

Introduction

The separation between the religious minorities and the Shi'a majority in Iran was never as clear to me as it was at an Armenian wedding I attended at Saint Sarkis Cathedral in the summer of 2010.

Following the ceremony, I gathered with the other guests in the courtyard of the church compound to congratulate the newlyweds. It was late afternoon when the weather was still quite warm but cool enough to be comfortable. The streets of central Tehran were just beyond the compound walls and through the gate, which was partially open in order to allow the guests to come and go, I was peering out at a different world peering in.

An Armenian wedding with unveiled women, wearing neither hijab (a veil that covers the head) nor manteau (a long coat that reaches the knees), is unseen in public in Tehran today. Needless to say, the outsiders were curious. I saw a car filled with young men deliberately hold up the traffic simply to look inside the compound. Women walking along the footpath in chadors, a loose long black veil worn over the head and reaching the ankles without covering the face worn by religious Shi'a women and girls, also stopped and looked inside. Their glances were not of disgust or shock but of profound interest and perhaps even bafflement at something foreign.

I was struck by the thought that before me were two groups of people, both Iranian citizens, who were living side by side but completely separately from one another. The "Twelver" Shi'a foundations of the Islamic Republic mean that the Armenian minority inhabits a private space rarely seen by the Muslim majority.¹ This physical separation belies a deeper social and cultural separation that has developed since the 1979 Revolution when a conglomerate of forces in Iranian society overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy, eventually replacing it with an Islamic republic. While Armenians, along with the other minorities, have always inhabited a separate place in Iran the previous regime made an attempt to neutralise their difference through

assimilation. Today, however, many Armenians born and raised in Iran are ambivalent towards Iranian identity.

This situation leads into a complex discussion of the intersections of ethnicity, religion, and identity in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The spatial and social separations described above are part of a wider question that this book seeks to address: to what extent has the exclusion of the religious minorities from the mainstream of Iran affected their ability or willingness to identify as Iranians? I will provide a case study of Iran's Armenian minority, a community of Christians in an Islamic Republic. Primarily I will be discussing how the Armenians, as both an ethnic and religious minority, position themselves with regard to their identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Armenians, along with the Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, the Jews, and the Zoroastrians, are classified by the state as the recognised religious minorities as they are afforded rights by Article 13 of the 1979 Constitution. These rights include reserved seats in parliament, of which the Armenians have two, for the northern (Tehran and Tabriz) and southern (Isfahan) constituencies. Recognition does not extend to "Iranian Christians" who have converted from Islam to Christianity, the Baha'is, Yarsanis, or the smaller Mandaean and Sikh communities.²

The Armenian community, like all of the religious minority communities in Iran, is in a state of decline. Every year more of the youth leave Iran, never to return, and the birth-rate is not great enough to replace them. As is the case in other parts of the Middle East, Iran is slowly losing its religious diversity. This situation poses numerous problems: as the nation becomes more religiously homogenous, it is less likely that its citizens will encounter difference and be able to challenge prejudice with face-to-face experience. Equally, Iranians, long isolated by international sanctions aimed at their government, have fewer encounters with other religions, and inter-religious encounters humanise difference. While a significant percentage of scholarly work on the Islamic Republic of Iran is focused on challenging existing stereotypes of Post-Revolution Iran, here I will additionally describe how the religious homogenisation of Iran is gradually robbing the country of a tangible connection to its history of coexistence and relative inclusiveness.

Contextualising the Research

This book is based on research I have conducted with Iranian Armenians, including five months of field research in Iran in 2010 and two

return visits in 2014 and 2015 for one month at a time.³ This research primarily involved participant observation and semi-structured interviews and I have utilised pseudonyms and other de-identifying tools throughout this book. A considerable amount of change took place from my first field trip in 2010 to the second in 2014, and this was in no small part influenced by President Hassan Rouhani (elected in 2013) and the different approach he has taken in public discourse, both in addressing minority issues and talking about religion more generally. President Rouhani appointed former Intelligence Minister Ali Younesi as his advisor on minority affairs, the first time such a role has existed in the history of Iran, and suggested that restrictions on the use of minority languages could be relaxed; both of these acts were received well in the Armenian community. This book, therefore, documents the changes and continuities in discourse around ethnicity and religion in a modern Middle Eastern state and provides a comparison between the Ahmadinejad and Rouhani Eras.

