



## *Armenian Christians in Iran*

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has promoted a Shi'a Islamic identity aimed at transcending ethnic and national boundaries. During the same period, Iran's Armenian community, once a prominent Christian minority in Tehran, has declined by more than 80 per cent. Although the Armenian community is recognised by the constitution and granted specific privileges under Iranian law, they do not share equal rights with their Shi'a Muslim compatriots. Drawing upon interviews conducted with members of the Armenian community and using sources in both Persian and Armenian languages, this book questions whether the Islamic Republic has failed or succeeded in fostering a cohesive identity which enables non-Muslims to feel a sense of belonging in modern-day Iran. As state identities are also often key in exacerbating ethnic conflict, this book probes into the potential cleavage points for future social conflict in Iran.

JAMES BARRY is Associate Research Fellow in Anthropology at Deakin University, specialising in religious and ethnic minorities. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from Monash University. His research focuses on the role of Islam in Iranian foreign policy and supports the work of the Chair of Islamic Studies. In addition to Iran, Barry has carried out fieldwork in Australia, Indonesia, and the United States.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-42904-7 — Armenian Christians in Iran  
James Barry  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

# Armenian Christians in Iran

Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity  
in the Islamic Republic

JAMES BARRY  
*Deakin University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-108-42904-7 — Armenian Christians in Iran  
 James Barry  
 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
 New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108429047](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108429047)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108684873

© James Barry 2019

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

Portions of this book have been adapted from “Reghettoization: Armenian Christian Neighborhoods in Tehran”, *Iranian Studies* 50/4 (2017): 553–573, and “‘This is Not Our Country’: Declining Diversity in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *The Muslim World* 105/3 (2015): 281–298.

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Barry, James, 1982– author.

Title: Armenian Christians in Iran : ethnicity, religion, and identity in the Islamic Republic / James Barry.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018013116 | ISBN 9781108429047 (Hardback) | ISBN 9781108450324 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Armenians–Iran. | Armenians–Iran–Ethnic identity. | Armenians–Iran–Religion. | Christians–Iran. | Iran–Ethnic relations.

Classification: LCC DS269.A75 B37 2019 | DDC 305.891/992055–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018013116>

ISBN 978-1-108-42904-7 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Note on Transliteration</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 Iranism, Islam, and Armenian-ness in Iran	31
2 Education and the Construction of Armenian Iran	63
3 Discrimination, Status, and Response	101
4 Stereotyping and Identity	156
5 Performing Armenian-ness in Tehran	206
6 Identity and Emigration	245
Conclusion	274
<i>References</i>	281
<i>Index</i>	300

# *Figures*

1.1 Map of Iran	<i>page</i> 13
2.1 Statue of Mesrop Mashtots, Yerevan	75
2.2 Mural of David of Sassoon, Ararat Compound, Vanak	77
2.3 Khatchkars, Ararat Compound, Vanak	80
2.4 Monument to Yeprem Khan, Tehran	84
2.5 Genocide memorial, Yerevan	87
3.1 Genocide memorial, Tehran	113
3.2 Saint Thaddeus and Bartholemew Church, Tehran	131
3.3 Golestan Palace, Tehran	133
3.4 Entrance of Saint Sarkis Cathedral, Tehran	135
3.5 Entrance of the Raffi Club, Narmak	136
3.6 Football stadium, Ararat Compound, Vanak	139
4.1 English headstones in the Saint Thaddeus and Bartholomew Church, Tehran	164
5.1 Surb Khatch Chapel, Ararat Compound, Vanak	208
5.2 Theatre performance, Ararat Compound, Vanak	215
5.3 Veiling banner, Isfahan	233
5.4 Veiling sign, Tajrish	234
5.5 Mixed-gender tug of war, Tochal	235
5.6 Armenian concert, Ararat Armenian Club, Vanak	238
6.1 A football match at Ararat Compound, Vanak	256
6.2 Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian 2010 Genocide Speech	260
6.3 Surb Gevorg Church, Tehran	263

## *Preface*

From the outset, I have carried out this research using the ethnographic field method. This involved learning the relevant languages (Armenian and Persian) and spending prolonged periods of time in Tehran. There were obvious difficulties in accessing the field given that Iran was under diplomatic isolation at the time of the research, and economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic restricted the financial viability of my project. Additionally, the suspicions that the Iranian government has for any type of research, let alone that performed by a Westerner, placed limitations on the time that I could spend in the field. I have been able to spend nearly eight months in the field over the course of five and a half years. This included a five-month stint from April to September 2010, a little over a month in October–November 2014, and a month for the duration of October 2015.

