

# No country for minorities: The agony of Iran's ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Balochis and Azeris

Mon, 2021-03-08 22:56

WASHINGTON D.C.: Iran's persecution of political dissidents has been well documented. But the popular conception of the "Iranian people" tends to privilege the grievances of Shiite Muslims and Persian speakers over those of ethnic minorities. Prominence is invariably given to events in Tehran and other urban areas at the expense of happenings in remote provinces.

Overall, non-Persian ethnic groups in Iran make up around 50 percent of the population, yet they are overwhelmingly marginalized.

In recent years, the regime in Tehran and its enablers in the West have assiduously pushed the narrative that the US is the oppressor and the "Iranian people" are the victim. But frequently the narrative is punctured when protests by Iran's oppressed ethnic minorities spin out of control, such as the violent protests that recently rocked the country's impoverished southeast.

Several rights groups reported in a joint statement that authorities shut down the mobile data network in Sistan and Balochistan province, calling the disruptions an apparent "tool to conceal" the government's harsh crackdown on protests convulsing the area.

Outraged over the shootings of fuel smugglers trying to cross back into Iran from Pakistan, local people had attacked the district governor's office and stormed two police stations in the city of Saravan.

A low-level insurgency in Sistan and Balochistan involves several militant groups, including those demanding more autonomy for the region. The relationship between its predominantly Sunni Baloch residents and Iran's Shiite theocracy has long been tense.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, ethnic Kurds, Arabs and Balochis have faced particularly harsh crackdowns by regime security forces. Consequently, more than 40 years on, provinces such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan and Sistan and Balochistan remain some of the most unstable and least developed parts of Iran.



Provinces such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan and Sistan and Balochistan remain some of the most unstable and least developed parts of Iran. (AFP)

Authorities typically claim they are fighting “terrorism” and “extremism” when justifying executions, arbitrary detentions and the use of live ammunition against protesting minorities. Even the most benign of dissident activities – like running a social media page critical of the regime – can carry the death penalty.

“It is a well-known fact that discrimination in Iran is institutionalized through the constitution,” Abdul Sattar Doshouki, director of the London-based Center for Balochistan Studies, said in a report submitted to the UN Human Rights Council Forum on Minority Issues.

“The Iranian regime’s policy in Sistan and Balochistan, and for that matter in other provinces too, is based on racial discrimination, assimilation, linguistic discrimination, religious prejudice and inequality, brutal oppression, deprivation and exclusion of the people who are the majority in their own respective provinces and regions.”

Baloch activists have repeatedly called on the international community and regional powers to press the Iranian government to end its systemic policy of harassment and imprisonment of their local leaders.



The 2018 attack on a military parade in Ahvaz highlighted growing resentment among minority groups at Tehran's repressive tactics. (AFP)

Ahvazi Arabs, the largest Arab community in Iran, face similar repression. Natives of Khuzestan, they live in extreme poverty, despite the region

holding almost 80 percent of Iran's hydrocarbon resources.

The province has never had an Arab governor and the majority of its top officials are Persians with close ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The official language is Persian; Arabic is not taught in schools.

On Tuesday, the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization reported the execution of four additional political prisoners in the infamous Sepidar prison. Among the few who avoided such a fate is Saleh Hamid, an Ahwazi Arab cultural and political activist who was detained by Iranian authorities in the early 2000s for allegedly distributing anti-regime propaganda.

According to the account he gave to the US-based Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), Hamid traveled to Syria to enroll at the University of Damascus, where he joined the university's Ahwazi Arab Students' Association.

Hamid said the student group primarily promoted Ahwazi Arab culture, but he believes he was identified as a subversive by Syrian intelligence because he was detained at Imam Khomeini airport upon his return from vacation.

He was released after four days but rearrested by plainclothes officers at his father's home in Ahvaz. Hamid spent two months in the IRGC's detention center in Chaharshir before being released on bail. He fled the country before his trial date.

Hamid believes Tehran's policy of persecution is designed to wipe out any ethnic identities that cannot be subsumed under the Islamic Republic's hegemonic ideology. He says the international community, particularly European powers keen to preserve the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, should make the protection of minorities a precondition of any trade agreements with the regime.

"Human rights in Iran are a victim of negotiations on the nuclear file and trade between the EU and Iran," Hamid told Arab News. "When they negotiate, they forget human rights, about the suppression and crackdown. We want human rights cases to be one of the main negotiating points with the regime. There is discrimination in all fields. If you ask an Arab citizen in Iran if he's benefited from the oil, they'll tell you 'nothing but smoke'."

Iranian Azerbaijanis, who make up at least 16 percent of the country's population, are another minority group with a long list of grievances. Although Shiites, many Azeris are viewed by the IRGC with suspicion because of their cultural and linguistic affinities with Turks, in addition to the sense of ethnic kinship they feel with the people of neighboring Azerbaijan.

