

ISSUE BRIEF

# Iran's Sunnis Resist Extremism, but for How Long?

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Some fifteen million of Iran's eighty million people are Sunni Muslims, the country's largest religious minority. Politically and economically disadvantaged, these Sunnis receive relatively little attention compared with other minorities and are concentrated in border areas from Baluchistan in the southeast, to Kurdistan in the northwest, to the Persian Gulf in the south.

The flare up of tensions between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran over Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen would seem to encourage interest in the state of Iranian Sunnis, if only because the Saudis present themselves as defenders of the world's Sunnis, and Iran the self-appointed champion of the Shia cause.

So how do Iran's Sunnis fare in a state where Shia theology governs almost every aspect of life? How have they been affected by this regional rivalry? Are they stuck between jihadist and other extreme regional Sunni movements on the one hand, and the Shia regime's aggressive policies on the other? Is there a danger that these policies could push some disgruntled Iranian Sunnis toward militancy and terrorism? A tour of Turkmen Sahra in the northeast of Iran near the Caspian Sea, and in Hormozgan on the Persian Gulf in 2015 and 2016 revealed some of the answers. More recent interviews were conducted by phone and in person in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and with European-based experts.

"Being a Sunni in Iran means pain, fear, anxiety, restrictions,"<sup>1</sup> said a young woman in a southern Hormozgan village. "We're afraid to say we're Sunnis," added the woman, who was wrapped in a brightly colored floral chador and, like others who were interviewed, asked that she not be named.

A group of high school girls in the same hamlet burst into giggles when asked what they thought of the Islamic State or Daesh. All said they were

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<sup>1</sup> Author interview, March 2015.

## ■ Sunni Regions in Iran

### Some breakdown of areas where Sunnis are found:

- Almost all of Hormozgan Province (though Minab is mostly Shia and Bandar Abbas has a significant Shia settler population) and parts of Fars Province.
- Almost all parts of the Baluchistan area of Sistan-Baluchistan Province (though not in the Sistan part of the province);
- Kurdistan Province; Kermanshah Province (though the capital of Kermanshah Province, Kermanshah city, is majority Shia Kurds while the rest of Kermanshah province is mostly Sunni); parts of Western Azerbaijan is majority Sunni Kurds such as Mahabhad, Piranshahr, Sardasht, Oshnaviyeh, and Bukan counties.
- Turkmen live mainly in Northern and Northeastern Iran—their region is called Turkmen Sahara that includes substantial parts of Golestan Province.
- There are Sunnis in Birjand and Torbat-e Jam in Khorassan Province, as well as Aimaq Sunnis.
- There are Sunnis in Talesh country in Gilan Province.
- Tehran has one million Sunnis.



surprised to learn that Daesh is a Sunni group. “Is it really Sunni?”<sup>2</sup> one asked with astonishment. “If they’re Sunni, they must be good, no?” wondered a young woman at another gathering. “Daesh uses the Sunni name to commit murder, rape girls,” interjected her sister. “It doesn’t distinguish between children and adults.”<sup>3</sup>

Persian Gulf-based, Saudi-funded Persian-language TV broadcasts and a proliferation of Persian-language Sunni religious websites are confusing many Iranian Sunnis about their faith and are seeking to turn them against Iran’s Shia majority. Sheikh Abdulkarim Mohammadi, a prominent Sunni scholar, said Sunnis are being pulled from opposing sides—the Iranian state with its discriminatory policies and the hardline anti-Shia propagandists in Arab states. “Iran’s Sunnis have lost their footing,” he said in an interview in the Hormozgan village of Herang.<sup>4</sup>

Last year’s Daesh attacks in Tehran compounded fears among Iranian Sunnis that the regime would use the threat of Salafism to intensify their suppression. Traditional Sunni leaders have sought to alleviate these concerns by urging their followers not to join extremist groups. A thir-

ty-seven-minute video message<sup>5</sup> by Daesh in March 2017 denounced Iran’s Sunni leaders, specifically prominent Baluch cleric Molavi Abdulhamid Ismaealzahi, and accused them of being stooges of the Iranian government.

### Iran’s Religious Makeup

According to official figures, ninety-nine percent of Iranians are Muslim, with the remainder being Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Some 300,000 Bahais, the largest non-Muslim minority, are not recognized as a religious group in the Iranian Constitution and are not included in the official census. The figures also do not give a breakdown of Sunnis and Shias. Iranian officials claim Sunnis make up seven to nine percent of the population, but Sunni leaders and observers put the total between 12 and 25 percent.

