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,” 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

1 Author interview, March 2015.
Iran's Sunnis Resist Extremism, but for How Long?

Dr. Ali Alfoneh argues that: “It is a major Shia and bordering 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 Twelve Shias 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 makes ethnic and cultural 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 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 ethnic, race or religious background,” Khamenei said in reply to a letter from Molavi Abdolhamid, the Friday prayer leader in the Baluchistan capital of Zahedan.

Abdolhamid has characterized Khamenei's response as “historic and decisive,” but cautions that previous directives regarding Sunnis have not been enforced, such as making it illegal to insult the Prophet Mohammad'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.

**This is why the majority of Sunnis in Iran’s provinces of Hormozgan and Fars and in northern Khurasan are duty bound, in accordance with religious teachings and the Constitution, to refrain from allowing any discrimination and inequality among Iranians from any ethnic, race or religious background.”**

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 county suffers from intolerance and prejudices,” said Molavi Abdolhamid, 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 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- Baluchestan, 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 Sunnis 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.” 9 He vowed to “walk barefoot in the streets wrapped in a shroud,” Jalalizadeh said in a recent interview.

2 Author interview, March 2015.
3 Author interviews, March 2015.
4 Author interview with Sheikh Abdulkarim Mohammadi, March 2015.
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 bN Abu Talib (600-661 AD) and ending with Mohammad Ali Khamenei (born 1933 AD), who, according to Twelver belief, disappeared but will reappear to bring peace and justice to the world.
8 Written questions were submitted to Molavi Abdolhamid who responded in writing in September 2017.
10 Author interview with Jalal Jalalizadeh, August 2017.
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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.1 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, nine per cent of schools have no 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.2 Sunnis stand a better chance of getting low-ranking jobs that the government considers safe, such as banking and agriculture, said Habibolah Sarbarzi, director of the Italy-based Baluch Activists Campaign.3

Iran's Religious History

Persia (the name for Iran until 1935) was predominantly populated by Shia. The Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan regions ranked the lowest in a 2009 human development index.4 Sunnis stand a better chance of getting low-ranking jobs that the government considers safe, such as banking and agriculture, said Habibolah Sarbarzi, director of the Italy-based Baluch Activists Campaign.5

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.6

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 Umayyad Caliph Yazid. To this date, Ashura epitomizes Sunni oppression of Shi’as.

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.7 The secular leader was not as concerned about the religious affiliation of Sunnis as much as he feared that neighbor-11

11  Gozinesh involves an ideological test requiring candidates to demonstrate allegiance to Shia Islam and the Islamic Republic, including the concept of Wilayat-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 Sarbarzi; August 2017.

14  The books by: Sahih Buharı, Sahih Muslim, Abu Dawood, Imam at-Tirmidhi, al-Nasa'i, and Ibn Majah. "state’s 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.8 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 area.9

"Because the state was secular, there was much less constraint on Sunnis," said Sheikh Abdulkarim in Heran. "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 hosted 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 Akbariain, 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.10

Unlike the Islamic Republic, which subsidizes numerous Arabic language channels to reach Arab Shia, Saudi Arabia has only recently begun to use TV networks 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 Akbariain, 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 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 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. "I don’t think that the Salafi jihads in Iranian Kurdistan have been influenced by Iraqi Kurds," said Mokhtar Zarei, a former Kurdish political prisoner in Sanadaj in Iranian Kurdistan.12

Kaveh Gholreisi, 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.13

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-15

15  Author interview with Salah Nasrawi, November 2017.

16  Through a series of administrative divisions—in 1928, 1936, and 1955—various Baluch inhabited areas joined adjacent provinces, such as Kerman and Sistan (present-day Khorasan). According to Baluch expert Hadi Gamshadzehi, many Baluch were forcibly resettled in Shiraz and Khorasan. Up to 155,000 Baluch were forced to migrate to Arab countries and to Zarand and Tawzin in Armenia (Africa) (Author interview with Hadi Gamshadzehi, August 2017).

17  Author interview with Mohammad Javad Akbariain, August 2017.

18  Author interview with Mokhtar Zarei, June 2017.

19  Author interview with Kaveh Gholreisi, June 2017.

9  Author interview with Kaveh Ghoreishi, June 2017.
Iran’s Sunnis Resist Extremism, but for How Long?

Although Sunnis, not Shia, Kurds have been in the opposition against the state, said Hozhinz Baghali, a Paris-based researcher of Iranian Islamist movements.22 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; 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.” 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.23 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.24

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22 Author interview with Hozhinz Baghali, February 2018.
24 Author interview with observer, February 2018.
25 Ibid.
Residents of a Hormozgan hamlet prepare for the Nowruz celebration of chaahrshanbeh 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. Mollaie 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 Abdulkarim al-Khalidi al-Makhzumi, founder of the Sultan al-Ulama madrassa 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 transform 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.”

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?

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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 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 Hussein, became a deputy mayor in 1959. Twenty years later, he established the Empire’s first factory for plastic, 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 crammed 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 Tahmasp.

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 Noruz festivities—including chaahrshanbeh 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 hardcore culture,” he said, adding that before the revolution, Shi’as and Sunnis coexisted and intermarried. Shi’as 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 Shi’as 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.”

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 asking, for instance, “why do Shia Kurds have a better chance to advance dominant reformist channels and asking, for instance, are more appealing to the wider Iranian public. They are shifting their demands from ethnic rights to general religious rights that the 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.

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 Salahaddin Shahnavazi, a teacher at the Makki school in Zahedan and a PhD student in theology in Tehran. Molavi Abdulhamid “believes that only gradual struggle can eliminate the problems and there is no need for radical action,” concurred Sarsabz.

In 1999, Khatami instituted local elections, giving local actors a bigger role in governing their own areas in the post-Cold War years.

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 there are no political parties to bring about change,” said 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.”

Paradoxically, the participation of local forces—including followers of mainly Deobandi, Ashari, and Muslim Brotherhood schools—in municipal councils has continued. “We are not anymore in the political framework of the Iran-Contra. She went on to report for the AP from across the Middle East as well as Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Africa, and Europe.

Iran’s Sunnis Resist Extremism, but for How Long?

The changes in the Sunni’s 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.”

IRAQ

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In 1999, Khatami instituted local elections, giving local actors a bigger role in governing their own areas—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.

Challenges faced by Sunni resurgence:

- Fragmentation among Sunni groups
- Competition with Shia factions
- Internal divisions among Sunni leaders
- Government's marginalization of Sunnis
- Lack of political representation

Challenges faced by Iranian Sunnis, they ask ‘then why is it behaving that way toward Iranian Sunnis abroad?’” said Sheikh Abdulkarim.

PRESS RELATIONS COORDINATOR

Scheherzade 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 reporting for the AP from across the Middle East as well as Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Africa, and Europe.

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In 1999, Khatami instituted local elections, giving local actors a bigger role in governing their own areas—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.
The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today’s global challenges.

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Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,
Washington, DC 20005