

Likelihood of Ethnic Cross-border Tensions in Iran

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Key Points

- The Iranian government discriminates against religious minorities including Sunni Muslims, as well as ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Azeris, Balochis, and Arabs.
- Iran's minorities face the terror of executions and the threat of demographic-based displacement.
- Ethnic groups span international borders.
- Iranian security forces have a strong grip on these ethnic groups.
- It is unlikely that cross-border ethnic tensions becoming a critical problem for the Iranian regime.

Introduction

For centuries, cross-border tensions have escalated the risk of crises becoming wars. The war in Iraq showed how complicated these tensions can be and what risks they entail. The current crisis in the Caucasus shed some light on another cross-border risk: from Iran's perspective, it is interesting to elaborate on what trans-border ethnic tensions in Iran are likely to create problems for the Iranian regime in the next 5-10 years?

General

Iran is a multi-ethnic country; Persians comprise less than half of Iran's population. Overwhelming majorities of non-Persian groups inhabit most of Iran's border provinces.¹ Iran's population includes Persians, Kurds, Azeri, Lorish, Arabic, Turkmen, Gilaki, Tabari, Balochi, and Taleshi. All these ethnic groups live within and across the borders of Iran. Some of these groups have disputes while others share common goals with their comrades regardless of what side of the national border they occupy.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran, combined with the effects of Maximum Pressure Campaign, the economic pressure on the people has increased. This pressure caused the people to protest against the regime. Concurrently, the IRGC maintained firm control over the people in the name of "medical support to COVID," to prevent a repeat of the protests of 2019. Iran will soon face meet two major potential leadership power-shifting moments: 1) Presidential elections in June 2021; and 2) a likely shift in clergy leadership of the Supreme Leader

¹ Brenda Shaffer, "Iran is more than Persia," Foundation for Defence of Democracies," April 28, 2021, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/04/28/iran-is-more-than-persia/> (accessed June 1, 2021).

due to Khamenei's health and age. During these critical periods, any internal issues could be exacerbated. Crossborder tensions could play a role in internal security affairs.

It is a striking fact that with four major ethnic groups, the international community does not recognize the intense ethnic conflicts within Iran. However, this modern façade of peacefulness among Iran's ethnic groups is false. Ethnic conflicts are still alive in Iran, primarily among the major minority groups rather than the majority Persians.

Conflicts spanning the Ottoman Empire, and the British and Russians meddling in the last century, carved out the contemporary Iranian borders that cut across some major ethnic groups. This historical fact prepared the ground for the roots of Pahlavi regime era Iranian ethnic conflict. Today, the ethnic conflicts in Iran are more apparent in the form of discrimination and less of violence. Regardless of the form, the conflicts still affect many modern-day Iranians and those around them. Since these conflicts affect a multitude of people, they are present on a local, a regional, and a global scale, so therefore generate speculation on what is to come in the future.²

The Iranian government discriminates against religious minorities including Sunni Muslims, as well as ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Azeris, Balouchis, and Arabs.³ These minorities live in under-developed areas and do not have access to proper education and healthcare. Due to the unequal treatment of the majority ethnic group compared to minority groups, ethnic unrest is common in Iran.⁴ Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, ethnic Kurds, Arabs, and Balochis have faced particularly harsh crackdowns by regime security forces. Consequently, for over 40 years, provinces such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan, Sistan, and Balochistan remain some of the most unstable and least developed parts of Iran. The ethnic groups who are likely to have the most effect on Iranian internal security and politics are the Kurds, the Azeris, the Balochis, and the Arabs, or Ahwaz.

The Kurds

The Kurds (the third largest ethnic group in Iran), make up approximately 10% of the population. They occupy both rural and urban areas. Rural Kurds are nomadic pastoralists. Kurds are not permitted to learn their native language on the national curriculum. The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims.⁵ Iranian Kurdistan is so poor that many young Kurdish men make a living by smuggling goods on their backs across the perilous mountain passes of the Zagros into Iraq's northern Kurdish region.

The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) has been waging a battle for independence and greater rights for Iranian Kurds since the Iranian revolution in 1979. KDPI wants to link the struggle of the Kurdish forces in the mountains with the struggle of the Kurdish people in the cities. The KDPI's military operations and confrontation with the Iranian regime surged following the 1989 assassination of the party's leader, Abdol Rahman Ghassemlou. The group's northern Iraq-based fighters announced a cease-fire in 1997. Clashes in 2016 between the KDPI and

² Daniel Qin-Dong, "Ethnic conflict within Iran: the four minority ethnic groups and the Persian majority," 2021, <https://www.ipsa.org/wc/paper/ethnic-conflict-within-iran-four-minority-ethnic-groups-and-persian-majority> (accessed June 1, 2021).

