torn homeland. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) has commended Iran's dedication to providing for refugees (The Iran Project, 2015).

Although Iran continues to spend vast sums of money on support for Afghan refugees each year (peaking at $10m/day in 2005) (Abbasi-Shavzi and Glazebrook, 2005: 21), it has invented a number of barriers to hinder Afghan refugees' access to public services, and has reduced subsidy programmes for basic goods. Denial of access to education, healthcare, and employment are among the issues that have affected Afghan refugees since the 1990s, when the current trend towards mass repatriation and deportation began.

As well as having to endure economic hardship, Afghans in Iran suffer from widespread societal prejudice and discrimination. Afghan labourers are often accused of undercutting Iranian workers and engaging in petty criminal activity. The sheer volume of cheap Afghan labour in Iran's major cities has been a major source of resentment amongst the native population — the vast majority of refugees live in major cities, and are generally able to participate (officially or unofficially) in Iran's economy. Only 3% of Afghan refugees were resident in purpose-built refugee camps in 2013 (UNHCR, 2015).

This discrimination isn't going unchallenged, however. This chapter will explore some of the initiatives that have been launched by Afghans and Iranians to challenge prejudice, and campaign for refugee rights and equality under the law.

Although Iran has sometimes treated Afghans as a burden, the country has also demonstrated great hospitality and generosity towards this vulnerable population. Plenty of young activists are taking to the web to call upon this humanitarian spirit, and to make Iran a safe haven for Afghan refugees.

DEMOGRAPHICS

POPULATION:

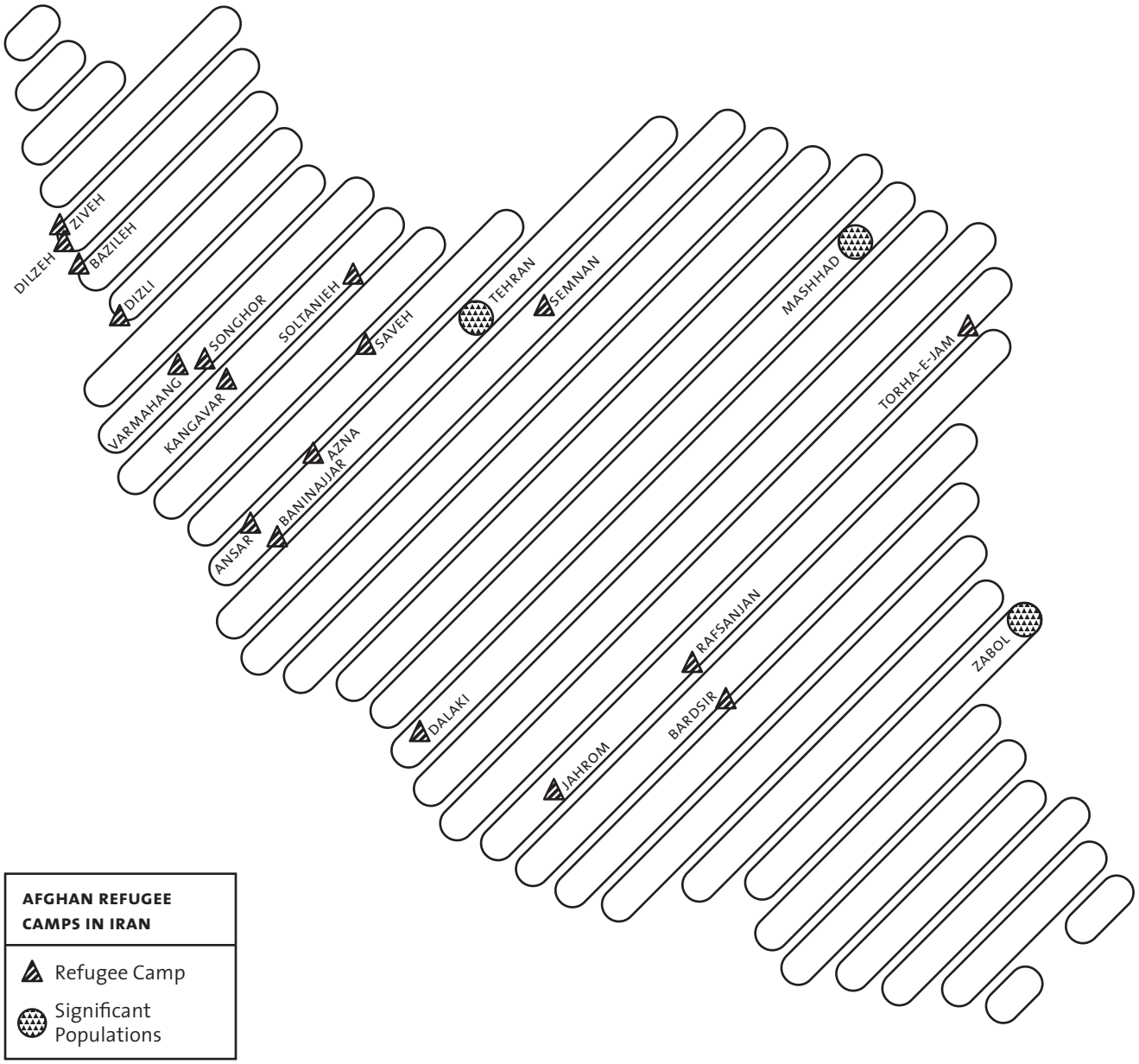
3 million

LANGUAGE:

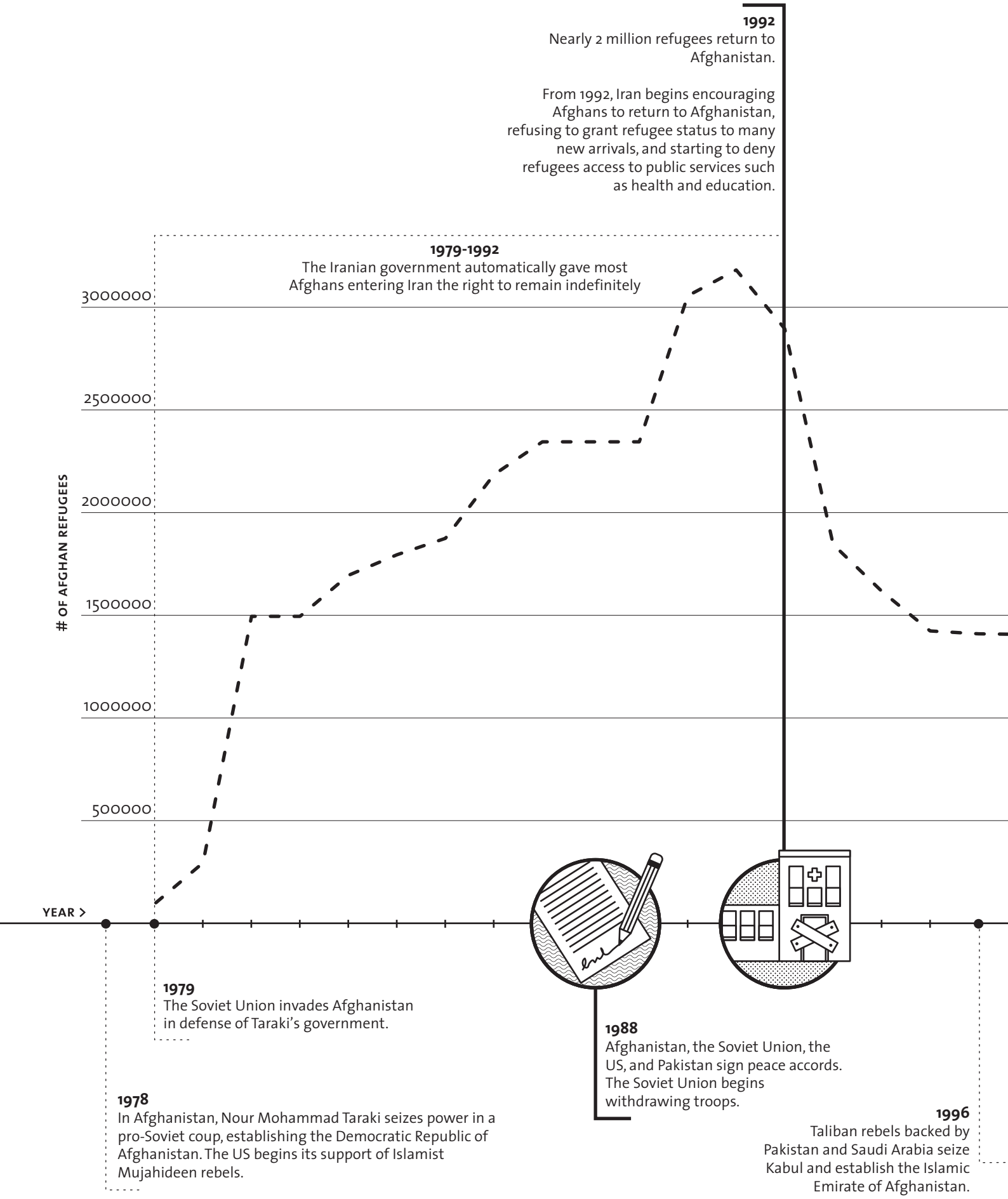
Dari Persian

RELIGION:

Sunni Islam (Majority) and Shi'a Islam (Hazara Afghans)



TIMELINE


1992
Nearly 2 million refugees return to Afghanistan.
From 1992, Iran begins encouraging Afghans to return to Afghanistan, refusing to grant refugee status to many new arrivals, and starting to deny refugees access to public services such as health and education.
1979-1992
The Iranian government automatically gave most Afghans entering Iran the right to remain indefinitely
3000000
2500000
2000000
1500000
1000000
500000
OF AFGHAN REFUGEES
YEAR >
1979
The Soviet Union invades Afghanistan in defense of Taraki's government.
1978
In Afghanistan, Nour Mohammad Taraki seizes power in a pro-Soviet coup, establishing the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The US begins its support of Islamist Mujahideen rebels.
1988
Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, the US, and Pakistan sign peace accords. The Soviet Union begins withdrawing troops.
1996
Taliban rebels backed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia seize Kabul and establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

2012
UNHCR, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan start to implement the Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) to support the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees into Afghanistan.

New regulations were issued by the Iranian cabinet, stating that 1.6 million foreigners "illegally residing in Iran" were to be expelled by the end of 2015.

2013
Rouhani is elected president of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

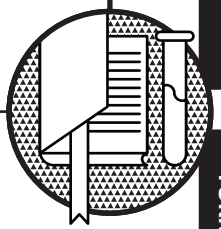
2003
Iran introduces a new system known as "Amayesh", requiring all Afghan nationals in Iran to register their refugee status on an annual basis.

2011
Due to the difficult economic conditions in Iran, voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan rises in 2011.

2015
Khamenei orders that all Afghan children residing in Iran should be granted access to schooling, even if they are undocumented immigrants.

2010
The UN imposes a fourth round of sanctions on Iran. The economic crisis has a particularly punishing impact upon Afghan refugees.

IRANIAN POLICY RESPONSES



2013
The US officially withdraws its forces from Afghanistan, and hands over security responsibilities to the Afghan government.

NATO officially ends combat operations in Afghanistan.

1996-2001
Fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance triggers a new wave of emigration.

2001
The US invades Afghanistan, and Northern Alliance forces conquer Kabul. Hamid Karzai is appointed as head of the interim government.

TURMOIL IN AFGHANISTAN

ISSUES FACING AFGHAN REFUGEES

POVERTY AND EXCLUSION

Afghan refugees in Iran suffer from acutely high levels of poverty. In 2013 Human Rights Watch reported that around 50% of Afghan refugees in Iran live below the absolute poverty line, meaning that they earn less than $1.25/day, and are deprived of basic human needs such as food, water, and safe shelter. The imposition of international sanctions on Iran in 2006 increased the financial strain of the refugee crisis upon the Iranian government, with vulnerable refugee populations most acutely affected by Iran's economic crisis (Human Rights Watch, 2013: 11).

Prior to 1992, Afghan refugees were able to obtain work and residency permits with relative ease, entitling them to the same health and education services and subsidy programmes as Iranian citizens. But after the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992, Iranian policy shifted towards encouraging repatriation. Work permits were denied, ID cards were confiscated, and Afghans who remained were relegated to the status of undocumented migrants, limiting their access to Iranian public services (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007: 141). Although more than 350,000 Afghan schoolchildren are legally registered in Iranian schools, a further 500,000 are estimated to miss out (Karami, 2015).

There are signs of positive change under the Rouhani government, however. In August 2015, Afghan children were offered a five-day window to enroll in schools regardless of their status as undocumented migrants—whether this policy results in a dramatic increase in Afghan school enrollment remains to be seen, and implementation so far has been patchy, and implementation so far has been patchy, though it certainly appears to be a step in the right direction (Radio Zamaneh, 2015).

DEPORTATION

As noted, Afghans have increasingly been subject to forced deportations, and the revocation of work and residency permits. The introduction of the "*Amayesh*" refugee registration system in 2003 requires all Afghan nationals to renew their refugee status on an annual basis. Those Afghans without valid Amayesh cards are considered illegal undocumented migrants, and can be legally deported - even if they have been resident in Iran for their entire lives, and even if they have families resident in Iran (Human Rights Watch, 2013: 35).

Owing to continuing violence, the number of voluntary repatriations to Afghanistan has plummeted in recent years. Even the Afghan government has been in consultation with Iran to slow the rate of deportations, and to extend Amayesh cards by several months in order to allow them time to process returnees (Donati and Hafezi, 2014).

DEMONISATION AND PERSECUTION

Afghans can face hostility from some segments of wider Iranian society, and are commonly accused of involvement in petty crime, drug smuggling, and the 'theft' of jobs from Iranians. Afghan labourers are commonly seen on Iran's construction sites, and frequently undertake other menial jobs that Iranians are hesitant to take on. Although Afghan labourers tend to apply for jobs in sectors with low unemployment rates, they still find themselves scapegoats for many of the economic woes afflicting modern Iran (Mina, 2015). As a consequence of the ill-will harboured towards the community, Afghans have been subject to a number of arbitrary bans from public spaces (Esfandiari, 2012), or even entire provinces (Ahmadi, 2012) by opportunistic politicians.

Afghans are also amongst the most frequent casualties of Iran's calamitous war on drugs. Iran's Anti-Narcotics Law calls for mandatory death sentences to be meted out for a range of drugs-related offences, in violation of international law (Amnesty International, 2015). In 2011 it was revealed that at least 4,000 Afghans were being held in Iranian prisons, over 3,000 of them on death row (Amnesty International, 2011: 16-17).

Although drug trafficking from Afghanistan causes immense problems for Iranian authorities, the existing Anti-Narcotics Law deploys massively disproportionate punishments, and has proven to be ineffective as a deterrent (Amnesty International, 2015). Although trafficking is big business, the people actually tasked with trafficking drugs hardly make a fortune from their trade: they are often desperate people who see no other way to provide for their families in the face of economic exclusion and endemic discrimination practices (*Ibid*).

"We are the victims of a state of hunger, poverty and misery, hurled down into the hollows of perdition by force and without our will... If we had jobs, if we did not need help, if we could turn our lives around and stop our children from going hungry, why should we have gone down a path that guaranteed us our death?"
54 prisoners held on death row in Ghezel Hesar prison near Tehran
-(Amnesty International, 2015)

WEBSITE
BOYS OF AFGHANISTAN

WEB ADDRESS:
facebook.com/mahmoudbn

STATUS:
UNBLOCKED

Boys of Afghanistan is a Persian-language blog that has charted the experiences of young Afghans in Iran and across the world since 2012. The blog is curated by a number of contributors who share their personal reflections on the refugee crisis and invite readers contribute to the blog with their own musings on Afghan identity, culture and politics.

In addition to providing original content, the page shares articles from across the web regarding the experiences of Afghan immigrants. Authors post updates several times per month with content including news articles, images, and examples of Afghan music and culture. Users continue to interact with posts via comments, and authors frequently reply.

[Fig. 1.1] shows a post from 2013, asking readers specifically what made them proud to be Afghan, and why they thought Afghans had a reputation for being petty criminals. The post encourages readers to behave well and be good citizens in order to challenge Iranian misconceptions about the Afghan community.

[Fig. 1] – *Boys of Afghanistan Blog*

[Fig. 1.1] – Exploring Afghan pride

SOCIAL MEDIA

DIFFICULT DAYS FOR AFGHAN REFUGEES IN IRAN

WEB ADDRESS:

http://on.fb.me/1FkSja3

LIKES:

3,726

Difficult Days for Afghan Refugees in Iran is a Facebook page working to highlight the plight of Afghan refugees in Iran. The content is predominantly written in Persian (Standard and Dari), although the existence of English language content suggests that the page is also seeking to inform a global audience about the ongoing crisis.

The page description is an English-language passage describing the poor treatment of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran:

"*There are around 3 million Afghan refugees in Iran and they have a very bad situation. Many Afghans are tortured just because they commit a minor crime. There are no legal and human rights in Iran. Afghans move to Iran from the war with great hopes to be safe there because Iran is a neighbor of Afghanistan. We are not asking them to help the Afghans with money or anything else, because we know that they can not do it. Most importantly is that we want them to learn about how to treat people. They say they are Muslims, so why* [sic] *they have not respect for other people who have so much problems.*"

"*Allah will not give mercy to anyone, except those who give mercy to other creatures.*"
-Abdullah b. Amr: Abu Daud & Tirmidhi

In addition to information about the discrimination against Afghans in Iran, the page shares inspirational quotes and poetry by figures ranging from Rumi to Gandhi. Despite having more than 3,700 followers, the page has been updated on a very irregular basis during the last two years.

There are multiple videos from the YouTube channel of Shafie Ayar, a controversial character who publishes his own programme—The Shafie Ayar Show—about religion, Afghan politics, and culture. The page also frequently links to Afghan music, including from the hiphop artists H.T. (Habib Teimuri) [Fig. 2.1] and Sonita [Fig. 2.2]. Their work criticises the anti-Afghan rhetoric of Iran's government, and the perceived racist attitudes of authorities.

Although the page frequently criticises the Iranian government's handling of the refugee crisis, it is not entirely anti-Iranian in its content, sharing posts celebrating Iranian defenders of Afghan refugee rights. For example, it published a YouTube video of the Oscar-winning director Asghar Farhadi's comments in support of Afghan refugees [Fig. 2.3].

[Fig. 2] – *Difficult Days for Afghan Refugees in Iran* on Facebook

[Fig. 2.1] – Habib Teimuri Music Video

[Fig. 2.2] – Sonita Music Video

[Fig. 2.3] – Asghar Farhadi's Statement of Support for Afghan Refugees

SOCIAL MEDIA

WE'RE ASHAMED FOR THE AFGHAN CHILDREN IN IRAN

WEB ADDRESS:

facebook.com/sharmsarim

LIKES:

20,327

We're Ashamed for the Afghan Children in Iran is a Facebook page that works to collect stories that have been shared via the hashtag #شرمساريم (#weareashamed). A Global Voices Online report notes that a teacher started the social media campaign to raise awareness about anti-Afghan discrimination in Iran (2015). Launched in December 2014, the page has amassed thousands of followers, and a substantial collection of stories from Iranians who have witnessed discrimination against Afghans, as well as from Afghans who have themselves been the victims of racism.

The page serves as a platform for users to speak out in defence of the basic rights of Afghan refugees, and a safe space for the Afghan community to share their collective experiences, and "*name and shame*" racist individuals and organisations. It also offer Iranians a chance to improve their awareness of the issues facing Afghan refugees and migrants, enabling them to better campaign for Afghan rights.

The images on the page opposite demonstrate the entrenched nature of anti-Afghan discrimination in Iran today. [Fig. 3.1] shows a sign explicitly barring Afghans from a public swimming pool, whereas [Fig. 3.2] depicts a banner displayed by officials at the entrance of the Golzar Shohad Cemetery in Hassanabad-e Khaleseh. It reads:

"*Information for foreigners (Afghans):*
Due to a lack of space, Golzar Shohad is unable to accept new burials.
-Islamic Council of Hassanabad-e Khaleseh"

Although the page was founded with the intention of sharing examples of discrimination, it has also developed into a hub for cultural content such as poetry and music. Among the most popular content are posts from Radio Pul ("*Bridge Radio, No Borders to Unity/Sharing*"), a podcast sharing Afghan stories and music from the diaspora, including the community in Iran. Users regularly engage with page content, discussions emerge organically amongst users, and the online campaign appears to be in good health.

