



Iran's Minorities

In the wake of Iran's revolution in 1978–79, a fundamentalist Islamic theocracy took control of the country. These dramatic changes impacted all sectors of society, including a vast array of diverse peoples and cultures. In this book, Lois Beck provides an anthropological and historical account of Iran's many minorities. She focuses on the aftermath of the revolution, declaration of an Islamic republic, and Iraq–Iran war. Drawing on six decades of anthropological research, Beck provides frameworks for understanding how each of Iran's linguistic, religious, ethnic, ethno-national, and tribal minorities fashioned unique identities. These identities stem from factors relating to history, location, socioeconomic patterns, and sociocultural traits. They reflect the people's interactions with Iran's rulers and governments as they changed over time. A modern nation-state cannot be fully understood without knowing the extent of its reach in the peripheries and border regions and among its diverse peoples. This landmark study challenges existing scholarly accounts by offering broad and detailed perspectives on Iran's many distinct languages, religions, ethnicities, ethnations, and tribes.

LOIS BECK is Professor of Anthropology Emeritus at Washington University in Saint Louis. She is the author of *The Qashqai of Iran* (1986), *Nomad: A Year in the Life of a Qashqai Tribesman in Iran* (1991), and *Nomads in Postrevolutionary Iran* (2015). She is the coauthor of *Weavings of Nomads in Iran* (2020) and the co-editor of *Women in the Muslim World* (1978), *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800* (2003), and *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic* (2004).

Iran's Minorities

Social Diversity and State Power

LOIS BECK

Washington University, St Louis



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, 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

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316513453

DOI: 10.1017/9781009072618

© Lois Beck 2026

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 & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009072618

First published 2026

Cover image: Detail of traditional Iranian mosaic wall with geometrical and floral
ornament, Iran. frentusha / iStock / Getty Images Plus.

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Beck, Lois, 1944- author

Title: Iran's minorities : social diversity and state power / Lois Beck, Washington
University, St Louis.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press,
2026. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025047960 (print) | LCCN 2025047961 (ebook) | ISBN 9781316513453
hardback | ISBN 9781009073776 paperback | ISBN 9781009072618 epub

Subjects: LCSH: Cultural pluralism—Iran | Iran—Ethnic relations—Political aspects |
National characteristics, Iranian | Islam and politics—Iran

Classification: LCC DS268 .B43 2026 (print) | LCC DS268 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025047960>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025047961>

ISBN 978-1-316-51345-3 Hardback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment 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.

For EU product safety concerns, contact us at Calle de José Abascal, 56, 1º,
28003 Madrid, Spain, or email eugpsr@cambridge.org

To Iranians everywhere

To my daughter and granddaughter

Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 Theoretical and Methodological Considerations	40
3 Languages	136
4 Religions	194
5 Ethnicities	331
6 Minority Ethno-Nations	445
7 Tribes	532
8 Various Perspectives on Iran’s Minorities	576
<i>References</i>	592
<i>Index</i>	644

Maps

0.1 Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the region	<i>page</i> xx
0.2 Iran’s ethnolinguistic diversity	xxi
5.1 Iran’s provinces	411

Tables

3.1 Indo-Iranian (Iranic) languages	<i>page</i> 141
3.2 Turkic, Semitic, and other non-Iranian languages	144
4.1 Religious communities	195
5.1 Ethnic peoples (Muslims)	334
5.2 Provinces and minorities	435
6.1 Minority ethno-nations	471
7.1 Tribal peoples	541

Preface and Acknowledgments

I met in Doha, Qatar, in 2011 and 2012 with scholars who specialize in the study of sectarian politics in the Persian Gulf region. Each of us discussed sectarianism in one of the countries and wrote an article on the subject. We commented on one another's work and prepared chapters for the book *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, which Lawrence Potter edited and prepared for publication in 2013.

Soon into my writing on Iran, I saw that the topic deserved a treatment lengthier than I could include in a chapter in an edited volume (Beck 2013). Ideas for this book took shape as I considered the range of topics, themes, and diverse peoples necessary for a more comprehensive approach.

