

Ideological Study

The Sunnis in Iran

A Study on Iran's Ideological Foundations
and Its Sectarian Policy Towards Sunnis



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Introduction

The treatment of minorities in Iran is among the country's thorniest and most controversial issues. The Iranian government always asserts that it does not differentiate among its citizens on the basis of religion, sect or ethnicity. On the contrary, however, some human rights organizations assert the opposite.

Thus, the importance of this study is clear. It focuses on the position of Sunnis in Iran, as an example of a minority group in Shiite majority Iran. Sunnis are the largest minority group in the country.

This study aims to answer some questions related to the status of Sunnis within the Iranian state and their relation to the political system after the 1979 revolution and the extent to which they have obtained their political and minority rights. It also seeks to give an answer to the question of victimization. Is it the dominating political and social reality in Iran, or not? It will also touch on how far Sunnis are affected by fragmentation among themselves along ethnic and cultural lines, as well as their abandonment of a united front. The important and central question that the study seeks to track and answer in this respect is: Are Sunnis marginalized by the ruling elite or are they isolated as they live in the largest Shiite majority country in the world? What are the manifestations of this marginalization? The study also includes a brief historical glimpse to cast light on the position of Sunnis in the political system of Iran within its modern structure. This enables us to discover whether this is a legacy which the government is simply continuing, or if the government has adopted a unique stance in its sectarian policies towards Sunnis. This focus will be given greater emphasis in the post-1979 revolution era.

I- The Position of Sunnis Within the Iranian State Before the 1979 Revolution

Before the era of the Safavids, most Iranians were Sunnis. Iran continued to have a Sunni majority population until the Safavid dynasty took control of the Persian regions. A systematic policy began to legitimize the new political system of the state. This system was consolidated through an enabling environment and appropriate conditions. Through different means, an environment was created which not only established Shiism as the state religion but also:

1. Established a clerical state

The Safavid dynasty established a religious apparatus for the first time in the annals of the Shiite Twelver doctrine. This apparatus was affiliated with the state in terms of appointments and financing. According to some contemporary historians, "Shah Ismail granted Al-Karki, a senior mullah, massive funds to gain followers. He justified this by citing the need for jurists in organizing the transformation that takes place from *Da'wah* [inviting people to Islamic teachings] to statehood."¹

This institutionalization deprived the Shiite jurists in Iran of their independence. The mission of this religious apparatus focused mainly on *Da'wah* and spreading Shiism at home.

The mission also included overseeing inter-sectarian conversions and submitting reports to the political authority. At the same time, it mobilized the people against foreign enemies.²

But some jurists remained opposed to being affiliated under the umbrella of a religious apparatus of the state. They preferred to remain under private religious establish-

ments. A jurisprudential difference arose between al-Karki and al-Qatifi on this issue,³ along with other issues such as accepting if their authority came from the Sultan/Shah, which was accepted by Karki and rejected by Qatifi.

2. *Their Position on Sunnis*

The Safavids pursued a policy of converting Sunnis, the majority at the time, to the official doctrine of the state. They spread religious propaganda and sectarian proselytism in cities and villages. They also consolidated the general features of the state's new identity via the Shah's decrees to insert the names of the Twelve Infallible Imams in Friday prayers and to add the lines of "*I bear witness that Ali is the Wali of Allah*" and "*Come to perform the best of all deeds*" to the call for prayer.⁴ These additions to the call for prayer were made official across all the state's mosques. Throughout history, these additions have not been accepted by most Shiite clerics and jurists. They considered these additions as actions undertaken by radical Shiites and the Murji'ah sect.⁵

Shah Ismail realized that the failure to spread Shiism prior to his reign was due to two factors: the fear of popular resistance against Shiite conversions and the inadequate propagation of Shiism among the people.⁶

Thus, Shah Ismail addressed these two factors by establishing a major religious institution which was loyal to him. The main aim of this institution included "the efficient propagation of Shiism among the people," as quoted by the Shah. As for the factor of "fearing popular resistance," he embarked on using excessive force to ensure that there would be no resistance among the people. This disturbed even al-Karki, the Shiite cleric close to the Shah. Al-Karki was angered by the killing of the top cleric al-Taftazani. He told the Shah, "We would have killed him

with our proofs and arguments if he had not been killed. His submission to us would have obliged all those dwelling in Transoxiana.”⁷ This violent policy prompted some historians, like Ali Shariati, to attribute the Qazlbashi Shiism⁸ or the Safavid Shiism to this dynasty. They also associated the Safavids with decadence, alcohol addiction and rioting. They maintained that the Safavids had nothing to do with Shiism, as some contemporary Iranian thinkers have also concluded.⁹

