Religious Pluralism and Minority Lives in Iran

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Introduction

This book explores the textures of religious pluralism and minority lives in Iran with both empathy and scholarly rigor. It begins from a simple observation: pluralism is not a slogan or a legal article; it is a daily practice negotiated in homes, schools, markets,

and sacred spaces. Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Baha’is, Kurds, and other communities have long shared neighborhoods and histories with the Persian-speaking Shi‘i majority, cultivating habits of coexistence while also contending with boundaries, exclusions, and periodic waves of contestation. Rather than flattening this complexity into a single narrative of tolerance or repression, the chapters that follow map the shifting ground between these poles. They trace how people make claims, build alliances, and preserve dignity under changing political and economic conditions.

Historically, the land we now call Iran has been home to intertwined languages, rituals, and memories reaching back many centuries. Empires rose and fell; dynasties and revolutions redrew the lines of belonging; and yet, everyday pluralism persisted in marketplaces, workshops, and shared festivals. The transition from imperial formations to a modern nation-state brought new opportunities for representation as well as novel mechanisms of categorization and constraint. Across this longue durée, minorities have contributed to commerce, medicine, literature, architecture, and the arts, even as they faced varying degrees of suspicion or marginalization. Recognizing this braided history allows us to see pluralism as a layered inheritance rather than a recent import.

Law is central to these layers. The constitutional and statutory frameworks of the Islamic Republic recognize some non-Muslim communities, shaping domains such as personal status, education, and public representation, while other groups remain outside formal recognition and must pursue protection and dignity through more precarious channels. Ethnic identity intersects with religion in complex ways: Kurdish life, for example, is marked by language, region, and diverse religious affiliations that do not fit neatly into a single category. Legal texts, however, rarely capture the lived nuance of these intersections. This book therefore reads the law alongside experience, asking how rules are enforced, bent, or negotiated in practice.

Methodologically, the study balances archival research with community interviews and participant observation. Court documents, newspapers, municipal records, and communal publications are read in dialogue with oral histories and contemporary conversations conducted in multiple languages. To protect participants, interviews employ pseudonyms, careful anonymization, and collaborative review where feasible; consent is treated as a continuing process rather than a single signature. Translation is approached not only as a technical task but as an ethical one, attentive to untranslatable terms and the risks of erasure. The goal is not to speak for communities but to listen closely and render their strategies, doubts, and aspirations visible.

A recurring theme is survival with creativity. Minority families navigate bureaucracies, cultivate educational capital, sustain professional guilds, and lean on diasporic networks. Ritual calendars become repositories of memory and sources of social protection; shared shrines and neighborhood charities generate forms of interdependence that outlast political cycles. At the same time, the costs of

marginalization are real: restricted opportunities, stigmatizing representations, and the quiet labor required to stay safe. By foregrounding both contribution and constraint, the book resists the temptation to romanticize resilience.

The chapters are organized to move from concepts and history to law and institutions, then to community-centered portraits and cross-cutting themes such as gender, education, economy, language, and media. Later chapters consider security, civil society, and diplomacy at local scales, followed by analyses of digital life, environmental vulnerability, and migration. The concluding chapters develop policy pathways grounded in what communities themselves identify as workable: incremental legal reforms, administrative practices that reduce arbitrariness, support for cultural and linguistic rights, and mechanisms for interfaith and interethnic cooperation that are sensitive to local context. Throughout, attention to everyday life anchors any proposal for change.

Ultimately, Religious Pluralism and Minority Lives in Iran is an invitation to see pluralism as a lived equilibrium—fragile, argued over, but continually renewed by those who inhabit it. It asks readers to hold together empathy and evidence, to let archival traces challenge assumptions, and to let personal narratives unsettle the neatness of categories. If the book succeeds, it will have shown that the question is not whether pluralism exists, but how it is made and remade each day—and how policy can learn from that labor. The pages ahead are offered in that spirit.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping Plural Iran: Concepts, Terms, and Debates

Iran, often perceived as a monolithic entity, is in reality a vibrant mosaic of ethnic and religious diversity, a characteristic that has profoundly shaped its long and complex history. Understanding this pluralism requires a careful examination of the concepts and terms used to describe its various communities, as well as the debates that swirl around their recognition and rights. The very notion of "minority" in Iran is multifaceted, evolving across historical epochs and often contested in contemporary discourse.

The predominant ethnic and cultural group in Iran consists of native Persian speakers, who constitute about half of the population, though some estimates place them higher. However, the people generally identified as Persians are of mixed ancestry, reflecting centuries of interaction and migration. Beyond this majority, Iran is home to significant Turkic and Arab elements, alongside Kurds, Baloch, Lurs, and smaller groups like Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews. These groups, collectively identifying as

Iranians, speak various languages, though Persian (Farsi) remains the official language of the state and the lingua franca across communities.

Religiously, Iran is an Islamic Republic, with Twelver Ja'fari Shi'ism enshrined as the official state religion, a status it has held for approximately five centuries. The overwhelming majority of Iranians, between 75% and 90%, adhere to this branch of Islam. Yet, the country’s religious landscape extends far beyond this dominant faith. Sunni Muslims, while also Muslim, form the largest religious minority, making up about 5-15% of the population. Most Sunnis in Iran belong to ethnic minority groups such as Kurds, Baloch, and Turkmen.