I focus on Iran in this book but also keep the wider region in perspective, which helps to situate Iran and explain its relationships with other nation-states, especially along its extensive border. Iran is one of multiple countries in the Persian Gulf region (Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and nearby Yemen). Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are also its immediate neighbors. Iran shares ties with other nation-states to the west (Syria and Lebanon) and to the northwest and northeast in the Caucasus mountains and Central Eurasia. Territories of all of these countries had once fallen under ruling dynasties and empires based in and near Iran, and they continue to share some features with Iran. As an unusual Shi'i-majority Muslim country (most others are Sunni-majority), Iran connects with three adjacent Shi'i-majority nation-states (Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan) and with large Shi'i minorities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran is linked with the larger Islamic world consisting of Muslim-majority countries and other Muslim communities elsewhere.

≈

My interest in the topic of Iran's minority peoples extends back to my first visit to Iran as an undergraduate student at Shiraz University in 1963–64. A deputy to the governor-general of Fars province invited me to have dinner with his family, which included several children my age. Eager to learn conversational Persian, I agreed to exchange language lessons with the deputy's daughter. Our two families began a friendship that extends to the present day.

As part of the evening's entertainment, the deputy (a Persian Iranian man) asked his employed household staff to welcome me in the ways he said were common in their native tribes, villages, and rural districts (all in southwestern Iran). As each person complied, the deputy burst out laughing at the accents, dialects, languages, and (to him) peculiar phrasings and gestures. New to Iran, I was appalled by this display and the deputy's reaction. Yet I was also intrigued by the linguistic (and implied cultural) diversity present in an urban middle-class household augmented by hired workers. I was curious about the societies and cultures represented by these men and women and their willingness to migrate to an urban center to seek employment, despite the maltreatment they might face there. Was this experience supposedly better than the ones they left behind? Did reasons other than economic ones help to explain their perhaps permanent relocation?

Later, as I grew to know this Persian Iranian family, the deputy would often play jokes on his employees. He would exclaim with feigned shock about their beliefs and customs, which he regarded as superstition and evidence of backwardness and a lack of education. One of his favorite ploys was to tell a worker to bring honey to accompany the cut melon pieces that another worker had just placed before us. Horrified, the person would refuse. He knew that anyone who ate melon along with honey would die. Each time I wondered how these kinds of attitudes and practices mixed with others to form the natal communities of these employees.

I observed in many other contexts, in Shiraz and throughout Iran, how "minority" peoples (whom I did not regard as such so explicitly at the time) were demeaned and ridiculed for their speech, attitudes, behavior, customs, and attire. I considered the possible origins of these diversities and the ways that people sustained and probably also modified them over time. Simultaneously, I was reading about Iran's ancient and premodern history and the many indigenous and foreign dynasties, kingdoms, and empires that had impacted people there.

On weekends and holidays, classmates invited me to visit nearby archaeological sites and explained their historic and symbolic significance. Residents of the lower-middle-class urban neighborhood where I lived were periodically swept up in religious ceremonies and secular festivities, which represented an array of faiths and customs. The nighttime processions during Muharram of bare-chested, bloodied men who beat themselves with chains and swords while lamenting the martyred Imam Hosain (d. 680 CE) were particularly memorable.

I grew curious about relationships between Iran's minority peoples and the dominating language and culture depicted in the state-controlled national media, in university classrooms, and among many (but not all) fellow students. I wondered about the efforts of Iran's king (Mohammad Reza Shah, ruling from 1941 to 1979) to modernize, westernize, and secularize the country's residents and how successful his policies and programs were nationwide. Students pointed out bullet holes in classroom walls, remnants of the shah's response to their recent nonviolent protests. They whispered about a few of their professors, who had disappeared at the hands of the shah's secret police.

During my first sojourn in Iran, I traveled extensively throughout this expansive country. Everywhere, people differed from those I observed among Shiraz's middle and upper classes. I saw a vast variety of settlements, dwellings, livelihoods, technologies, and material cultures at practically every hairpin turn of the road in the mountainous northwest, in lush valleys leading down to the Caspian Sea coast, in marshy inlets of the Shatt al-Arab along Iraq's border, and in isolated desert oases in the southeast near Pakistan. I observed societal and cultural differences in rural and urban communities and grew aware of the many languages spoken, religions practiced, ethnicities displayed, ethno-nations asserted, and tribal affiliations expressed. Disparities among Iranians of the lower, middle, and upper classes were glaring. Gaps between the poor and the wealthy were increasing, despite, or because of, the shah's efforts to modernize the country. I resolved to organize these impressions and to write about these complex, interrelated issues.