Primarily, this book looks at how minorities engage with the official national identity that is designed to unite all citizens within the one nation state. As David Yaghoubian noted in his historical research on the Armenians of Iran, examinations into minority identities provide striking insights into negotiations of national belonging.⁴ For this reason, research into the religious minorities of Iran has provided a better understanding of the diversity of the country as well as the flexibility and limitations of the Islamic Republic's ideological foundations. Each minority is shaped by its own history and degree of acceptance in Iranian society. The distinction between the recognised minorities (Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Jews, and Zoroastrians) and those not recognised (Iranian Christians, Baha'is, Yarsanis, and Mandaeans, to name a few) evidently affects their day-to-day existence. Furthermore, the traditionally low position of Jews in the social stratum coupled with the continuing hostility between Iran and Israel obviously affects the Jewish community, in spite of the recognition and representation afforded to them, whether or not their leaders choose to admit to their traditionally low status and problems with Israel affecting the community.⁵ The links between Zoroastrianism and ancient Iranian history, tied to the prevalence of Zoroastrian imagery in expressions of Iranian identity, influences the Zoroastrian community in many ways. While their "indigeneity" grants them some status in Iran, the presence of self-declared ethnic nationalists who claim to have "returned" to their ancient religion from Islam provides

the community with unwelcome attention. The Baha'i community has no recognition or security, and both the state and the clergy are hostile towards them.⁶

For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to focus on the Armenian minority. They are both an ethnic–linguistic and a religious–sectarian minority, sharing neither a common language nor faith with the majority of Iranians. They have a language and sect unique to themselves. This, along with historical factors, contributes to a perception of Armenians as more foreign to Iranian society than other religious minorities (with the possible exclusion of the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Mandaeans). My own familiarity with the Armenian language and culture provided an incentive for me to choose this community as a case study. In addition to this, the size of the community as the numerically largest of the recognised religious minorities and the only minority to have two seats in the federal legislative assembly (the Majles) contributes to a greater level of visibility in Iran.

The Field Site

Tehran is the cultural, social, economic, and political centre of Iran. A metropolis of perhaps 12 million at the time of writing, it is a crowded, congested, and polluted city and home to every conceivable kind of Iranian demographic.⁷ Most importantly, since the mid-twentieth century Tehran has eclipsed Isfahan as the centre of Armenian life in Iran.

Armenians live throughout Tehran but most prefer neighbourhoods that they refer to as *hayashat*, which translates to “many Armenians” or even “Armenians galore.” These are located in many places of original settlement. Armenians have been living in Tehran since at least the Safavid Era (1501–1736), having a church on the site of the present Saint George Church (Surb Gevorg) in the bazaar district. However, their numbers increased after Tehran was declared the capital in 1776. The first Armenians to arrive during this period were brought from New Julfa (Isfahan) at the order of Karim Khan Zand in the 1770s and a second group, deportees from Karabakh, were resettled in the Qajar capital during the reign of Agha Mohammed Khan in the 1790s.⁸ Armenians from all over Iran began arriving as free settlers in the early part of the reign of Fath-Ali Shah (1797–1834), both seeking opportunities in the newly proclaimed capital as well as wanting to be near

the seat of power and the protections it offered.⁹ The community continued to grow during the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979), with the greatest increase occurring in the 1950s as Armenian villagers, many of whom had initially wished to “repatriate” to Soviet Armenia, began settling in Tehran, leading to the near-doubling of the population from 36,000 to 65,000 in just over ten years.¹⁰ Tehran was not the only urban centre to experience such a dramatic increase in its Armenian population at this time, as the central Iranian city of Arak’s Armenian community swelled from 1,000 to 6,000 residents within the space of twelve months in 1946.¹¹ This migration from rural areas to Tehran continued throughout the 1960s and 70s and by 1978 the Armenian population of Tehran was 110,000.¹² Urbanisation further increased directly after the Revolution of 1979, although so did emigration.

