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Religious Minorities in Iran

Eliz Sanasarian's book explores the political and ideological relationship between non-Muslim religious minorities in Iran and the state during the formative years of the Islamic Republic to the present day. Her analysis is based on a detailed examination of the history and experiences of the Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahais, and Iranian Christian converts, and describes how these communities have responded to state policies regarding minorities. Many of her findings are derived from personal interviews with members of these communities as well as careful analysis of primary documents. While the book is essentially an empirical study, it also highlights more general questions associated with exclusion and marginalization and the role of the state in defining these boundaries. This is an important and original book which will make a significant contribution to the literature on minorities.

Eliz Sanasarian is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Southern California. Her previous publications include *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (1982).

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Dedicated to my students

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It is not good to feel that one's own religion alone is true and all others are false. God is one only, and not two. Different people call on Him by different names: some as Allah, some as God, and others as Krishna, Siva, and Brahman . . . Opinions are but paths. Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the one ocean.

Sri Ramakrishna, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 8th edn. (1992), pp. 264–65.

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Preface

The genesis of this book goes back to an incident at the University of California, Berkeley, in April 1986. I was lecturing on women's political participation in the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies when I noticed a young woman who was leaning against the door listening with great intensity. In the audience were three women in their fifties who were whispering uninterruptedly and were clearly disturbed by something. During the question-and-answer period, one of them expressed her displeasure with me. My comments had appeared to her as a defense of the Islamic government; she severely criticized the clerical regime and Ayatollah Khomeini. Seeing her difficulty in communicating in English, I asked her to speak in Persian; she refused. She was determined to prove to the audience that I was a backer of the Islamic forces in Iran. Her strong pro-monarchical sentiments were not lost on anyone; in those days facing this kind of misreading of one's talk was a common occurrence. I would have forgotten the incident except for what happened next.

When the lecture was over, the young woman who had been leaning against the door approached me. "Do you remember me?," she asked. I did not. "We entered Pahlavi [Shiraz] University together. We were classmates. Even then you were always with the Muslims. You never learn." I was intrigued. Later, surrounded by Iranian students, most with some leftist affiliation, we sat for coffee. Her anger burst out: "I read your book [referring to my first book on Iranian women]. What is this attraction you feel for these prejudiced people? Why should you as an Armenian write about them? Haven't they harmed and offended us enough?" Bewildered, I asked if she was an Armenian. "I am an Assyrian. For them, all of us are the same. We are those dirty Christians. I left Iran a long time ago determined to have no communication with Iranians. Then, today, I came to hear you, thinking perhaps things have changed. Maybe now that so many of the expatriates have experienced oppression at the hands of fundamentalists their biases have disappeared. Maybe those who have fled Khomeini are more civilized. But I was wrong; they will never change.

Never. Did you know what the three women said after your talk? They said it was all the fault of the good shah. He was so kind-hearted that he spoiled [rudad] our religious minorities. These Armenians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Bahais conspired against him; they brought Khomeini to power. They destroyed our nation, and this one [referring to me] is a Khomeini agent. You see; they never change. Why aren't you as disgusted as I am?"

The brash young leftist idealists sitting around us were silent. I do not recall my response, but I do recall the feeling that she was not listening. I never saw or heard from her again but her words consumed me with curiosity. The ludicrous notion she attributed to the other women, that religious minorities were responsible for overthrowing the shah's regime and the founding of a Shii Muslim clerical-led state, raised many questions in my mind, eventually leading to the present work.

This book attempts to answer two questions: (1) what has been the overall policy of the theocratic Islamic state toward its non-Muslim religious minorities? And (2), how have the minorities dealt with state intrusion into their lives? Although there are small numbers of Hindus, Sikhs, Sabeans, and others in Iran, the focus of this investigation is on major non-Muslim religious minorities: Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahais, and Iranian Christian converts. Specifically, this study identifies the main ethnoreligious components, the history of official policy, possible variance in theocratic state policies, and the response of minorities.

The conceptual focus of the study is on the first decade of the Islamic Republic (1979–89); however, events and developments pertaining to 1989–98 are covered either in chapters or in the conclusion. The study focuses on 1979–89 for three main reasons: (1) state definition of Islamic ideology is the strongest during this time period and becomes more differentiated and obscured after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989; (2) with some exceptions the legal, social, and political position of recognized non-Muslim minorities after going through a major upheaval in the early 1980s is routinized by the mid- to late 1980s; and (3) the fall of communism and the formation of post-Soviet states introduce new nuances which, along with domestic strife, further complicate the political scene. Of course, several developments in the 1990s are covered but only when they directly relate to the main points of the text.

It would have been easier but intellectually less challenging to focus only on one community and trace their trials and tribulations in greater detail. The designation "non-Muslim" had a special place in the belief structure of the Shii revolutionary ideologues, and no single community could shed light on the intensity and variance of the meaning and practice

of state ideology. In addition, important differences in culture and history of the non-Muslim communities colored their varying reactions to state intrusion.

This study utilizes a variety of sources including personal interviews, primary sources, and documents obtained during a field trip to Iran in 1992, theological writings of religious leaders and various publications in Iran dealing with non-Muslim minority rights, thousands of pages of documents published by the government such as the proceedings of the Assembly of Experts and the Majlis, published interviews with leaders of religious minorities and Islamic authorities, and a myriad of media accounts of events verified in personal interviews by members and leaders of the non-Muslim communities. Periodicals published by non-Muslim minorities have also been used, albeit with caution, such as *Alik* (Wave) in Armenian, and *Cheesta* (Knowledge and Awareness) published by a Zoroastrian press in Persian. These publications have tried to introduce their communities' religion, tradition, and culture. They are message-givers to their communities and to the state, and also reflect the agenda preferences of editors or groups within religious minorities whom they represent.