During this initial trip to Iran and then during subsequent ones to conduct cultural anthropological research, I saw evidence of the shah's repressions, the growing discontent of citizens, and the accelerating oppositional and then revolutionary movement against the autocracy. I traveled to Iran several months after the shah's forced ouster in 1979.

During that visit and many research trips thereafter, I witnessed the intensifying impact of the new Islamic Republic of Iran on the country's diverse peoples.

My study of the Qashqai insurgency in 1980–82 opened new approaches for me, including opportunities to interview the survivors in Iran and those who were driven into exile abroad. I observed how Qashqai Turks and other Iranians in the growing international diaspora (consisting of millions of emigrants from Iran since 1978) were reconfiguring their personal, collective, social, and political affiliations and identities. They were responding to hardships they had experienced in Iran and were reacting to disconcerting relocations and unfamiliar settings in often-inhospitable foreign countries.

I base this book on my periodic residence and research in Iran, and with Iranians, over a period of six decades. I engaged in research among Iranians in the diaspora in the Middle East, Europe, and North America over the same period. I traveled throughout Iran (including all of its provinces) and visited most of Iran's bordering countries. I went by ship from the port of Bushire to the city of Abadan, along the Persian Gulf coastline and then on the Shatt al-Arab river. These many experiences widened my appreciation of the region's peoples, societies, and cultures.

My long-term ethnographic research in Iran has focused on the Turkish-speaking, tribally organized, nomadic, pastoral Qashqai. They are one of Iran's many linguistic, ethnic, and tribal minorities and one of its many ethno-nations. Prolonged residence on multiple occasions over a wide span of time in this large minority community provided insights for me about the experiences of Iran's many other minority peoples and their attitudes toward repressive governments. The Qashqai are dispersed across a vast territory of southwestern Iran, their neighbors consisting of other minority ethnolinguistic and tribal peoples. Frequent contacts with these neighbors expanded my understanding of Iran's societal and cultural diversity.

I conversed with thousands of Iranians over the years, on the complex topics I explore here as well as on everyday issues and local and wider national and international events. I maintained contact with some of them through personal visits (in Iran, the United States, and other countries) and electronic communications. I also draw on contemporaneous news accounts in Iran (Iranian television, radio, and

newspapers) and the immediate reactions of Iranian consumers. Elsewhere (Beck 2015: 202–07), for example, I describe how some Iranians responded to the unexpected (and suspicious) death in 1995 of Ayatollah Khomeini's sole surviving son, Ahmad. For information derived in these multiple ways, I do not always cite specific sources, such as people's conversations and publicly disseminated media accounts. Also, I protect the identity of people who discussed sensitive, politically charged issues.

For this study, I also draw on the large literature on Iran, especially works by scholars and others who address the country's historical and contemporary societal and cultural diversities. Anthropologists who conducted long-term, on-site research in Iran in different regions and among various peoples were especially helpful in providing me with wider perspectives on Iran's social complexities. Scholarly work on Iran's many neighboring countries offers other kinds of perspectives on circumstances similar to and different from those in Iran. Compatriots of many of Iran's diverse peoples (Turks, Kurds, Baluch, Arabs, and others) also resided in these adjoining territories.

I also pursued this volume's topics when I continued ethnographic research among diaspora Iranians in Qatar, Turkey, Switzerland, and France in 2013. During three visits to Qatar that year, I met with citizens and residents of eight Persian Gulf countries, all of them demonstrating wide-ranging opinions about intersections of religion, politics, society, and culture in the region. Those having family and personal connections in Iran helped me to understand issues raised in this study. For millennia, people of various origins and identities traveled throughout the Persian Gulf region and resided in many locales there. Iran's revolution (1978–79), creation of an Islamic theocracy, Iraq–Iran war (1980–88), and educational and economic pressures expanded the mobility of Iranians throughout the gulf area.

My continuing ethnographic research in Turkey (2015, 2016) and Switzerland and France (2014–19, 2022–25) among diaspora Iranians and citizens and residents of multiple Persian Gulf countries added information and widened my perspectives. The larger contexts during these years fueled our discussions. Everyone expressed distress about escalating political crises throughout the Middle East and increasing emigration from there due to political repression, conflict, and war. I traveled in rural Bangladesh (a Muslim-majority country) in 2013,

another recent experience that contributed to my cross-cultural understandings.