[Fig. 3] – *We're Ashamed for the Afghan Children in Iran* on Facebook

[Fig. 3.1] A photo of a poster forbidding the entry of Afghans into a swimming pool.

[Fig. 3.2] – A sign barring Afghans from burying their dead in Golzar Shohad Cemetery

SOCIAL MEDIA
THE AFGHAN QUESTION

WEB ADDRESS:
facebook.com/Afg.Question

LIKES:
22,424

The Afghan Question is a Persian (Standard and Dari)-language Facebook page, conceived to allow globally-scattered Afghan refugees to ask questions (and receive speedy answers) about immigration issues. Users are advised to send their queries via private messages in order to protect their anonymity.

The page is generally updated daily, and frequently posts news videos from Euronews, Voice of America, and the BBC. It also shares eyewitness videos and content generated by the page's users, including one video showing the dire situation facing Afghans living on the streets in Greece or user-recorded video of a demonstration in Vienna denouncing the precarious condition of those living in shelters.

The Afghan Question also publishes useful updates on legal cases and law changes for asylum seekers and refugees. Many posts originate from Sweden, as well as from countries in which refugees face highly sensitive situations, including Greece, Iran and Turkey.

Overall, public posts on the page are widely-debated, and user engagement is high. A recent example of an extensive discussion centered around the imposition of tighter controls at the Iran/Turkey border [Fig. 4.1]— one user asked if the border was still being closely monitored, and the page quickly responded, advising the user that it would be unwise to cross the border at that time.

[Fig. 4] *The Afghan Question* on Facebook

[Fig. 4.1] – A discussion about the state of border regulations at the Iran-Turkey border

SOCIAL MEDIA

BITTER MEMORIES OF AFGHANS IN IRAN

WEB ADDRESS:

http://on.fb.me/1EDfmSTW

LIKES:

338

Bitter Memories of Afghans in Iran is a Facebook page working to expose the poor living standards of Afghan refugees in Iran. It was created in 2014 and conceived of as a space in which Afghans could denounce discriminatory Iranian policies, and share their experiences of discrimination.

New content is shared on a monthly basis, and generally consists of screenshots of posts from other Facebook pages and Instagram accounts, although the page also intermittently shares articles from Afghan news agencies.

So far, 338 people have liked the page. Although the community that uses this page is not very large, it is quite active—content posted on the page frequently attracts debate and engagement.

[Fig 5.1] shows the precarious and unbearable situation of those living in Iran's refugee camps. Even though many of these Afghan refugees have Amayesh identity cards, they have been detained by the Iranian police, and extorted for cash to secure their release, and avoid deportation. The user quoted is complaining about the silence of NGOs and the Afghan government over such abuse, despite knowing the situation in the camps.

After the final approval of the Iranian nuclear deal on 14 July 2015, Afghan citizens living in Iran joined in with the celebrations on social media, but they weren't always welcomed.

[Fig 5.2] shows an image of an exchange published on Bitter Memories of Afghans in Iran. Yama Safar says:

"*I am from Afghanistan. I send my congratulations for the nuclear deal to all dear Iranians.*"

In response, Kian Mir Nazir denounced him harshly:

"*It does not concern you. Iran will never be your homeland. You are guests here, if unwelcome ones.*"

The page shared this image adding the caption: "*Just read the comment to better understand Iranians.*" The embittered and frustrated tone of the posts on this Facebook page are indicative of growing anger amongst some Afghan refugees at the hardship they endure.

[Fig. 5] – *Bitter Memories of Afghans in Iran* on Facebook

[Fig. 5.1] – An image showing poor conditions in an Afghan refugee camp

[Fig. 5.2] – Racist attitudes against an Afghan commentator

INSIGHTS

This chapter has provided an overview of some of the ways that Afghan activists have been making use of social media platforms to share their personal stories of discrimination and social injustice in Iran today, and begin to mobile online campaigns to push back against entrenched societal prejudice. These initiatives have been more open to participation from Iran's Persian population than many of the other efforts profiled in this report—whereas many other groups are investing their energies into articulating a distinct ethnic, cultural, and/or linguistic identity, the Afghan community is working instead to appeal to Iranians' sense of social justice in order to counter the dominant narratives of xenophobia and intolerance propagated by state authorities.

Other campaigns are geared towards disseminating migration and asylum information to Afghan refugees who have poor access to such sources, and appear to offer reliable, practical advice to vulnerable individuals on the move through Iran and into Europe and Asia. Although such responsive campaigns have already demonstrably been of use to Afghan refugees, their reach and influence is still relatively limited, especially when it comes to reaching Afghans not on Facebook. A diversification of platforms and outreach methods to lower-tech alternatives may therefore constitute a useful stage in the development of these campaigns.

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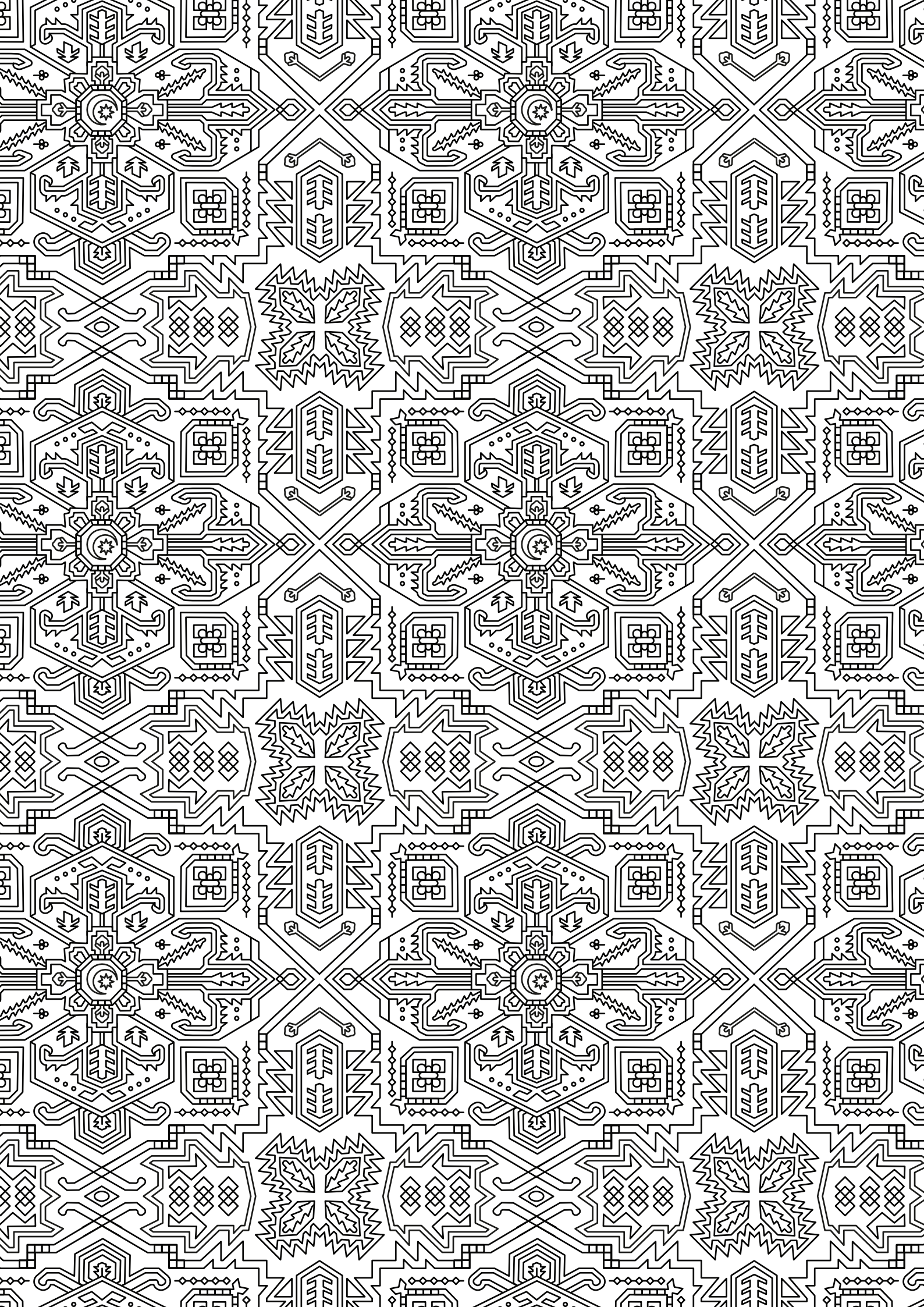


AHWAZI ARABS

Iran's Arab minority communities are primarily located in and around the city of Ahvaz (or Ahwaz) in the southwestern province of Khuzestan, although a number of smaller Arab populations are scattered along the Gulf coast. Separated from the Iranian Plateau by the Zagros Mountains, the Arabs of Khuzestan enjoyed effective autonomy from the Iranian state until the early 20th century, when the discovery of oil brought the region to the attention of global powers and the central government. By the mid-20th century Khuzestan's vast oil reserves were being exploited comprehensively—at first by the British, and later by the central government in Tehran.

Regardless of its importance to the national economy, Khuzestan's Arab-majority population has seen little benefit from the province's soaring oil revenues; despite living in the third-richest province in the country, the Ahwazi Arabs continue to suffer from widespread poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion.

As well as being marginalised, Iran's Arabs face a range of cultural and political restrictions. Journalists who choose to write and publish in Arabic often face government harassment, while cultural and civil society activists have often been subject to arbitrary arrest, unfair trials, and the possibility of execution on vague, trumped-up charges.

The relationship between Iran's Arab minority and the state is further complicated and obscured by the meddling influence of Iran's geopolitical nemesis, Saudi Arabia. Saudi media affiliates devote substantial coverage to the plight of Iran's Arab minority, and there is some evidence of Saudi support for Arab ethnic nationalists inside Iran (Dorsey, 2015). Nonetheless, Iran has a record of playing up the threat of foreign intervention in order to justify cracking down on Arab cultural activists in the region. (IHRDC, 2014: 40)

This chapter seeks to separate state-sponsored fiction from the facts, and determine the extent to which Iranian Arabs are making use of online platforms to articulate and preserve their distinct cultural identity. Can genuine local narratives break through the noise?

DEMOGRAPHICS

POPULATION:

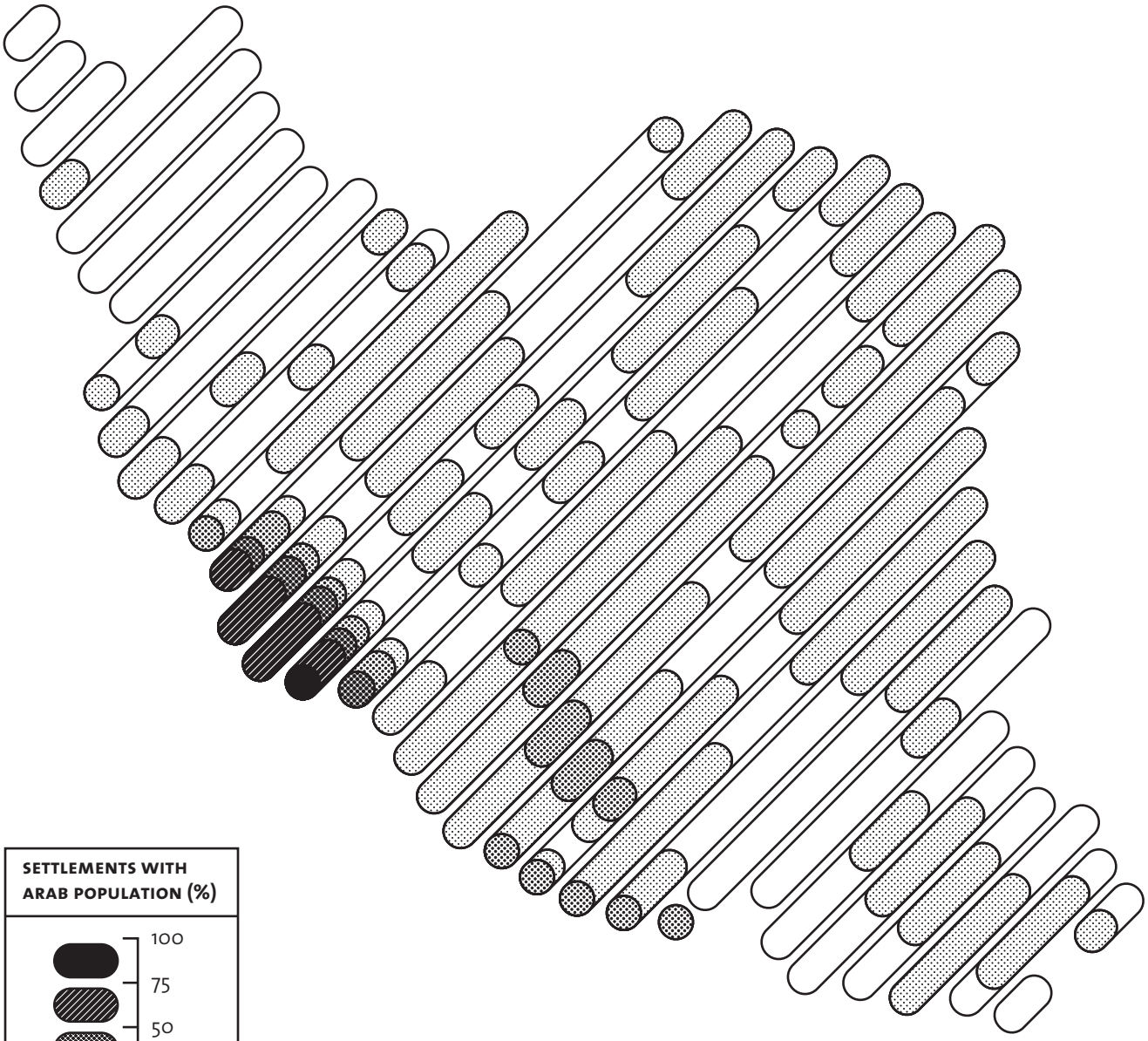
1.5 million

LANGUAGE:

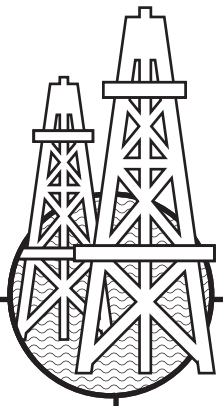
Arabic

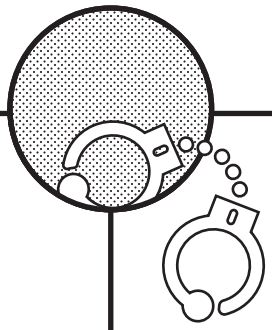
RELIGION:

Shi'ite Islam (Majority), Sunni Islam (Minority)



TIMELINE





ARABS IN PRE-MODERN IRAN

247 BC – 224 AD
Arab tribes and confederations have likely lived in Khuzestan and other parts of southern Iran since the Parthian era.

651-821
The Arab Conquest brings Islam to Iran, and places the Persian Empire under Arab domination for nearly 200 years. Arabs settle throughout Iran, but most intensely in Khuzestan.

1501-1736
Under the Safavids, Khuzestan comes to be known as Arabistan, reflecting its Arab-dominated culture, and Arab-majority population. The local Arab sheikhs enjoy considerable autonomy.

1779-1924
During the Qajar period the Bani Ka'b sheikhs achieve semi-independent status in southern Khuzestan, a situation that continues until the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925.

OIL BOOM, INDEPENDENCE BUST

1908
The discovery of oil in Khuzestan makes the province increasingly appealing to the central government, as well as foreign powers. Tensions grow between the government and local tribes, who frequently act as proxies for the British government.

1924
The semi-independent Sheikh Khazal of Mohammareh (in Khuzestan) launches a doomed rebellion to secure the region's independence from central government. The rebellion is crushed, marking the end of the region's autonomy.

1925-1941
Reza Shah intensifies his programme of centralisation. Integral to this process is his programme of forced settlement of semi-nomadic tribes, including the Ahwazi Arabs. Thousands are re-settled in distant Persian-majority provinces.

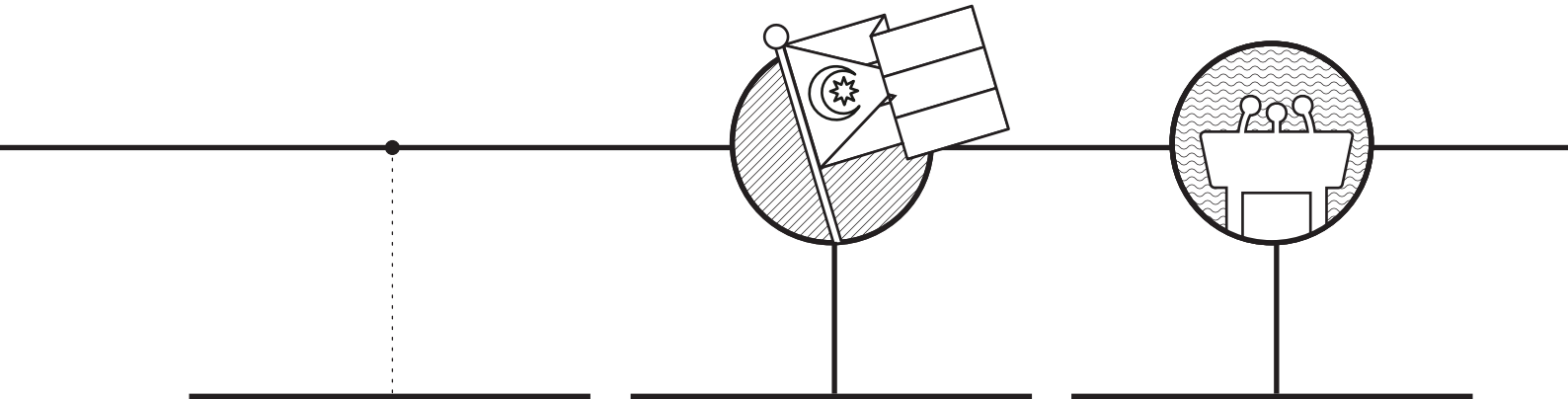
REVOLUTION AND RUIN

1978-1979
Many Iranian Arabs are initially supportive of the Revolution. But their efforts to negotiate for greater autonomy in the post-revolution order ultimately fall apart.

May 1979
Arab activists in Khorramshahr protest against a lack of advances in Arab rights. On '*Black Wednesday*' the new government cracks down, killing a number of Arab protestors.

1980-1988
The bloody Iran-Iraq War is tough on Iran's Arab minority. With Saddam justifying his invasion as a defence of Iranian Arabs' rights, they become subject to intense government suspicion. Despite this, the vast majority of Ahwazi Arabs fight for Iran in the war.

1988-1995
Repression of the Ahwazi Arabs extends into the post-war period. Some Ahwazi Arab activists are branded collaborators, and arrested.



SPACE TO BREATHE

1997-2005
Khatami's government affords numerous political, social and cultural freedoms to Iran's Arabs, permitting them to establish new political and cultural organizations.

DAYS OF RAGE

April 15, 2005
The Arab residents of Ahvaz take to the streets to protest a leaked Presidential memorandum setting forth a policy aimed at changing the ethnic makeup of the province.

June 2005
During the 2005 presidential elections, multiple bombings in Ahwaz target government buildings and state employees. Another device is set off in Tehran.

April 15, 2011
The '*Day of Rage*' erupts during the Arab Spring, and commemorates the anniversary of the 2005 protests. The protests are triggered by the arrests of 16 Arab cultural activists. Hundreds of protesters are detained, tortured, and sentenced in unfair trials.

June 2012
Four Ahwazi men are executed in secret, charged with *moharabeh*—'*waging war against God*'.

December 2013
Five Ahwazi rights activists are executed without informing their families.

A NEW HOPE?

January 15, 2014
President Rouhani makes a speech in Khuzestan condemning racism, and stating that discrimination against ethnic communities must not be tolerated.

ISSUES FACING ARABS

POVERTY AND EXCLUSION

Arab-majority regions of Khuzestan have very limited access to many government services, including basic health and education provision (Tehran Bureau, 2014). The inhabitants of major cities such as Khorramshahr and Abadan have suffered from frequent power cuts, and a fragmented gas distribution infrastructure (Elling, 2013: 70). Partly as a result of this underinvestment in regional services and infrastructure, rates of unemployment and poverty are well above the national average in Khuzestan, with Arabs in the province suffering the most (*Ibid*). Although integration between Arab and Persian communities is increasing in the province's major cities, outlying villages remain largely segregated on the basis of language and ethnicity (Tehran Bureau, 2014).