The Armenian community was originally settled around the old city of Tehran with their ghetto roughly corresponding to the southern edge of the Bazaar district, where the Surb T’adēos-Bardughimēos (Saint Thaddeus and Bartholomew) Church is one of the few reminders.¹³ Further north of the city are two suburbs, Vanak and Darrus, which Tehran Armenians occasionally refer to as old Armenian villages.¹⁴ Darrus, once described as “a suburb of Tehran with a largely Armenian community,”¹⁵ is now an upper-class neighbourhood without a visible Armenian presence. Armenians from Kharqan and Karabagh settled in Darrus and nearby Qolhak in the 1790s.¹⁶ Vanak was settled in the nineteenth century by Armenian villagers from the Kharqan and Kazaz districts, near the city of Arak,¹⁷ and was a segregated village, with Christian and Muslim sections separated by a stream.¹⁸ Although swallowed by the metropolis in the 1970s, the Armenian presence in this area remains strong and it is home to several Armenian businesses, an Armenian Fortress Street, the Saint Minas Church, and, most notably, the Ararat Cultural Organisation’s principal compound. By the early twentieth century Armenians were moving up into the northern centre of the city in an area now referred to as Naderi (after the street, as well as a hotel and fashionable café opened by an Armenian). Armenians lived especially around the streets of Shah (Enqelab), Naderi (Jomhuri-ye Eslami), Qavam ol-Saltaneh (Si-e Tir and Mirza Kuchek Khan), and Laleh-zar, built many schools and churches and the original offices of *Alik*, Iran’s Armenian-language daily newspaper, are located in this neighbourhood. This area was generally popular with non-Muslims, and the Jewish and Zoroastrian communities also maintain many of

their institutions there today. By the 1970s, Armenians had begun to move up to the area on the grid between Haft-e Tir Square and Shah Abbas Street (Farahani) to Nader Shah Street (Mirza-ye Shirazi), encompassing the Saint Sarkis Cathedral (colloquially known as the Villa Church, after the street on which it is located).¹⁹ The Armenian populations of both Naderi and Nader Shah/Shah Abbas districts have declined, although many of the businesses, churches, schools, and cultural institutions remain. Today, the Armenian community is mainly settled in the north-eastern suburbs of Majidieh and Narmak as well as Vahidieh and Heshmatieh, an area that my interlocutors most often termed *hayashat*. These suburbs were originally settled in the 1950s by Armenian villagers who had intended to repatriate to Soviet Armenia but missed their opportunity and were forced to settle on the far outskirts of Tehran. Traditionally, Armenians from outer Tehran were looked down upon by the Armenians of Tehran proper and even amongst themselves they were divided by village and region of origin. Today, these neighbourhoods form the core of the community. The *hayashat* neighbourhoods, with their deep histories and present day dynamism, are the principal sites where this research took place.

As I have written elsewhere,²⁰ performing research in Iran involves its own unique challenges, beginning with access to the field site. Iran's diplomatic relations with most nations make prolonged stays in the Islamic Republic difficult, at least for those who are not eligible for an Iranian passport. Aside from visa restrictions and the suspicion that the government has for foreigners (especially Westerners), at the time of research sanctions against the regime made lengthy stays in Iran financially problematic. In each field trip, the sanctions blocked access to my Australian bank account while in Iran and I had to take all the funds on which I intended to survive into the country before arrival; as a postgraduate student in 2010, raising a suitable amount of capital was not an easy task.

A second major methodological challenge was the political situation. Arriving in Tehran in April 2010, I landed in a country that was still tense from political violence that had raged in the streets of several cities only months before. There was a heavy police presence, particularly around important days such as the anniversary of Khomeini's death, and their numbers around the *meydāns* made me more than just uncomfortable.²¹ Occasional tense moments on the streets, though never resulting in anything, sometimes made me question my project.