The Iranian constitution formally recognizes Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as religious minorities, granting them certain rights, including representation in parliament. This recognition stems from their continuous historical presence in the country, predating the advent of Islam in Persia. However, other religious groups, most notably the Baha’is, are not officially recognized and face significant discrimination and persecution. This distinction between "recognized" and "unrecognized" minorities is a critical aspect of religious pluralism in Iran and profoundly impacts the daily lives of these communities.

The term "pluralism" itself, in the Iranian context, carries different layers of meaning. At its most basic, it denotes the mere existence of diverse religious belief systems and ethnic groups coexisting within society. Historically, Iran has exhibited a "cosmopolitanism-in-practice," where various ethnicities, religions, and cultures were governed under a centralized order, often through pragmatic accommodation rather than forced homogenization. This has resulted in a long history of peaceful coexistence among different Iranian ethnic groups. However, this coexistence has also been marked by periods of contestation and varying degrees of state control and repression, especially since the 1979 revolution.

A key debate revolves around the official recognition of minorities. While the constitution acknowledges linguistic diversity and allows for the use of local languages in media and education, it draws a sharp distinction between religious and ethnic groups. Ethnic groups like Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, and Baloch are not explicitly recognized as "minorities" in the same constitutional framework as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. Instead, the government often emphasizes language as a distinguishing factor for "cultural-social subunits," referring to them as "speakers of Arabic," "speakers of Azeri," or "speakers of Kurdish." This linguistic focus, rather than explicit ethnic recognition, shapes the discourse around their rights and identity.

The reluctance to formally acknowledge ethnic minorities as such is not merely a legal oversight but is also influenced by Iran's historical and geopolitical experiences. Concerns over separatist movements throughout the 20th century have contributed to official fears that explicit recognition could pose threats to national security and

territorial integrity. Consequently, the state often views any claims for political rights by ethnic minorities, particularly Kurds, Baloch, and Arabs, as threats to national security.

Coexistence in Iran, therefore, is not a static condition but a dynamic process. It involves a complex interplay of shared history and cultural contributions alongside ongoing negotiations over identity, rights, and political space. Iranian society exhibits a prevalent sense of social cohesion, where various ethnic groups are often seen as integral to the broader Iranian identity. The shared history and the religion of Islam are often cited as unifying elements that link Iranians to each other, fostering an identity that, for many, does not clash with their national identity. Yet, the state's efforts to impose a homogeneous national identity, particularly one that is predominantly Persian and Shi'i, has led to a sense of marginalization and persistent demands for inclusivity and autonomy from non-Persian communities.

The concept of "contestation" is crucial in understanding minority lives. This refers to the ways in which various groups challenge existing norms, legal frameworks, and societal expectations to assert their identities and rights. This can manifest in diverse forms, from quiet cultural preservation to more overt political activism. For instance, despite constitutional guarantees, discrimination persists in areas like employment, education, and property rights for recognized minorities, and even more severely for unrecognized groups. This necessitates continuous efforts by these communities to navigate and sometimes defy restrictive policies.

Policy towards minorities in Iran is a blend of constitutional provisions, interpretations of Islamic law, and practical implementation, often resulting in inconsistencies. While Article 13 of the Constitution recognizes Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, it also specifies that they may exercise their religious ceremonies "within the limits of the law." This phrase, coupled with the dominance of Islamic law and jurisprudence, can create ambiguities that allow for arbitrary decisions and restrictions. For instance, while recognized minorities have parliamentary representation, they are generally barred from holding senior governmental or military positions. Furthermore, laws related to inheritance and testimony can also place non-Muslims at a disadvantage.

The government's approach has often been described as one that seeks to impose a homogeneous Iranian identity, repressing minority cultures, traditions, and religions perceived as threats. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the Baha'i community, which is not recognized by the constitution and faces systematic human rights abuses, including imprisonment, harassment, and intimidation. Similarly, Sunni Muslims, despite their significant numbers, complain about a lack of Sunni mosques in major cities and restrictions on public displays of their religion and culture.

Recent years have also seen intensified crackdowns on ethnic and religious minorities, often under the guise of national security. These actions, including mass arrests,

violent detentions, and disproportionate impacts on groups like Kurds and Baloch, underscore the fragile nature of minority rights in practice. The protests sparked by the death of Mahsa "Jina" Amini in 2022, an Iranian-Kurdish woman, further highlighted the intertwined nature of ethnic and gender discrimination, with minorities experiencing compounded harms.

In examining these concepts and terms, it becomes clear that "pluralism" in Iran is a negotiated reality, constantly shaped by historical legacies, legal frameworks, political imperatives, and the resilience of diverse communities. The debates surrounding these issues are not merely academic; they profoundly influence the daily lives, opportunities, and sense of belonging for millions of Iranians. Moving forward, understanding the nuances of these interactions—between official recognition and practical discrimination, between historical coexistence and contemporary contestation—is essential for any meaningful exploration of minority lives in Iran.