≈

The system of transliteration I use in this book is a modified version of the format recommended by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. I exclude diacritic marks except for the *ain* (‘) in Shi‘i Islam, to follow conventional use by many scholars. For names of individuals (including authors), I respect their preferred spellings. I spell common Persian, Turkish, and Arabic words and names in anglicized form. I minimize the use of non-English terms, but when I include them, they usually appear in italics and parentheses after the English translation. Exceptions include non-English, but generally known, words, such as *basij* (people’s militia), *chador*, *darvish* (dervish), *fatwa* (religious order), *hadith*, *hajj*, *hezbollah*, *hijab*, *hojjat ol-islam* (religious title), *imam*, *jihad*, *jinn*, *madrasa* (Islamic school), *mahdi*, *mulla*, *sayyid*, *shaikh*, *sharia* (Islamic law), and *ulama* (Islamic scholars).

In footnotes containing more than one source, I usually list publications chronologically to reflect historical developments and the views of multiple authors about circumstances as they unfolded (such as accelerating Shi‘i Islamization in Iran beginning in 1979).

Many people, including some scholars and specialists in Iranian studies, use the terms “Iranian” and “Persian” (as nouns and adjectives) synonymously and interchangeably, as if they are one and the same. They often do so when they discuss nationality and cultural identity in Iran (this volume’s topic). Yet only half of Iran’s population consists of ethnic Persians, whose first language is almost always Persian and who express varying notions about Persian culture (as broadly defined).

The other half of Iran’s population consists of many ethnic, ethno-linguistic, and ethnoreligious minorities and ethno-nationalities. They include Afro-Iranians, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Azeri Turks, Bahais, Bakhtiylaris, Baluch, Chaldeans, Georgians, Gilakis, Hazaras, Jews, Kurds, Laks, Lurs, Mandaeans, Mazandarani, Qashqai, Shahsevan, Talesh, Turkmans, Yarsanis, Zoroastrians, and others. These (and many other) peoples in Iran identify by these and other labels (and their named divisions). They usually assert and express distinctive languages, religions, and cultures. Some proclaim their own ethno-nationalities, especially in contrast to a Persian Iranian nationality. To varying degrees, each of these other peoples, as

residents of Iran (however marginalized they might be), is aware of the Persian language and some cultural traits associated with Persians. By comparison, most Persians lack much, if any, knowledge about Iran's many other languages, religions, and cultures. This asymmetry aligns with the unequal (and discriminatory) distribution of power and wealth throughout Iran and manifests other deleterious consequences.

In this book, the term "Persian" (used as a noun and referring to a person) refers only to ethnic Persians. The term "Iranian" includes all citizens of Iran and those in the diaspora who consider Iran as their homeland. (Not all citizens and not all people in the diaspora identify as Iranians. Often political, their reasons reflect their attitudes about the revolution, imposition of an Islamic republic, devastations of the Iraq–Iran war, unwanted mass emigration, Iran's global unpopularity, two wars against Iran by Israel and the United States, and the people's own intensifying affiliations and identities during difficult times.) Several of Iran's religious minorities also identify as Persians. Yet they usually regard the label as less significant than their religious one, in part because of persisting discrimination by Iran's Persians against them. Most other religious minorities in Iran do not consist of Persians, including almost all Iranians who are Sunni Muslims (ten percent of Iran's population).

Scholars and others often inaccurately apply the term "Persian" (used as an adjective) when the term should be "Iranian." Some writers refer vaguely to notions of "Persian" etiquette or artistic sensibility in ways that are difficult for anthropologists and others to interpret.

≈

I thank Mehran Kamrava and the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar for organizing and hosting the two workshops in Doha, Qatar, on sectarian politics in the Persian Gulf region. Lawrence Potter and other participants in the Doha gatherings (especially Justin Gengler and Fanar Haddad) provided helpful comments on the chapter that became the foundation of this book. Julia Huang, Shahla Haeri, Mary Martin, and Christian Bromberger also contributed to the chapter's development.*

* "Iran's Ethnic, Religious, and Tribal Minorities" in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* (Potter 2013) is a preliminary version of the current book, *Iran's Minorities*. Hurst Publishers have given permission to use it here.