Problems of poverty and social marginalisation have been exacerbated by large-scale, state-directed expropriations of Arab land, resulting in forced displacement to temporary camps with extremely limited access to basic amenities such as water, gas, or electricity. At the same time as Arab residents are removed from their homes, labour is being imported on a large scale from the rest of the country, and so in some regions, Persian-speakers are rapidly supplanting the local Arab population (*Ibid*).

RESTRICTIONS ON ASSOCIATION

The state has frequently placed restrictions on the ability of Iranian Arabs to organise themselves into political or cultural associations, although the intensity of the state's hostility has waxed and waned over the years. President Khatami oversaw the most liberal period in relation to the rights of the Khuzestani Arabs. During his presidency political organisations were founded (including the Islamic Reconciliation Party), cultural foundations such as the Al Hiwar Institute were permitted to function, and a small Arabic-language press was given space to develop (IHRDC, 2014: 9). However, these organisations only functioned on provisional permits, and never managed to secure official government approval (*Ibid*: 10).

The situation worsened dramatically under President Ahmadinejad. On the day of the 2005 presidential elections that brought him to power, a number of bombs exploded in Ahvaz and Tehran, killing at least 11 people, and injuring many more. Several more bombs were set off over the course of 2005-6, with the government pinning the blame on Arab secessionists (*Ibid*: 17). Ahmadinejad's government reversed all the limited gains in cultural freedom made under Khatami, and refused to grant permission for any Arab organisations to operate (*Ibid*). These restrictions have remained in force up to the present day.

IMPRISONMENT AND PERSECUTION

Since the Revolution, Iranian Arabs have had to endure several waves of suspicion, arrest, arbitrary imprisonment, and execution. The first came in the wake of the 1979 Revolution, the second after the 2005-6 wave of bombings, and the third following the 2011 '*Day of Rage*' protests across Khuzestan province.

The 1979 Revolution was at first widely welcomed by the Arab inhabitants of Khuzestan, who had long suffered as a result of the Pahlavi regime's Persianising cultural policies. However, as it became clear that the post-revolutionary constitutional settlement would make no concessions towards regional autonomy for the Arab-majority region, activists and protesters took to the streets. In May 1979, things turned ugly when naval commandos and revolutionary militiamen fired upon Arab protesters in Khorramshahr. Numerous eyewitness reports state that protesters were massacred in the streets on this day, which has become known as '*Black Wednesday*' (Ibid: 7-8).

The latter two waves of arrests and executions took place during Ahmadinejad's premiership. In response to the aforementioned 2005-6 bombings, between 10 and 20 ethnic Arabs were held, convicted in unfair trials (often on the basis of evidence obtained under torture), and executed (*Ibid*: 20). The subsequent 2011 '*Day of Rage*' protests across Khuzestan led to another bloody crackdown which saw at least 12 protesters shot dead by security forces, and many more wounded and arrested (Kamali Dehghan, 2011).

In the aftermath of this latest violence, the government took the opportunity to snuff out several leading lights of the Arab cultural renaissance in the province. Former leading members of the Al Hiwar Institute were arrested and charged with *moharebeh* ('*waging war against God*'). Although sentenced to death under Ahmadinejad, two cultural activists—the poet Hashem Shaabani, and his colleague Hadi Rashedi—were executed in 2014, mere months after President Rouhani came to Khuzestan to denounce the evils of ethnic discrimination (Kamali Dehghan, 2014). Despite his positive language, Rouhani has yet to alter systematic state discrimination against the Iranian Arab community.

WEBSITES

THE ARAB STRUGGLE MOVEMENT FOR THE LIBERATION OF AHWAZ

WEB ADDRESS:

ahwazna.net

STATUS:

BLOCKED

Ahwazna is a website aimed at Arab-Iranians living inside and outside Iran. The content is largely political in nature, seeking to raise awareness about ongoing human rights violations against Iran's Arab minority. The site is run by the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz, a militant organisation that claimed responsibility for bombings in Ahvaz in 2005, 2006, and 2015 (NowMedia, 2015).

The site is updated with news stories on a frequent basis, and is well-integrated with social media, with affiliated YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, and an RSS service. Although the site receives around 5,000 visits per month, engagement with news stories is fairly low. Comments are open on all news stories posted on the website, but there is no evidence of users taking advantage of this functionality to participate in debates or discussions.

A page titled "*The Political Program*" contains further information about the *Ahwazna* movement. The statement mentions that Arab-Iranians have been struggling since 1925 for liberation from the "*despicable Iranian occupation*" of their lands. The goal is to establish an independent Ahwazi state through armed revolutionary struggle. The statement refers to the alleged injustice endured by the Arabs in Iran through processes of marginalization, persecution, deprivation, and ongoing attempts to erase Arab identity. The policies of the government are described as "*racist*" by *Ahwazna*, which goes onto describe the "*Persian enemy*", the same term used in Iraq during the Iraq-Iran War.

The *Ahwazna* YouTube channel was created on 13 May 2008, and has 1848 subscribers with 782,922 total video views. Its Twitter account was created in June 2012, has 16,000 followers, and has published 3862 tweets. Its Facebook page has 6654 likes, and receives a moderate level of engagement—posts are liked and shared on a fairly frequent basis, although comments are posted less often, and are irregular. The vast majority of users who list their locations state that they are based in Arab states, with many based in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Jordan.

Ahwazna is loaded with sectarian rhetoric, despite the fact that the majority of the Ahwazi Arab population belonging to the majority Shi'a sect. For example, the article "*Doubling of Safavid Activities in Ahvaz Universities*" discusses how 'Safavid' activities (a term used primarily by Sunni sectarians) have been organized by the central government to attempt to counter the spread of '*Wahhabism*' in Ahwaz.

A second article quotes Habib Jaber, the leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz, expressing condolences to the Saudi King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz upon the death of former Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal. Taken together with the Sunni sectarian language in [Fig 1.1], it appears as though *Ahwazna* and its backers generally retain (or at least advocate) close ties to Saudi Arabia. Whether this is a natural act of pan-Arabist outreach on the part of Ahwazi dissidents, or evidence of overt Saudi support for Arab separatism in Iran isn't entirely clear, although the explicit Sunni sectarianism of the website is suggestive of the latter.

[Fig.1] – *Ahwazna*

WEBSITES

PATRIOTIC ARAB DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT IN AHWAZ (PADMAZ)

WEB ADDRESS:

padmaz.org

STATUS:

BLOCKED

This site is geared towards political activists living inside and outside Iran, acting as a resource for the documentation of Arab-Iranian protests around the world, and as a space to promote further protests and acts of dissent.

The site is updated on a relatively irregular basis, with news articles on the front page originally posted between April and early August 2015, with the most recent story noting the death of Adnan Salman, the PADMAZ General Secretary in the UK. It is unclear how much influence the website actually wields—viewership statistics are not available, and users are not able to engage in a meaningful way with site content.

The website is relatively well-integrated with social media platforms. The organisation's Twitter account was created in March 2013, but tweets are posted very irregularly. Content from the past year appears to have received next to no engagement in the form of retweets or favourites, despite the account having more than 730 followers. PADMAZ's Facebook page has just 507 likes, is updated irregularly, and receives fairly limited engagement, although a small number of users comment on and share posts on a sporadic basis.

The website appears to have a diaspora focus, with a number of articles focused on UK-based protests [Fig. 2.1]. One such article, posted on 5 May 2015, describes an Arab-Iranian gathering held near Trafalgar Square in commemoration of the anniversary of the April 2005 Ahwazi rebellion, and expressing a demand for Ahwazi independence. There is very little evidence of widespread usage of the site by Iranian Arabs actually living inside Iran.

[Fig. 2] – *Patriotic Arab Democratic Movement in Ahwaz*

[Fig 2.1] - Ahwaz community demonstration in the British capital, London

WEBSITES

ARABISTAN – AL AHWAZI

WEB ADDRESS:

arabistan.org

STATUS:

BLOCKED

Created eleven years ago, *Arabistan* is the oldest website in our sample. The site is aimed at Arab-Iranians as well as Arabs from the whole MENA region, and campaigns to draw attention to the Arab character of the '*Al-Ahwaz*'. The site is openly hostile to the Iranian state, calling directly for war and another '*Qadisiyah*'—the name given by Saddam Hussein to the Iran-Iraq War, and a reference to a key battle in the Islamic conquest of Iran [Fig 3.1].

The website is updated at least once per day with news articles about the Ahwaz region, although it is not integrated with any social media platforms, and does not allow users the opportunity to comment on or engage with content in any meaningful way.

It seems apparent that for all its content, the site does not receive a great deal of traffic, and is likely sustained by support from external sources. The site appears to be at least loosely affiliated with the National Organization for the Liberation of Ahwaz (Hazm), containing numerous links through to the organisation. It also appears to enjoy some form of relationship with anti-Iran activists in Egypt, with several articles focusing on statements from Egyptian commentators on the Ahwazi Arabs—one comes from an Islamic scholar accusing Iran of expansionism, while another story focuses on a seminar held at the Egyptian Center examining the '*occupation of Ahwaz*'.

Arabistan also carries statements from the provocative Kuwaiti professor Abdullah al-Nafisi, who claims Kuwaiti Shi'ites are being used as agents of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and recognises Al-Ahwaz as an Arab state. al-Nafisi previously shot to global notoriety when he expressed support for mass anthrax attacks to be launched against the United States (Rollins et al, 2010: 10).

A page entitled "*The National Ahwazi Cornerstones*" sets out the movement's primary demands. The statement from Ahwazi activist Adnan Al-Suwaidi describes Al-Ahwaz as a land '*occupied*' by Persian '*Safavid*' forces (an anti-Shi'ite pejorative), highlights the importance of the Ahwazi flag as a symbol of the region's independence, and calls for the Arab League to intervene to protect the autonomy of Ahwazi Arabs and curb Iranian expansionism.

[Fig. 3] – *Arabistan—Al-Ahwazi*

[Fig 3.1] – Site banner calling for another '*Qadisiyah*' to be visited upon Iran

SOCIAL MEDIA

MUHAMMED MAJID AL-AHWAZI

WEB ADDRESS:

twitter.com/mohamadahwaze

FOLLOWERS:

283,000

This is the Twitter account of Muhammed Majid Al-Ahwazi, a high-profile Arab-Iranian political activist. His account is very active, and is updated several times per day. Al-Ahwazi currently lives in Europe, but maintains a high profile in the Gulf region, making numerous media appearances on Saudi-funded channels, including as a presenter on *Al-Ahwaz*, and as an interviewee on *Eqtisadiya TV*.

His display picture shows him wearing the traditional Arab headdress in a clear assertion of his Arab identity, and his banner image shows him giving a speech during an Ahwazi independence protest, with the Ahwazi flag prominently displayed. All of his posts are written in Arabic.

[Fig. 4.1] shows a sample of a tweet criticising Iran. Al-Ahwazi links the plight of the Ahwazi Arabs to those across the region, showing an image of Iraqi protesters tearing the poster of Khamenei, and stating: "*Free Iraqis tear the picture of Khamenei in southern Shi'ite towns and cities. The Iraqi Revolution has placed Iran in a difficult situation*".

[Fig. 4.2] is an image of General Qassem Suleimani weeping during the Iraq-Iran War. Al-Ahwazi comments: "*This is how the Persian leaders were humiliated during the war*".

As a result of this kind of anti-Iranian and Arab nationalistic content, Al-Ahwazi has attracted a wide following from users in Saudi Arabia and around the Gulf region. His tweets defend the foreign policy stances and national interests of Arab countries, with particular sympathies for the Sunni Gulf states.

It is unclear whether his popularity actually extends into the Arab regions of Iran—many of the replies to his tweets are sectarian in nature, attacking Iran as a Shi'a state. This would suggest that a significant chunk of engagement with Al-Ahwazi's campaign comes from outside Iran, given that most Iranian Arabs are Shi'ites.

[Fig. 4] – Mohammed Majid Al-Ahwazi on Twitter

[Fig. 4.1] – Image of Iraqi Arabs attacking poster of Khamenei

[Fig. 4.2] – Image of General Qassem Suleimani weeping

SOCIAL MEDIA

THE AHWAZI ARAB REVOLUTION AGAINST THE DESPICABLE IRANIAN OCCUPATION

WEB ADDRESS:

facebook.com/alahwazalarabia

LIKES:

152,047

This is one of the most popular social media platforms on the Ahwazi issue, functioning as a space for political activism, and documenting human rights violations against Arab Iranians.

The page has affiliates elsewhere on social media. One such example is a Twitter account called "*We Ask For Freedom*" [Fig. 5.1], which shows the Ahwaz region as an independent entity, accompanied by the text "*The Ahwaz is Arabic first*". Both platforms are updated frequently, and often connect the Ahwazi cause to the regional crisis, expressing concern over the Syrian Civil War and Bashar al-Assad's persecution of Sunnis [Fig. 5.2]. The platforms are very explicit in their opposition to the Iranian government, with [Fig. 5.3] showing Ahwazi protesters burning the Iranian flag in an act of defiance.

[Fig. 5] – The Ahwazi Arab Revolution Against The Despicable Iranian Occupation

[Fig. 5.1] – A burning Iranian flag

SOCIAL MEDIA
THE AHWAZ VOICE

WEB ADDRESS:
ar-ar.facebook.com/ahwazchannel

LIKES:
16,424

The Ahwaz Voice is a pro-Shi'ite outlet, distinct from the Iranian government-run network Al-Ahwaz TV. It is described as the first exclusively-online Ahwazi channel focused on covering Shi'ism in Ahwaz. It is worth noting that the '*h*' in '*Ahwaz*' is written with a Persian '*heh*' (ه) rather than an Arabic 'heh' (ح) denoting its affiliation.

The content of *Ahwaz Voice* frequently highlights the speeches and public statements of Lebanese Hezbollahi leaders such as Hassan Nasrallah [Fig. 6], with other posts appearing to stress the connection between Shi'ite Arab Ahwazis, and other Shi'ites from across the Arab world. [Fig. 6.1] shows two men from southern Beirut carrying pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei. The picture's description reads: "*The most honorable people*".

In contrast to the previous social media pages surveyed, this page describes the Syrian anti-Assad rebels as terrorists, and the Saudi intervention in Yemen as an act of aggression. [Fig. 6.2] shows a video clip of a Yemeni child delivering a speech against "*the Wahhabis and their mercenary followers*". The term '*Wahhabi*' is loosely employed by the Iranian government as a general sectarian pejorative against Sunnis, just as Sunni sectarians deploy the term '*Safavid*' against Shi'ites.

The platform has an active YouTube channel, created in November 2012. It has 20,249 subscribers and 5,534,269 views. The channel description states that "*This channel was established to serve Islam and the True Doctrine*" (in an indirect reference to Shi'ism). It also has a Twitter account founded in July 2015. It is updated daily, but currently has just 4 followers. A Google+ account also exists, with 149 followers and 104,099 views. It has essentially no content, and enjoys no public engagement.

[Fig. 6] – *Ahwaz Voice*

[Fig. 6.1] – Image of Beiruti men honoring Khomeini and Khamenei

[Fig. 6.2] – Video of young boy criticising 'Wahhabis'

SOCIAL MEDIA

THE AHWAZI-BALOCHISTAN MEDIA CENTER

WEB ADDRESS:

twitter.com/ahwaz_baluosh

FOLLOWERS:

10,800

Created in 2013, this page suggests some forms of cooperation between Arab-Iranians and the similarly-oppressed Sunni Baloch community. The banner image of the page stresses the common struggle of the Arabs and Baloch, lumping both Arab-majority regions and parts of Iranian Balochistan into a single geographical mass labelled '*Occupied Al-Ahwaz*' [Fig. 7].

Although there are mutual calls for autonomy or independence amongst these communities, it is unclear whether there is much that would unite their activists. Contrary to the characterisation put forth by this Twitter page, Iranian Arabs are mostly Shi'ite, and do not share either a religious or ethnolinguistic identity with the Baloch people.

Additionally, the Baloch resistance movement is becoming increasingly dominated by Saudi- and Pakistani-linked Sunni sectarian movements such as *Jundullah,* whose rhetoric precludes close collaboration with Shi'ite Ahwazis. The fact that this page frequently re-tweets content from the Saudi-aligned activists Muhammed Al-Ahwazi suggests that it too may be an example of a Saudi initiative to stir up existing ethnic tensions in Iran for its own geopolitical advantage.

Links to Saudi Arabia crop up elsewhere—[Fig. 7.1] is a tweet describing a young Ahwazi man who was arrested for praising King Salman of Saudi Arabia for his decision to intervene in Yemen. Although the account also posts about human rights violations in more general terms—[Fig. 7.2] highlights the high rate of executions amongst the Ahwazi community—the Saudi links and Sunni sectarianism of the account does give it the appearance of pro-Saudi propaganda aiming to cast the Kingdom as the protector of all Iran's oppressed Sunnis.

[Fig. 7] – *The Ahwazi-Balochistan Media Center*

[Fig. 7.1] – Description of a man's arrest for praising the Saudi intervention in Yemen

[Fig. 7.2] – Criticisms of high execution rates amongst the Arab minority

INSIGHTS

This initial research into the state of online Ahwazi activism raises as many questions as it answers. This study has shown that a huge volume of visible online content relating to Iran's Arab minority is explicitly political and anti-government. Content appears to be largely produced and consumed by Arab residents of other states in the region—activists from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf are particularly prominent in the examples we have used. The only exception was the pro-government page *Ahwaz Voice*, which itself has seemingly failed to attract any significant following with its attempts to tie Iranian Arab identity to the struggle of Shi'ite Arabs in the wider region.

The websites and social media pages we surveyed are largely irredentist, sectarian, and divorced from social realities on the ground in Khuzestan province. In this study we have found very little evidence of Arab-speaking inhabitants of Khuzestan or the Persian Gulf coast making use of technology to facilitate the development of local campaigns, cultural organisations, or civil society groups.

Iran's Arab population faces immense problems in the shape of high unemployment, de facto segregation, above-average illiteracy rates, and below-average life expectancies. That the debate around the needs of the community has devolved into a crude, sectarian propaganda war is a failure on the part of both Iran and its neighbours in the region. Far more should be done to support the development of digital spaces in which authentic Ahwazi Arab voices can debate and organise themselves to best confront the issues they face.

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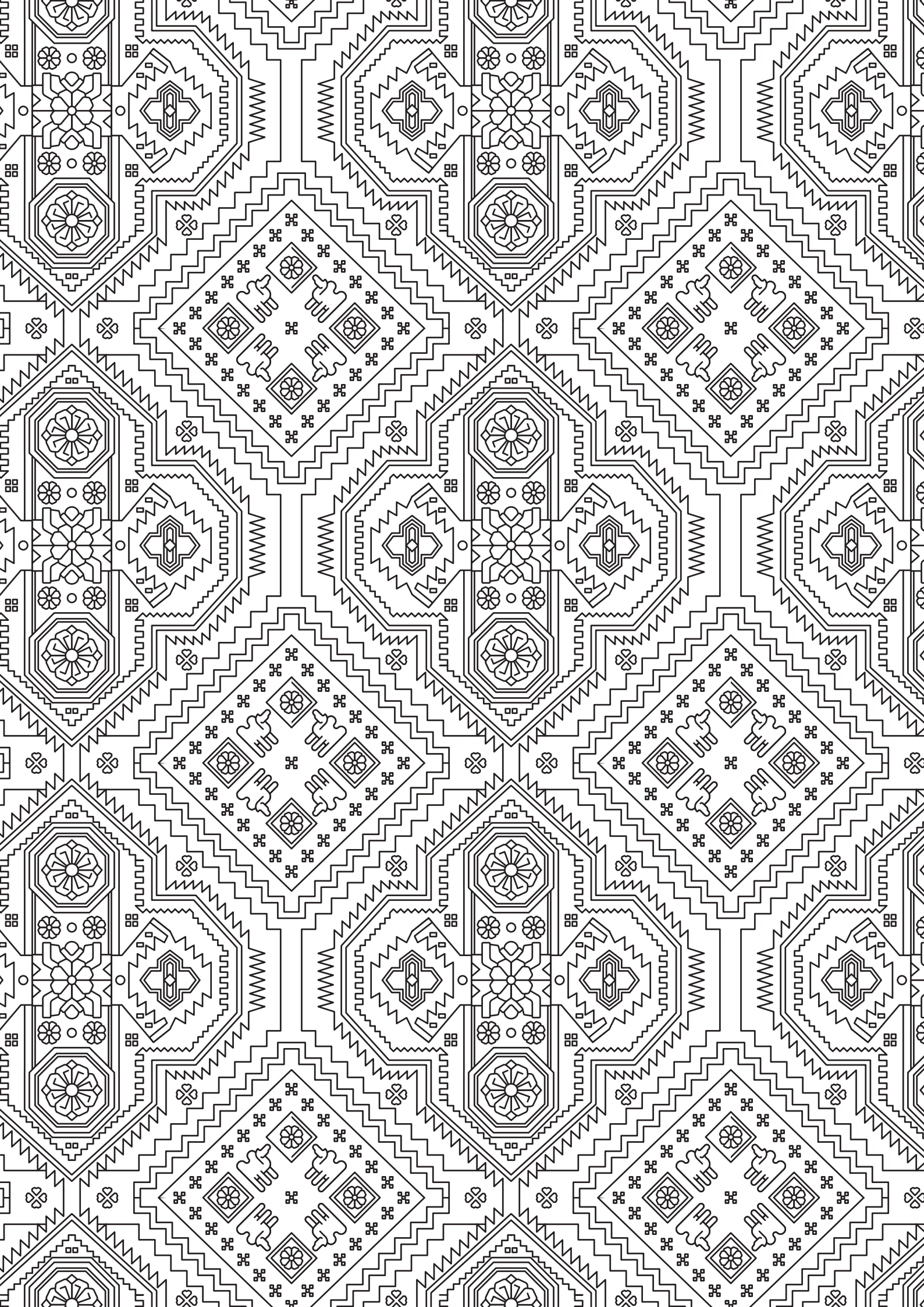


BALOCH

Balochistan sits in Iran's far southeast—a hot, dry, wind-blasted region stretching out alongside the Indian Ocean and into Pakistan. Sparsely populated, and subject to decades of underinvestment and neglect by the central government, Iranian Balochistan is one of the most deprived and underdeveloped regions of Iran.