My method of research was participant observation and semi-structured interviews. In my initial field trip, I sought to engage Armenians who were not involved in the leadership of the community, and preferred to speak to those from various class and educational backgrounds in Tehran. My reasons for this were twofold: on the one hand, I wanted to gain an insight into Armenian life in Tehran without it being too influenced by the filter of official party lines; and on the other, I was aware that if I was too closely engaged with the members of parliament or the clergy, that this would potentially raise alarms within the Iranian government. During my second and third visits, I felt much more able to speak to Armenian academics, politicians, clergymen, journalists, and committee members of the leading institutions. Their perspectives have offered an additional context to the diversity of opinions among the unaffiliated community members with whom I continued to speak. In these three field trips, I have regularly visited Armenian venues such as churches and clubs to participate in events, and have reciprocated where possible by giving interviews to community organisations and providing them with copies of my publications.

In addition to the main field research, I have spent shorter periods in areas where Armenians have settled in the United States (two weeks in 2013 and an additional fortnight in 2015), particularly spending time with members of the Iranian Armenian migrant community. This has been concentrated around the Los Angeles area. I have also visited Armenia (three weeks in 2008) and Lebanon (one week in 2015), although the research conducted during those travels is not incorporated into this book.

Finally, I acknowledge that the ethical responsibilities that I have towards those with whom I have spoken is of particular importance given the political nature of research in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following academic conventions, and required by the ethics committees of both Monash University and Deakin University (from which I obtained formal approval), most of the information presented here has been de-identified, and all names used regularly throughout the text (Sarkis, Hakob, Ani, etc.) are pseudonyms. I have added some demographic information to give the reader guidance on the context from which these interlocutors are speaking; however, I have limited it so that they are not identifiable. In some cases where the subject of conversation was particularly sensitive, straying into extremely personal information or political subjects, I have not used any identifiable material and not even a pseudonym, but rather relayed the information. In this way, the reader is able to access Armenian points of view on sensitive topics without any risk being placed on the speaker. In a few incidences, I have stated the real name of a participant, but only in cases of non-sensitive information for which the interlocutor is already known through other sources, such as through articles they have written. In these cases, I have provided the participant with a copy of the chapter, with their section highlighted, seeking permission and approval of accuracy before including it in the text. I have used the word “interlocutor” rather than “informant,” as the latter has connotations of espionage, which I seek to avoid.



## *Acknowledgements*

I would firstly like to thank those who have read parts of this manuscript and offered their comments. In particular, I would like to thank my former supervisors, Dr Faridullah Bezhan and Associate Professor John Bradley, in addition to Dr Ali Mozaffari, Robert Safarian, Dr Matt Tomlinson, and Dr Lejla Voloder, and the two anonymous reviewers. I would also like to extend my thanks to Dr Antonio Gonzalez Zarandona, Associate Professor Benjamin Isakhan, Dr Julian Millie, and Dr David Tittensor for their feedback in the preparation of this volume, as well as to the team at Cambridge University Press.

I would also like to acknowledge the following academics who offered their time to provide feedback on my work at various stages: Dr Mushegh Asatryan, Dr Gay Breyley, Professor Peter Cowe, Dr Andrea di Castro, Professor Eliz Sanasarian, Dr Rizwana Shamshad, Professor Farzad Sharifian, and Professor Marika Vicziany. I have also benefited from the generosity of scholars based in Iran, and would like to extend my thanks to Dr Silva Allahverdian, Professor Mohammad-Reza Majidi, Professor Emilia Nercissians, Professor Farideh Pourgiv, and Professor Soheila Shahshahani for their insights.

