

## PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

### ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN IRAN: A CASE STUDY OF BALOCH AND KURDISH INSURGENCIES

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**Muhammad Owais, Ashfaq Ahmed, Benish Ijaz Butt, Saima Kausar. Ethnic Conflicts in Iran: A Case Study of Baloch and Kurdish Insurgencies -- Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 19(1), 1228-1239. ISSN 1567-214x**

#### ABSTRACT

This academic paper discusses ethnic conflicts in Iran. It has been explained that how presence of various ethnic groups has created a complex environment where state has been concerned over the legitimacy of minorities' demands. Iranian state has long neglected the Kurds and the Baloch. Available literature affirms that these groups see a Shia Islamic-Persian identity ruling over their Sunni-Kurd and Sunni-Baloch. Minority groups believe their identities are being curbed by the state. It has been analyzed that state's concern about Kurds and Baloch of being a secessionist group doesn't weigh much when compared with demands of the majority. Militant activities from these groups have created blurring effect on the regime. Paper proposes recommendation that Iranian state should hold pen dialogue militant groups to overcome grievances of resented minorities. Confidence building measures aimed at increasing trust between minority groups and the government is the only way forward.

#### INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity is an important component of Human society. It defines what we are and how we are different from the others. In its essence, at places where this distinction of one group from the other is appreciated as a diversity, at other places it turns into feelings of antagonism, hatred, animosity and finally turning this all into conflict. Same is the case with the ongoing conflicts in the world where they can be attributed to between different ethnic groups. Although all

these conflicts emanates from injustice, limited political space, curb on rights and somehow not allowing the right of self-determination to the people of a specific group.

One of the major term associated with ethnicity is “Identity” (UK Essays, 2018). It is basically the identity which gives the people of a specific family, group, territory, culture, or civilization a distinctive representation among people of the whole world. Whenever identity of someone is threatened, they try to regain their identity. But assimilation also happens when one group merges itself into another, because of similarities or easy adoption of another culture (Collins, 1996).

Before going into ethnic conflicts, we should first know what ethnicity is? In this regard Max Weber (1968) gives a very comprehensive description of ethnicity:

“Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation: furthermore it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists” (Weber, 1968).

This definition covers a very diverse approach in defining ethnicity. By looking into this, we can come across different ethnic groups in Iran. They mainly include Persians, Arabs, Turkmen, Azeri’s, Balochi’s and Kurds. Due to its multi-ethnic nature, **John Bradle** (2007) y called Iran as “**Ethnic Tinderbox**”. As the Persians are majority in number, holds majority of key positions in government and are the main identity group of Iran. Indeed, it is the Persian history, culture and the Religion Islam, which are the key factors of Iranian Identity. Persians hold almost 50% of country’s total population (Riamei, 2015). As the paper is about Ethnic conflict, so from hereon, the discussion will be on ethnic groups that are involved in conflict with the regime on ethnic reasons.

## **RESEARCH PROBLEM**

There are mainly two Sunni dominated ethnic groups in Iran that remained and are involved in insurgent activities against the regime. They are Kurds and Baloch (Spyer, 2019). There are confrontations between Persian dominated-Shia Islamic majority and other ethnic minorities but none has shifted their demands in a violent way to the extent done by the Kurds and Baloch. A distinctive feature among these two ethnic groups from all others in Iran is that these states currently do not have any independent territory that solely belongs to Kurds and Baloch. It is despite the fact that both ethnicities have claimed their autonomous territories in the past. While Arabs, have their autonomous territories in the Gulf, Azeri’s have Azerbaijan and Turkmen have Turkmenistan and Turkey. So, this differentiates Kurds and Baloch from all other ethnicities.

This paper endeavors to look at the underlying reasons that caused insurgent activities from these two groups. This academic research aims at answering the problem that ethnic conflict persisted in Iran due to the insurgencies by the

Kurds and Baloch. Why Iran has adopted such asuppressive behavior against the ethnic minorities and how this issue could be resolved?

For the completion of this research paper **qualitative method is adopted**, where analysis has been done on the question of Kurds and Baloch insurgencies. Research method is “**Case Study**”, where ethnic groups in Iran have been discussed in general while the clash between the government and Kurds, Baloch has been discussed specifically.

### *Ethnic Conflict in Iran*

A number of writings are available on the ethnic issues in Iran. Some are written specifically from the standpoint of one ethnic minority in Iran while others are written by taking a wider perspective covering all ethnic minorities. But few texts are available specifically mentioning “Ethnic Conflict in Iran”. In this regard, **Alam Saleh** (2013) has written a detailed book “Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran”. He covers a wide range of topics in his book by looking at Iran’s national identity, its treatment with the ethnic minorities, and separatist struggles of ethnic groups. He specifically designates a chapter “Ethnic Conflict in Iran: Continuity and Change” in which he wrote an overview of ethnic groups in Iran, government’s behavior with these groups and also ethnic groups reaction towards regime against their repressive policies.

### *Ethnic Groups’ Unrest and State’s Response*

Lionel Beehner (2006) gives an account of ethnic groups in Iran. He explains the composition of different ethnic groups in Iran. Then he moves onto the issues and problems faced by these Ethnic groups who are living in minority as opposed to the dominant Persians. He also explains how Iranian government is countering the ethnic unrest in the country. Finally he also looks into the question that what U.S can do in this regard (Beehner, 2006).

