
Iran : A Country Divided.

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London, Asharq Al Aawsat Iran constitutes one of the most diverse countries in the Middle East in terms of ethnic and religious composition. This state, which has preserved its geographical and historical structure, in addition to its borders - at least since the 19th Century without any significant change by virtue of not participating in the two world wars - has a widely diverse internal fabric of races, religions and creeds. For this reason, it becomes difficult to understand the fundamental equations that construct the make-up of this country, which is spread on a wide range and which has a population of approximately 70 million, without a clear and accurate understanding of the constituents and details of this fabric.

At a first glance, present-day Iranian society ostensibly appears to be homogenous and harmonious in its ethnic and religious build-up, but in reality it is but a misleading image of the Iranian arena. The internal diversity of this Middle Eastern state that spreads from central Asia to the Persian Gulf is distinguished by historical and geographical factors and the absence of 'openness' and economic interaction - in addition to an intense suppression. The Khomeini Revolution in 1978 contributed to the religious ideology of the Iranian authority and what ensued of disastrous political, cultural, economic and military attempts that affected the Iranian formations, particularities and human aspirations, fueling further the internal fires.

In the book 'The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics', British researcher, Fred Halliday sees that the Iranian constitution, as opposed to the secular Turkish one, recognizes the ethnic and cultural pluralism of Iran, however in his view, the problem lies in the notion that the plurality in the constitution is limited to language, culture and tradition only. Iranian academic and Professor of Sociology, Dr Abbas Wali explains that the Iranian (Islamic) constitution acknowledges the cultural diversities in identities in the national formations in Iran but disregards the political content of these identities, furthermore forbidding any national activity that deviates from the ideology of the prevalent political system, considering any national differences to be inconsistent with the prevailing religious rule. Therefore, it would be correct to say that this diversity in population led to the enrichment of the linguistic, cultural, literary and spiritual life in Iran but it also took its toll on the country in terms of its internal political reality and its conflict and struggles externally, which has led to a substantial amount of tension and problems.

Political observers do not rule out the possibility of countries, such as the US, playing the minority card to exert pressure on Iran's current stands - especially its nuclear development program and its support of organizations that Washington describes as 'terrorist', in addition to Iran's opposition to the peace process between Israel and Palestine and its interference in Iraq's internal affairs. Without a doubt, the populational and cultural diversity in Iran cannot act as a source of imminent threat to stable or democratic societies, or those not involved in external conflicts, but the situation is different in Iran. The escalating tensions that the country faces with the United States and the international community, coupled with

internal problems on all levels; political, economic and cultural herald a turn for the worse - add to that the increasing unemployment amongst youth and the continuous subtle hints that point towards the imposition of international sanctions upon it.

Iran's internal fabric is comprised of the following ethnic groups:

1-Persians, who largely dominate the country's political institution, in addition to its culture, literature and official language.

2-Azeris, (Azerbaijani) who share the same faith of the current regime and who have noticeable control of the trade markets (bazaars) in Tehran and other major cities.

3-Kurds, who are mainly spread in northwestern Iran, or what the Kurds refer to as Eastern Kurdistan, the most prominent cities of which are Mehebad (Mahabad), Sine (Saqqez), Karmanshah and Sardasht.

4-Arabs, who live in Khuzestan, or what is referred to by Arab Iranians as 'Arabistan'. The most renowned cities of which are Ahvaz (Ahwaz) and Khorramshahr, and some parts in the eastern coast of the Gulf.

5-Turkmen, who are spread out in southern Turkmenistan.

6-Baloch, who live in the areas of Kerman and Zahedan.

Additionally, there exist independent tribal groups whose allegiances are divided between the Farsi, Azerbaijani and Kurdish nationalities such as the Bakhtiari and the Lur. The truth is no census exists with an accurate record of the existing ethnicities in Iran - especially since the governmental institution has long since avoided compiling statistics. Moreover, the dominance of the Persian language, literature and culture among Iranians over the past few centuries - especially since the decades that preceded the rise of the Islamic republic in Iran - makes it more difficult to view the existing ethnical differences. The closest known estimates are: 40-45 percent Persian; 30-35 percent Azeris; 9 percent Kurds; 4 percent Arabs; 3 percent Baloch; 2 percent Turkmen; Armenians and Assyrians combined constitute 2 percent; and a further 2 percent are independent tribal groups.