³ Humans Right Watch, "World Report 2021," Humans Right Watch, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/countrychapters/iran#> (accessed June 2, 2021).

⁴ Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "Largest Ethnic Groups in Iran," WorldAtlas, July 18, 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/largest-ethnicgroups-in-iran.html> (accessed June 1, 2021).

⁵ Ibid.

the IRGC were interpreted as a call to renew the armed struggle against Iran.⁶ Armed groups inside Iranian territory like the KDPI, even if only acting defensively, are highly likely to be attacked by the Iranian security forces who see them as terrorists countering the goals of the revolution.⁷ Though the Kurds want to create their own Kurdish state, there is not much cross-border Kurdish alignment to achieve these goals jointly. As Iran has previously targeted Kurdish armed groups in Iraq (PJAK), it is clear Iran does not want the issue to grow as an uncontrolled cancer.⁸ Despite claims by KDPI leaders about the group's strength and support among Iranian Kurds, analysts generally agree that KDPI does not possess the capability to pose a serious military threat to Iran.⁹ Nevertheless, the KDPI creates tensions which can escalate. However, Iraqi Kurdish parties, due to their "strategic dependence" on Iran (especially after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011), will not likely support the KDPI's operations against Iran for any extended period of time.

The Azeris

The Azeris are the second largest ethnic group in Iran, making up an estimated 16% of the total population (20 M). Living in northwestern Iran close to the border with Azerbaijan, the Azeri language is similar to the Turkish language. Iranian Azeris who speak of their home region as "Guney Azerbaijan," or south Azerbaijan, are also not allowed to use their native tongue in educational institutions. Azeri people have a great deal in common with Persians. They live similar lifestyles. In the cities, Azerbaijani and Persians have intermarried. These people are more integrated into the Iranian society than other ethnic minorities. Azerbaijanis, just as with most Persians, are predominately Shia Muslims. 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.¹⁰ Many Azeris have come to view "reunification" of their historical region with Azerbaijan as the only solution.¹¹ Though experts also believe the Azeri kinship with Azerbaijan is not important enough to drive unification. One reason is Iranian Azeri see their brothers in Azerbaijan as religiously inferior. Tehran supported Azerbaijan during the last war with Armenia to limit internal ethnic tensions. However, even during the war, political alienation of Iranian Azerbaijanis led to protests in the northern city of Tabriz. The Azeris strongly protested when Tehran opened its airspace for Russian military supplies destined for Armenia for use against Azerbaijan.¹²

The Balochis

The Balochis are an Iranian people inhabiting the province of Balochistan in Iran, parts of Pakistan, and areas of neighboring Afghanistan. The Balochis speak Baluchi, which is considered a north-western Iranian language, and

⁶ Hossein Rajabi, "Iran, IRGC, Kurdistan," Press TV, June 28, 2016, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/06/28/472562/Iran-IRGC-KurdistanHossein-Rajabi>, (accessed Jun 4, 2021).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "Largest Ethnic Groups in Iran."

⁹ Golnaz Esfandiari, "Now Iran-Kurdish Tensions are Spiking; Why?" Informed Comment, June 30, 2016, <https://www.juancole.com/2016/06/kurdish-tensions-spiking.html> (accessed June 3, 2021).

¹⁰ Oubai Shahbandar, "No country for minorities: The agony of Iran's ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Balochis and Azeris," Arab News, March 09, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1822151/middle-east> (accessed May 24, 2021).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Alex Vatanka, "Tehran's Worst Nightmare," Foreign Policy, October 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/14/iran-azeri-ethnicminority-nagorno-karabakh/> (accessed May 25, 2021).