All in all, this policy was the main strategy for the Shah and his government as he believed that it would ensure the stability of his rule at home and abroad. He attempted to use this policy in Iraq. According to an Iraqi historian, “When Shah Ismail entered Baghdad again, he embarked on killings, especially against Sunnis and Christians. He launched a merciless crackdown on them, showing an excessive bias to Shiism. He exceedingly prosecuted Sunnis who remained after the crackdown and even forced most of them to convert to Shiism.”¹⁰

Here we must pay heed to two main pillars on which the modern and contemporary state was established: Shiism which was institutionalized during the era of the Safavids, and Persianism which was institutionalized during the era of the Pahlavis. The two were merged in a way which is hard to understand. It is a product of a host of complicated social, political and sectarian interactions. It cannot be attributed to just one factor or certain parameters.

The position of both the private and governmental religious establishments in Iran were unified towards other non-Shiite sects. Both of them belong to the same traditional jurisprudential school. They adopted a radical tone towards the Sunnis, as did most of the traditionalist schools in general. The reformist Shiite movement was

still fledgling and weak, but with its reformatory language it was much more moderate towards religious minorities compared to the fundamentalist and traditionalist schools. The main features of the Shiite reformist movement were shaped following the Persian Tobacco Protest and the Constitutional Revolution.

II- The Sunnis in Iran Following the 1979 Revolution

Under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the condition of religious minorities was dire when it came to their political and social rights. Therefore, minorities demanded their rights and participated with the rest of the popular factions in the revolution, hoping that their condition might change. Following the revolution, their grievances were constitutionalized. The Iranian revolution could have been a melting pot for all Iranians regardless of their sectarian affiliations under the auspices of a nation state bringing them all together. But *Article 12* states, “The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja’fari school of [shi’i] religion. This principle shall remain eternally unchangeable.”¹¹

There was no urgent need to determine the identity of the state or for the president of the republic to be identified as a Shiite Twelver. This identity contradicted the originally stated vision of the new political system which was supposed to be based on the concept of Shura that depends on jurisprudential knowledge and uprightness rather than on infallibility and religious dictates by Prophet Mohammed on who would be his successors.¹² Although the preamble to the Iranian constitution, prepared by Khomeini while he was in exile in Paris, stipulated that the president should be Shiite, and should be one of the promoters of

Shiism, the preamble to the constitution in its first version discussed by the Assembly of Experts when approving the Iranian constitution did not include any provisions stipulating that Shiism should be the official religion of the state. Moreover, there was no condition that the president of the republic be a Shiite.¹³ But Ayatollah Hussein Montazeri, the then Chairman of the Assembly of Experts, intervened to approve two important sections which had a negative impact on the Iranian state. He confirmed *Article 2* and *Article 115* which determine the identity of the Iranian state and the president of the republic. Montazeri later realized this tremendous mistake. He promised Sunnis opposed to the articles related to the identity of the state that he would reconsider them in coming constitutional amendments.¹⁴ This did not happen. Montazeri was sacked before the amendments of 1989. The articles remained as they were and the oppression of Sunnis increased, whose number, according to some of those affiliated with the government, neared six million.¹⁵ Some statistics suggest that Sunnis make up 10 to 20 percent of the Iranian people.¹⁶ Regardless of the real percentage, which the state refuses to release, Sunnis have remained oppressed and deprived of their rights.

In any event, the constitutionalization of this oppression was consolidated by the current supreme leader when Moulavi Abdelhamid sent him a message demanding an end to the discrimination against Sunnis. Khamenei responded with an unprecedented message outlining the framework within which officials would work to end discrimination against Sunnis. This framework involved religious teachings and the constitution.¹⁷ Hence, the supreme leader cited the same constitution which Sunnis complain of due to its institutionalization of exclusion and

religious teachings which are nothing but jurisprudential understandings subject to different interpretations.

Moulavi Abdelhamid responded to Khamenei's message saying, "We expect that the Supreme National Security Council of Iran will pass the decree of the supreme leader to all state apparatuses and institutions for implementation. And we expect that the president will call on officials to enforce justice and quickly end discrimination. They should not submit to pressures from some state apparatuses and departments."¹⁸ Abdelhamid responded to Khamenei, citing the same constitution, reminding him of the provisions which urge justice and ending discrimination on the basis of religion and sect.