The Azeris speak a dialect of the Turkish language and they are spread in the northwestern region of Iran of which Tabriz is the capital. Although they follow the Islamic Shia creed, their nationalistic inclinations are affiliated to their ethnical Turkish origins, according to numerous Azerbaijani researchers. Despite sharing the same religious creed, Shiism, the Azeris are distinguished by their nationalistic spirit, which is why they declared they were supported by the former United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), in the northwestern region of the country during the period that followed World War II. It is true that the Iranian forces succeeded in quashing the republic less than a year after it was formed, and yet the Azeri nationalistic movement continued to regard the Persian role with suspicion and mistrust based on the former's belief that they are the true fundamental basis of the Iranian state, achieved at the hands of their historic leader Ismail Safavi who was the one to announce Shiism as the official doctrine of the Savafid (Safavi) Iranian Empire in the 13th Century. According to the nationalistic among the Azerbaijanis, the loss of their right to rule Iran is a result of the Persian cultural and literary hegemony practiced in the country. Despite that, the Azeris still continue to

be at the helm of trade activities and the economy in Iran yet still felt alienated and ignored in politics and culture, which is what led to a number of demonstrations in a number of Azeri provinces last year, protesting against the Iranian government's disregard of their language. In turn, the Iranian security forces arrested a number of Azerbaijani political activists on charges of illicit dealings with Turkey.

Despite the 25 percent of the Kurdish population that follows the Shia doctrine, the majority of whom are spread throughout the provinces of Kermanshah and Ilam, we find that historically the relationship between the two parties remains 'unnatural'. The Kurds have often taken up arms in the face of the Iranian governments and empires as a result of feeling that the central authorities rejected their local peculiarities. This is what is declared as the reason that drove the Kurds to declare an independent republic, with Mahabad as its capital in 1946. However the Kurdish Republic, like its Azeri counterpart lasted no longer than 11 months after the Iranian forces crushed it weeks after vanquishing the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Presently, the Iranian government allows for the publication of a number of cultural Kurdish magazines and other publications in the Kurdish language, as there are active Kurdish cultural centers in Tehran. A Kurdish literary union was established in Saqqez, in addition to a number of orchestras and arts groups, which have been allowed to practice their activities. But political activity was prohibited. In this domain, last year saw a number of bloody demonstrations in the Kurdish areas demanding political rights. It should be noted that the Kurds accuse the Iranian security forces of being responsible for the assassination of the Iranian Kurdish leader, Dr Ebdulrehman Qasimlo in the Austrian capital, Vienna, in 1989, and Dr Sadegh Sharafkandi in Berlin in 1992.

Iran's Arabs inhabit the oil-rich Khuzestan and although the majority follows Islam (Shia), the Sunni followers form a force to be reckoned with among them. A few months ago, according to human rights findings conducted by the United Nations (UN), it was noted that the Iranian government was unjustifiably harshly treating the Iranian Arabs and was limiting job opportunities for them, in addition to tampering with their topographical composition in the region by sending Arab families to faraway cities and bringing families of other nationalities to live in their place. In this same report, international supervisors from the UN demanded that the Iranian government not execute capital punishment on three activist Arab politicians. As such, the Arab areas, Ahwaz province in particular, constitutes a hub for political oppositional activities led by clandestine (Arab) organizations, many of whom Iranian officials accuse the US and Britain of supporting and encouraging. Arab sources who believe that that the Iranian government is attempting to displace Arabs by tampering with their topographical makeup in Khuzestan, which is considered one of the world's richest areas by virtue of its oil, believe that the main aim is to reduce the Arab presence in the province from 70 percent to 30 percent.