The book first presents an overview of Iranian society and politics, explains the conceptual framework, and discusses the religious ideologues' views of non-Muslims. Chapter 1 introduces each main non-Muslim religious minority and explores the group's historical, social, and political segmentation from Muslim ethnic groups. Chapter 2 focuses on the drafting of the Islamic constitution and discussions held in the Assembly of Experts (Majlis-e Khebregan) in 1979. Accommodative and critical positions taken by deputies on the status of the non-Muslim population and the significance of the final outcome is analyzed. By focusing on four arenas of state-minority interaction – religion, education, communal life, and political representation – chapter 3 identifies several state policies vis-à-vis the Armenians, the Assyrians/Chaldeans, the Jews, and the Zoroastrians. Chapter 4 uses a psychological framework of ethnic conflict in order to explain the severity of the treatment of the Jews, the persecution of the Bahais, and the troubled Iranian converts to Christianity. Chapter 5 addresses minority responses to local governments and state policies. It distinguishes between similar and dissimilar responses, demonstrating that, in changing circumstances, marginal groups continue to act within the framework of a learned cultural tradition. In conclusion, this study takes on a larger issue: what are the perils of marginality in the Islamic Republic, and what is a fair assessment of marginality for an individual and a collectivity?

Acknowledgments

Completion of this book has been a lonely and painstaking process. The acute sensitivity of the subject, lack of sufficient resources, hesitancy and fear of the religious minorities, misinformation and false rumors emanating from Iranian officials and their opponents, my own personal affection for the religion of Islam (as distinct from outrageous acts which have been committed in its name throughout history), and a conscious effort to be fair to the country in which I was born contributed to a cautious and slow evolution of this work. Under these circumstances any assistance (major or minor) was deeply appreciated.

First, I would like to extend my gratitude to the countless members of religious minorities inside and outside Iran who confided in me, answered my questions, and provided me with documents and evidence. They cover a wide range of people and professions, from the poor wandering Bahai farmer who had lost all yet adamantly clung to his holy book, to children who recalled their experiences, to those leaders and community activists who welcomed me. All have asked to remain anonymous.

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Acknowledgments

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Most of the research on primary sources was undertaken as a visiting scholar at Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies. The Ethnic Politics seminar organized by Karl W. Deutsch and Dov Ronen helped develop my ideas and the core framework for the book. My thanks to both of them, particularly Dov Ronen who offered me many fantastic ideas.

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During my visit to Iran in 1992, no one impressed me more than

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xvi Acknowledgments

Reverend Tateos Mikaelian. Courageously and openly he shared information with me, and I was convinced then that I had been on the right track all along. In the conclusion of our last meeting I invited him to visit me in United States; with a smile he replied: “I shall never leave this place.” He was assassinated in 1994. Reverend, you live in my heart and this is for you.

Notes on transliteration and bibliography

All Persian, Armenian, and Arabic words have been translated parenthetically in the text. The transliteration adopted for Persian and Armenian words follows a simple system. All diacritical marks with a few exceptions have been omitted. The exceptions apply to quotations and published sources. After consultation of more than a dozen published works, it was clear that no unified system of transliteration for Persian words exists. Since this is a work in social sciences, therefore, every effort has been made to keep the transliteration clear and concise by preserving uniformity, applying the Persian pronunciation of words as often as possible, and maintaining the common usage of words. Discrepancies in transliteration may appear in cases such as the usage q or gh (q has been the norm here), or Abd-al-Baha instead of Abdol Baha, the version used for most such names. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

The bibliography, as is customary, contains every work cited in the notes. However, since the articles from print and broadcast media sources are numerous and are fully cited in the notes, only a listing of the sources themselves appears in the bibliography.

Glossary

Ahl al-Dhimma	Protected People in Islamic communities
Ahl al-Ketab	People of the Book, referring to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians (in Iran)
ajam	non-Arab people
Dar al-Harb	the territory controlled by the non-Muslims where non-Islamic laws govern
Dar al-Islam	the territory where Muslim authorities are in charge and enforce Islamic laws
Ershad	guidance, direction; in this book, it refers to the Vezarat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Islami (the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance)
faqih	an expert in fiqh, jurisprudent
ferqeh	sect
fiqh	Islamic jurisprudence
hadith	tradition, a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammad
haram	religiously prohibited
hejab	Islamic headcover
jazieh	special tax paid by the non-Muslims to Muslim rulers
kafir	infidel, nonbeliever, non-Muslim
Majlis	Assembly or parliament; full form: Majlis-e Shoraye Islami, the Islamic Consultative Assembly
Majlis-e Khebregan	Assembly of Experts
Marja-e Taqlid	the highest rank among the Shii clergy, the Source of Emulation
millet	religious administration of the Ottoman Empire designed for the non-Muslim ethnoreligious communities giving them autonomy in religious affairs, certain administrative matters, and the judicial arena; this system predates Islam, but was

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	given a religious coloring with the advent of Islam and the Ottomans designed it as an administrative model	
najess	impure, unclean	
nejasat	being impure, impurity	
Pasdaran	Revolutionary Guards	
qesas	retribution, law of retaliation, revenge for homicide	
shariah	religious law of Islam	
ulama	plural of alim, the learned men (clergy) of religious law of Islam	
Velayat-e Faqih	“the government belongs to those who know Islamic jurisprudence,” the rule of the supreme jurist or top theologian	