In the same context, sectarian, religious and ethnic minorities called for the amendment of provisions of the constitution which discriminate between citizens on the basis of religious belief and do not openly stipulate equality among them.¹⁹ We notice that minorities attempted to enforce some of the suspended constitutional provisions. At the same time, they tried to change some of the provisions that permit sectarianism and discrimination against them, which Iranian leaders cited.

The Iranian government has pursued some sectarian policies towards Sunnis, including:

1. The Government's Policy Towards Sunni Figures

After the success of the revolution, Sunni Kurds were angered due to the continuation of policies marginalizing them and excluding them from resources and positions. Despite the Kurds partaking in the revolution and welcoming it, Khomeini did not give them the freedom to practice Sunni Islam. He also did not allow Sunnis to have even a single mosque in Tehran or to take advantage of the

oil revenues in their regions.²⁰

Ahmed Muftizadeh, one of the Sunni leaders in Iran, was angry at Khomeini because he later reneged on the promises he made them.²¹ He was arrested in 1982 for 10 years. He was locked up in a 1.5 meter high cell where he could not stand upright. His bones were broken, among other injuries. He was released in 1993. He went blind and died two weeks after his release. The authorities cracked down on some of his comrades and killed them, fearing assembly around his memory.²² This repression was not confined to Moftizadeh. The government is still pursuing this strategy to this day against any figure who can galvanize minorities or mobilize them to demand their rights.

Moulavi Abdelhamid, the leader of the Sunnis in Iran, called on the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to suspend secret orders issued by the former head of the judiciary Sadiq Amoli Larijani to uphold the death penalty against Sunni drug smugglers before a parliamentary vote to suspend the death penalty against drug smugglers. “The recent executions upheld against several Sunni nationals in different cities in Iran on charges related to drugs increases the likelihood that there had been secret orders from the former head of the judiciary,” he said.²³

The crackdown increased to impact major Sunni clerics. The clergy court in Hamadan, in western Iran, summoned the Sunnis’ Mufti in Kurdistan, Sheikh Kak Hassan Amini, and charged him with three counts: inciting public opinion against the government, spreading propaganda against the government, and inciting sedition between Sunnis and Shiites. The head of the Jurisprudential Complex denounced the charges against the Sunnis’ Mufti in Kurdistan, describing them as fabricated and baseless.²⁴ The arrest came three months following criticism leveled

at Shiite clerics by the Sunni Mufti, accusing them of preventing Sunnis from assuming government positions. In his comment on the letter sent by Sunni clerics to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, in which they asked him to allocate government posts to them in the government after the resignation of three ministers, he said, "Solving the problems facing minorities is not within the powers of Rouhani. Therefore, achieving the demands of Sunnis will not happen through these letters."²⁵

In a letter from Moulavi Abdelhamid to cleric Mohsen Araki, the head of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, he pointed to the politicized and indiscriminate arrests against Sunnis: "Summoning Sunni clerics and arresting them in recent years, among other problems mentioned, have alienated Sunnis. They no longer see a bright future for themselves or their children. This issue negatively impacts efforts to achieve Islamic unity and fraternity."²⁶

The oppression was not confined to tracking, arresting and sending some of these Sunni figures to jail. It also extended to places that nurtured Sunni religious figures and their popular bases.²⁷ By analyzing reports which focus on security incidents in Iran, we find that the oppression of Sunni and Kurdish elements and minorities in general is a systematic strategy pursued by the authorities. For example, the Iranian authorities executed 25 Sunni Kurds in 2016. Families of the martyrs pointed out that they suffered barbaric and brutal means of torture before they were executed. Among those executed was Hassan Amini, headmaster at the Imam Bukhari religious school in Sanandaj. He was also the Mufti and legal jurist of the city.²⁸ In the same month, the province of Khuzestan in southwestern Iran witnessed three executions among

the Ahwazi Arabs on terror-related charges.²⁹ Here we should note that the executions were issued against the defendants without any legal process. Moreover, the arrests were tantamount to kidnapping. The death sentence was issued after one or two court hearings. Sometimes the rulings were issued without hearing the arguments of the defendants. The Supreme Court in Iran also issued death penalty verdicts against some Ahvazi Arab activists. The European Union (EU) denounced these verdicts. The then EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton expressed concern about what was happening with Arab minorities in Iran. She said, “We receive reports that those men were not subject to a fair trial. They were coerced into confession. I remind the Iranian authorities of their obligations under international law, especially the provisions related to protecting the civilian and political rights of ethnic minorities. Based on the EU’s firm position and principles when it comes to the issuance of death verdicts, I repeat my call on Iran to cease all the executions.”³⁰