Proof of the political alienation of Iranian Azerbaijanis came most recently in the form of protests in the northern city of Tabriz during the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia that ended in November. They were angry at Tehran for reportedly sending weapons through its overland border to Armenia for use against Azerbaijan.

Iranian Azeris who speak of their home region as “Guney Azerbaijan,” or south Azerbaijan, are also not allowed to use their mother tongue in educational institutions. Many of them have come to view “reunification” of their historical region with Azerbaijan as the only solution.

The IRGC recently detained and savagely beat an Iranian Azerbaijani activist, Yashar Piri, for writing graffiti demanding greater language rights. The courage shown by Piri was remarkable given that detention, torture or arbitrary execution is the fate that awaits minority-rights activists.

“Persecution of religious minorities is one of the main pillars of this regime,” Masih Alinejad, an Iranian journalist and activist, told Arab News.



Overseas Ahwazis have lobbied governments to take action. (AP)

“For the past 42 years now, the regime has not refrained from resorting to arresting, persecuting, executing and confiscating the properties of these minorities. These minorities have been barred from realizing their full potential and have had limited employment opportunities.

“Sunni Muslim minorities like the Kurds and the Balochis have not fared any better. The regions inhabited by these minorities are some of the poorest and most under-invested by the regime, and these minorities are overrepresented in the execution statistics of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These regions are so poor that many people have to resort to cross-border smuggling of goods in order to eke out a living and feed their families.”

This is certainly the case for Iran’s northwestern Kurds, who make up around 10 percent of the overall population. Concentrated predominantly in the provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan and Ilam, many young Kurdish men make a living carrying goods on their backs across the perilous mountain passes of the Zagros into Iraq’s northern Kurdish region.

Known as kolbars, those who survive the bitter cold and sheer drops must also

navigate vast minefields and trigger-happy IRGC border guards.

Like other minorities in Iran, Kurds are not permitted to learn their native tongue on the national curriculum. Suspected membership of one of the many Kurdish opposition groups operating along the border also carries the death penalty.

Activists say the terror of executions and the threat of demographic displacement that Iran's minorities face should be recognized for what they are: crimes against humanity.

They note with dismay that the economic, social and political exclusion of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities never figures in the diplomatic discourse surrounding the nuclear issue and the IRGC's regional meddling.

In the final analysis, the activists point out, the defiance of Iran's minority communities, who are determined to hold on to their identity and traditions, constitutes a much needed check on the absolutism of the Shiite theocracy.

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# Pope Francis promises to visit Lebanon

Mon, 2021-03-08 21:53

ROME: Pope Francis on Monday said he promises to visit Lebanon, but has not considered the possibility of visiting the “beloved country of Syria.”

Speaking to the 75 journalists traveling with him on the papal flight from Baghdad to Rome at the end of his historic visit to Iraq, the pope revealed that Cardinal Bechara Rai, head of the Maronite Church, had asked him to make a stop in Beirut on his way back to the Vatican.

“But it seemed like a bit of a crumb (given) the problems of a country that is suffering like Lebanon,” the pope said.

He has promised to visit the country, “which despite its crisis is so generous in welcoming refugees,” according to a transcript of the news conference released by the Vatican Press Office upon his arrival in Rome.

The 84-year-old told the press corps that he got “very tired” during his intense visit to Iraq.

He described Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the top Shiite cleric whom he met on Saturday, as “a beacon” and “a person of wisdom, prudence, humility and respect.”

The pope said he was “honored to be welcomed by him,” adding: “I felt the duty to make this pilgrimage of faith and penance (in Iraq), and to go and see a great, wise man, a man of God.”

Pope Francis also spoke of his meeting on Sunday with the father of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child who drowned off the coast of Turkey in 2015 while trying to enter Europe.

“Alan Kurdi is a symbol ... that goes beyond that of a child who died during migration. He is a symbol of civilization that is dying,” the pope said.

He added that urgent measures are needed so that people have work in their own countries and do not have to migrate, as well as measures to preserve the right to do so.

He noted the need for countries to receive and integrate migrants, singling out for thanks “generous” countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, which host millions of refugees.



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## [Head of Yemen Red Cross criticized for meeting Iran's Houthi 'envoy'](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-03-08 21:46

AL-MUKALLA: The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) office in Yemen, Katharina Ritz, has been criticized for meeting Iran's representative in Houthi-controlled Sanaa.



Yemen's Foreign Minister Ahmed Awadh bin Mubarak said Monday that the government had protested the meeting as Hasan Irlu was a member of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and had snuck into the country illegally last year.

"He (Irlu) is not an ambassador to Yemen," the minister told Arab News. "He has not been accredited and entered Yemen illegally. She is accredited in Yemen and is not entitled to meet with a member of the Revolutionary Guard to discuss matters related to Yemen."

The official Saba news agency reported that the ministry sent a "strongly worded" protest note to the ICRC about the meeting between Ritz and Irlu.

"The ministry is awaiting clarifications from the International Committee of the Red Cross about the circumstances of the mistake made by the Red Cross office (in Sanaa), and the ministry will take sovereign measures in accordance with Yemeni law," Saba quoted an anonymous ministerial source as saying.