are generally considered an Iranian people accordingly. The Balochis are predominantly Muslims.¹³ An ongoing 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 Balochi residents and Iran's Shiite theocracy has long been tense.¹⁴ Several human rights organizations 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.¹⁴ In the 13 November report submitted to the UN Human Rights Council Forum on Minority Issues, Abdul Sattar Doshouki, director of the London-based Center for Balochistan Studies stated, "It is a well-known fact that discrimination in Iran is institutionalized through the constitution."¹⁵ 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, inequality, brutal oppression, deprivation, and exclusion of the people who are the majority in their own respective provinces and regions. These regions are so poor that many people are forced into cross-border smuggling in order to make a living and feed their families.¹⁶ As Iran-Pakistan strategic relations became increasingly turbulent following the latter's increasing tilt toward Saudi Arabia, the Balochistan border become a site of conflict with each side lambasting the other for providing sanctuaries to militant groups in their respective provinces.¹⁷ Iranian officials often accuse elements in Pakistan (with the alleged backing from Gulf States) of providing sanctuary and support to anti-Iranian militants to try to create instability for Tehran. The Pakistanis have always rejected such charges.¹⁸ The militants at the heart of the dispute are from Jaish Al-Adl (Army of Justice). Jaish Al-Adl is an ethnic Balochi and Sunni group which purports to fight for better living conditions in Sistan Baluchistan as Iran's most impoverished province.

The Arabs

The Ahwazi Arabs, the largest Arab community in Iran, are a smaller minority group in Iran at an estimated 2% of the population. They primarily occupy oil rich regions in Iran. Ethnic Arabs complain of discrimination, repression, and neglect by the Iranian government. Ethnic conflicts involving Arabs and government agencies have broken out in recent years.¹⁹ These residents of the Khuzestan province live in extreme poverty, despite the fact that the region contains almost 80% of Iran's hydrocarbon sources. 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. The Ahwaz Human Rights Organization reported the execution of four political prisoners in the infamous Sepidar prison.²⁰ It is believed Tehran's policy of persecution is designed to wipe out any ethnic identities that cannot be subsumed under the Islamic Republic's hegemonic ideology.

¹³ Atlas of Humanity, "Iran, Baloch people," <https://www.atlasofhumanity.com/baloch> (accessed June 2, 2021).

¹⁴ Oubai Shahbandar, "No country for minorities: The agony of Iran's ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Balochis and Azeris."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dr. Abdul Sattar Doshouki, United Nation's Human Rights Council Forum on Minority Issues Second Session, Geneva 12-13 November 2009 Minorities and Effective Political Participation. Center for Balochistan Studies. (accessed June 15, 2021).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Muhammad Akbar Notezai, "The Coming Crisis Along the Iran-Pakistan Border," The Diplomat, March 17, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/the-coming-crisis-along-the-iran-pakistan-border/> (accessed June 1, 2021).

¹⁸ Alex Vatanka, "Iran-Pakistan: Will border tensions boil over?" BBC News, October 24, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middleeast-29752647> (accessed June 1, 2021).

¹⁹ Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "Largest Ethnic Groups in Iran," WorldAtlas, July 18, 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/largest-ethnicgroups-in-iran.html> (accessed June 1, 2021).

²⁰ Oubai Shahbandar, "No country for minorities: The agony of Iran's ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Balochis and Azeris."

Therefore, powers keen to preserve the 2015 Iran nuclear deal should make the protection of minorities a precondition of any trade agreements with the regime. Some analysts conclude human rights in Iran fall victim to nuclear negotiations and trade between the EU and Iran.²¹

Conclusion

There are currently open and violent ethnic conflicts within Iran, although the tensions with the four major ethnic groups certainly provide enough reasons for ones to begin. The façade of peacefulness among ethnic groups is false. The ethnic conflicts that are still alive in Iran are primarily between major minority groups and the majority Persians. Iran's minorities face the terror of executions and the threat of demographic displacement, which are crimes against humanity. The economic, social, and political exclusion of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities should be addressed through diplomatic discourse surrounding the nuclear issue, and the IRGC's regional meddling, in order to improve the minorities' conditions. The ethnic groups share cross-border regions with their ethnic brothers in neighboring countries, but generally do not seem to share the same goals. Therefore, crossborder alliances are not likely. The ethnic minorities could play a role in overthrowing a regime, but since Iranian security forces have a steady grip on these ethnic groups, it is unlikely that the ethnic tensions will become critical even during future Iranian regime transition.

Recommendations for the US / USCENTCOM

- Addressing economic, social, and political exclusion of Iran's ethnic and religious minorities should be integrated in the diplomatic discourse surrounding the nuclear issue, and the IRGC's regional meddling, in order to improve the minorities' conditions.
- Monitor the development of the conditions and goals of ethnic minorities to get an understanding of the regime's grip on these regions.

²¹ Ibid.