Nearly one million ethnic Persian Sunnis live in the southern provinces of Hormozgan and Fars and in northern Khorasan. The majority of Sunnis are ethnic Kurds, Baluch, and Turkmen, whose ethnic brethren extend beyond Iran’s borders. There are also a very small number of Arab Sunnis in the southwestern province of Khuzestan,

5 Arash Azizi, “What Does ISIS Say When It Speaks Persian?” Iranwire, July 24, 2017, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/4725>.

2 Author interview, March 2015.

3 Author interviews, March 2015.

4 Author interview with Sheikh Abdulkarim Mohammadi, March 2015.

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which is majority Shia and borders a part of Iraq that is almost entirely Shia.

### Victims of Systematic Discrimination

Because most Sunnis also belong to ethnic minority groups, it is often unclear whether discrimination is based on ethnicity or religion—or both. Most Sunnis live in remote, impoverished areas, making it difficult to tell whether poor government services are due more to geography than to sectarianism.

However, discrimination against Sunnis is deeply institutionalized in the Islamic Republic’s laws, rules, and regulations. Article 107 of the Constitution allows only Twelver Shias<sup>6</sup> to become Supreme Leader or members of the powerful Assembly of Experts that chooses the leader. Article 115, paragraph 5, stipulates that the president of the Republic shall be a Shia. The Constitution also denies ethnic minorities the use of their languages in schools, universities, and the media. It does, however, recognize Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence as sources of family law and religious education.

Sunni demands to eliminate Article 115 and implement Article 12—which grants them certain rights, such as full freedom of worship—have been consistently ignored. In an unprecedented move, however, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in September 2017 called<sup>7</sup> for an end to discrimination against Sunnis and other minority groups. “All elements of the Islamic Republic are duty bound, in accordance with religious teachings and the Constitution, to refrain from allowing any discrimination and inequality among Iranians from any ethnicity, race or faith,” Khamenei said in reply to a letter from Molavi Abdulhamid, the Friday prayer leader in the Baluchistan capital of Zahedan.

Abdulhamid has characterized Khamenei’s response as “historic and decisive,” but cautions that previous directives regarding Sunnis have not been enforced, such

6 Twelvers are the followers of the twelve imams, whom they consider to be the only rightful successors of the Prophet Muhammad, beginning with Ali ibn Abu Talib (600-661 AD) and ending with Muhammad ibn al-Hasan (born 869 AD), who, according to Twelver belief, disappeared but will reemerge and bring peace and justice to the world.

7 “Leader Reiterates Prohibition of Ethnic, Racial Discrimination in Iran,” Tasnim News, September 6, 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/09/06/1512301/leader-reiterates-prohibition-of-ethnic-racial-discrimination-in-iran>.

as making it illegal to insult the Prophet Mohammed’s wife Aisha. Parliament, he recently noted, did not legislate this directive into law. “We’re afraid the same will happen regarding the Leader’s historical and clear directive,” he said. “Iran and the Muslim world will benefit from it if the government, judiciary, armed forces, parliament, and all state organs take it seriously and act on it. It will also have a positive effect on Iran’s relationship with Muslim states and Muslim people.”<sup>8</sup>

One main point of contention is that Sunnis are not allowed to build mosques in major cities, including the capital Tehran, where an estimated one million Sunnis reside. The government claimed in 2015 that Tehran had nine Sunni mosques, but prominent Sunnis say these are merely prayer rooms. “The country suffers from intolerance and prejudices,” said Molavi Abdulhamid, adding that the Sunnis’ other top demand is to be assigned senior government and provincial positions.

President Hassan Rouhani’s special assistant for religious and ethnic affairs, Ali Younesi, admitted in<sup>9</sup> published interviews four years ago that discrimination against Sunnis—especially for cabinet ministries and provincial governorships—was a result of the prejudice of hard-line Shia clerics and promised improvements. In Rouhani’s first administration, a Sunni served as deputy oil minister. Another is now Iran’s ambassador to Vietnam, albeit the only Sunni in the diplomatic corps. There are currently twenty-one Sunni representatives in Iran’s parliament, up from nineteen in the previous session. In Sistan-Baluchistan, two ethnic women were appointed local governors, and one was appointed deputy provincial governor. Yet, no Sunni has held a ministerial portfolio.

Discrimination against Sunnis was laid bare in 2000 when hard-liners lobbied to block the candidacy of Kurdish Sunni MP Jalal Jalalizadeh to parliament’s presiding board. Influential Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani threatened to issue a *fatwa* delegitimizing the assembly “if a Sunni was installed above Shias.”<sup>10</sup> He vowed to “walk barefoot in the streets wrapped in a shroud,” Jalalizadeh said in a recent interview.