Furthermore, the fact that Iran does not seem to issue research visas meant that I have had to test different types of visas to see what was the most appropriate, or more importantly the most comfortable (*rāḥattarīn*) or safest for my participants. Throughout this book, I have presented my findings in accordance with the ethical requirements of my institutions (Monash University and Deakin University), as well as in accordance with my own judgement. This means that while I have used pseudonyms and basic contextual information in many sections to prevent participants from being identified, I have also removed these entirely in circumstances where the risk to participants is greatest.

A third factor was in accessing the community. Upon arrival in 2010, I had the contact details of a few community members, although none responded. A week after arriving, a classmate in my Persian language class introduced me to an Armenian couple she knew and other introductions would follow in similar circumstances. Most members of the Armenian community have encouraged my research, although occasionally I have been viewed with suspicion. In some instances, this had to do with the setting in which I was meeting people; formal events outside of Armenian organisations where non-Armenians were present were usually cold encounters, although the same people would be much more open to me in different environments. For example, a meeting on a university campus was less ideal than somewhere else, as very often my interlocutor behaved as if they were being scrutinised by others. The fact that I am not only a foreigner, but also a Westerner, would have no doubt influenced their anxieties.

Additionally, I found some community organisations, especially during a trip to Isfahan in November 2014, extremely reluctant to engage with me. In New Julfa, I was first invited but then refused entry to the community's schools, only to have the community's leadership change their tone a few days later by inviting me to be interviewed for their newsletter and gifting me locally-produced publications. I am not sure why they changed their mind but I assumed that one of my interlocutors in Isfahan interceded on my behalf. This demonstrates the advantages of the ethnographic method, where cultural familiarity and prolonged stays in the field facilitate an understanding that is otherwise inaccessible. Interactions like these also reminded me of my outsider status and in some cases I have no doubt that this was the explicit intention.

Issues with Nomenclature

In the English language spoken outside the UK, the practice when dealing with “hyphenated” identities is usually to place the ethnicity or other defining element before the subject’s primary nationality. Hence we speak of Indigenous Australians, Chinese Americans and white South Africans. However, this is not a consistent rule. In this study, I have had to decide whether to use the term “Armenian Iranian” (consistent with the regular English ordering) or “Iranian Armenian.” While I acknowledge the veracity of both terms, for the sake of consistency I use the term Iranian Armenian. Most of the Iranian Armenians with whom I have met used the term *parskahay* to describe themselves. However, the English translation of this term, Persian Armenian, is awkward. Furthermore, some Iranian Armenians have objected when I used the word *parskahay*. In one such instance, an interlocutor in Tehran insisted that there is no such thing as *parskahayut’iwn* (Persian Armenian community), asking me rhetorically if I had ever heard of *k’ordahayut’iwn* (Kurdish Armenians). She instructed me that *iranahay* is more correct because it reflects the country, not the ethnicity and although I noticed that she occasionally used the term *parskahay*, I acknowledge that her point was correct. *Iranahay*, Iranian Armenian, and *iranahayut’iwn*, Iranian Armenian community, are the most common terms used in the Armenian language publications of Iran. For this reason, and having been admonished for my mistakes, I have chosen the order of Iranian Armenian.

A second major conceptual dilemma, and not one I have faced alone, relates to the word that best describes the category of Shi’a Iranians whose first language is a dialect that is mutually intelligible with the official language of the country, standard Persian. Eliz Sanasarian noted the problems with using language as a marker for ethnicity in the case of Persian-speakers, but as her study was centred on state-minority relations, she did not occupy much space defining ethnicity in Iran.²² This was a wise move in one sense; while many Iranians make the distinction between certain groups – for example, *pārs* and *tork* – very rarely, if ever, are these definitions given a concrete form.²³ Elling defined Persians as the “elusive majority” of Iran, acknowledging that while the designation is more linguistic than ethnic and is not commonly employed as a form of self-ascription, the connection between Persian language and the “supra-ethnic notion of Iranian-ness” means

that Persian speakers can be placed as a separate category in some contexts.²⁴ Since in this study I will be demonstrating that Armenians make important distinctions between “Iranians,” especially between Azeris and Persian-speakers, it will be necessary for me clarify some boundaries.