UN special rapporteur, Miloon Kothari, who visited Iran in 2005, accused the Iranian government of attempting to change the Arab and Kurdish demographic makeup, in addition to restricting job opportunities and exercising sectarian pressure on them. It should be pointed out that Khuzestan, which has a number of active political parties and organizations, including the Popular Democratic Front of Ahwazi Arabs has witnessed a number of terrorist operations over the past two years. Only last month, Iran's Supreme Judicial Council

declared the Arab Lejnat al-Wefaq party (Committee of Reconciliation), which is active in Ahwaz, illegal on the grounds that it was flouting the Islamic regime. Previously the Iranian security forces killed three Arab youth during a demonstration in Ahwaz, in addition to arresting 250 people.

Other nationalistic formations include the Turkmen, who are spread over areas that overlook the Caspian Sea in the northeastern tip of the country and the Baluch who live on the border areas adjacent to Afghanistan and Pakistan - most of whom are Sunni, in addition to the Uzbek minority who are spread in the northeastern region of the country. What is striking about these nationalities is that they form extensions of the larger ethnical groups who have their own independent states neighboring or close to Iran. Since Tehran is not concerned with local peculiarities and economic development, the majority of the youth is attracted to these states and is inspired by their nationalistic spirit and values and cling to their ethnical origins. Recently, the Iranian government has deployed forces from the police and the Iranian Guard in the Baluch region, particularly in Kerman and Zahedan and the areas that surround them under the pretext of combating the cross-border smuggling trade.

But ethnic diversity does not constitute the sole feature in the mosaic Iranian society; religion and sectarianism also play a large role. The following are the approximations of Iran's population:

1-Shia: 70 percent

2-Sunni: 20-25 percent

3-Other religions (Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, and Zaydis): 5 percent.

Followers of other religions are spread throughout the major cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, Hamedan, while Sunnis are concentrated in Kerman, Zahedan, Kurdistan and the areas inhabited by Turkmen, in addition to pockets in the coastal areas of the gulf of Khuzestan (Arabistan). The reality is that the Iranian government has displayed remarkable attention towards caring for the peculiarities of these religious groups and did not hesitate in allocating a parliamentary seat to each of the groups, save the Sunnis who have more than one seat. And yet in the end, the government did not succeed in establishing good relations with these religious groups. In Kerman and Zahedan sectarian groups actively oppose the government; however Tehran ignores their political and cultural demands and instead focuses its attention on the illegal involvements with neighboring Pakistan. Likewise, the Christians are persecuted under the accusation of their involvement with foreign countries such as the US, Britain and Germany. The western region in Iran has a large number of tribal formations with their own linguistic and social peculiarities, distinguished by their mountainous cultures and their unique economic life. What is remarkable is that none of these aforementioned groups consider themselves to be Persian nationals, such as the Bakhiaris who claim that they are descendents of the Lurs, the Lurs in turn believe that they have descended from the Kurds, among other examples. Most Orientalists and specialists in Iranian civilization will agree that over half the Iranian population is affiliated to non-Persian ethnic groups.

The period that followed the rise of the Khomeini revolution in 1978, a year later, saw the significant flourishing of Iran's ethnical groups. Less than a year later, April 1979, the government embarked

on bloody campaigns against the various ethnicities - particularly in Kurdistan and Arabistan and against the Turkmen of Iran. The religious regime left no room for cultural liberties in its constitution, especially article 19. This resulted in the establishment of a number radio and television channels and a large number of publications in languages other than Persian, which reflects the buzz of cultural activity, but still, more rights are being demanded. Amnesty International issued a report last February condemning the practices of the Iranian government against ethnic and religious groups and sects, especially related to the acquisition of lands and displacement, standard of living and the harsh economic conditions for these groups unto the sentences issued by the judiciary against political activists.

In a situation like this, the burning question remains: What if the UN Security Council imposes international sanctions on Iran? Or what if the current tensions between Iran and the international community were to lead to a military war?