8 Written questions were submitted to Molavi Abdulhamid who responded in writing in September 2017.

9 Ali Alfoneh, “Marginalizing Religious Minorities Risks Fueling Radicalism in Iran,” Middle East Institute, December 11, 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/io/marginalizing-religious-minorities-risks-fueling-radicalism-iran>.

10 Author interview with Jalal Jalalizadeh, August 2017.

Shia hard-liners are paranoid that if Sunnis occupy decision-making positions, they would be privy to state secrets and jeopardize Iran's security, explained Jalalizadeh. They allege that Sunni allegiance is to Sunni Arab states, not to Iran. The best way to eliminate this threat is to marginalize and keep them out of public life. "When you create extreme economic hardship it's much easier to convert them to the Shia faith," Jalalizadeh said.

A seemingly deliberate process to marginalize Sunnis is through *gozinesh*—a discriminatory and ideologically based regulation that filters applicants' eligibility to work in the state sector or to attend university.<sup>11</sup> Even when they are selected, they face another hurdle: *herast*, a branch of the Intelligence Ministry tasked with ensuring that applicants are loyal to the regime.

Not surprisingly, unemployment is high in Sunni-majority areas. According to the mayor of the port city of Chabahar in Baluchistan, ninety percent of high school teachers and seventy percent of elementary teachers in Sunni Baluch-populated areas are Shia. The Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan regions ranked the lowest in a 2009 human development index.<sup>12</sup> Sunnis stand a better chance of getting low-ranking jobs that the government considers safe, such as banking and agriculture, said Habibolah Sarbazi, director of the Italy-based Baluch Activists Campaign.<sup>13</sup>

### Iran's Religious History

Persia (the name for Iran until 1935) was predominantly Sunni from the advent of Islam in the seventh century until the sixteenth century. During this period, the country produced some of the world's top scientific and political thinkers and the most important books on religion, including *The Six Books of Hadith*,<sup>14</sup> which have gained universal acceptance as part of the official canon of Sunni Islam.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722) conquered much of what is now Iran and parts of Turkey and Georgia and made Twelver

11 *Gozinesh* involves an ideological test requiring candidates to demonstrate allegiance to Shia Islam and the Islamic Republic, including the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*, or governance by a supreme Shia jurist.

12 The national mean for the human development index was 0.717 in 2001 and grew to 0.747 in 2009.

13 Author interview with Habibolah Sarbazi, August 2017.

14 The books were by: Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Abu Dawood, Imām at-al-Tirmidhi, al-Nasa'i, and Ibn Majah.

Shi'ism the official religion to stem the threat of the Ottomans (the self-declared defenders of Sunni Islam) to the west and the Mongols to the east. Converting to Shi'ism was "a smart survival strategy," said Salah Nasrawi, an expert in Islamic affairs.<sup>15</sup>

The Safavid period is often described as the beginning of modern Persian history. Much of Persia was unified under a single political entity, transforming an essentially tribal nomadic order and making Persian the main language—even replacing Arabic as the language of theological discourse.

The brutal conversion of the Sunni population lasted about 120 years, forcing droves of intellectuals, poets, scientists, and prominent Sunni *ulama* [scholars] to flee the country. Many with lesser means escaped to remote areas of the country, such as Hormozgan.

Soon after establishing a Shia state, the Safavids imported some 1,200 clerics from Lebanon's Jabal Amel region to disseminate the Shia creed and vilify the Sunni faith—the effects of which remain instilled in Iranian Shia culture. The clerics popularized the Shia festival of *Ashura*, which marks the death of the Imam Hossein, the son of Imam Ali, in a 680 AD battle with the Ummayyad Caliph Yezid; to this date, *Ashura* epitomizes Sunni oppression of Shias.

In attempts to "Persianize" and assimilate various ethnic, religious, and subnational identities, successive governments and foreign powers redrew frontiers and scattered communities around the country. The first significant redrawing of borders occurred under the Qajar dynasty in the late 19th century, when Britain carved up the Baluch homeland and divided it among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

In 1928, Reza Pahlavi began a full-scale redrawing of internal ethnic and religious boundaries.<sup>16</sup> The secular leader was not as concerned about the religious affiliation of Sunnis as much as he feared that neighbor-

15 Author interview with Salah Nasrawi, November 2017.

16 Through a series of administrative divisions—in 1928, 1938, and 1955—various Baluch-inhabited areas joined adjacent provinces, such as Kerman and Saheli (present-day Hormozgan). According to Baluch expert Hadi Gamshadzei, many Baluch were forcibly resettled in Shiraz and Khorasan. Up to 150,000 Baluch were forced to migrate to Arab countries and to Zanzibar and Tanzania in Africa (Author interview with Hadi Gamshadzei, August 2017).

ing states would exploit their ethnic identity. His son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, intensified the cultural assimilation policy, banning ethnic languages in schools and local government offices and making it a criminal offence to publish or even possess publications in those languages. That said, under the last Pahlavi rule, religious minorities enjoyed greater freedom than under the current regime.