In October 2016, Iranian authorities upheld mass executions against what they called Kurdish separatists as well as several Sunnis.³¹ In November 2016, Iranian authorities summoned those Sunni scholars and figures partaking in the Jurisprudential Complex meeting, which was held in the Kurdish city of Sanandaj in western Iran. They were interrogated and the authorities threatened them with a judicial trial on charges of conspiring against national security. The authorities threatened to refer them to the infamous court of the clergy. They would be sentenced to long jail terms if they partook in such meetings again.³²

This heavy and incessant crackdown was met with unceasing protests, especially as this crackdown also impacted women and children.³³ The official media outlets

embarked on defaming the Ahvazi Arabs.³⁴ Sometimes the protests descended into violence between protesters and security forces.³⁵ These repressive policies led to the formation of separatist armed groups which work against the Iranian authorities. These groups attacked key IRGC positions in a sporadic manner.³⁶

2. The Government's Policy Restricting the Movement of Sunni Figures

The government has placed harsh restrictions and measures on the movement and travel of Sunni scholars and dignitaries between Iranian cities and provinces. Those seeking to travel have to receive a permit from Iran's security authorities. For example, these measures prevented the Friday prayer leader in Zahedan, Hassan Ghargig, and the legal judge of the Kurdistan province, Hasaan Amini, among other Sunni clerics, from participating in a conference for religious school students in Baluchistan. The Sunni clerics protested these measures.³⁷ Ghargig said, "Iran claims it enjoys freedom at home, but the notable Sunni clerics do not have the right to travel to all the provinces. After the end of the conference of religious school students in Baluchistan, things did not turn upside down, nor did the regime change nor was the security of the country breached. The authorities should not work in an arbitrary manner, nor should they obstruct activities which are legal. Furthermore, the authorities should not undermine security. National identity cards of citizens should not be confiscated when entering the city of Zahedan. This is illegal and spreads panic and fear among citizens." Amini added, "The Ministry of Intelligence prevented them from travelling to Zahedan because Sunni clerics in Iran are not allowed to travel to Sunni provinces and cities. The ministry also prevents them from assembly and holding meet-

ings.” He was arrested when he travelled to Zahedan in 2009 to participate in the graduation ceremony of the Dar al-Ulum al-Makkia school. He was released after 10 days in detention. He was banned from traveling to Zahedan. The imam and preacher of Sunnis in Zahedan, Sheikh Abdelhamid Islamil Zahi, said the authorities in the country prevented some Sunni clerics from travelling inside and outside the country. He said, “Traveling freely inside the country is among the rights of citizenship. Nobody can be prevented from traveling to any other province. The constitution does not give any apparatus the right to prevent people from traveling. The Sunnis do not have demands more than those enshrined in the constitution and they will not accept any measures that run counter to the country’s constitution.”³⁸ Furthermore, some Sunni clerics were assassinated when the authorities failed to protect them.³⁹ Therefore, prominent Sunni figures called for changing the constitution of the country and writing a new constitution which respects the rights of citizens and minorities.⁴⁰

3. Iran’s Policy Towards Sunni Mosques

Iranian authorities refuse to grant licenses to build or renovate places of worship, especially for Sunnis. Tehran does not even have a single mosque for Sunnis. It may have small prayer places but the main mosques where congregations gather for prayer on Fridays and Eid occasions are not permitted. This could be understood in the context of placing restrictions on the movements of Sunni clerics as we explained out of fear that those clerics may assemble and gather to coordinate among themselves.

Iranian authorities demolished the last parts of the last Sunni mosque in Tehran,⁴¹ citing administrative reasons.⁴² The Jordanian ambassador to Tehran indicated that Sun-

nis are deprived of performing Friday prayers, as are ambassadors and diplomats.⁴³ “They were praying in the Saudi consulate in a place like a garage. It was furnished for us to perform Friday prayers as the sermon was given in Arabic. This was licensed for diplomats and their families. It was not allowed for the public. An envoy from the Iranian administration came to ask us to close this mosque although we don’t announce the call for prayer on the streets and do not ask people to come to pray with us. He said that you should establish your prayer at the mosque of Tehran University. Tehran has churches for Christians and synagogues for Jews. Therefore, why aren’t there any mosques for Sunnis? There is an anathema to Arabs in the Persian dimension. They also hate us as Sunnis. These are not the policies of states. If a part of your people is Sunni and the other part is Kurdish, enlightened national policy would bring together all people. Sectarianism and bias towards certain factions is devastating for countries. Khatami, who is a decent man, travels to the United States for interfaith dialogue. If interfaith dialogue makes it incumbent upon us to talk with Christians, Jews and Buddhists, we should give precedence to holding dialogue at home in Iran.”⁴⁴ The religious Sunni establishment of Al-Azhar denounced the Iranian authorities’ demolishing of the last Sunni mosque in Iran.⁴⁵