The government has accused Irlu of masterminding military operations against its forces and facilitating the arrival of arms shipments from Iran to the Houthis.

In December, the US blacklisted Irlu for spearheading IRGC activities that fueled instability in Yemen.

The ICRC said Ritz met Irlu in her capacity as a representative of an independent humanitarian organization that talked to all parties and countries involved in the Yemen crisis and conflict.

"Humanitarian diplomacy is an integral part of ICRC activities to assist the people affected by the protracted conflict across the country," the organization said in an email to Arab News. "The ICRC has been working in Yemen since 1962 and it enjoys good acceptance and respect by all the Yemeni successive governments and all parties to the conflict."

Yemeni officials and activists went on social media to say that the organization should apologize to the Yemeni public for meeting a "terrorist" figure who sponsored the launch of attacks on civilians in the country and Saudi Arabia.

Yemen's ambassador to Morocco, Ezudding Al-Asbahi, said that Irlu was responsible for guiding the Houthi missiles that targeted Aden airport last December and killed dozens of civilians, including several ICRC workers.

"What can the international organization say to the victims," the ambassador tweeted.

The controversy came as Yemen's army on Monday announced fresh territorial gains in the southern city of Taiz after clashes with Houthis, local commanders and official media said.

Troops pushed into Maqbanah district after freeing Jabal Habashy district,

west of Taiz, as other forces liberated a number of locations on the eastern edges of the city, said Abdul Basit Al-Baher, a military official in Taiz.

“The army troops are pushing to completely seize control of Al-Bareh (so) as to meet government troops along with the country’s western coast,” Al-Baher told Arab News, attributing the Houthis’ setbacks in Taiz to severe attrition and sending their forces to Marib.

“The Houthi manpower has been greatly weakened over the last couple of months. This enabled the Yemeni army to advance in Taiz.”

Yemen’s defense minister said that Arab coalition warplanes had carried out dozens of air raids in the past 24 hours in the central province of Marib, targeting Houthi military equipment and locations in Al-Kasara, Helan and Serwah.

The strikes paved the way for the army and allied tribesmen to push back the attacks.

Last month the Houthis resumed a large-scale military offensive to seize control of oil-rich Marib city, which is the government’s last stronghold in the northern half of the country.

Local army commanders said that more than 1,000 Houthis, including many military leaders, had been killed since the start of the offensive.



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## [Iran enriching uranium with third cascade of advanced IR-2M centrifuges: IAEA](#)

Mon, 2021-03-08 20:22

VIENNA: Iran has started enriching uranium with a third set of advanced IR-2m centrifuges at its underground plant at Natanz, the U.N. nuclear watchdog told its member states on Monday, a further breach of Tehran's 2015 deal with major powers.

The move is part of a recent acceleration by Iran of its violations of restrictions under that deal, which granted Iran relief from financial sanctions in return for curbs to its nuclear activities.

It began breaching limits after then-U.S. President Donald Trump quit the deal and re-imposed sanctions in 2018.

The acceleration of breaches appears aimed at raising pressure on Trump's successor Joe Biden. The new U.S. president wants to revive the accord, but Washington and Tehran are locked in a standoff over which side should move first.

The deal allows Iran to enrich uranium only with first-generation IR-1 centrifuges at the underground, commercial scale Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP) at Natanz. In November Iran started enriching there with a first set of IR-2m machines, which are far more efficient, and has since been adding to it.

"On 7 March 2021, the Agency verified at FEP that: Iran had begun feeding natural UF<sub>6</sub> into the third cascade of 174 IR-2m centrifuges," the International Atomic Energy Agency said in a report obtained by Reuters, referring to uranium hexafluoride, the form in which uranium is fed into centrifuges to purify it.

"The fourth cascade of 174 IR-2m centrifuges was installed but had yet to be fed with natural UF<sub>6</sub>; installation of a fifth cascade of IR-2m centrifuges was ongoing; and installation of a sixth cascade of IR-2m centrifuges had yet to begin," it added.

In addition to its IR-1 machines, Iran is now using 522 IR-2m centrifuges to enrich uranium to up to 5% fissile purity at the FEP, the IAEA added.

That is more than the 3.67% purity allowed under the deal but less than the 20% it is enriching to at another facility, Fordow. Uranium enriched to 90% purity can be used to make an atomic weapon.



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UN atomic watchdog: Iran now operating Natanz centrifugesIran enriching uranium in second set of centrifuges in Natanz: IAEA

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## [Recording of the week: Mohamed Choukri at the ICA](#)

This week's selection comes from Steve Cleary, Lead Curator of Literary and Creative Recordings. Tangier, Morocco by Brett Hodnett – used under Creative Commons license CC-BY-SA-2.0 Today's selection features the Moroccan writer

Mohamed Choukri (1935-2003), recorded at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, 22 September 1992. Choukri's first volume...