Under the Shah, said Jalalizadeh, discrimination against Sunnis was subtle. "It's true that the Sunni-populated areas were deprived, but at least they could manage their own affairs," he said. "For instance, a Sunni could head the state-run radio and television broadcast in their region or could be the general manager of a ministry department in their local areas."

"Because the state was secular, there was much less constraint on Sunnis," said Sheikh Abdulkarim in Herang. "They didn't interfere in our religious affairs." He was able to pursue his studies at a seminary in the southern port city of Bandar Lengeh, which boasted thirteen seminaries before the revolution.

The Shah promoted two schools of Sunni religious thought as a bulwark against Soviet influence in Iran. The Islamic regime has used the same institutions—Deobandi in Baluchistan and in the south, and Muslim Brotherhood in Kurdish areas—to stem the spread of Saudi Wahhabi-Salafi ideology.

### Saudi Influence Over Iranian Sunnis Is Debatable

The extent of the Saudi ideological influence in Iran is open to debate. At the outset of the 1979 revolution, the Saudis lacked a coherent policy toward Iranian Sunnis; any financial help may have been provided only to certain individual clerics. The Saudi aim was not necessarily to spread Wahhabism, according to Mohammad Javad Akbarein, an Iranian scholar and former Shia cleric. "What's important for them is preserving the Sunni faith and maintaining a strong balance with Shias," he said.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the Islamic Republic, which subsidizes numerous Arabic language channels to reach Arab Shia, Saudi Arabia has only recently begun to use TV networks

17 Author interview with Mohammad Javad Akbarein, August 2017.

to propagate its faith in Iran. Iran's Shia regime also started early on to proselytize in Sunni-populated areas of the country. Under the supervision of Shia clerics, the Islamic Propagation Organization built Shia schools and controlled school curriculums, said Akbarein, who taught religious studies in both Sunni and Shia sectors of Sistan-Baluchistan from 1993 to 2000.

The various Sunni Islamist groups in Iran employ different strategies toward Riyadh and Tehran. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Deobandi and Ashari schools, which emphasize nonviolence and tolerance, tend to steer away from regional tensions. Jihadist groups that view both the Iranian and Saudi governments as heretics are more affected by regional developments and identify with fellow jihadists.

Saudi efforts to allocate funds to Iranian Sunnis, in the form of scholarships to study in Saudi-sponsored universities in the Persian Gulf, have not borne fruit. An Iranian Salafi Kurd, who studied in Kuwait on a Saudi scholarship, later joined the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Call and Reform Organization—which has good relations with the Iranian government—instead of working for the Saudis, according to an observer who asked not to be identified.

Iran's northwestern Kurdish region was home to the five assailants in last June's attacks in Tehran, the first time that jihadists struck the heart of the Islamic Republic. Tehran blamed Saudi Arabia. But several Kurdish activists and experts discounted a Saudi role. "Most of the Salafi jihadis in Iranian Kurdistan have been influenced by Iraqi Kurds," said Mokhtar Zarei, a former Kurdish political prisoner in Sanadaj in Iranian Kurdistan.<sup>18</sup>

Kaveh Ghoreishi, an Iranian Kurdish journalist based in Germany, said the attacks were "directly linked to the weakening of Daesh in Iraq and Syria," where Iran-backed militias have been fighting the Islamic State group.<sup>19</sup>

The attacks reflected Iran's ambiguous and at times contradictory relationship with Salafists. While tough on extremist groups threatening its sovereignty or its military presence in Syria or Iraq, the Iranian government has often turned a blind eye to such groups, most notably to let them fight US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also to undercut the secular nation-

18 Author interview with Mokhtar Zarei, June 2017.

19 Author interview with Kaveh Ghoreishi, June 2017.

alist Iranian Kurds. There is no evidence, however, that Iran has actually financed, armed, or trained jihadist groups.

Meanwhile, Iran has accused Saudi Arabia—as well as the United States and Pakistan—of providing direct aid to Baluch insurgents, a charge Baluch observers dismiss.