Human Rights Watch (HRW), in its report issued in 2015, blasted the Iranian authorities for preventing the construction of Sunni mosques in Tehran.⁴⁶ In a report released in 2013, HRW accused the Iranian authorities of denying Sunnis of their right to build mosques and conduct communal prayers, such as the Eid al-Adha prayers.⁴⁷ The Iranians not only prevented Sunnis from building new places of worship, but also enforced a policy based on

demolishing the remaining ones, as was the case with the last mosque in Tehran. They also did the same with the Sunni mosque in the city of Chabahar.⁴⁸ The authorities demolished a Sunni mosque there, known as Jafar al-Sadeq mosque in the neighborhood of Korser. According to local sources, this mosque was built 15 years ago. Police officers blocked all the roads leading to the mosque. They never allowed anybody to enter the mosque while demolishing it. They also removed all the belongings inside the mosque to prevent it from being captured on camera. The way Chabahar mosque was demolished is much like the way Sheikh Fayd mosque in the city of Mashhad was taken down. In addition, Imam Abu-Hanifa religious school in the city of Zabel was demolished after closing all the roads leading to the mosque.⁴⁹

The question raised by some Shiites and those calling for proximity among the Islamic schools of thought is: why don't Sunnis perform their prayers in Shiite mosques? One of the Sunni scholars responded to this question saying, "Tehran does not have one single Sunni mosque. All mosques there are allocated only for Shiites. People in the West believe that mosques are all the same. But, for example, a Sunni Muslim cannot smoke a cigarette inside the mosque, while a Shiite can. The prayers also differ in number. Shiites go to mosques on three occasions per day, while the Sunnis perform five prayers per day. The Sunnis complain that mosques open for prayer on only three occasions. Therefore, they should have their own mosques to establish the five prescribed prayers."⁵⁰

Even if there were no differences between Sunnis and Shiites, building mosques and places of worship is one of the minorities' rights provided for in the constitution and human rights charters. Some parliamentarians and members

of city councils called on the government to allow Sunnis to build their own places of worship in Tehran and across Iran without restriction. The government considers that small mosques are enough and continues to ignore and deny this Sunni demand.⁵¹

4. The Sunnis and Sovereign Positions

Following the revolution, the Sunnis in Iran were deprived of assuming elite positions. They were also deprived of working in elite apparatuses and ascending to senior positions. Blasting the policies of marginalization and deprivation, the Sunni cleric Moulavi Abdelhamid said, “We expected that President Rouhani would appoint a Sunni figure to senior posts; therefore, we voted for him. The Sunnis make up about 75 percent of the citizens of Sistan and Baluchistan province. However, there are only 18 Sunni employees out of 300 working in a government department. He added that those qualified should not be deprived of these positions on ideological and sectarian grounds.” According to him, this discrimination impacts agriculture and livestock in the region as well as industry. Citizens are facing sectarian pressures in regions where Sunnis are minorities. Hence, the government should negotiate with Sunnis and the people and accept their conditions instead of negotiating with the Americans.⁵² Iranian officials themselves have admitted to this oppression against minorities in general and Sunnis in particular. Mohammad Khatami, affiliated with the reformists, denounced this political and religious behavior. “One century ago, Ayatollah Naini defended the rights of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians to have seats in Parliament. Iran today is lagging behind. It even prevents non-Muslims from having seats in city councils,” he said.⁵³

Hassan Rouhani, counted among the moderates, criticized

the policy of the conservatives towards minorities in general and Sunnis in particular. He admitted that some of the institutions of the state rejected appointing Sunnis to senior positions within the state.⁵⁴ But his remarks were criticized by Sunnis themselves. Rouhani's words were described as electoral campaigning. Member of Parliament Shihab Naderi wondered, "When did Rouhani ever float a Sunni figure who was dismissed by the state leadership?⁵⁵ Is there any minister or governor that was named by Rouhani and then excluded?"