With a population standing at around 1.5 to 2 million, the Baloch constitute one of the smaller minority communities in Iran. Putting aside the issue of marginalisation, poverty, and systematic discrimination, the Baloch face immense challenges in holding onto their unique cultural identity in the face of the dominance of Persian culture.

The Baloch language is still largely an oral one, and as a result the publication of Balochi literature remains very limited, with the problem exacerbated by pervasive state suppression and an under-equipped and underfunded education system. Porous land borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan have also allowed for the flourishing of the drugs trade, and the free flow of militants into the region—crises which have been met by an intense militarisation from Tehran, and the deployment of thousands of Iranian soldiers.

In the following chapter we'll provide a short history of this fiercely independent region of Iran, explore the extent of its neglect and abuse by the central government, and look at some of the ways that the Baloch have been making use of modern technology to defend their unique linguistic and cultural identity.

DEMOGRAPHICS

POPULATION:

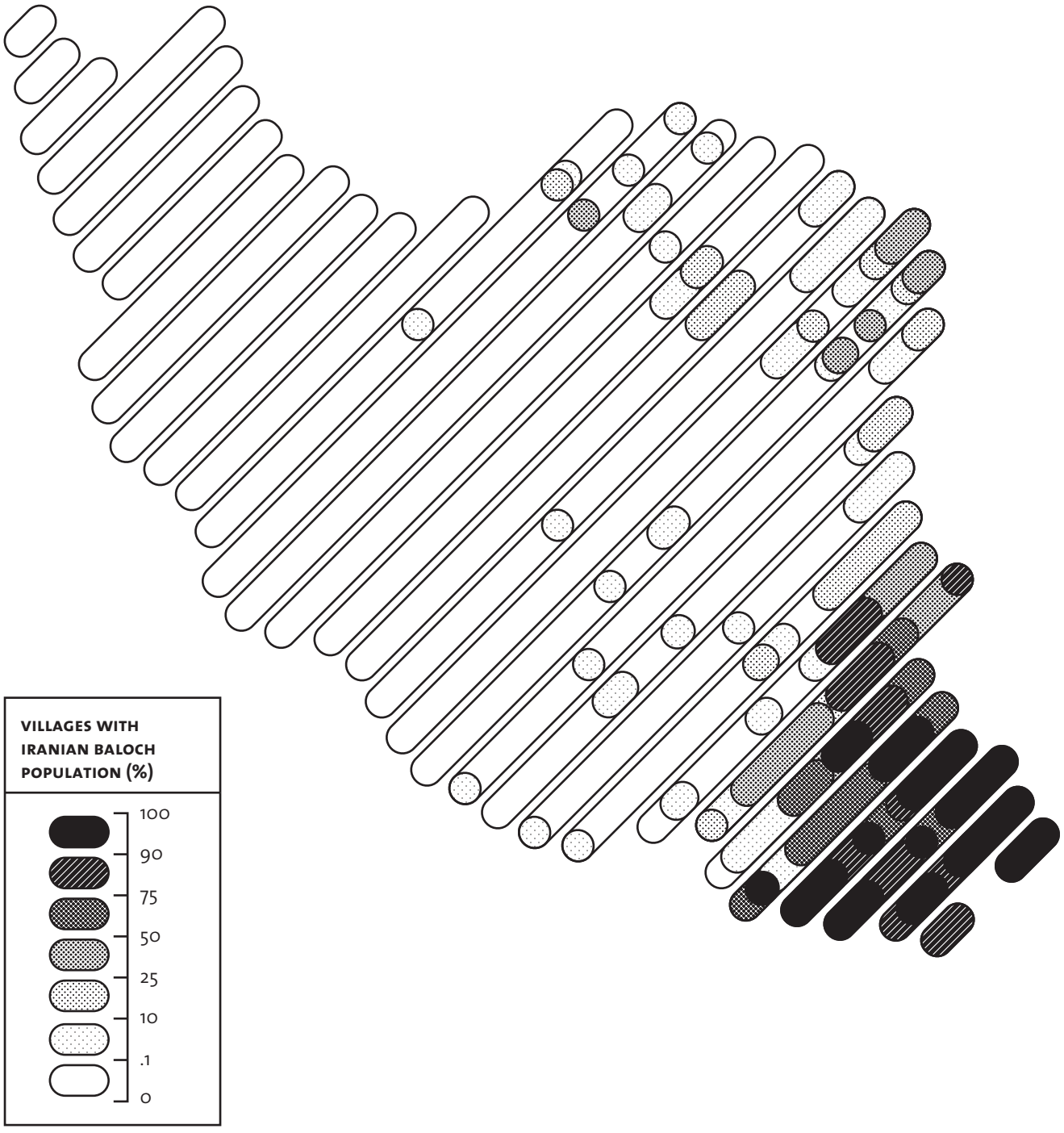
2 million

LANGUAGE:

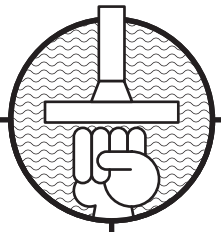
Baloch

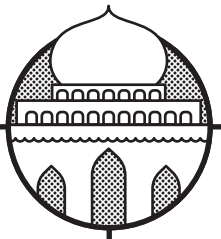
RELIGION:

Sunni Islam



TIMELINE





900s
The Baloch people are first mentioned in Arab chronicles in the 10th century.

1666
Ahmedzai Baloch establishes the Kalat Khanate. It occupies the central region of the modern Pakistani province of Balochistan.

1872
The border splitting Iranian and Pakistani Balochistan is fixed by a British colonial official, ceding territory to Iran in a bid to win Tehran's support against Tsarist Russia.

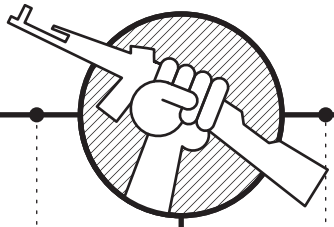
1896
A major uprising by Baloch chieftain Sardar Hussein Narui in 1896 leads to the creation of a joint Anglo-Persian expeditionary force to crush the Baloch resistance. The revolt is defeated after two years.

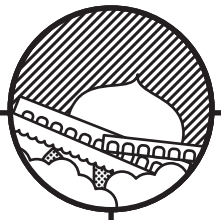
1928
After a period of quasi-independence in the wake of Reza Shah Pahlavi's coup, Western Balochistan is subjugated by central government forces.

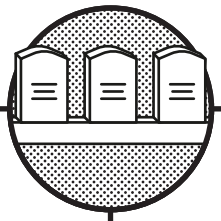
1928-1979
Balochistan remains marginal and underdeveloped throughout the Pahlavi period.

1979
The state begins to provide greater support for Sunni clerics, hoping to strengthen religious identity at the expense of secular nationalists.

1994
A Sunni mosque is demolished in Zahedan. Riots break out in the city, and are only quelled when Revolutionary Guards fire live ammunition into the crowd.







1997
Turnout in the 1997 presidential elections in Sistan and Baluchistan is above the national average, and overwhelmingly pro-Khatami.

2002
Jundallah (Soldiers of God)—also known as the Iranian People's Resistance Movement—is founded to campaign for Baloch independence.

2005
The reformist candidate Mostafa Moeen promises to redress ethnic grievances and appoint Sunni cabinet members. His largest percentage of the vote came in Sistan and Baluchistan. Of the 874,353 votes cast in the province, 479,125 went to Moeen. President Ahmadinejad received just 47,070.

March 2005
Jundallah terrorists establish a roadblock near Tasooki, opening fire on civilians. 22 people are killed.

December 2005
In its first major terrorist attack inside Iran, Jundullah ambushes the motorcade of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on a highway near Zabol. In late December, nine border guards are abducted. Jundullah requests the release of a number of Baloch prisoners on death row.

September 2007
The Iranian Government demolishes the Abu Hanifa mosque in Azimabad, the second largest Sunni religious seminary in Sistan and Balochistan, stating that it lacked a proper license.

December 2010
Jundallah claims responsibility for an attack at the Imam Hussein Mosque in Chabahar, killing 40 people.

October 2013
Sixteen Iranian Baluchi prisoners are speedily executed in retaliation for an armed attack by Baluchi insurgents in Saravan, which killed fourteen border guards. International observers state that no evidence links them to the attack.

November – December 2013
In Zahedan, Jaish-ul Adl (The Army of Justice) shoots an Iranian prosecutor dead in Zahedan. A month later, a bombing kills three revolutionary Guards.

February – April 2014
Jaish-ul Adl capture five Iranian border guards. One is executed, and the other four are later released. Media reports claim that the Iranian government released 60 Jaish-ul Adl members in exchange for the release of the border guards.

ISSUES FACING BALOCHIS

POVERTY AND EXCLUSION

Balochistan is the most underdeveloped and impoverished region in Iran. Urbanisation has proceeded slowly, and rural ways of life still predominate throughout much of Sistan and Balochistan province. Around 50% of its Baloch inhabitants still live in villages, or as nomads (Elling, 2013: 72). On child and infant mortality rates, literacy levels, and access to basic amenities such as clean water and sanitation, Sistan and Balochestan province ranks as the worst in the country (*Ibid*).

Sistan and Balochistan MP Hamidreza Pashang stated in the Iranian Parliament that two-thirds of the province's population do not have access to drinking water, and 70% live below the poverty line. His verdict was that "*the underdevelopment of the province is due to discrimination, neglect and marginalization of the province*" (Radio Zamaneh, 2015).

Industrialisation has essentially passed by the region, which boasts very limited economic development. Many large-scale development projects undertaken prior to the Revolution were simply abandoned (*Ibid*), and investment has been lacking ever since. The development of a major Indian Ocean port at Chahbahar has been one of the few exceptions, although Baloch activists contend that many new economic opportunities in the city have been granted to Persian-speaking migrants from distant provinces, at the expense of Baloch locals (Sarjov, 2015: Interview).

DOUBLE DISCRIMINATION

The Baloch are one of the most socially marginalised populations in Iran today, and face double discrimination on the basis of their Sunni faith and Baloch identity. Baloch culture has faced a systematic and deliberate campaign of suppression from the Iranian state, which has banned Baloch cultural associations and publications, and excluded Baloch people from holding high political posts in the province (Elling, 2013: 73-4). Although Baloch university students have been granted limited freedom to publish Baloch-language culturally-focused periodicals such as *Estoon* and *Daaz*, their output has so far been low (Taheri, 2012: 64).

In addition, Baloch cultural activists have consistently endured persecution and state-directed violence as a result of their activities to resist cultural assimilation. In 2008 Yaghub Mehrnehad, a Baloch journalist, cultural activist, and founder of the Baloch cultural organisation Voice of Justice was charged with vaguely-defined crimes, convicted in an unfair trial, and sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out the same year (International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 2008).

Media in the Baloch language is as limited as might be expected given the general marginalisation of the community. Mehrab Sarjov, a Baloch campaigner and commentator working for the exiled Khan of Kalat suggested that their exclusion from Iran's official media ecology isn't the end of the world—the Baloch of Pakistan have developed their own satellite channels and radio stations which are frequently used by Iran's under-served community:

It's our belief that the majority of people are using satellites, and watching this programming [from Pakistan]. It's very widely watched. (Sarjov, 2015: Interview)

The state has further alienated the Baluch community by intensifying its campaign of religious propaganda in the province, with little respect for the faith of the local inhabitants. Sunni mosques were demolished in 1994 (Meho, 2004: 297) and 2004 (Zambelis, 2009), triggering riots and violence throughout Sistan and Balochistan province. The increasingly sectarian framing of the clash between the Iranian state and the Baloch has only led to a deterioration of security and human rights in the region, with militarisation and violence on the increase in the past decade.

VIOLENCE AND MILITARISATION

As a result of its proximity to Pakistan and Afghanistan, organised crime and the drugs trade have established very deep roots in Sistan and Baluchestan, with one estimate suggesting that around 50% of the province's population may directly or indirectly participate in the smuggling of drugs, oil, or gasoline (Elling, 2013: 72). Iran's Narcotics Law mandates the death penalty for a wide range of drugs offences, and as a result the Baloch make up a massively disproportionate number of prisoners on death row. According to a report from the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, the Baloch have accounted for over 20% of all executions since 2006, despite only making up 2% of Iran's population (Farooq, 2013).

Baloch militancy is another deeply-entrenched problem in the province: the Baloch organisation Jundullah is active across Balochistan, with operations straddling

the border with Pakistan (Zambelis, 2014). Ever since its foundation in 2003, the militant Sunni group has waged a sustained guerrilla campaign against Iranian military and government targets in the province.

Baloch militant organisations have in recent years typically been aligned with the region's more radical and fundamentalist Sunni movements, including the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Given the existing barriers to the development of Baloch cultural and political organisations, the only spaces left available to disgruntled activists are Sunni mosques (Rehman, 2014), where the lines between ethnic and religious grievance are being blurred by a minority of conservative clerics trained in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Taheri, 2012: 60).

Although many are now being persecuted by the government, Sunni clerics were once supported by the state as an antidote to the strength of secular, leftist Baloch nationalism in the region (Rehman, 2014: 2). The absence of such secular political and cultural movements in the province has allowed sectarianism to fill the vacuum unchecked.

WEBSITES
OSTOMAAN

WEB ADDRESS:
ostomaan.org

STATUS:
BLOCKED

Ostomaan´s website is a frequently-updated news website affiliated with the Balochistan People's Party, providing daily news from Iranian and Pakistani Balochistan. The page is multilingual, with the home screen containing three columns of content in English, Persian, and Baloch, although content differs across each of them.

English-language content is a mixture of Balochistan-related news from Ostomaan, and aggregated news from other English-language sources focused on Iranian and Pakistani politics. Baloch and Persian content has a tighter focus on political matters and events in Iranian and Pakistani Balochistan, alongside content on human rights violation reporting and political activism. Much of this news focuses on the work of activists in the diaspora, rather than by Baloch activists inside Iran.

The multilingual nature of the website allows for international audience to access its content relating to human rights violations, and Iranian minority policy. The Persian and Baloch sections are updated on a daily basis, and English content is updated weekly. According to analytics from Similarweb, the site receives around 3,000 visits per month.

[Fig.1] – *The Ostomaan front page*

WEBSITES

THE BALOCH ACTIVISTS CAMPAIGN

WEB ADDRESS:

balochcampaign.com

STATUS:

BLOCKED

The Baloch Activists Campaign (BAC) is a Persian-language website offering daily updates on the status of human rights in Sistan and Balochistan Province, along with information about other Iranian ethnic minorities and the Sunni community. The website has a section dedicated to literature and culture, but it remains empty at present. According to Similarweb analytics, around 3,000 people visit the BAC website each month.

Visitors can engage with the campaign in a variety of ways—besides joining the BAC mailing list, it's possible to engage with other activists using a number of social media accounts, ranging from Facebook, to YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and WeChat.

The significance of mobile chat apps for the Baloch community is something that has been echoed in Small Media's discussions with diaspora-based activists. Mehrab Sarjov, a Baloch campaigner and commentator working for the exiled Khan of Kalat stated in an interview with Small Media that:

"WhatsApp is widespread—everybody is using it. For the content—for writing and those sorts of things, most people use WhatsApp for communications. You'd need an army of soldiers to comb through all these conversations and monitor them" (2015).

Given that Sistan and Balochistan Province has the third-lowest internet penetration rate of all the provinces in Iran (Small Media, 2014), this pattern of dependence on mobile phone apps is not so surprising—with limited access to internet connections in Baloch homes, it is far easier for Baloch people to maintain networks via 3G internet access on mobile phones. It is impossible to verify the number of users chatting on these WhatsApp and WeChat groups, though Mehrab Sarjov suggests that many thousands of Baloch maybe turning to chat apps as a primary means of communication.

The site's Facebook page is also a widely-used platform for Baloch activists, with 5,122 likes and frequently re-shared and commented-upon content. The page's users seem to be a mixture of Baloch activists in exile, and Baloch people living in Iran and Pakistan.

[Fig. 2] – *The Baloch Activists Campaign* Banner

SOCIAL MEDIA
ROZHN TV

WEB ADDRESS:
youtube.com/user/rozhntv/videos

SUBSCRIBERS:
1,100

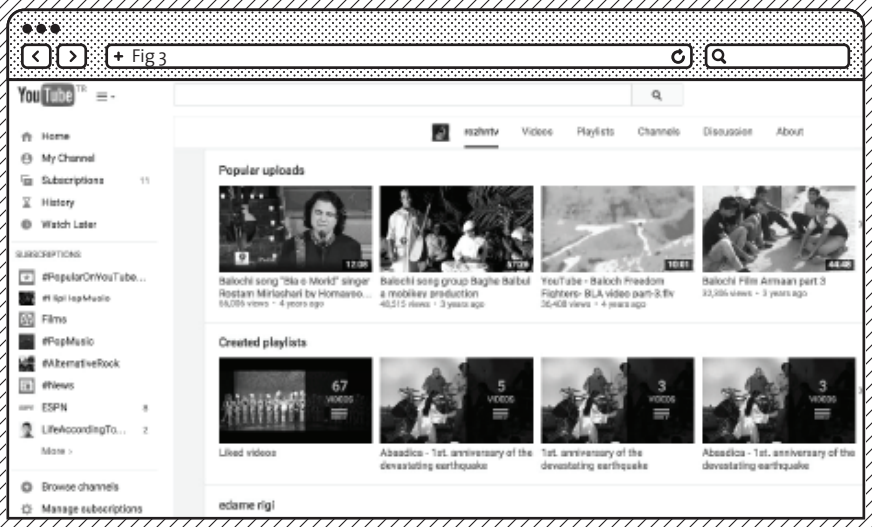
The Baloch language programme *Rozhn TV* was first broadcast via the Kurdish satellite TISK TV in February 2009, and ran for nearly six years until it was forced to broadcasting in December 2014 due to financial difficulties. Much of its programming is still available to the public via YouTube.

Rozhn TV was given a weekly one hour broadcasting slot on the Kurdish satellite channel, broadcasting new programmes each week. The aim of Rozhn TV was to promote Balochi language and culture amongst the Balochi population of Iran and Pakistan. 90 percent of content was in the Baloch language, with the rest in Persian, English, Hindi, and Urdu.

According to its producer Homayoun Mobraki, *Rozhn TV* was established to give the Balochi people a forum for free expression, and a space in which they could study their own language. It also covered efforts within the diaspora to organize meetings and seminaries on Balochi language and history, such as the 2011 Balochistan International Conference [Fig. 3.1], and a meeting in the Swedish Parliament.