Since 2003, there has been an upsurge in antiregime violence in Baluchistan, mainly by the Jundollah group, whose tactics include kidnapping and beheading Iranian soldiers and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) members. Despite the capture and execution of leader Abdul Malek Rigi in 2010, the small “cash-strapped” group continues to pose a security threat with deadly attacks on government targets, noted Sarbazi.

“Anyone—especially in Baluchistan—who takes up arms against the Islamic Republic is automatically slapped with the jihadi tag, a tactic that garners wider public support for the government,” Akbarein said. “There’s so much talk of Baluch insurgency that it’s difficult to disseminate who is a jihadi and who is engaged simply in an anti-government guerrilla activity for its rights.”

Baluch radicalism dates back to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Baluch fighters who had been recruited for jihad returned to Iran after the war ended and formed Islamist groups, including the Mohammad Rasoul Allah Organization, which later became Jundollah and then morphed into Jaish al-Adl, said Amdolmoqset Kamal, a Baluch academic in Turkey.<sup>20</sup> These groups, which are not affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Afghan Taliban, have failed to build a significant power base in Iran because of the influence of clerics such as Molavi Abdulhamid, experts say.

“After the anti-Soviet jihad, the main priority of the Iranian state was to counterbalance Saudi influence in the Sunni populated regions,” said French academic Stéphane Dudoignon, a Baluch expert.<sup>21</sup>

Because Sunnis are not homogenous, it is difficult to gauge the degree to which they are affected by the rising Iran-Saudi rivalry. In Kurdistan, for example, the sectarian factor has always been secondary, even

20 Author interview with Amdolmoqset Kamal, August 2017.

21 Author interview with Stéphane Dudoignon, September 2017.

though Sunni, not Shia, Kurds have been in the opposition against the state, said Hawzhin Baghali, a Paris-based researcher of Iranian Islamist movements.<sup>22</sup>

Having failed to forge tangible ties with Islamists in Iran, Saudi Arabia has reportedly turned to backing secular opposition groups, including the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), and to a lesser extent, the Komola Party. This alleged move has coincided with the renewal since 2016 of a series of KDPI military operations, code-named *Rasan* [uprising again], against Iranian security targets that ended a two-decade ceasefire.

Mohsen Rezaei, a former IRGC commander, has accused the Saudi consulate in Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan of being behind the attacks;<sup>23</sup> however, Saudi Arabia and the KDPI have denied the charges. An observer quoting KDPI sources said the Saudis offered money to some KDPI members “presumably to carry out attacks against targets inside Iran.”<sup>24</sup> The KDPI has denied it was involved but said that such payments could have happened on an individual basis.

“The regional rivalries between Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have created an opportunity through which Iranian Kurdistan can become part of the bigger regional picture,” said Mamand Roja, a Kurdish researcher and analyst.<sup>25</sup>

The most visible Saudi intervention in Iran has been through Persian-language TV channels. Even here, there is no evidence that the broadcasts have radicalized Sunnis or encouraged them to take up arms against the Iranian state.

The TV channel operators claim they receive funds from wealthy Persian Gulf businessmen, including Saudis, but not from any government. However, a retired Kuwaiti official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said he had no doubt that Saudi intelligence was behind the channels. Nour, the Persian-language channel that operates from Dubai, is registered as an Amman-based company to circumvent detection of a Saudi government role, he said.

22 Author interview with Hawzhin Baghali, February 2018.

23 Mohammed A. Salih, “Why Iranian Kurdish Party Is Stepping Up Fight Against Tehran,” *Al-Monitor*, July 1, 2016, <https://www.geopolintelligence.com/why-iranian-kurdish-party-is-stepping-up-fight-against-tehran/>.

24 Author interview with observer, February 2018.

25 *Ibid.*

Nour’s Dubai director, Abdulsalam Mollaei, said as a rule the UAE does not give permits to non-Arabic religious networks “for fear of antagonizing Iran.”<sup>26</sup> But of course, authorities there know exactly what kind of work they do. “You will never find proof because the way they operate is to avoid detection,” said the Kuwaiti official.

Oddly, Saudi Arabia, which promotes itself as the guardian of the world’s Sunnis, has not shown much interest in the plight of Iranian Sunnis. “It’s because they are afraid to provoke Tehran,” said the Kuwaiti official,<sup>27</sup> adding that anti-Persian racism may be a major factor. Another factor could be Saudi fears of provoking Iran into stirring up the Shia population in eastern Saudi Arabia, which also complains about being victims of discrimination.