It seems that Rouhani's remarks were nothing but electoral propaganda. He does not have the capacity to change the status quo for Sunnis and minorities. This file is under the exclusive authority of the supreme leader as was clear from the statement of Hassan Amini that "resolving the problems facing minorities is not within the powers of Rouhani. Therefore, meeting the demands of Sunnis cannot be achieved through messages."⁵⁶

We could say that Rouhani has power and can change things on the ground regarding Sunnis through making political decisions. However, things seem to be much more complicated. This marginalization comes with years of fundamentalist and radical posturing which has impacted the religious and ruling elites, as well as the grassroots support for them by their popular bases. It has become part of religious behavior in Iran. It could be described as the culture of the state. This approach has been passed down from the era of the Safavids, especially since the Safavid era marked the beginning of Sunni displacement and exclusion including the killing of the top Sunni cleric al-Taftazani.

At this moment, this approach still prevails despite some variations in tools, aims and strategies. The supreme lead-

er and the ruling elite are blamed for the fact that they did not attempt, even gradually, to change this culture embraced since the era of the Safavids. On the contrary, they have worked to constitutionalize and institutionalize these practices in the apparatuses of the state.

The letter of the supreme leader to Moulavi Abdelhamid in which he called for making the constitution the reference point in improving the situation of Sunnis shows that the Iranian political elite does not have a genuine intent to change these circumstances. Sectarianism has been exploited in political conflicts, especially with the Sunnis, and in electoral contests and political blackmailing. Rouhani himself stated before that the Sunnis are not oppressed. During his visit to the province of Kurdistan in 2015, a journalist asked him a surprising question on the reasons why there was not a Sunni governor for this Sunni province. Rouhani was angered by the question. He responded briefly in an angry tone that his government does not differentiate between Sunnis and Shiites in Iran saying, "Which discrimination do you speak about? Do we prevent Sunnis from assuming government positions? Do you reduce the government to the cabinet?"⁵⁷ In spite of these remarks, he himself expressed anger during his electoral campaign at the exclusion of Sunni governors.

III- The Sunnis and the Political Dispute Between the Reformists and Conservatives

The problem for Sunnis in Iran today is that they have become part of the political conflict between conservatives and reformists. Rouhani was angered by the question of the journalist about denying Sunnis their rights. During his electoral campaign, he accused his opponents - the conservatives - of excluding Sunnis.

Rouhani's response shows how sectarianism against Sunnis is exploited in politics. Therefore, it has become more complicated and detached from the framework of true and strategic solutions by concerned officials in the state. Minority issues should be counted within the national security system of the country. The state should seriously seek to solve these problems through dialogue and determining the root of the problem and not confine the issue to political blackmail. As the reformists cannot reverse the status quo, they should have spoken frankly to the people about the limits of their ability and the extent of their clout.

While we see that the rhetoric of the reformists is considerably more moderate towards Sunnis compared to the conservatives, the ruling elite has never allowed the reformists to practice their rights or to enforce and shape their demands. Therefore, it seems that the maintenance of the status quo is intentional. The Iranian authorities have excluded clerics supportive of minority demands. At the forefront was Mohammed Taher al-Khaqani (died 1985). He played a big role in supporting the 1979 revolution when he ordered oil field workers in Abadan and Muhmarra to go on strike in solidarity with the revolution. Most of the workers were Arabs and he himself was a senior Arab cleric.⁵⁸

After the success of the revolution, Khaqani asked Khomeini to implement some demands, the most important of which was asserting the Arabism of the Ahvaz region as an essential element in confirming the rights of Muhmarrah, Abadan and the entire Ahwaz.⁵⁹

But after the Iranian authorities consolidated their power, Khaqani was arrested at his house in Muhmarrah. He was blind. He was then moved to Qom where he was placed

under house arrest until he died in 1986.⁶⁰ Ayatollah Shariatmadari was also excluded. According to Hojatoleslam Hashemi Rafasnjani, Ayatollah Shariatmadari had close links with the clerics of Abadan such as Sayyed Qaemi and others. They were all opponents of the Shah. Abadan was a hotspot for resistance due to the presence of petroleum company workers. They were open-minded.⁶¹ Shariatmadari was much more open to Sunnis, according to Hassan al-Saffar, and forged relations with Sunni Islamic institutions such as the World Muslim League. Delegations from across the Islamic world used to visit him. Sheikh Abul-Hassan al-Nadavi visited him along with an accompanying delegation in Qom. They received a warm welcome. The two sides held a dialogue on bridging the gap between Sunnis and Shiites.⁶²