Rozhn TV's programming covered topics ranging from politics to news, literature, music, culture, and comedy. Comedic programming included the moderately popular series 'Sangantan' (Friends). *Rozhn TV* attracted its largest audiences in urban regions of Iranian Balochistan, including Chabahar, Iranshahr, Bandar Abbas, Zahedan, Nikshar and Panjoch. Although no longer broadcasting, *Rozhn TV* still hosts a Facebook page upon which new content is posted intermittently.

Although a lack of funding forced it to close its doors, *Rozhn TV* represented an important alternative to state media, which offered very little content for Baloch citizens. The station helped to provide the Baloch language with a dedicated media platform, allowing the Baloch inhabitants of Iran to consume digital media that reflected their own language and culture.



[Fig. 3] – *Rozhn TV* on YouTube

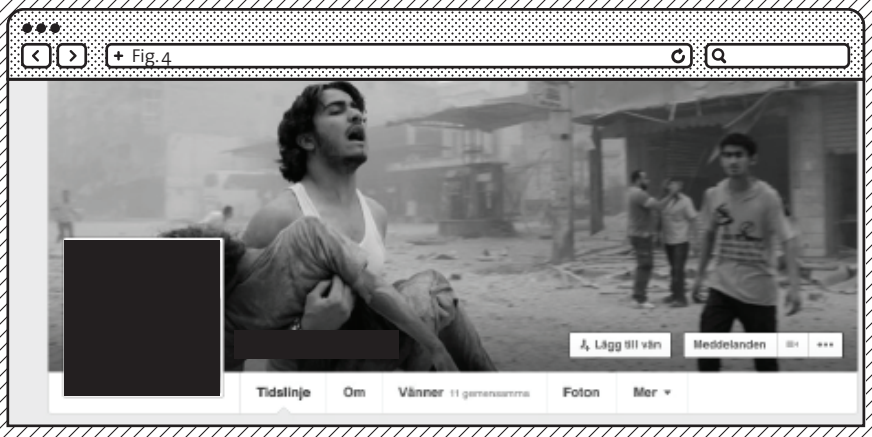
[Fig. 3.1] – 2011 Balochistan International Conference

SOCIAL MEDIA
BALOCH JOURNALIST

P. is a Baloch journalist from Zahedan, the provincial capital of Sistan and Balochistan. He is currently the chief editor of a regional newspaper in Balochistan, and an editor of two other papers based in the province.

Due to his active online presence, he is one of the very few Baloch journalists followed by Balochis in Iran and the diaspora. Content on his Facebook page is written in Persian, and is aimed at every Persian reader interested in news from Iranian Balochistan. The page produces original content from within the province, and regardless of the self-censorship P. practices in order to keep working, he offers a wealth of rich content for Balochis and Iranians interested in the politics of the region.

P. generally re-shares online versions of his newspaper articles, alongside personal reflections on social issues in Balochistan, and commentary on the state of local administration in The Province. [Fig. 4.1] shows an example of one of P.'s posts, displaying images of a local government ceremony, and providing a short description of events. Users who visit P.'s page frequently engage with his content, asking questions and providing feedback in the comments.



[Fig. 4] – Baloch Journalist on Facebook

[Fig. 4.1] – Coverage of a local government ceremony

INSIGHTS

Compared to many of the other ethnic minority communities profiled in this report, the Iranian Baloch community inhabit a rather underdeveloped digital media ecosystem. The Baloch lack well-developed networks on the social media platforms most widely utilised by other communities; Facebook communities are comparatively small, and dominated by Baloch activists working in exile.

This is not to suggest that the Baloch are shunning digital platforms—their patterns of technology usage have instead adapted to their unique circumstances, living as they do in a region with limited internet penetration, but relatively widespread mobile phone reception. Until the Iranian government decides to invest greater resources in the development of internet infrastructure in Iranian Balochistan, satellite television and WhatsApp groups will likely continue to dominate as spaces for Baloch organisation and cultural development.

The closed nature of these WhatsApp groups unfortunately meant that we were unable to undertake a deeper analysis of their content and user base. We would suggest that a deeper exploration of these networks could form the basis for valuable further research into the patterns of digital engagement amongst the Iranian Baloch.

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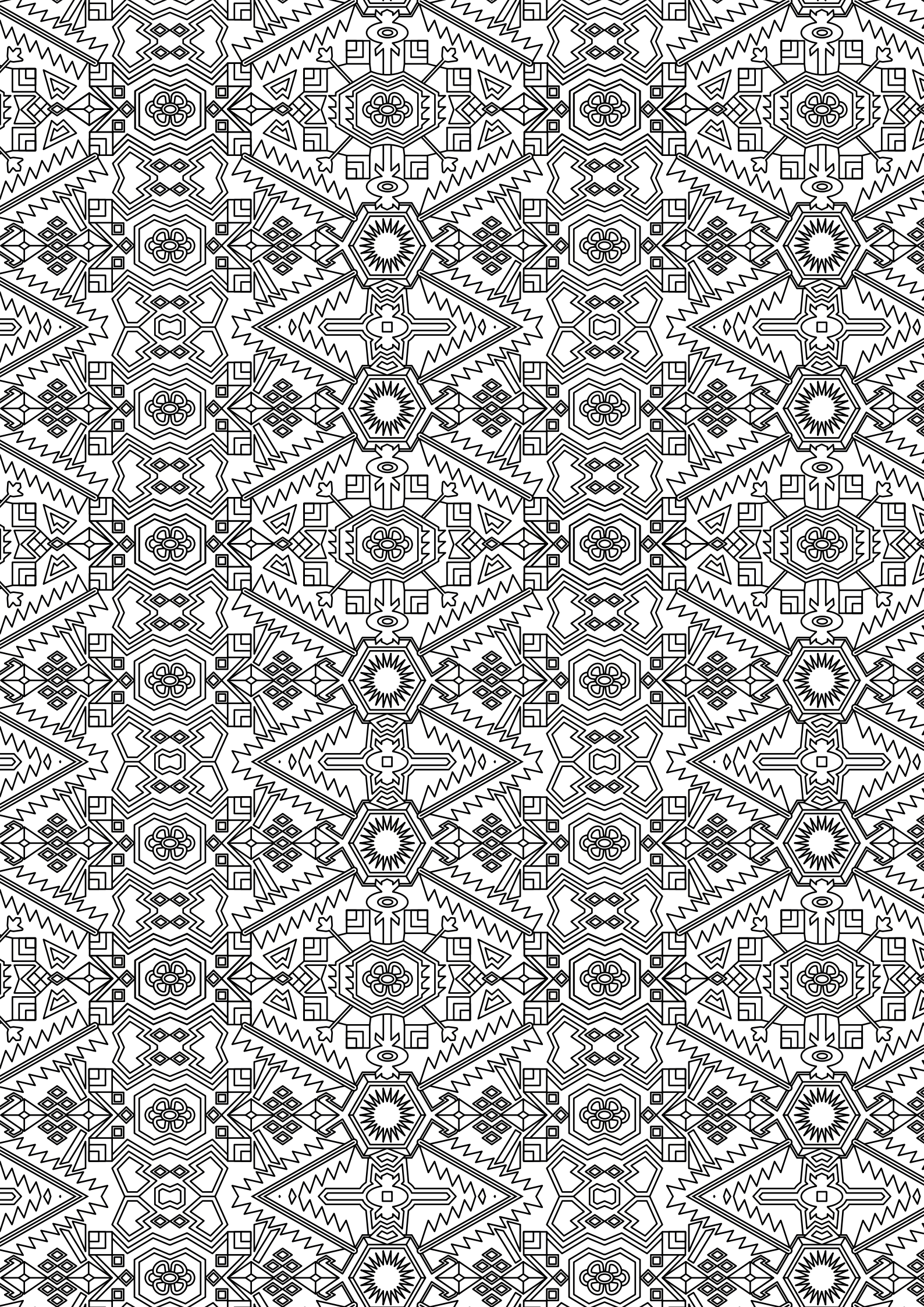


KURDS

Iranian Kurdistan is the easternmost region of Kurdistan, a loosely-defined region spanning the peripheries of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. A rugged landscape dominated by the Zagros Mountains, Kurdistan has a long history of self-government and dogged resistance against external powers.

Around 28 million Kurds live in the Kurdistan region, which is one of the largest 'nations' in the world to lack statehood. At the same time, the idea of a single, united Kurdish 'nation' is complicated by the wide linguistic and cultural variance that exists amongst self-identifying Kurds. Although Kurdistan's inhabitants are predominantly Kurdish-speaking, Kurdish is more a language-continuum than a singular, codified language. Speakers of the Sorani, Kurmanji, Zaza, Gorani, and Kermanshahi dialects don't necessarily have an easy time communicating, hampering the development of a cohesive and unified national movement.Kurds aren't just linguistically-divided; Kurdistan is one of the most religiously-diverse regions in the Middle East. Iranian Kurdistan is largely Sunni, but there are significant Shi'ite and Sufi minorities as well, alongside Christians and the small Ahl-e Haqq (or Yarsan) community. Sectarianism within the Kurdish community itself is not a major issue, although non-Shi'ite groups tend to suffer from double discrimination at the hands of the Shi'ite Iranian state.

In this chapter we'll offer a quick run-down of the history of Kurds in Iran, their defiance in the face of Pahlavi and Islamic Republican repression, and their efforts to organise and cultivate dialogues of national and cultural renewal in online spaces.

DEMOGRAPHICS

POPULATION:

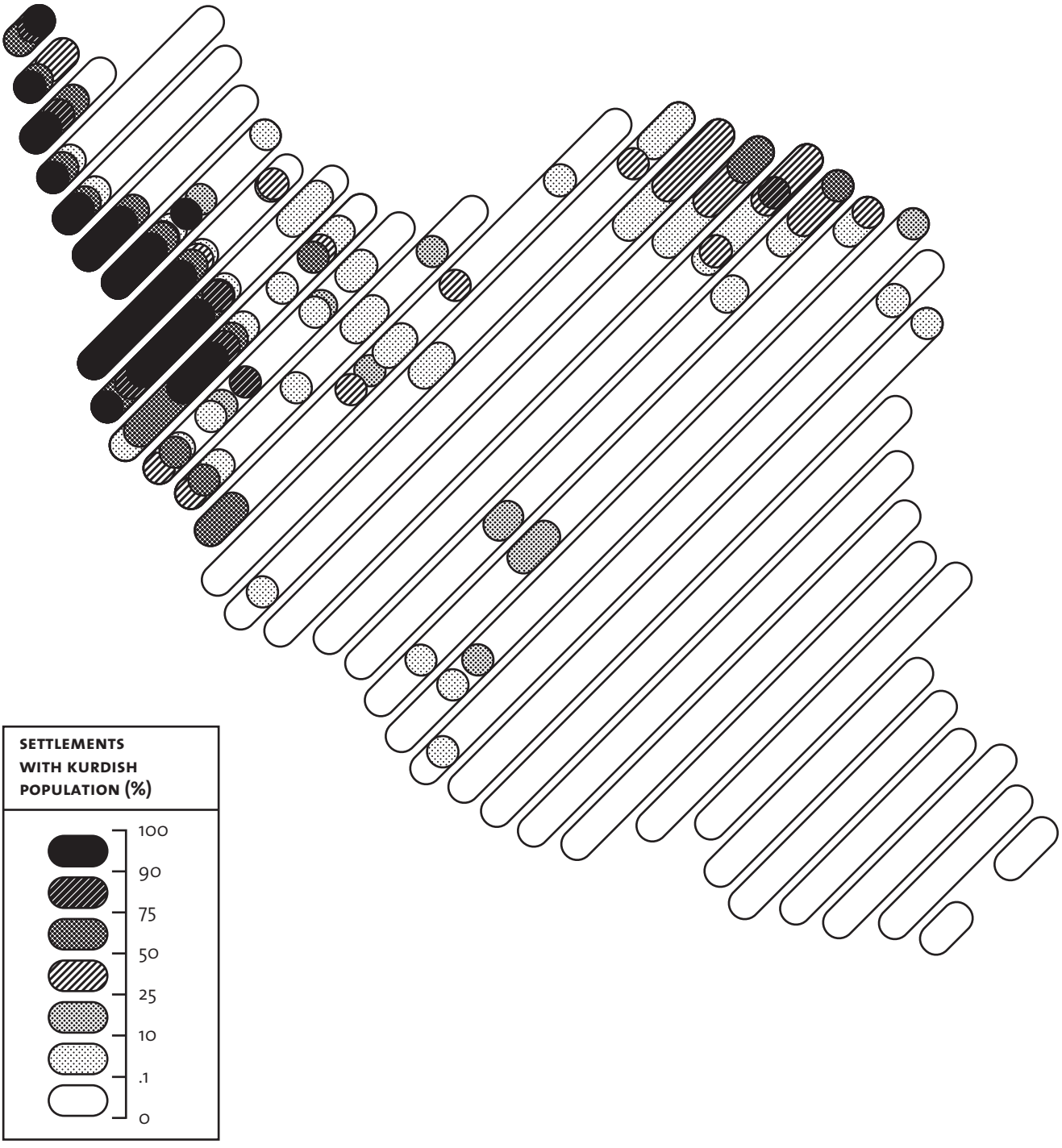
8.2 million

LANGUAGE:

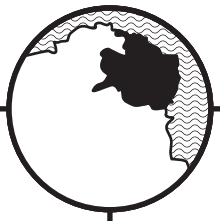
Kurdish (Various dialects: Sorani, Kermanshahi, Gorani)

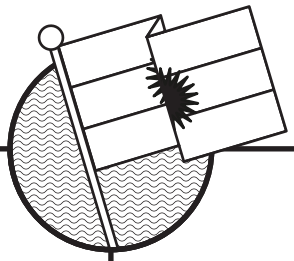
RELIGION:

Sunni (majority), Shi'a (minority), Christians, Ahl-e Haqq/ Yarsanism (small minorities)



TIMELINE





1169-1867
Ardalan
Ardalan was a remarkably long-lived Kurdish vassaldom existing in western Iran from the 12th century up to the middle of the Qajar period. It frequently switched allegiences between the Ottoman and Persian empires in order to maintain its autonomy. Its rulers were of the minority Yarsan faith.

1535
Khorasan Deportations
In order to break Kurdish resistance to Safavid rule, Shah Tahmasp I orders the deportation of many Kurdish tribes to Khorasan, in Iran's far northeast. Many Kurds still reside there today.

1610
Battle of Dimdim
Shah Abbas puts down a Kurdish rebellion at Dimdim, near Lake Urmia. After the Kurdish forces surrendered, Abbas ordered a massacre of the survivors, and forced deportations to Khorasan.

1918-1922
Simko's Revolt
Ismail Agha Simko, Leader of the Kurdish Shekak tribe, led a failed uprising against the Iranian government with the hope of establishing an autonomous Kurdish region in northwestern Iran.

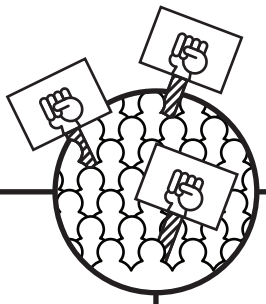
1946
Mahabad Republic
Self governing Kurdish state is created in Northwest Iran following the chaos of WWII. "*In Kurdish nationalist discourse, the Kurdish Republic in Mahabad is repeatedly referred to as an example of the Kurdish struggle for recognition of national identity*" (Koohi-Kamali, 2003).

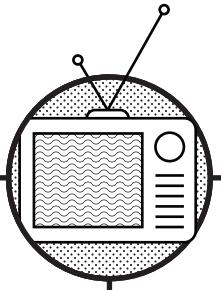
1979
Islamic Revolution
Kurdish groups supported the revolution that overthrew the Shah, whose posture towards Kurdish self-determination ranged from indifferent to fiercely repressive.

1979
Constitutional Referendum
Kurdish leaders quickly sour on the Revolution. After seeing the new government's proposed constitution—enshrining Shi'a supremacy—they order Kurds to boycott the constitutional referendum.

1979
Kurdish Rebellion
Led by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and its allies, this uprising began a few months after the Islamic Revolution and lasted until 1982, taking the lives of nearly 10,000 Kurds.

1989
KDPI Leader Assassinated
Abd al-Rahman Ghassemlou—the leader of the KDPI—is assassinated by the Iranian government in Vienna.





1992
Second KDPI Leader Assassinated
Ghassemlou's successor, Sadiq Sharafkandi, is murdered in Berlin. The KDPI struggles to recover.

2004
Iran-PJAK conflict
Armed conflict between the Iranian government and the Kurdish guerilla group Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) begins.

1999
Street protests in Iranian Kurdistan
Kurdish nationalists staged protests in serveral cities including Mahabad and Sandanaj in support of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who had just been captured in Kenya by Turkish authorities.

2006
Rise of Satellite TV
Although Kurdish satellite stations begin broadcasting from Europe in 1995, it isn't until 2006 that Iranian Kurds gain widespread access to foreign-made Kurdish programming.

2005
Opposition activist killed
Kurdish opposition activist Shivan Qaderi and two other Kurdish men are shot dead by Iranian security forces in Mahabad, prompting protests throughout Iranian Kurdistan.

2015
Protests in Mahabad
Iranian Kurds take to the streets in Mahabad following the mysterious death of a Kurdish hotel maid.

2011
Iran-PJAK ceasefire
A ceasefire between Iran and PJAK is declared, however sporadic fighting continues up to the present day.

ISSUES FACING KURDS

DENIAL OF POLITICAL AUTONOMY

For many centuries the Kurds have chafed against attempts by successive Iranian governments to impose direct political control in their lands. Until the 20th century, tribal leaders were generally very effective at playing the Ottoman Empire and Iran off against one another in order to secure as much autonomy as possible (McDowall, 2010: 66-8). Although the 19th century Qajar rulers began to rein in tribal leaders through processes of intermarriage and military coercion (*Ibid*: 68), the Kurdish tribes on Iran's western periphery would largely retain their political autonomy until Reza Shah Pahlavi's rise to power in the 1920s.

Reza Shah's establishment of a strong and effective central government had negative consequences for the autonomy of Kurdish tribal chiefs and the nomadic patterns of life in Iranian Kurdistan. Uprisings by the influential Kurdish chief Simko were put down decisively in 1926 and 1930, honorific tribal titles (such as *ilkhan*, *beg, amir* and *agha*) were abolished, and conscription was enforced (*Ibid*, 225).

Reza Shah's 1941 abdication and the period of British/Soviet occupation created a vacuum which allowed a limited resurgence in tribal power, and the first organised expression of Kurdish nationalism in the establishment of the Mahabad Republic from 1946-7. Led by Qazi Muhammad and his Kurdish Democratic Party (KDPI), the Mahabad Republic was short-lived, and did not survive long past the 1947 Soviet withdrawal.

Kurdish dissent simmered until the conflagration of 1979, when calls for autonomy in the new republican state went unmet by Iran's new clerical establishment. The secular bent of the Kurdish national movement and the Sunni identity of most Kurds were at the root of further dissent with the Shi'a regime, triggering an armed rebellion in Kurdistan that ran intermittently from 1979-83. Thousands were killed on each side, as Iran's Revolutionary Guard clashed with Kurdish forces from the KDPI and Komala; intermittent, low-burning guerrilla warfare continued through the 1980s to the present day (*Ibid*, 273-80).

Kurds would remain largely barred from administrative positions until the Khatami period, when he appointed the liberal Kurd Abdollah Ramazanzadeh as governor of Kurdistan Province. These political advances were reversed under Ahmadinejad's presidency from 2005-2013, after the 2005 lynching of a young Kurdish political activist sparked riots that left more than 20 people dead (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010: 22). Even under Rouhani, Kurdistan has been rocked by sporadic violence—May 2015 saw clashes between security forces and protesters in Mahabad in the wake of the suspicious death of a Kurdish hotel maid (Al Jazeera, 2015), and the Iranian state has executed 17 Kurdish political prisoners so far this year (MacDiarmid, 2015). The 'Kurdish question' in Iran remains unsettled.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC SUPPRESSION

Over the course of the 20th century, Kurds in Iran have not only been denied their political rights, but have had to contend with sustained campaigns of cultural repression from the central government in Tehran. The first sustained efforts to suppress the usage of the Kurdish language came in 1934, when schools were ordered to instruct children using only Persian. The following year, the prohibition on Kurdish was extended to all public notices (McDowall, 2010: 225). Many tribes were forced to give up their nomadic way of life, and were forcibly settled. To add insult to injury, Kurds (like all other Iranians) were required to abandon their traditional forms of attire, and take up European-style clothes instead (*Ibid*).