Other Persian Gulf states have shown similar apathy toward Iranian Sunnis. Bahrain’s Sunni government imported Pakistanis and Bedouin Syrians to increase its Sunni population in relation to the Shia majority that it sees as a threat to its survival. A few years ago, the UAE deported several Iranian Sunnis who had been living in the Emirates for decades after relations with Tehran soured. This may explain why many Persian Sunnis who live in Arab countries along the Persian Gulf often hide their Iranian heritage.

### Iranian Sunnis Follow the Shafei School

The majority of Iranian Sunnis belong to the Shafei school—one of four schools of Islamic law in the Sunni faith. Like the Hanafi school—to which Baluch, Turkmen, Aimaqs,<sup>28</sup> and Persians in Khorasan province adhere—the Shafei school relies predominantly on the Quran and the *hadith*.

Shafei scholars in Hormozgan—except those educated in Saudi Arabia<sup>29</sup>—follow the Ashari theology and have been under the strong influence of the Deobandi schools in Baluchistan since the 1980s. Ashari thought, which arrived in Iran during the Seljuk period in the tenth century, had no institutional presence until the

26 Author interview with Abdulsalam Mollaei, August 2017.

27 Author interview with former Kuwaiti official, February 2018.

28 The majority of the nomadic or seminomadic Aimaq tribes are Sunnis.

29 Those who studied in Saudi Arabia were influenced by the Ahl al-Hadith theological school championed in recent times by Salafi and jihadist movements.

end of the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925). It is older than the Deobandi school that was born in India’s Ganges River Valley in the 1860s and was developed in Iran in the latter third of the twentieth century.

“In the south, we do not like to call ourselves Deobandi,” said Sheikh Mohammad Ali Amini, the head of the Dar al-Ulum religious educational institution in Bandar Lengeh. “We are only different in name, but similar in our views.” He describes Asharism as somewhere “between Sufism and Salafism.”<sup>30</sup>

Asharis “pay attention to the inner self,” he said, and unlike proponents of Ahl al-Hadith, Ashari theology stipulates that inferences from the Quran and the *hadith* are based on rationality. The Ahl al-Hadith, on the other hand, “are religiously dogmatic” and “on some issues are extreme and tend to exaggerate,” he said. The Ahl al-Hadith theological school, which has been championed in recent years by Salafi and jihadist movements, suffices with appearances and does not interpret; it considers the Quran and authentic *hadith* to be the only authority in matters of law and creed.<sup>31</sup>

Since the 1970s, Ashari, Deobandi, and Muslim Brotherhood institutions have been encouraged, financed, and controlled by the Iranian government. The Shah used them as a bulwark against Soviet influence, and the Islamic Republic has used them as a counterbalance to Saudi Wahhabi currents in Iran, Dudoignon said.

As in Baluchistan, Hormozgan’s Sunni leaders have “always stood up” to radical movements in Iran, said Sheikh Amini, who describes Sunni *ulamas’* relationship with Tehran<sup>32</sup> as good. “We can freely voice criticism of government policies and communicate our demands. We’re in contact with the country’s highest *marjai* [senior clerics], the Leadership and the president.” Government interference in Sunni institutions in the south is minimal “because we are attentive to what we do,” further adding, “We seek unity and the preservation of Iran’s territorial integrity.”

30 Author interview with Sheikh Ali Amini, August 2017.

31 The Taliban belong to the Deobandi school.

32 However, relations have been far from good in past decades. In July 1994, Haji Mohammad Ziaie, a prominent Baluch Sunni figure in Bandar Abbas who had been critical of the government’s policies toward the Sunni minority, particularly in Baluchistan, was assassinated under suspicious circumstances (his decapitated body was found in a valley, an arm and a leg were missing, and his abdomen had been split open).



Residents of a Hormozgan hamlet prepare for the *Nowruz* celebration of *chaharshanbeh soori*, an ancient pre-Islamic rite of jumping over fire. Only a handful of villagers turned up for the celebration, which hardline Islamists consider *haram*, or religiously forbidden. March 2015. Photo by Scheherezade Faramarzi.

The Islamic Republic has capitalized on the influence and prestige of the Sunni religious schools in Hormozgan and has used them in diplomacy toward the Arab world, Dudoignon said. The main Sunni religious schools—namely the Dar al-Ulum in Bandar Lengeh and seminaries in Bandar Abbas—have, since the late nineteenth century, educated a succession of imams who have been active throughout the Persian Gulf. Mollaei claims that there are about five thousand elementary, intermediary, and senior students studying at twenty-two Sunni seminaries in Iran.