The research for this book began with my dissertation at the Monash Asia Institute. This project would not have been possible without an Australian Postgraduate Award from the Australian Federal Government, and the assistance of the administration staff at Monash University. Part of this research was able to take place due to my participation in the project “Islam and Iranian Foreign Policy in Central Asia and Afghanistan,” funded by the Australian Research Council (FT120100032) and led by Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation. For this reason, I would also like to extend my thanks to the administrative and research support at Deakin University.

While living in Iran I received support from the following institutions, to which I extend my thanks: the Loghatnameh Dekhoda Institute and International Centre for Persian Studies, for providing me

with the facilities to greatly enhance my Persian language abilities; the Institute for Political and International Studies, Tehran; the British Institute for Persian Studies, for assistance with accommodation; and Payman, for kindly making their library and time available to me, as well as the staff from Nairi Publishing and *Hooys* magazine in Tehran. I would also like to thank Shakeh Amirian, Karine Armen, and Var-and, the staff at *Alik*, the Ararat Armenian Cultural Organisation, and at the *Arax Weekly*. Thank you to Ani for introducing me to your wonderful family, for your friendship and for advising me when my observations were *Parskahay* and when they were not. Thank you to Melika, Pedram, and family for your generous friendship as well as for helping me adjust to and navigate Tehran.

True to the discipline, this thesis would not have been possible without the help of numerous Iranians, Armenians, and Iranian Armenians who put their trust in a foreign researcher. Sadly, I cannot thank these individuals by name. Some are mentioned in the text under pseudonyms, others are not. May their contribution be a tribute to the collaboration between people of different cultures, religions, and worldviews.

I would never have been successful in my endeavour without the Armenian community of Australia who have been unceasingly supportive of me over these past ten years. Special thanks goes to Gaby Mitilian, a story teller, a comedian, and one of my greatest friends; and Annie Adilian, my Armenian language teacher, who can only be described as among the most devoted, kind-hearted, and headstrong people on earth. In no special order thank you to Ilda Deryan from the Aginian Armenian School; Hratch Nazikian and all my classmates; Shiraz Iskenderian; Vahe Kateb and SBS Armenian Radio; Berta Mansourian; Vrej Sakadjian; Souren Zarmanian; Kevork Krozian; and Avak Bedikian, Kapriyel Bedikian, and *Armenian Life* magazine. Thank you to the Iranian community in Australia, in particular Leila, for helping me continue to speak Persian outside of Iran.

A special thank you to my family: Dr Kirstie Close, Eamon, Hamish, my mother Christine Rose and my late father John Cotter Barry, Bill, my parents-in-law, my sister, and the rest of my extended family... *sláinte mhaith!*

Finally, I would like to extend a thank you to all the Tehranis whom I met, especially the complete strangers who upon meeting me would immediately mention the 1997 World Cup qualifying match in which Iran eliminated Australia. A special thanks to all of you, since I know what that day meant in the history of your country.

## *Note on Transliteration*

I have transliterated Armenian and Persian words using adaptations of the Library of Congress and IJMES systems respectively. The changes I have employed are aimed as more closely reflecting the sounds of the language as it is spoken, particularly the vowel sounds of each language. As Iranian Armenians are Eastern Armenian speakers, by and large, most of the Armenian words have been transliterated according to the Eastern pronunciation and Traditional Orthography. There are some exceptions where I have used Western pronunciation when the speaker or writer was using that form of the standard language, or a publication used the Reformed Orthography.

The Persian pronunciation is standardised Iranian, although occasionally the Tehran dialect or the Armenian accent have been transliterated as is to illustrate a point.

For names of public persons such as politicians and writers, I have used the most common transliteration. For example, “Rouhani” as opposed to “Rowhani” or “Rowḥānī.” Additionally, I have written “Sarkis” instead of “Sargis” because of the actual pronunciation.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-42904-7 — Armenian Christians in Iran  
James Barry  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---