Many of Reza Shah's policies unravelled after his abdication in 1941, and the foreign occupation during World War Two allowed space for Kurdish civil society and a nascent nationalist intelligentsia to begin articulating a modern vision of Kurdish ethno-linguistic nationhood. In the short-lived Mahabad Republic, schools began to translate Persian textbooks into Kurdish, and printing presses began to churn out journals and literary magazines (Ibid: 242). Such publications made valuable contributions to the emerging notion of Kurdish national identity, but would only do so for a few months. When Iranian troops retook Mahabad in 1947, they smashed Kurdish printing presses, outlawed Kurdish education, and set any Kurdish publications they could find to the flame (*Ibid*: 245).

Such intolerance towards the Kurdish language and its literature remained entrenched for the remainder of the Pahlavi period, and continued into the Islamic Republican period. The 1979 Iranian Revolution brought no great advances in cultural autonomy for Iran's Kurds, although the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) kept Iranian authorities distracted enough that Kurdish-language schools and local government were able to function throughout the early 1980s (*Ibid*: 278).

Change would not come in any significant way until the arrival of President Khatami in 1997. His comparatively laissez faire cultural policies allowed for the foundation of

an array of Kurdish magazines and cultural journals, while Kurdish societies were permitted to function, and Kurdish academics were permitted to undergo official cultural exchanges with their counterparts in Iraq's Kurdish Autonomous Region (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010: 21). Ahmadinejad's government reversed many of these policies, and banned numerous cultural organisations and Kurdish newspapers during his presidency (*Ibid*: 22).

The late Khatami and early Ahmadinejad periods were also marked by another trend in cultural development: the rapid uptake of satellite dishes amongst the Kurdish population, which enabled access to Kurdish television shows broadcast from Iraq and Turkey (*Ibid*: 24). Such content mobilises Kurds against their respective governments, and draws Kurds from different regions and linguistic communities together, helping to bridge the gaps that exist in the modern Kurdish political movement.

Although political repression of the Kurds continues under Rouhani, things do appear to be looking up in terms of cultural freedom. In August 2015 it was announced that middle schools in Kurdistan would be permitted to use Kurdish as a language of instruction (Radio Zamaneh, 2015). Soon after, it was announced that a Kurdish language and literature course would be made available to students of the University of Kurdistan, in Sanandaj (Bolandpour, 2015). Whether this marks the beginning of a long-term trend in cultural liberalisation for the Kurds remains to be seen.

WEBSITES

BOKAN LITERARY COMMITTEE

WEB ADDRESS:

eebokan.com

STATUS:

UNBLOCKED

Encumeni Edebiy Bokan (Bokan Literary Committee) is a Sorani and Persian-language website dedicated to Kurdish literature. It was created in 2015 by a group of Kurdish artists and serves as the online voice of the Bokan Literary Committee in Bokan, East Azerbaijan Province. Its aim is to provide support for Kurdish literature in Iran by creating a literary news network, and organising cultural events in Iranian Kurdistan.

The website provides Iran's Kurds a space in which they can share new works of poetry and literature and discuss their cultural heritage. The website offers daily updates about Kurdish poetry, history, and minutes of the committee's meetings.

A special section of the website called "*Story*" is dedicated to allowing users to publish and share their own stories and poems. In doing so the Committee hopes to inspire Kurdish writers in Iran to produce literature and contribute to Kurdistan's literary corpus. Other readers frequently engage with user-submitted content, leaving comments and asking general questions about Kurdish literature.

The website is also available in Persian, but with a very limited selection of content. The Persian site is mainly concerned with the translation of Kurdish poems and articles, but these articles receive very low levels of engagement.

According to the user statistics provided by the Bokan Literary Committee, the Kurdish version of the website is far more popular than its Persian equivalent—it received 19,934 pageviews in the month of August, versus 887 pageviews for the Persian site.

The website appears very professional and sophisticated, and even offers users the chance to download a Kurdish e-reader app for Android devices. Curiously, the Literary Committee has a Facebook page, although links to it do not appear to have been integrated into the website.

The Facebook page [Fig. 1.1] has 4,730 likes and was created at the end of 2012. Apart from some updates and articles from the website, the page is primarily used to share extracts from user-submitted poems that have been published on the website [Fig. 1.2]. Users engage frequently with the page, liking and commenting on the poems, as well as sharing fresh poetry of their own.

[Fig. 1] – *Bokan Literary Committee*

[Fig. 1.1] – *Bokan Literary Committee* on Facebook

[Fig. 1.2] – An extract from a user-submitted poem

WEBSITES

NNS ROJ

WEB ADDRESS:

nnsroj.com

STATUS:

BLOCKED

NNS Roj ('*Day*' – The News and Analysis Center) is a Sorani Kurdish and Persian-language news website focused on politics and social activism in Iranian Kurdistan, and targeted primarily at Iranian and diaspora Kurds.

The website was established in 2011 by a number of Kurdish youth activists, with the objective of supporting the Kurdish cause in Iran by creating a news network with a primary focus on local issues.

The website is organised into a number of segments which are updated on a daily basis, including: news, opinion, culture, interviews, and features. This final section includes a sub-section dedicated to Dr. Abdurrahman Ghassemlou, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) from 1973 until his 1989 assassination in Vienna by suspected Iranian agents.

Users cannot interact directly with website content, but do engage frequently with posts published on *NNS Roj's* social media accounts—on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Facebook is by far the most active platform, posting several items of content per day, and being followed by more than 11,000 people. [Fig. 2.1] is an example of the content posted on the NNS Roj Facebook page: a video on the subject of the July 2015 Suruc bombing which killed 33 people, and left 104 injured, demonstrating the news agency's commitment to covering not just local news in Iranian Kurdistan, but from across the entire Kurdistan region.

[Fig. 2] – *NNS Roj* Front Page

[Fig. 2.1] – An *NNS Roj* Facebook post about the July 2015 Suruc bombing

WEBSITES

KURDPA — KURDISTAN PRESS AGENCY

WEB ADDRESS:

kurdpa.net

STATUS:

BLOCKED

Kurdpa, or the *Kurdistan Press Agency* is an online Kurdish news agency featuring content in Sorani Kurdish (in Perso-Arabic and Latin scripts), English and Persian. It covers Iranian and international news, along with a plethora of articles concerning Iranian Kurdish issues ranging from politics, to art and culture. *Kurdpa's* audience is broad, consisting of Kurds from across the region, as well as those living in the diaspora.

Kurdpa has a particular focus on human rights issues in Iran. The website has a "*Human Rights*" section dedicated to analysis of the human rights situation of Iran's Kurdish population. This section covers arrests, trials, and executions of political activists, along with campaigns for linguistic rights and gender equality. Additionally, *Kurdpa* publishes a weekly report on the status of women in Iranian Kurdistan called Pendant [Fig. 3.1]. It is published in Sorani Kurdish, Persian, and English.

Kurdpa makes use of a number of social media platforms to publicise content posted on the website, including Twitter, YouTube, and a number of Facebook pages. The Facebook pages (like the website) are available in several languages, and it appears clear that Kurdpa is attempting to reach as wide an audience as possible with its content. The Persian version seems to be the most successful, with 8,173 likes and quite a high level of user engagement with posts. The Kurdish page (in Perso-Arabic script) has 5,443 likes and a lower rate of engagement, while the English and Latin script Kurdish page are quite limited in their following, the former having just 1,960 likes, and the latter just over 900.

[Fig. 3] – *Kurdpa* Front Page

[Fig. 3.1] – An example of a Pendant bulletin, in English

SOCIAL MEDIA
KERMANSHAH MUSIC

WEB ADDRESS:
facebook.com/kermanshahmozik

LIKES:
25,136

Kermanshah Music is one of the most popular Facebook pages dedicated to the music of the Iranian Kurdish community. The page shares music and videos from other websites and social media pages, and uses both Persian and Sorani Kurdish to address as wide an audience as possible. Indeed, the users are not solely Kurds, but also Persians, and members of other ethnic minority communities in Iran.

Political and nationalist aspects seem to be quite dominant within the music shared in this community. For example, [Fig. 4.1] shows a post containing a video clip of the song "*Peshmerga*", which was composed in support of the efforts of the Kurdish peshmerga fighting against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. The piece was performed by the Czech National Symphony Orchestra and vocalists from the four regions of Kurdistan. The post was shared more than 50 times, and received over 140 likes.

One user commented upon the post both in Persian and Kurdish, saying: '*Very artistic, beautiful and assured. Thanks dear admin, I really enjoyed this.*'

[Fig. 4.2] shows a video clip of the Kurdish artist Shahram Nazeri's song *I am from Kermanshah, and I do not know Persian*. The song tells the story of a Kurdish boy and a Persian girl, exploring their linguistic differences in order to demonstrate the distinctness of the Kurdish language. The post received a very high level of engagement, receiving more than 40 comments and 340 shares. One commenter was bursting with national pride, posting: "*Long live the Kurds*!"

The page also shares user-generated content. [Fig. 4.3] shows a user video in which Kurds—seemingly from Turkish Kurdistan—celebrate Kobani's resistance against the ISIL onslaught in January 2015, dancing a traditional Kurdish dance around a fire. The post received 350 likes, more than 60 shares, and several comments.

The comments also reveal some friction between different Kurdish communities in Iran and across the wider region. Among the comments written in Persian, a user accuses the Iranian Kurds in Kermanshah of ignoring the struggle in Kobani. Another user accuses Kermanshah's Kurds of 'Persianising', and discarding their Kurdish identity. A Kurd from Kermanshah responded, stating that Kurds in the city had actually staged demonstrations in support of Kobani's guerrillas from October 9–10 2014, but were forced to disperse after the government expressed security fears.

[Fig. 4] – *Kermanshah Music* on Facebook

[Fig. 4.1] – A Facebook post sharing a performance of "*Peshmerga*"

[Fig. 4.2] – A Facebook post sharing a bilingual song from Shahram Nazeri

[Fig. 4.3] – A user-submitted video showing Kurdish celebrations in the wake of victory in Kobani

SOCIAL MEDIA
MAHABAD

WEB ADDRESS:

facebook.com/pages/348317527157/مهاباد

LIKES:

26,568

Mahabad is a popular Facebook page dedicated to the Kurdish city of Mahabad, in West Azerbaijan Province. The city lies south of Lake Urmia, and was the capital of the autonomous Mahabad Republic from 1946—1947.

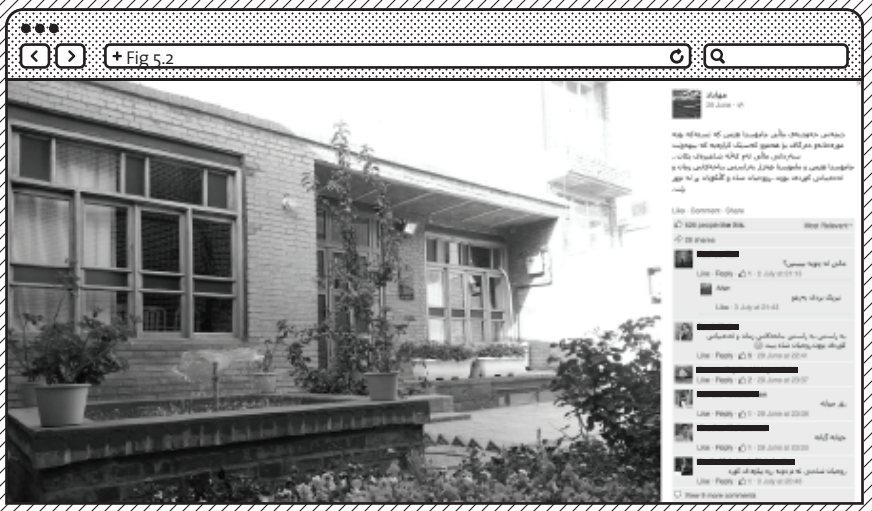
The page shares content from a variety of other pages about the city of Mahabad, along with Kurdish landscapes, culture, and identity. The page also provides a historical overview of the city in both English and Sorani Kurdish, stressing its centrality to Kurdish identity and the development of the Azerbaijani Turkish language.

The posts are usually shared and commented upon in Sorani Kurdish, but sometimes they receive attention from Persian-speaking users, as well. Users sometimes pose questions about Kurdish culture and history, and receive speedy responses from the page administrator.

The image in [Fig. 5.1] is dated from 1928. In the comments, a user asks in Persian: "*Who are these people?*", with the administrator responding in Persian "*Some officials in Mahabad.*" A second user angrily butts into the conversation, asking: "*Why are you speaking Persian? Is your language so fucked up that you can't express yourself with it?*" This frustration at the usage of Persian in a Kurdish-majority space is suggestive of an antipathy towards those Kurds who are perceived to have 'Persianised', and who employ Persian rather than Kurdish to communicate.

A further example of the page's cultural activism is visible in [Fig. 5.2], in a post displaying an image of the house of Kurdish poet Hemin Mukriyani. As an enthusiastic and high-profile advocate for Kurdish poetry, Mukriyani wrote a vast canon of nationalist work which remains influential throughout Kurdistan today.

The caption reads: "*A photo from Hemin's house, where there's now a museum open to anyone who'd like to visit. Hemin and Hazhar Mukriyani laid the foundations of Kurdish language and literature. God bless them.*"



[Fig. 5] – The Facebook page for '*Mahabad*'

[Fig. 5.1] A Facebook post depicting a number of Mahabadi officials from 1928.

[Fig. 5.2] – A post featuring the house of the noted Kurdish poet Hemin Mukriyani

SOCIAL MEDIA
NODSHE

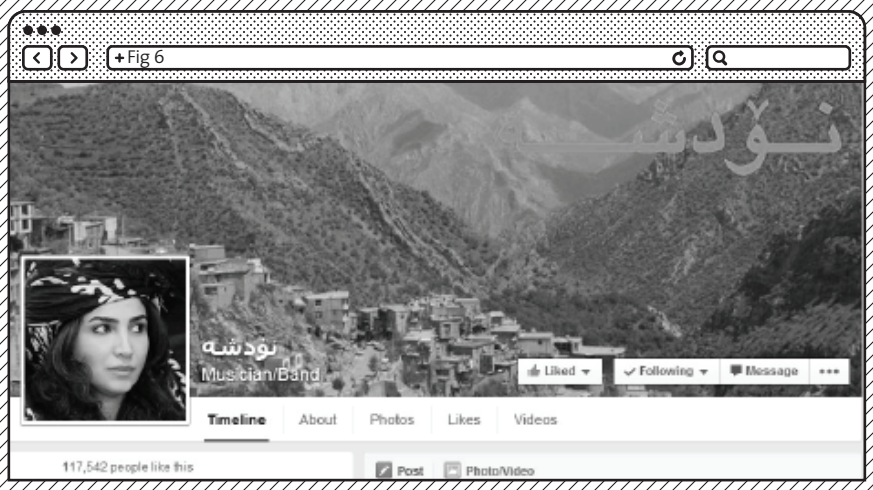
WEB ADDRESS:
facebook.com/Nodshe

LIKES:
117,989

Nodshe is one of the most popular Kurdish Facebook pages used by Iranian Kurds. The page takes its name from the Kurdish town of Nodshe, located in the Hawraman Mountains in Iran's Kermanshah Province. The page produces content about the cultural traditions of the region's Kurdish inhabitants, most frequently posting images of daily life in the community, along with shots of the region's landscapes.

The page's content and comments are written in a variety of Kurdish languages, in both Latin and Perso-Arabic scripts, suggesting that the page is a space in which Iranian Kurds are working to record and share their cultural heritage with other Kurds from around the region.

[Fig. 6.1] is a photo of some elderly Kurdish farmers eating breakfast on their land. The administrator shared it as a morning greeting to the page's followers, posting "*Good morning to everyone*" in four different varieties of Kurdish.



[Fig. 6] – *Nodshe* on Facebook

[Fig. 6.1] – A multilingual 'Good morning' post to the page's followers

INSIGHTS

Much like the Azerbaijani Turks, Iran's Kurds benefit from access to an extensive media network based over the border which operates generally free from censorship and state interference. The online content examined in this chapter has demonstrated that social media platforms provide additional opportunities for cross-border engagement and intellectual exchange, transforming the position of Iranian Kurds from that of a 'consumer' of Turkish- and Iraqi-produced content, to one of a cultural 'producer'. Not since the days of the Mahabad Republic have the Iranian Kurds been able to project their voices so clearly, and to contribute to the Kurdish 'nation-building' process so constructively.

The digital networks profiled here appear to be rooted in Iranian Kurdish communities, and generally have an outward-facing stance, with Kurdish communities in Iraq and Turkey equally welcome to contribute. There are rather mixed attitudes towards Persian-speakers, and although websites such as the Bokan Literary Committee offer Persian-language content as a means of bridging the gap between Kurdish and Persian communities, many of the spaces examined are ambivalent, or outright hostile to the use of Persian, with their primary objectives appearing to be a defensively-minded cultivation and reinforcement of Kurdish identity.

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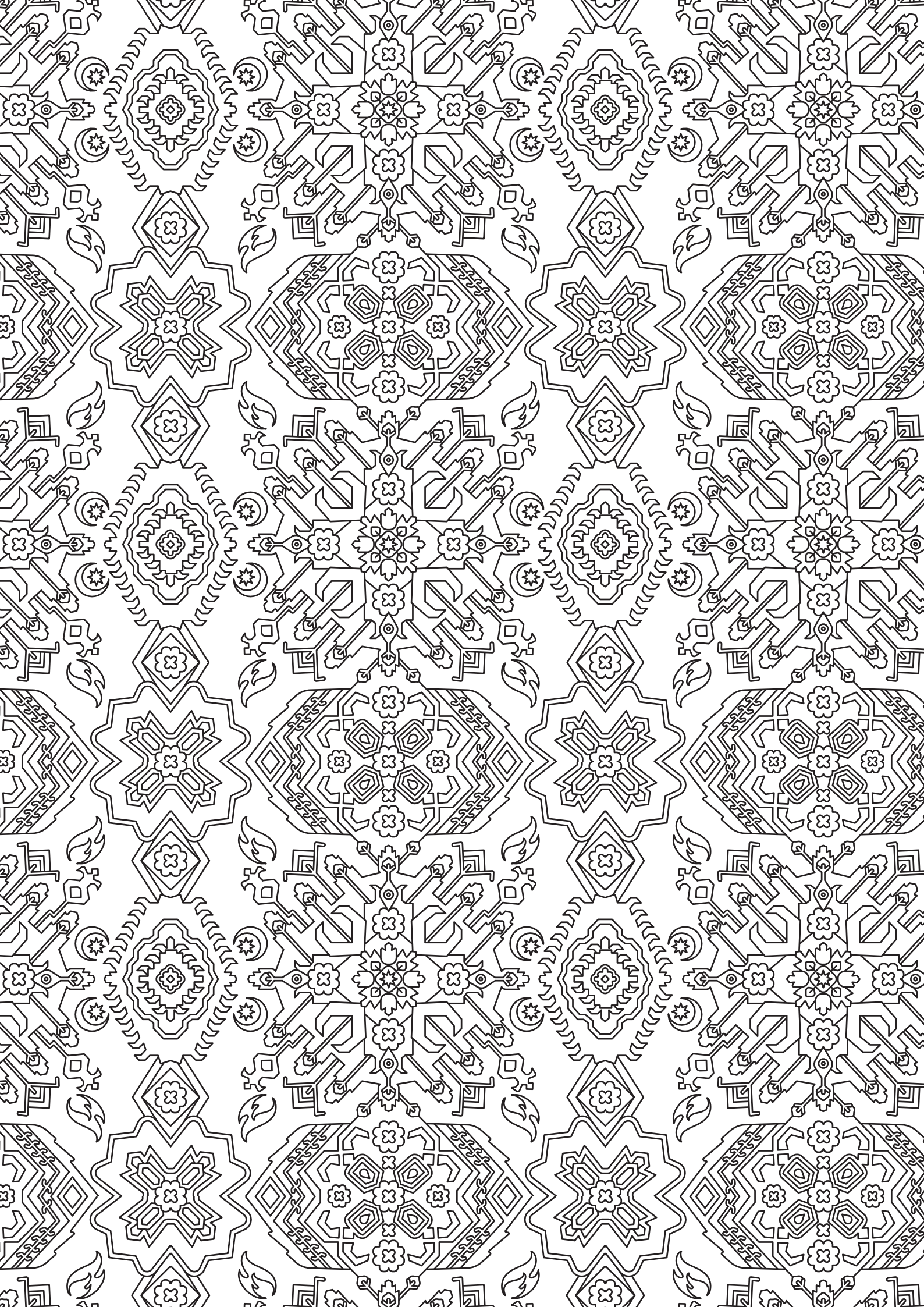


TURKS

Turkish peoples have been central to the development of the Iranian nation in the past millennium, with Turkic dynasties such as the Ghaznavids and the Seljuqs playing important roles in the revival of Persianate culture in the wake of the Islamic Conquest. Although later Turkic invasions would prove more destructive (the invasion of Tamerlane wrought destruction on Iran to an extent not seen since the conquest of Genghis Khan), nomadic Turkic groups would continue to enmesh themselves in Iranian politics well into the twentieth century. Although nomadism has receded into history, politicians and leaders from Iranian Azerbaijan have gone on to play key parts in modern Iranian politics, from the Constitutional Revolution of 1908 through to the 1979 Revolution and the Green Movement.