In the same context, Talaghani and Hussein Montazeri as well as many reformist clerics viewed minorities from an inclusive, not an exclusive, perspective. However, we cannot say that the ostracization of reformists came about due to their moderate position towards Sunnis compared to the conservatives. However, they were punished for their overall political and religious positions, which were deemed by the government as a threat to its political and sectarian core tenets. In addition, the political system protected clerics who adopted radical views towards Sunnis and who insulted and launched tirades against Sunni figures. Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani, one of the senior clerics in Qom, launched a tirade against Sunni figures at one of his lectures. He issued a fatwa that Muslims should dig up the graves of Abu Bakr and Omar, because they are buried in the usurped land of Fadak. "Given the proof that Fadak land has been usurped, the mission of every Muslim now is to dig up

the graves of the two men and exhume their remains. All clerics agree that if bodies are buried in usurped land, their graves should be dug up. This is the rule. And this is the conclusion.”⁶³ In another lecture, he said, “Omar Ibn al-Khattab was worshiping idols and drinking alcohol. He was the owner of a club for alcohol drinkers. He was ignorant, knowing nothing about *tayamum* [the Islamic act of dryablution].”⁶⁴

This rhetoric against revered Sunni figures was not countered by the Iranian political system. However, the case is the opposite when it comes to criticizing figures of the Iranian state such as Khomeini and Khamenei or even *Velayat-e Faqih*. Unlike the calls from the moderates for unity and proximity among Muslims, the political system has protected radical clerics, and exalted their positions as public figures as well as regularly consulting them. This led to the emergence of radicals and revitalized what some call the *irrational memory* which is rooted in the culture of revenge and vendetta. Both are deeply rooted in the Shiite mindset. It reveals a shortcoming in Shiite psychology, which focuses on grief and lamentation. It sustains a sense of revenge and vendetta which is passed down from one generation to another through a countless number of rituals.⁶⁵ Although the political system ignores this thorny issue, and Khamenei and other clerics issued fatwas banning insults against the Prophet’s companions, these fatwas remained political and thus uninfluential in jurisprudential and seminary lessons. The proof is that the culture of insulting the Prophet’s companions still prevails in the Meddahs group supportive of the state⁶⁶ as well as among fundamentalist clerics. Furthermore, many Shiites justify these acts by arguing that they do not insult the Prophet’s companions. They just invoke God’s curse upon them⁶⁷

and there is a difference between insults and invoking God's curse. This happens at a time when neither the Iranian political system nor any Shiite figures accept invoking curses on Shiite figures and clerics.

In fact, this policy of the Iranian government has been detrimental to all the previous proximity efforts led by popular scholars who were distant from the political system. These efforts were led by Brougardi in Iran. But Iran hijacked these efforts and brought it under the government's auspices. This was noted by Rainer Browner. He said, "In 1979, the history of the classic Islamic proximity movement ended. The ambition looking forward to proximity has become a central component of the foreign policy of the concerned states."⁶⁸ All efforts for proximity have become part of serving the aims of the political system only, not for achieving Islamic unity in general.

IV- The Future of Sunnis in Iran

The future of Sunnis in Iran remains dependent on the political system itself. It is impossible that the position of Sunnis in the Iranian state will see any strategic change in the direction of their retrieving rights under the current political system. But this does not prevent giving them some of their political and civilian rights or raising their issue from time to time through international or regional pressure or electoral campaigns, which the political system deems as a temporary pragmatic tactic.

The issue of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran is closely related to the future of the Iranian state as well as settling its political and sectarian crises in general. In other words, it depends on the country's readiness for change and to become a state based on civil rule and freedom as well as political and religious pluralism, whether under the current political system, if it presumably changes its

approach, or under a new one, which might behave with more political and national wisdom towards *the other*. Therefore, one must question the ability of the modernist liberal and religious current to be an alternative to the conservative current in the country. If this happened, would the equation of Sunnis in the political system change? In addition, the possibilities and capabilities of Sunnis when it comes to dealing with the current political system and any coming regime have become questionable. This is because they do not represent a cohesive sectarian unit. They are plagued by deep fragmentations along ethnic, cultural and patrimonial lines.