Gernot Windfuhr offered useful suggestions for this volume's two tables on Iran's languages. Habib Borjian and Erik Anonby provided additional clarifying linguistic information. Julia Huang assisted in preparing these tables. Jake Lulewicz produced the volume's maps. Kian Tajbakhsh provided a pre-publication copy of his manuscript on local democracy and decentralization in Iran (2022), a rare study of local-level politics in Iran. Hessam Habibi (2023) enabled me to read his book on Iran's Sunni Muslims before it was accessible. He also responded to my queries in helpful ways. Throughout the writing and revising, Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Saeid Golkar provided important details about postrevolutionary politics in Iran. Knowledgeable about Iran's diverse languages and their speakers, Habib Borjian and Maryam Borjian answered crucial questions while I revised the manuscript.

Scholars and others who contributed specific, pertinent information for this study also include Shaherzad Ahmadi, Ali Ansari, Ata Anzali, Allahverdi Bahman-Beigi, Kaveh Bayat, Marcel Bazin, Rouhollah Askari Begdili, Houchang Chehabi, Juan Cole, Stephanie Cronin, Naheed Dareshuri, Foroogh Farhang, Zahra Farhoudi, Mateo Farzaneh, Khaled Fattah, Navid Fozi, Yacoub Ghaderpoor, Shahla Haeri, Allan Hassaniyan, Denis Hermann, Arang Keshavarzian, Shahram Khosravi, Eric Lob, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Ali Mirsepassi, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, Mehdi Noorbakhsh, Mahmoud Omidshah, Eliz Sanasarian, Ehsan Shahghasemi, Georg Stober, Richard Tapper, Matthijs van den Bos, Rose Wellman, and David Yaghoubian. I am grateful to all of them for their unique insights on complicated, often controversial, topics.

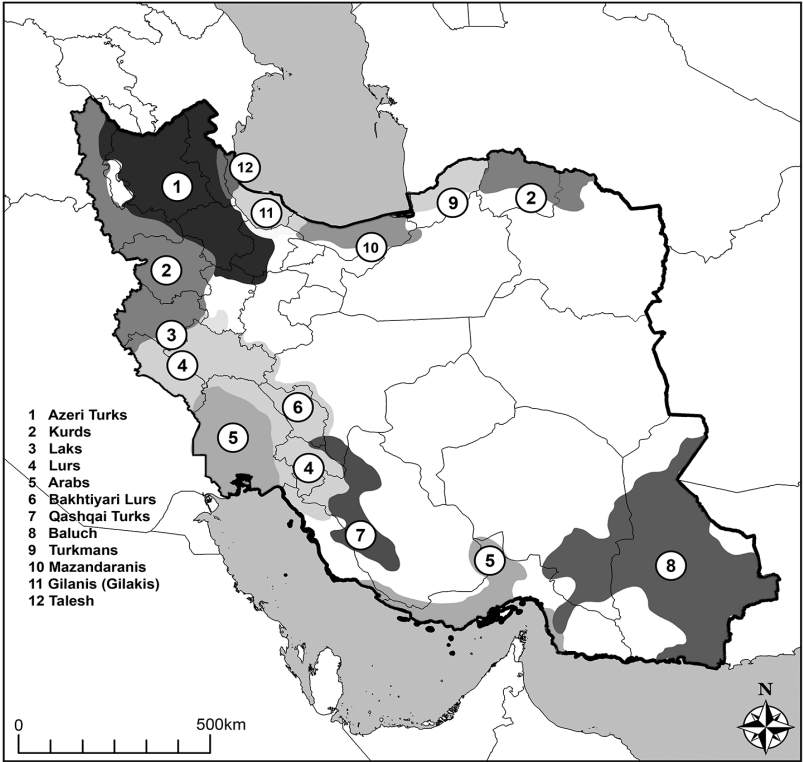
As a blessing, this book has reconnected me with many of these scholars. I have known many of them for decades and some for more than half a century.

Postscript: The chronicle offered here narrates a story about Iran in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It serves as a time capsule and a metaphorical message in a bottle.

I completed this book in April 2025. While the publisher was copy-editing the manuscript, I mentioned in the text the 12-day war waged against Iran by Israel and the United States in June 2025. While proof-reading the formatted pages, just before publication, I mentioned in the text the resumption of war against Iran by Israel and the United States in February–May 2026. I do not discuss these conflicts or their impact on Iran’s diverse peoples. These wars have changed Iran and its societies and cultures in currently unfathomable ways and are yet to be determined.



Map 0.1 Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the region



Map 0.2 Iran’s ethnolinguistic diversity