The authority of Ashari theologian Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Khalidi al-Makhzumi, founder of the Sultan al-Ulama madrasa in Bandar Lengeh in the early twentieth century, extended across the Persian Gulf, especially to Qatar and Bahrain. In 1962, Iranian-born Sheikh Abdullah Ansari, the first director of the Administration of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Education of Qatar, co-founded the World Muslim League to counter Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab nationalism. He also helped transform Qatar into a center of Sunni learning independent from Riyadh. In the 1980s, he was instrumental in mobilizing international support for the Afghan jihad. His activities raised Qatar's international stature and helped stem possible homegrown Islamist movements there.<sup>33</sup>

33 Stéphane A. Dudoignon, "Iran, an Unexpected Sunni Hub Between South Asia and the Gulf" in *Pan-Islamic Connections: Transnational Networks Between South Asia and the Gulf*, eds. Christophe Jaffrelot, Laurence Louer (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).

While the Ashari clerical networks provided the Iranian state with links to Arab nations across the Persian Gulf, the Deobandi networks in Baluchistan have afforded ties to religious authorities in Central Asia, the southern states of the former Soviet Union, and, to a lesser extent, the Caucasus. In Baluchistan, Iran used Deobandi leaders to rally support for the Afghan mujahadeen against the Soviets. In recent years, such networks have played a major role in Iran's diplomacy with several post-"Arab Spring" governments, Dudoignon said. Khamenei dispatched a Muslim Brotherhood leader as his envoy to Tunisia following the election victory of Ennahda, a party inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

### How Persian Sunnis Survived

There are few, if any, documents that shed light on how a large number of Persians remained devoted to the Sunni faith during the forced conversion that began more than five hundred years ago. Did they flee to distant areas to escape conversion, or was the central government unable to reach them because they lived in remote parts of the country?

"Generally, both the above happened," said Sheikh Abdulkarim. "We assume they mostly fled to remote and uninhabitable areas, such as here, because they were not within the reach of the Safavid army. Historically, security was assured in places where life was difficult."

Around 1896, when famine hit Iran, newly wed Abdullah and Aisha boarded a dhow in Bandar Lengeh, along with twenty-five mules, and sailed to the Arab side of the Persian Gulf. In Dubai, Abdullah worked as a servant for wealthy Iranian merchants. The couple went on to have a son and two daughters. The son, Gholoum Hussein, grew up to become a smuggler, mainly transporting sugar to Iran. His son, Abdul Ghaffar Hussain, became a deputy mayor in 1959. Twenty years later, he established the Emirate's first factory for paint, plastic, and pipes. Today, he is a major industrialist in Dubai.

"We never felt we were discriminated against. To this day, they have treated us well," said the eighty-five-year-old Hussain, speaking fluent Persian in his cramped office. "My father always said we should never forget our Persian language. Today, except for my eldest daughter, none of my children and grandchildren speak Persian."

His ancestors fled Khorasan when the Safavids launched their Shia conversion campaign, heading south and settling briefly in various towns on the way. They had arrived in Larestan in what is now Hormozgan when Shah Ismail, the first and most brutal of Safavid rulers, died and was succeeded by the more lenient Shah Tahmasb.

The last major migration of Iranian Sunnis across the Persian Gulf occurred shortly before and after the 1979 revolution. Those who remained rebuilt their houses with money they received from relatives. The most generous help, however, has gone to building mosques. One tiny Hormozgan hamlet of no more than 1,000 residents boasts five mosques, but no high school, library, or hospital.

Many in the Arab states of the Gulf are also spreading among relatives in Hormozgan the strict religious teachings of extremist clerics who have been popping up in recent decades.

Fanaticism and ignorance about religion have become epidemic in some Hormozgan towns and villages, to the extent that Quranic texts and credible *hadith* are liberally distorted. Unlike decades ago, men and women do not mingle or share the same dinner table. Many mundane practices are deemed *haram* [religiously forbidden], such as plucking eyebrows or shaking hands with the opposite sex. Celebrating the ancient pre-Islamic *Nowruz* festivities—including *chaharshanbeh soori*, an ancient rite of jumping over a fire—are also considered *haram* because they are not mentioned in the Quran.

Sheikh Abdulkarim partly blames the Iranian regime's foreign policy and anti-Sunni propaganda for the rising popularity of these fanatical influences. "Sunnis feel their identity is being eroded to the point that they feel they have no choice but to embrace this hardline culture," he said, adding that before the revolution, Shias and Sunnis coexisted and intermarried. Shias voted for Sunni candidates to parliament, but today, Sunnis are routinely disqualified by the Guardian Council that vets candidates.