In any case, the ideological and national tenets - or Shiism and Persianism - on which the current political system depends prevent the Sunnis from growing more secure. The leaders of Iran, the military and clergy believe in Iran's centrality and religious and civilizational significance. According to the Supreme Adviser of the Commander in Chief for Military Affairs, Yehia Rahim Safavi, "Iran currently is the heart of the Islamic world. Khomeini and the current supreme leader have engineered this roadmap in their principles. This roadmap and system are clear." According to him, "The victory of the 1979 revolution created the appropriate environment for establishing the modern Islamic civilization, as well as the well-established will of the current supreme leader to achieve this important end. Without establishing a civilization, we would not have been able to be influential in the developments of the region. You should know that our foes never fear our hard power, but they fear our ideology. Ideology and culture never stop. They continuously evolve." This is close to the ideology of ISIS which is based on exclusion. He deems the Islamic model in Iran as the correct version of Islam and

others as false and that the valid Mohammedan version of Islam exists in Iran through the principle of *Velayat-e Faqih* only. He added, "Neither the Wahhabist Islam nor the Islamic version sponsored by Al-Azhar in Egypt is capable of meeting the needs of the Islamic world."⁶⁹

These clear remarks cannot be ignored. They expose the doctrine of the Iranian military elite which follows the tenets of Persianism and populism towards *the other*. According to this view, the other does not have a civilization. Furthermore, *the other* does not follow the true version of Mohammedan Islam. Islam is only the Islam that exists in Iran, which should be applied to the rest of the countries of the Islamic world according to the absolute version of *Velayat-e Faqih* theory, which has no boundaries due to the nature of its structure.

The remarks of the military commander were not the only ones like this. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made remarks about incidents dating back thousands of years in history saying, "The Iranians are those who saved the Jews from bloodshed and slavery;" and "The Iranian king liberated the Iranians from slavery in Babylon. The Iranian king was the only foreigner who was described as a Christ."⁷⁰ In a speech given by Javadi Amoli to the Foreign Minister of Iran, he said, "You should know that you have the upper hand in negotiations with other countries. You are the superior in these negotiations. Pride, dignity, greatness and chivalry are our traits. You should convey this greatness to the people and the world."⁷¹

This continuous supremacist nationalist language is fueled on a daily basis by the educational system in schools and the seminary, and via media channels and apparatuses of the state. This leads to a deepening sense of victim-

ization across all minority groups in general and the Arabs and Sunnis in particular.⁷²

Conclusion

It seems that the ruling elite in Iran is gripped by deep concerns about the identity of the Iranian state. The elite does not hesitate to assert this identity and reinforces it in speeches, comments and statements. Nobody has protested against this issue. This is one of the manifestations of the deep crisis which the Iranian elite is facing.

Iranian policymakers are still unable to forget and bypass Iranian history and the Persian environment and regions, which were centers for Sunnis and the Arabic language for several centuries from the Islamic conquest until the 16th century. Furthermore, most of the scientific and religious scribes in the Safavid dynasty wrote in Arabic. The Persian language was still unpopular.⁷³ The religious elite ideologizes history and its sectarian leanings. Such elites measure the degree of their failure or success based on the spread of their sect or ideology. Iranian senior officials have often repeated remarks regarding the *Shiite Crescent*; the past Iranian era; and that Baghdad is to return as the capital of the Iranian empire in the future. These remarks, despite implying euphoria and power due to expansion in the region, expose the manifestations of the contemporary Iranian limbo. The 21st century is different from the pre-Islamic era, from the 16th century and from the era preceding the emergence of the modern state.

This sense of crisis is the main cause for the violent reaction towards minorities due to fear of the unknown, which is Iran's return to the Sunni sphere through an inevitable demographic change, which will happen over time. This

change could also happen through organized and effective Sunni organizations or even through an effective Sunni engagement with state and society. Thus, the Iranian reaction is always one of permanent exclusion or deprivation. The Iranian obsession in this respect evolved to counter these fears beyond its borders through massive demographic changes in Syria and Iraq. This is what was called by the Shiite thinker Hani Fahs as *the Iranian Cosmopolitanism*.

The Iranian political system still believes in the policy of decisiveness towards *the other* as well as in the ineffectiveness of compromises. So it repeatedly resorts to executions and repression as the Safavids did before. However, the Safavids historically did not obliterate the Sunni faction. No country is able to annihilate an ethnic or religious minority. Moreover, this policy enhances alienation and isolation as well as racial and sectarian discrimination. This is detrimental to the nation state, which brings together all factions on all fronts. The Iranian political system is well aware of this fact. But the Sunni position in this state of alienation and discrimination is of no significance to the state. Rather, the Iranian political system is interested in maintaining its gains in the region according to its philosophy and ideological persuasions.

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