Despite their large population, and rootedness in Iranian history and culture, Turkish communities have consistently found themselves at the sharp end of 20th century politicians' campaigns of cultural 'Persianisation'. Ever since the accession of the nationalist Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925, educational instruction in the Turkish language has been forbidden, and restrictions have been imposed on publishing and the media.

Iranian Azerbaijan is a majority-Shi'ite region in which the majority of the population speaks both Azerbaijani Turkish and Persian. Although it is generally very well integrated, the region has a long history of tension and conflict with the central government, with a number of autonomist uprisings being launched in the early 20th century. Although they were suppressed by the Iranian army, a strong sense of regional identity persists to the present day, buoyed in recent years by easy access to Turkish-language satellite programming from Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

This chapter will examine the current state of the Iranian Turkish minorities and their engagement with digital media. As a result, this study will have a particular focus on content produced by the Azerbaijani Turks—the group with the highest levels of internet access and urbanisation. In the face of discrimination and the sidelining of the Turkish language, we will explore how the community is mobilising online to bring about a linguistic and cultural renaissance.

DEMOGRAPHICS

POPULATION:

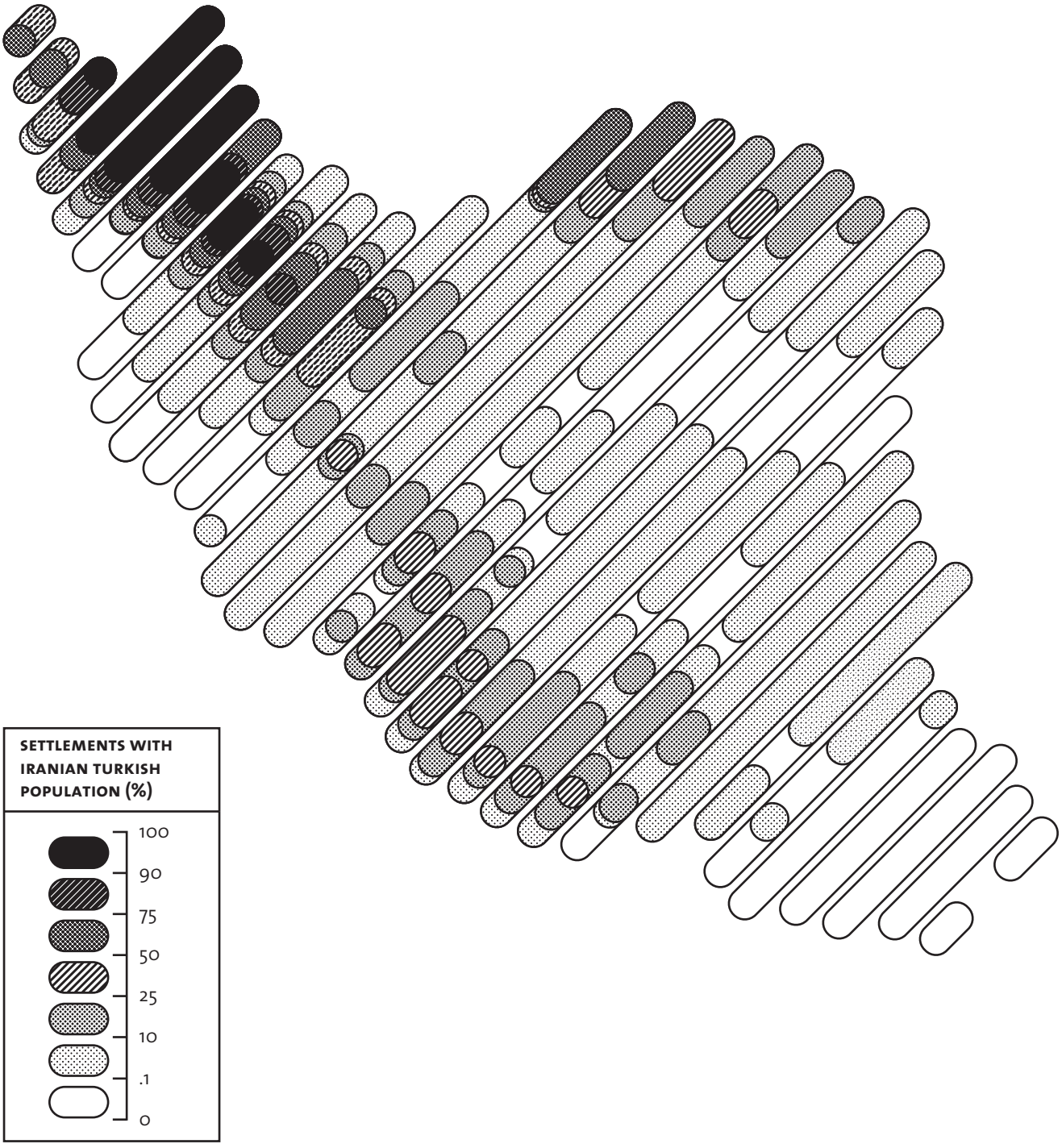
12—18 million

LANGUAGE:

Azerbaijani Turkish, Qashqai

RELIGION:

Shi'a Islam



TIMELINE

EXTERNAL POWERS

POLITICAL ACTION

CULTURAL FREEDOMS

1501
Shah Isma'il establishes the Safavid dynasty. Isma'il is a native Turkish-speaker, and Turkish becomes the language of the early Safavid court. An estimated 1200 Turkish words entered the Persian language in this period.

1909
Pro-constitutional forces from Azerbaijan occupy Tehran and depose Shah Mohammad Ali Mirza Shah Qajar, after he overrode Iran's new constitution the previous year.

1920
Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani establishes the Republic of Azadistan ('Land of Freedom') in Tabriz, but it is crushed by the Iranian military.

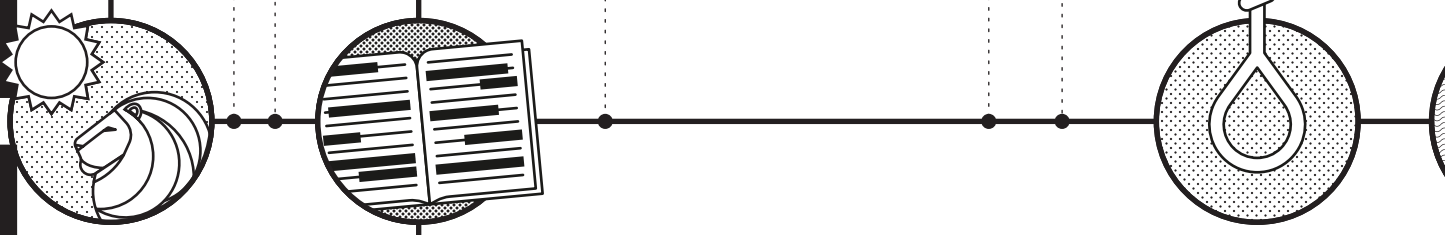
1925-1979
Azerbaijani Turkish-language publications and teaching are banned throughout the Pahlavi period.

1941
Soviet troops occupy Iranian Azerbaijan.

October 1945
The autonomous Azerbaijan People's Government is established, as left-wing nationalist leaders take advantage of the Soviet-enforced power vacuum. Azeri Turkish was recognized as the official language of the province, and the Turkish-language media flourished.

May 1946
The USSR agrees to withdraw forces from Azerbaijan in return for oil concessions.

December 1946
Iranian troops occupy Tabriz. The leaders of the People's Government attempt to negotiate, but are forced to surrender. Mass arrests and executions follow, and the ban on the use of Turkish in official settings is renewed.



December 1991
The Republic of Azerbaijan declares independence from the USSR.

January 1980
Military forces from Tehran restore the revolutionary government in Tabriz and execute the Khalq-e Moselman's leaders. Ayatollah Shariatmadari is confined to virtual house arrest in Qom.

1994-1995
Protests erupt at Orumiyeh University and Tabriz University against the racist misrepresentation of Azerbaijani Turks on Iranian television. The protests are suppressed.

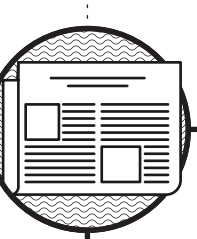
May 12 1996
Large demonstrations broke out in Tabriz after Chehregani's resignation. Many protesters were arrested, and 5 were publicly executed.

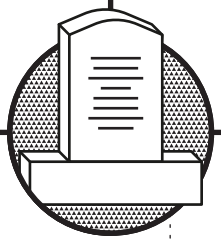
February 1979
Associates of the Azeri Turkish cleric Ayatollah Shariatmadari establish the Muslim People's Republican Party, drawing together anti-Pahlavi Turks from different political factions.

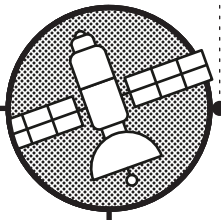
February 28 1981
The Khalq-e Moselman bomb the Tabriz headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party. The subsequent insurgency claims around 10,000 lives.

May 2006
Massive rallies are held in Tabriz and Orumiyeh in protest against a newspaper cartoon depicting Azeris as cockroaches. Authorities cracked down, killing scores of people and jailing hundreds.

December 1979
The Khalq-e Moselman launch an insurrection in Tabriz, in opposition to the constitutional empowerment of Khomeini as Supreme Leader.







1992
With the advent of satellite TV, Iranian Azerbaijanis gain access to vast amounts of unfiltered Turkish content from across the border in Turkey and Azerbaijan.

19 April 1996
Khatami's election ushers in a cultural detente that stimulates the flourishing of Azeri-nationalist press.

February 1979
As the Shah leaves the country, Azeri Turkish newspapers begin to flourish.

1984
Writers and poets from Iranian Azerbaijan are excluded from Iran's 1984 Congress of Muslim Writers.

2013
Rouhani's government drafts the 'Charter of Citizens' Rights', with the stated aim to improve human rights and minority rights in Iran. The draft is still under consideration in the Iranian Parliament.

ISSUES FACING TURKS

EDUCATION DISCRIMINATION

Ever since the accession of Reza Shah Pahlavi to the throne in 1925 (and even during his period as Prime Minister from 1921-25), the linguistic and cultural autonomy of Iranian Azerbaijanis has been under more-or-less constant assault from the central government in Tehran, with the first memo mandating Persian-language education distributed in 1923 (Hassanpour, 1991).

These policies resulted in the state-sponsored stigmatisation of the Turkish language in education. In 1941 the Cultural Affairs Chief of Azerbaijan Province stated: "*Whoever speaks Turkish, tether him like a donkey and fasten him to his stall*" (Nouri, 2015: 1477).

During World War II, British and Soviet forces occupied Iran, essentially preventing the central government from devising and implementing cultural policy. The Soviet occupation continued into 1945-1946, creating a power vacuum in Iranian Azerbaijan which was filled by the left-wing nationalist leaders of the Azerbaijan People's Government, who permitted mother-tongue education (Price, 2005: 176). The central government reasserted itself in 1946, and restrictions on Turkish education were reimposed. Anti-Turkish Persianising policies increased in intensity until the collapse of the Pahlavi regime in 1979.

Although the Revolution enshrined minority language rights in the new Constitution, in practice Turkish literature was suppressed and restrictions continued on mother-tongue education (Shaffer, 2002: 87). Persian-language textbooks form the basis of assessment in Iranian Azerbaijan, as they do all across the country (Rust et al, 2008). Although examples do exist of teachers bending the rules and teaching classes in Azerbaijani Turkish (Azarsina, 2007), the system still insists on Persian as the primary language of instruction.

Recent studies indicate that despite the strength of Turkish identity amongst Azerbaijani young people, their levels of linguistic sophistication in Turkish is generally not high—in 2008 only 36% of survey participants stated that their knowledge of the language was 'high' or 'very high' (Nouri, 2015: 1478). Azerbaijani Turkish largely remains the language of the home and the bazaar—not of the lecture theatre.

PUBLISHING RESTRICTIONS

Alongside restrictions on education, Turkish-language writers and publishers have faced significant barriers to their operations. The long-term impact of the Azerbaijan People's Government was to exacerbate Pahlavi paranoia about the threatening potential of Azerbaijani literature. As a result, Turkish-language publications were few and far between from 1946-1979, and the few examples of published literature were forbidden from mentioning ethnic designations (Javadi and Burrill, 2014).

The Islamic Republic was initially more relaxed about Azerbaijani Turkish journals, with several regular publications being established in the wake of the Revolution (Ibid). Most of them, however, soon fell foul of state censors (Shaffer, 2002: 87; FIDH, 2010: 16), with only the bilingual *Varliq* surviving until the present day.

DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM

Turkish-speakers in Iran report widespread ridicule and discrimination in society, with racially offensive content fairly commonplace in Iranian popular culture. The most visible demonstration of this came in 2006, when a cartoon published in the newspaper *Iran* was accused of insulting Azerbaijani Turks by portraying them as cockroaches. Although the cartoonist denied that this was the intention (Miranda, 2015), the images triggered a wave of riots and general unrest across Iranian Azerbaijan (Collin, 2006), resulting in scores of deaths and hundreds of arrests (Amnesty International, 1997: 139).

Other reports suggest that Azerbaijani military personnel have been expelled for taking part in cultural celebrations in recent years (FIDH, 2010: 16), echoing earlier claims that Qashqai Turkish ceremonies were banned by the government for being 'un-Islamic' (Beck, 1992: 39). Such suppression of displays of Turkish culture have not always been systematic, but do suggest that elements in the Iranian establishment still view Turkish culture as something to be swept under the rug, rather than recognised as a component of Iranian identity.

WEBSITES

BILIMSESI

WEB ADDRESS:

bilimsesi.com

STATUS:

UNBLOCKED

Bilimsesi ("*Sound of Science*") is an Azerbaijani Turkish-language technology and science website. Geared towards Iranian Turks, the website employs the Perso-Arabic alphabet, which is more easily accessible than the Romanised forms of Turkish used in Turkey and Azerbaijan. The website was launched in 2013 by a group of Azerbaijani youth activists, and aims to promote the use of the Azerbaijani Turkish language in everyday life, and in particular within technical fields normally dominated by Persian.

As a result of the Persian language's hegemony in the fields of education and science, Iranian Azerbaijani Turks frequently use a combination of Persian and Azerbaijani Turkish—colloquially known as "*Fazeri*"—to discuss technical topics. *Bilimsesi* works to counter this by replacing Persian technical words with Turkish ones. These substitute words are either created by *Bilimsesi* itself, or imported from Turkey or Azerbaijan. In this way, Bilimsesi implicitly confronts the opinion that Azerbaijani Turkish is an '*improper*' language to be used in scientific contexts.

The site contains a wide variety of content ranging from men's and women's health, to technology, culture, sport, cities, tourism, environmentalism and astronomy. Written content is updated on a daily basis. *Bilimsesi* recently unveiled a new segment called "*Bilim Video*" (Science Video), which features videos about health and technology. The videos are short—appropriate for slow internet speeds in Iran—and mobile friendly. As one of the site's administrators puts it, "*Our people like to watch [rather] than to read. That is why we have started our video section*".

The page is well-integrated with social media. Bilimsesi's Facebook page has more than 4,300 likes, is updated twice a day on average, and content is consistently liked and shared by the page's users. Hosts of 'Bilim Video' are also active on Facebook, and users sometimes engage with them on their own pages.

[Fig. 1] – *Bilimsesi* Front Page

WEBSITES

OYAN NEWS

WEB ADDRESS:

oyannews.com

STATUS:

BLOCKED

Oyan News (Wake News) is one of the most widely used websites for local news amongst Azerbaijani Turks in Iran. It is utilised not only by Iranian Azerbaijanis inside the country, but also throughout the Azerbaijani diaspora. Groups in the Iranian opposition media often use the website as a source for news related to Iranian Azerbaijan.

Oyan news introduces itself as "*a tool to access to the kinds of information and consciousness about Turks in Iran that Persian sources do not normally provide. Our focus will be on providing for the groups who do not have much information about what is happening in (Iranian) Azerbaijani society". It also states that "our aim is to increase the self-awareness of Turkish people in Iran in order to help them recognise the obstacles to political development, and the ways to overcome them*".

The site has been active since 2012, and has a wide network of correspondents in Azerbaijani cities. It frequently provides exclusive news and reports, and cross-post news reports from other agencies. *Oyan News* uses Persian, Azerbaijani Turkish (in both Latin and Perso-Arabic alphabet), and English in its reports, although the content is not exactly the same. The Persian-language site is most-frequently updated. The site is integrated with Facebook and Twitter, having over 3,700 likes and 400 followers respectively. According to web analysis tool Similarweb, the site receives around 20,000 visits per month.

The news agency focuses primarily on the Turkish-populated provinces of Iran, and lists stories under the lists of human rights, politics, economics, culture & art, sport, cities, women, special reports and other topics.

Special reports deal with historical events, figures, and current issues facing the Azerbaijani Turkish minority in Iran. Examples include the death of Lake Urmia, the Qaradagh earthquake, and the 22 May 2006 'cockroach cartoon' unrest in Iranian Azerbaijan. The website also carries podcasts and videos containing interviews and video reports.

The website has a separate page for letters and editorials sent in by visitors and contributors. Some articles in the current list are named: "*Emancipation of the modern Azerbaijani people*", "*Azerbaijan, the victim of a new structural racism in Iran*", and "S*ustainable development and education in mother-tongue languages*". The paper therefore serves as a platform for Azerbaijani Turks in Iran and the diaspora to exchange ideas and discuss the situation of the community in Iran.

[Fig. 2] – *Oyan News* Front Page

SOCIAL MEDIA
SATTAR KHAN

WEB ADDRESS:
facebook.com/pages/Sattar-Khan/196958984 46?fref=ts

LIKES:
74,589

Sattar Khan is one of the most popular Facebook pages active around the issue of Turkish rights in Iran. The page is named after an Azerbaijani leader who led an uprising against Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar during the 1908 Constitutional Revolution. He is regarded as a national hero not only in Iranian Azerbaijan, but across the rest of Iran as well. Content is posted in Azerbaijani Turkish (in both the Latin and Perso-Arabic alphabet) and Persian. Iranian Turks, Persians, and users from other ethnic groups are all active on the page, which has over 74,000 likes.

The page covers a wide range of content relating to cultural, political, and social issues in Iran. Although there is a special focus on the plight of Iranian Turks, the page is also concerned with national political and social issues. Posts are frequently made about Turkic minority rights in other countries ranging from China, to Afghanistan and Syria. Although the page hosts a great deal of content, none of it is originally produced—all images, videos and articles are sourced from other websites and social media pages.

In [Fig. 3.1], '*Admin 17*' discusses minority rights, citing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

"*As human beings, let's know our rights:*

"Article 27 – In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language."

A user responded:

"*If they are wise, we will get our rights inside Iran, though I am not very hopeful about that.*"

In [Fig. 3.2] the admin "*Ata*" introduces the book "*Crafting State-Nations: India and Other Multinational Democracies*". Its focus is on how to establish democratic systems in multinational states. One user asks for a Persian translation of the book.