The first obstacle is to choose an appropriate term for the national language, itself part of a dialect continuum stretching from the western extremity of China across Central Asia into the Iranian plateau. The continuum is linked by the standard forms used in three countries: Tajik (Tajikistan, but also Uzbekistan), Dari (Afghanistan), and Farsi (Iran). The language was known officially as Farsi in Afghanistan before 1964. These terms are further complicated by the assumptions that exist in the names themselves; Farsi alludes to the region of Fars, now a province of Iran, due to the centrality of that region in the cultural, religious, and political traditions of “Western Persia” from the Achaemenid Era (550–330 BCE) onwards. Dari indicates its formal status as the language “of the court.”²⁵ Attempts to unify the language under the term “modern Persian” is problematic in that it claims continuity with the Persian of the Sassanian Era (224–651 CE). Zabiollah Safa argued that although some similarities have been identified by linguists between Modern Persian and Middle Persian, they do not represent a continuation of the one language.²⁶ Instead, Modern Persian developed out of the dialects spoken in the regions of Khorasan and Sistan (both centred today on Afghanistan and eastern Iran). The genre of literature cultivated in these regions by local rulers in the three to four centuries following the Arab Conquest led to the creation of a “court language” (*zabān-e darī*). Through the influence of its literature, this language moved west, gradually penetrating Azerbaijan and Iraq as well as the Middle Persian-speaking areas of western and southern Iran.²⁷

Finally, even regional terms such as Farsi do not reflect how many of its speakers view themselves. Traditionally divided by dialect, tribe, and other forms of social identification, Persian speakers have been increasingly encouraged to think of themselves as part of one ethnicity and to find similarities with those that they had previously considered to be quite different from themselves. Furthermore, those Iranian nationalists who emphasise their Persian identity will often exclude Persian-speaking Afghans from their definitions of Persian ethnicity. Instead of referring specifically to “Persian Iranians” or “Farsi-speaking

Iranians,” I will attempt to avoid complicating the study by simply referring to them as Muslim Iranians, which reflects how my Armenian interlocutors viewed this category of people. As the Armenian word *parsik* (Persian person) is often also used to mean “Iranian person,” without a specific ethnic connotation, at times in the text the terms “Persian” and “Iranian” appear to be used as synonyms. However, I must emphasise that this does not mean that I, nor my interlocutors, see the two as synonymous. In Chapter 4, for the sake of the discussion of Azeris who are also Muslim Iranians, I make the differentiation clear. Again, I will be following the categorisation made by my interlocutors, who used the terms *tork* and *t’urk*’ in Persian and Armenian respectively, rather than following any precedent set by existing scholarship.

Armenian Identity in Iran

A key argument I will present in this work is that Armenians of different generations do not relate to their Iranian identity in the same way. My initial assumption at the outset of my research was that Iranian Armenians would essentially see themselves as Iranians; however, interviews in the field problematized this assumption. While many Iranian Armenians, particularly of the Pre-Revolution Generation, accepted that they were Iranians, there were often those who argued that to be an Iranian is to be a Muslim, and therefore Armenians, as Christians, were not Iranians. Yet even this was not so straightforward, as interlocutors who claimed this in one setting would often identify as Iranian in other settings, for reasons I will explain in Chapter 5.

Essentially, those born after the Revolution expressed a stronger affinity with their Armenian identity and less compatibility with their Iranian identity. A perfect example of this generational attitude is found in the self-reflections of Sarkis, an engineer in his early thirties.²⁸ Sarkis was born during the early days of the Revolution and raised under the Islamic Republic. Very soon after meeting Sarkis, I became aware that when he was referring to Iranians he did not include himself. One evening, after a game of squash at the Nassiri Stadium, I asked him why and he responded “because I am a Christian.” He actually held no religious belief, but was designated as Christian by his Armenian-ness. I suggested that he was an Iranian and was only different in terms of religion, but he rejected this outright; as far as