Sunnis have stopped listening to him because his voice is being drowned out by extremists, he said. "It's getting worse by the day. Our voice no longer has the same impact because the opposite side comes forward with a stronger message. Their rationale is that passive religion doesn't work anymore. Today, I feel a stranger in my community, even among my seminary students. I can barely hold onto my pulpit. My followers will multiply if I preach violence. No one wants to hear about tolerance, compromise and kindness. I am paying a hefty price to stay moderate."

So far, however, no extremist movement has risen against Shias in Hormozgan.

### Improvement, but Concerns for Future Radicalization

Despite the hurdles, there have been some general improvements for Iranian Sunnis. Official anti-Sunni rhetoric has subsided, and Khamenei has called for lifting the discrimination. Alam Saleh, a United Kingdom-based academic, went as far as to say that this is "the closest we have reached so far to a Golden Age for Sunnis."<sup>34</sup>

The relative improvement began after Sunnis rallied behind Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential elections. Since then, Sunnis have voted for reformist candidates—Rouhani won six million Sunni votes in 2013—making them kingmakers in elections.

"Twenty years ago," said Saleh, "nobody asked 'who are Sunnis going to vote for.' They asked, 'who will the Kurds or the Baluch vote for?' For the first time, the Sunni vote has entered the political discourse," which "indicates that Sunnis are being recognized as a lever and a political force."

34 Author interview with Alam Saleh, September 2017.

As Iran's political landscape has evolved, reformist movements have emerged among Sunnis who have joined the country's larger, mainstream religiously-oriented reformist camp. In so doing, they have shifted their demands from ethnic rights to general religious rights that are more appealing to the wider Iranian public. They are communicating these demands through the country's dominant reformist channels and asking, for instance, "why do Shia Kurds have a better chance to advance than Sunni Kurds?" said a Kurdish analyst requesting anonymity.<sup>35</sup> The same goes with Baluch and Turkmen reformists. Still, secular nationalist aspirations remain strong among the larger Kurdish population.

At the same time, Sunnis are developing strong new leaders. "Now, there is one by the name of Molavi Abdulhamid who has taken up that role," said Saleh. "This in itself is a positive outcome because in Iran there are no political parties to bring about change."

"Molavi Abdulhamid, a far-sighted leader, who understands that the problems we face today are temporary, doesn't support militant groups," said Molavi Salahaddin Shahnavaazi,<sup>36</sup> a teacher at the Makki school in Zahedan and a PhD student in theology in Istanbul. Molavi Abdulhamid "believes that only gradual struggle can eliminate the problems and there is no need for radical action," concurred Sarbazi.

In 1999, Khatami instituted local elections, giving local actors a bigger role in governing their own areas<sup>37</sup>—in another boost to Sunni political participation.

Paradoxically, the participation of local forces—including followers of mainly Deobandi, Ashari, and Muslim Brotherhood schools—in municipal councils has contributed to the secularization of political discourse, said Dudoignon. This does not mean that the larger Sunni society has become secular, but that those religious movements have come to reiterate the demands of secular nationalists who were all but eliminated after the revolution.

<sup>35</sup> Author interview with Kurdish analyst, February 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Author interview with Salahaddin Shahnavaazi, August 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Governor-generals are still appointed by Tehran.

The changes in the Sunnis' situation, said Saleh, are also linked to the general situation in the Middle East because regional issues are now more about religion than ethnicity.

On the home front, it is not clear if Iran's strategy of working with Sunni religious networks will continue to prevent the spread of Salafism. While the policy may have succeeded until now, the advent of social media could make it more difficult unless Iran makes "decisive concessions" to the Sunni population, Dudoignon said. "We are not anymore in the political framework of the post-Cold War years."

The explosion of Persian-language Sunni religious websites has created a new generation of Salafi-inspired religious and political activists who are questioning the authority of the Ashari, Deobandi, and Muslim Brotherhood leadership. The Baluch Deobandis, the French scholar said, are already "losing ground to grassroots radical movements inspired by cross-border and transnational Salafi trends."

Iran's military intervention in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen has also antagonized its Sunni population. Analysts and Sunni leaders fear this policy could play into the hands of extremists. "When we tell our followers that our government's foreign policy is not directed against Iranian Sunnis, they ask 'then why is it behaving that way toward Sunnis abroad?'" said Sheikh Abdulkarim.

**Scheherezade Faramarzi** began her journalism career in Iran in 1978 as a reporter on the English-language *Tehran Journal*. When the independent press was excluded from Iran after the revolution, she reported from Beirut for The Associated Press, covering the Iran-Iraq war, the Lebanese civil war and Israeli invasion, and the arms-for-hostages exchange that came to be known as Iran-Contra. She went on to report for the AP from across the Middle East as well as Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Africa, and Europe.

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