The post shown in [Fig. 3.3] contains an image of a calendar showing '26 Azar' (17 December)—the anniversary of a high-profile anti-Turkish book burning held in 1946. It came in the aftermath of Iran's re-occupation of Tabriz in the wake of the brief Soviet occupation. The text on the calendar reads:

"*To protest the burning of Turkish books on this day, let's present one another with a Turkish book.*"

The post itself reads:

"*Sisters and brothers, instead of swearing at Aryamehr ["Light of the Aryans"—an honorific title used for Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi], or feeling sad, just buy a Turkish book and give it as a gift. Let's make it a tradition.*"

[Fig. 3] – *Sattar Khan* on Facebook

[Fig 3.1] – A post outlining ethnolinguistic minority rights recognised in the ICCPR

[Fig. 3.2] – "*Crafting State-Nations*"

[Fig. 3.3] – From book-burning to book-buying

SOCIAL MEDIA
DIL-XOSHLUX

INSTAGRAM:
instagram.com/dilxoshlux

FOLLOWERS:
52,700

Dilxoshlux, "*Dilxoşluq*" in standard Azerbaijani Turkish and "Fun" in English, is a popular Instagram account. Dilxoshlux's profile picture mixes Turkish and English, with the slogan "*Keep calm and have fun*". The page describes itself as a place for "*Turkish fun and romance. No politics, no sexual content. Consistent with the Islamic Republic of Iran's laws. Insults and propaganda are forbidden. Please do not follow us if you're not a Turk, because all posts are in Turkish and are untranslated.*"

Unlike Facebook, Instagram remains unblocked in Iran, enabling people to use it freely—the page has more than 48,000 followers. Dilxoshlux mostly uses Turkish slang, and makes an effort to appeal to Turkish-speaking people from all over Iran—not just in Azerbaijan. The page uses just the Perso-Arabic script for Turkish, rather than the Latin font used in Turkey and Azerbaijan, making it easier for Iranian Turks to engage with. Beside the 'fun and romantic' posts, the page usually shares posts under the hashtag "*Let's preserve our mother-tongue language*". These posts suggest Turkish alternatives to commonly-used Persian words.

The page primarily offers Turkish-language jokes and memes, thereby attracting a wide audience. The page recommends to its followers that they use Turkish at every opportunity, and show respect to differing dialects and accents. It encourages Turkish-speaking citizens of Iran to feel pride in their own language and defy assimilation. Below are a few examples of the page's posts.

In [Fig. 4.1] a hedgehog looks at a brush, and asks: "*Mum? Is it you*?" The text accompanying the post tags a number of Turkish city names inside Iran, and states simply:

"*Persian comments will be deleted. Offensive comments against other dialects will be blocked.*"

In [Fig. 4.2] Dilxoshlux implores followers to "S*ay 'subay', don't say 'mujarad*'", in an effort to promote the Turkish language when using the word 'single'. At the bottom of the image is a quote from a poem about the Turkish language from the Azerbaijani poet Shahriar:

"There is no such lovely or favoured language as Turkish. If you mix it with another, it will thus lose its nobility."
-Shahriar, 'Türkün Dili', 1964

[Fig. 4] – *Dil-Xoshlux* on Instagram

[Fig. 4.1] – Turkish-speaking hedgehogs

[Fig. 4.2] – Language Dos and Don'ts

SOCIAL MEDIA
SINIQ RADIO

WEB ADDRESS:
facebook.com/SiniqRadio

LIKES:
7,006

Siniq Radyo (Broken Radio), is an Azerbaijani Turkish-language internet radio station. Its Facebook page is popular and active, with more than 7,000 likes. The station has been run by a number of Azerbaijani Turkish civil society activists since 2012, and is the first non-governmental Azerbaijani internet radio station based in Iran. Content is written in Perso-Arabic and Latin script, allowing it to appeal to Azerbaijani audiences across borders.

Although some programs focus on the political dimensions of the Azerbaijani Turkish issue in Iran, most devote their time to studies of poetry and literature—mostly Turkish in origin, but featuring some translations from Persian as well.

"Our listeners will listen to what they wish from the world of literature."
-Siniq Radio

Programming is professionally prepared and produced, with many shows presented by poets, authors, and literary critics. Podcasts are presented on the Facebook page and the Siniq Radio website. As well as analysing classical poets, programmes introduce new writers, conduct interviews with literary experts, and offer readings of the Turkish language's own literary masterpieces.

[Fig. 5.1] is an example of the sort of anti-racist content produced by Siniq Radio. The listed post links to a podcast condemning ethnic discrimination in Iran.

"*The listeners of Siniq Radio are always against racism. Here we'd like to again share our program about discrimination which we produced last year. It is worth another listen."*

The post in [Fig. 5.2] advertises the launch of a fresh podcast, containing an audio drama from Anton Chekhov's oeuvre, alongside a reading from listener's submitted work. The show thereby serves to impart new Turkish-language texts and translations upon its audience, promoting the use of Azerbaijani Turkish as a language of literature and high culture.

"*In our 44th program, we begin with a radio drama from the famous Russian author Anton Chekhov, and will finish the program with a reading sent in by our listener, who goes by the name of 'Hungry Child'."*

[Fig. 5] – *Siniq Radio* on Facebook

[Fig. 5.1] — Anti-racist programming on Siniq Radio

[Fig. 5.2] – *Siniq Radio* offers classical readings alongside fresh talent

SOCIAL MEDIA
EL BILIMI

WEB ADDRESS:

facebook.com/groups/1415600832051761/

MEMBERS:

6,685

El Bilimi (Folklore) is a closed Facebook group with more than 6,500 members, with a focus on the folklore of different Turkic communities living in Iran and the wider region. The group shares the folklore of Iranian Turks, including the Turks of Khorasan, Azerbaijan, and the Qashqai nomads of central and southern Iran, as well as Turks in Central Asia, Iraq, and Turkey.

The folklore shared on this page largely consists of proverbs, local expressions, and traditions. The group allows members to write new posts on the group's main page, although irrelevant posts are deleted. The most widely-used language is Azerbaijani Turkish, although the group is flexible in its approach. In its description it says:

"*Posts can be made in either the Latin or Perso-Arabic alphabet. If you are not used to writing in Turkish, it is permissible to write in Persian*".

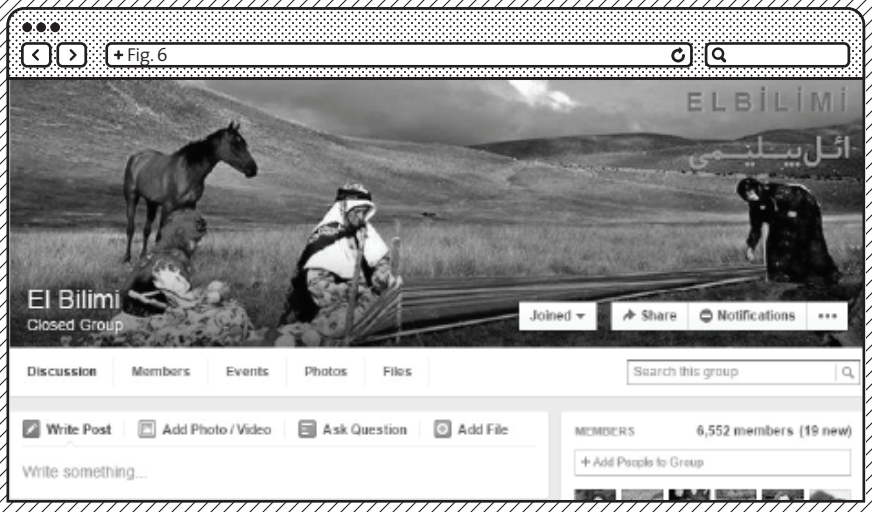
The group administrator requests that members mention the regional origin of the folklore submitted in their posts. The group bans posts containing materials considered insulting on the basis of gender, religion, language, accent, or nationality. It also recommends that items of folklore be submitted in the original regional dialect.

The group is aimed at young Turks from across the region who are interested in Turkic folklore. At the same time, it provides an invaluable forum for researchers and academics working in Turkology and cultural anthropology of the Turkic peoples.

An example of linguistic comparisons is evident in [Fig. 6.1], in which a user writes that the pictured plant is called '*Üzarlik'* in Germi, on the Iranian-Azerbaijani border. A number of respondents confirm that the name is shared by Turks in the Qashqai region of central Iran, Tabriz, and Kirkuk in Iraq.

The post displayed in [Fig. 6.2] describes Koroghlu, a hero celebrated in a number of Turkic traditions. In the epic of Koroghlu, the titular hero is a champion of the people who wages a guerilla war against the corrupt feudal lords of Anatolia.

By providing the space for Turkish-speaking people from different locations to share common cultural traditions the group strengthens Turkish self-identification and community solidarity. Written records of oral cultural heritage created by the group also serve as an invaluable resource for preserving vulnerable oral (predominantly rural) culture and transferring it to younger generations of Turks in Iran, and around the region.



[Fig. 6] – *El Bilimi* on Facebook

[Fig. 6.1] – Linguistic comparisons from Germi to Kirkuk

[Fig. 6.2] – The group discusses folk hero Koroghlu

SOCIAL MEDIA

CAMPAIGN FOR MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION AMONGST NON-PERSIANS IN IRAN

WEB ADDRESS:

facebook.com/groups/languematernelle/

MEMBERS:

13,590

Activists from a number of ethnic groups in Iran came together to create an open, multi-ethnic and, multi-lingual Facebook group in 2014, campaigning for the right to education in mother-tongue languages. The campaign was launched in response to a statement by the "*Institute of Literature and Persian Language*" which opposed mother-tongue education in provinces with significant non-Persian populations (Deutsche Welle, 2014).

Representatives of Kurds, Arabs, Baloch, Azerbaijani Turks, and Turkmen came together to call for support and solidarity in their efforts to practice education in their mother-tongues. The campaign continued until 21 February 2014—the International Day for Mother Languages—when a petition was sent to NGOs and human rights organizations. Despite the end of the political campaign, the page remains active, and over 13,000 members share posts relating to the issue of mother-tongue education for Iranian minorities.

Content on the page is largely rooted in political activism aimed at highlighting human rights violations, in order to provide international organizations with evidence of government mistreatment of minorities. Armed with such information, members hope that the international community might be able to exert pressure on Iran's government to lift its restrictions on mother-tongue education provision.

In [Fig. 7.1] a user shared a picture of an outdoor classroom in Iranian Balochistan, comparing it in the comments with an image of a well-equipped Tehrani classroom, a move intended to show the gulf between education provision for Persian and Baloch children.

The image shared in [Fig. 7.2] demonstrates the multiple identities of many ethnolinguistic minorities in Iran. It reads: "*To be Iranian is not to be Persian*", and has received more than 40 likes. Although some strands of ethnically-rooted dissent in Iran advocate for separation and total independence from the Iranian state, many other Iranian minorities are simply seeking to be able to express themselves in their native languages—for them, the concepts of 'Iran' and 'Iranianness' transcend such straightforward linguistic categories.

[Fig. 7] — *Campaign for Mother-Tongue Education Amongst Non-Persians in Iran* on Facebook

[Fig. 7.1] – Comparing education provision in Balochistan and Tehran

[Fig. 7.2] — Iranian ≠ Persian

INSIGHTS

The Azerbaijani Turkish community has produced a vibrant and diverse online ecosystem catering to the specific needs of the Turkish community in Iran—that is, with a fairly narrow focus on the consolidation of Turkish identity, and the development of the Azerbaijani Turkish language. Examples such as Bilimsesi and Dil-Xoshlux demonstrate clearly the efforts being made by Iranian Azerbaijani activists to professionalise'the language, and encourage people to use it as a serious language of education and literature.

The paradox of Azerbaijani Turkish identity is also noticeable when contrasting the Sattar Khan and El Bilimi pages. Sattar Khan is an inclusive page celebrating Iranian Azerbaijani culture in Turkish and Persian, with participation from a number of Persian users. El Bilimi, on the other hand has more of a pan-Turkic character, drawing connections between Turks in Iran, Iraq, Anatolia, and Central Asia. However, even this page is explicitly inclusive of Persian-speakers and the users of the page seem to be at ease reconciling their Turkish and Iranian identities.

The Azerbaijani Turkish online community is an inclusive community that is generally mindful of the existence of dual Iranian and Azerbaijani identities. By creating bilingual spaces for Persian and Turkish speakers to develop their awareness of Azerbaijani Turkish language and culture, activists are facilitating the development of greater understanding and tolerance between Persian-speakers and Turkish communities throughout Iran.

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CONCLUSION

This report has shown some of the ways that ethnic and linguistic minorities in Iran use new technologies and social media platforms to respond to the specific issues facing their communities. The platforms they use and the sophistication of the networks they develop are naturally contingent upon the levels of internet access the community enjoys inside Iran and the extent to which a cross-border digital media ecology has been cultivated by co-ethnics outside the country.

Although Iran's ethno-linguistic minority communities share some challenges—such as the widespread denial of access to mother-tongue education, the imposition of tight controls on the development of minority publications and cultural organisations, and economic exclusion—there are so many local specificities that it would be crude and unhelpful to make a blanket set of recommendations for the multitude of ethnic and linguistic minority communities in Iran.

Instead, we'll take each community in turn, and point out the existing strengths and development needs within each group's digital landscape, before making some more generalised comments about the Rouhani government's approach to minority issues two years into his first term.

TURKS

- The Turks of Iranian Azerbaijan have developed thriving digital networks spread across a wide range of social media platforms.
- Although geared towards language and identity preservation, Azerbaijani online communities have generally remained open to contribution and engagement from Persian-speaking users, and are generally comfortable with expressions of dual Turkish-Iranian identity.
- Initiatives such as *Siniq Radio* are making strides towards raising the profile of Azerbaijani literature, and could provide a valuable platform for the further development of the region's literary tradition in the years ahead.

Given the breadth of content across numerous filtered and unfiltered platforms and the existence of numerous forms of content catering to the community's specific needs, our assessment is that the Iranian Turkish communities are in need of relatively little external support or capacity-building measures.

BALOCH

- Iranian Balochis have very limited access to digital media, with Sistan and Balochistan Province having the third-lowest internet penetration rate in the country. The Baloch population over the border in Pakistan has comparably poor access, leaving exile organisations with limited access to Balochistan as leaders in content production.
- There is evidence of integration between Baloch content on traditional social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) with more widely-available chat apps such as WhatsApp. Anecdotal data suggests that such platforms operate as safe spaces for Baloch-language discussion and cultural development, although their closed nature and the limited scope of this report makes this difficult to verify. Small Media recommends that further research be conducted on the extent and purpose of such networks.

Iran's Baloch community have struggled to construct widespread and durable digital networks, or utilise technology for the purposes of cultural production. Although some Pakistan-produced Baloch programming is accessible via satellite, the community in Iran tends to consume culture rather than produce it in any great capacity. Nonetheless, Baloch people have managed to mitigate the effects of limited internet access upon community building by making use of simpler mobile chat apps instead. Further research should be conducted on the extent and purpose of these networks, and support should be provided to help Baloch innovators, cultural producers, and community leaders to craft secure spaces for cultural development and exchange.

AFGHAN REFUGEES

- Although Afghan refugees are a generally underprivileged group with lower levels of internet access than many Iranians, a number of the campaigns featured in this report are targeted primarily at Afghan users, including one campaign attempting to provide support to refugees and migrants on the move through Iran and Europe.
- Iranian citizens are very much involved in the social media campaigns for Afghan rights. This solidarity towards the refugee population is a positive force that should be harnessed to bring about tangible social change.
- Currently, campaigns are geared more towards countering racist discourses online than they are towards providing tangible help for refugees. There remains space for the application of non-Iranian refugee assistance models—such as the German 'Welcome Refugees' initiative—to be applied in an Iranian context.

Online communities and campaigns relating to the Afghan refugee crisis are not powered solely by Afghans living in Iran—these initiatives have been fuelled by the energy of thousands of sympathetic Iranians as well. Up until now, their efforts have been geared towards combating societal discrimination and entrenched racism, but there is the potential for the pro-refugee movement to start to provide more concrete and hands-on assistance to Afghan refugees living in Iran.

AHWAZI ARABS

- Genuine digital activism around the issue of Ahwazi Arab rights has been subsumed by a tidal wave of competing propaganda put out by anti-Iranian activists from the Gulf and government supporters in Iran.
- The legitimacy of much anti-Iranian material is put into question by its sectarian, anti-Shi'ite language. Given that Ahwazi Arabs are broadly Shi'a Muslims, one wouldn't expect genuine Ahwazi activists to couch their criticisms of Iran in such terms.

It is very difficult to establish a clear picture of the situation facing the Ahwazi Arabs of Iran, as a result of the overwhelming levels of Gulf-based social media engagement on 'Ahwazi' platforms. There is a need to cultivate alternative spaces in which Ahwazi Arab activists can come together and articulate their cultural and political demands, free from the distorting influences of aggressive government activists from Iran and the Gulf states.

KURDS

- Similarly to the Iranian Turkish community, Iran's Kurds are able to take advantage of well-developed cross-border activist networks in Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdish activists there (and to a lesser extent, from Turkey) have engaged actively with Iranian Kurds, sharing literature, music, and imagery of national significance, thereby strengthening cross-border conceptions of Kurdish nationhood.
- Kurdish online publishing platforms have offered Kurdish writers an opportunity to publish their work without having to subject it to Iran's byzantine and censorial publication system, which has inhibited the development of Kurdish literature since 1979.
- Several Kurdish online communities are multi-lingual, allowing Kurds from various linguistic groups to share in the same discussions, and giving them access to the same cultural materials.

Iranian Kurds have found their voices hugely magnified by digital media, and social media platforms in particular. Although the community has long been able to import Kurdish-language culture produced in Iraq and Turkey (whether via smuggled literature or satellite TV broadcasts), it has struggled to export cultural output back to these markets. For the first time, Iranian Kurds have been able to make substantive contributions to the ongoing regional discourse about Kurdish identity, and the cultural and political demands of the Kurdish people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report offers two sets of recommendations. The first is a list of suggested policies for the Islamic Republic of Iran to adopt in order to protect the rights of its ethnic minority citizens. As this report has noted, the Rouhani administration has been sending some encouraging signals in some areas of ethnic minority policy, but there is a long way to go before all Iranian citizens can enjoy equality under the law.

Small Media offers the following recommendations to the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

- Increase government investment in local services and infrastructure in ethnic minority regions. Education provision, internet access, and even the availability of basic necessities (including clean water and electricity) are lacking in a number of Iran's peripheral, minority-majority provinces.
- Lift restrictions (official and unofficial) on the free activity of non-Persian language writers and publishers, and allow their works to be published within the existing framework of Iran's publishing system.
- Lift restrictions on mother-tongue education in minority schools allowing, at the very least, minority languages and literatures to be taught in schools from the primary level.
- Take steps to counter discriminatory policies and hate speech directed at Afghan refugees by local government authorities and members of the public, and continue to provide humanitarian support for the Afghan refugee population in Iran.
- Achieve better representation of 'double minority' Iranians in government at national and local levels. Representatives at the local government level should reflect the ethnic and religious makeup of their communities.

The second set of recommendations is targeted at the communities themselves, along with their advocates in the international community. As this report has demonstrated, ethnic minority activists are building exciting new tools, establishing digital spaces in which to revive national cultures and languages, and cultivating cross-border networks to build relationships with co-ethnics in neighbouring countries.

These recommendations posit some potential areas for further research and development which will allow for such community initiatives to make greater impacts on the development of Iran's movement for ethnic minority rights:

- Baloch activists need greater support in order to effectively counter state propaganda and marginalisation, as well as to counter the growing influence of sectarian movements in the region. More research should be undertaken to explore the potential of mobile phone apps as platforms for community empowerment.
- The voices of Ahwazi activists need to be heard more clearly. Currently, sectarian activists from both Iran and the Gulf States are hijacking the debate around cultural politics. More initiatives should be undertaken to assess the position of Iran's Arab community, and construct spaces in which genuine local movements might be able to take shape.
- The online movement in support of Afghan refugees in Iran has grown to a remarkable size and has proven to be a powerful and effective platform for anti-racism activists. It would be fantastic to harness this energy and channel it into initiatives that provide more direct support for refugees, and provide activists with some calls-to-action with more tangible results.
- The lack of access to mother-tongue education is

inhibiting the academic progression of ethnic minority students across Iran. Online learning initiatives could prove to be valuable tools for young students denied the opportunity to learn in their own languages at school.

- Online platforms for the dissemination of minority literature are generally small, and host limited collections of work. If minority language literature could be drawn onto a single e-publishing platform publications would be likely to reach a larger and more diverse audience, and foster greater inter-community dialogue.

CONTACT US

Want to speak with us about our findings? Perhaps you've got suggestions about how we could take our recommendations forward? The Small Media team would love to hear from you.

Drop us a message via any of the methods below, and we'll get back to you as soon as we can!

Email: contact@smallmedia.org.uk
Facebook: facebook.com/SmallMedia
Twitter: @small_media