### *Baloch and Kurd Insurgent Groups*

Specifically on the question of Baloch and Kurdish insurgency, there are some papers that have covered these issues in wide lens. **Zia Ur Rehman** (2014) in his report gives a detailed account of Baloch insurgent groups, their historical claims to an autonomous territory and the ways by which Iranian government can bring the ethnic group in mainstream activities of the state (Rehman, 2014). A general overview of insurgent groups belonging to Baloch ethnicity is given by Nicholas Cappuccino (2017) in his work on Baloch insurgents in Iran. He explained the significance of Baloch ethnicity in Iran, their socioeconomic problems and support provided by international and regional powers for their prowess. He also streamlined major insurgents groups of Baloch origin involved in insurgency in Iran (Cappuccino, 2017).

On Kurds issue, Chris Zambelis (2011) explains the reasons behind Kurds rebellion. It also explained which groups are operating by calling their armed movement against the Iranian government. He showcases that how foreign involvements are making the Kurds difficult to be stopped by the regime

(Zambelis, 2011). Paul Bucala and Shayan Enferadi (2016) gives an encompassing overview of Kurdish Insurgency in Iran. The authors identified two major Kurdish separatist and militant groups operating in Iran, and the response of Iran to the challenges posed by one of the largest ethnic groups in this region (Bucala & Enferadi, 2016).

### *Ethnic Groups in Iran*

Iran comprises of various ethnic groups, with Persians being in majority, they comprise almost 65% of the total population (Country Profile: Iran, 2008). Other sources quote less percentage of Persians at 51% (Saleh, 2013). Majority of the Persians belong to the Shia sect of Islam. Other major ethnic minorities include Azeris who are almost 24% in terms of total population (Khorshidi, Fee, & Soltani, 2010). They are the largest minority ethnic group in Iran. Apart from these, Kurds (7%), Arabs (3%), Balochi (2%) and Turkmen comprise about 2% of total population (Khorshidi, Fee, & Soltani, 2010, p. 271). Except Azeris and Arabs, all other aforementioned minorities are predominantly Sunnis. Also, in terms of ethno-religious groups, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Baha'is make a very minute percentage of Iran's population.

### *Ethnic Conflict in Iran*

Historically, the regime has found itself in confrontation with various ethnic groups. Minority groups demanded more autonomy and less-restrictive practice of their culture. But often they end up in some form of conflict. Right after the end of World War II, Azeris and Kurds tried to create their autonomous lands but it faced strong reaction from the Pahlavi Dynasty. Even Kurds formed short-lived "**Republic of Mahabad**", but it was soon dismantled once Iran re-established its control in 1946 (Saleh, 2013). Balochis have also time and again protested for government's repressive attitude towards their Sunni Islam practices. Despite the fact that Article 19 of the Iranian constitution gives equal rights to all ethnic groups, State's response to them almost remains same in pre and post Iranian Revolution. They consider the ethnic movements as a threat to its security. President Khatami's tenure gave some hope to the ethnic minorities that their rights will be given protection. Although their hopes were not completely fulfilled but they were given some open space in the expression of their culture. Numbers of Azeri and Kurdish papers were increased during Khatami's presidency (Saleh, 2013, p. 65)

There are some notable incidents in the past two decades where ethnic rift can be observed between government and ethnic minorities. In 2007, government arrested hundreds of Azeris who were protesting against not given equal rights in the light of Article 15. Once, Persian media projected Azeri language speaker as a cockroach that also resulted in protests by the Azeri people (Khorshidi, Fee, & Soltani, 2010). In 2005, Arabs protest in Ahvaz turned violent resulting in death of one person while several people were arrested by the government. In the same year, at two different instances various bomb attacks by the Arab militants in Ahvaz resulted in death of at least 16 people.

### ***Kurds Involvement in Insurgent Activities***

Kurds live in Iran's northwestern provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Kermanshah. Kurds claim that historically they used to live autonomously while having their own authority over their territories. Ancient Kurd territory now falls in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Their largest number of population lives in Turkey then in Iran. Historical facts show that Kurds were living in semiautonomous form till late 1800 (Saleh, 2013, p. 68). Situation shifted during the time period of Pahlavi Dynasty when its first Ruler Reza Shah tried to mute Kurdish people from demanding their right of self-determination in 1930's.

Soviet Union's dominance over Northern Iran in 1940's tried to create problem for the Shah regarding Ethnic unrest by supporting the creation of 'Republic of Mahabad' (Archie Roosevelt, 1947). Though it lasted for a very short time and subsequently Iran regained its authority over the region. Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) supported the creation of Mahabad and then it also supported uprisings in Kurdish regions in second half of 1960's. The most violent of all these conflict happened in 1979. After the Islamic revolution, Kurdish people with the support of KDPI rebelled against the regime which was resisted by the regime. Finally, the movement turned violent and it resulted in the killing of 3000-10000 people. In late 1996, PKDI left its armed struggle against the regime (Shifrinson, 2006).

### ***Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK)***

PJAK is a separatist Kurdish militant group that has also been designated as a terrorist organization by the US, remained largely involved in anti-Iran activities. This group remained largely active in anti-state attacks from 2004-2015. PJAK is considered as an offshoot of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which is mainly fighting against Turkey in relation to Turkish-Kurdish conflict (Muhammed, 2016). PJAK basically adopts Guerrilla strategies to attack Iranian forces, government officials and civilians. Since 2004, it has been estimated that conflict between the regime and the PJAK caused a little less than 1000 casualties. PJAK calls for an autonomous territory of Kurdish people within the Iranian boundaries and want to replace the theocratic government with a democratic one (Brandon, 2006). Another account also says that PJAK does not state in its goals that they want unification of historical Kurdish regions or they want to break away from Iran. They claim that their fight is for Kurdish rights (Zambelis, 2011, p. 19).

### ***Demands of Kurds***

Kurdish people demand the protection of their ethnicity within Iranian territory, their protection from extra-judicial killing, preservation of their culture and shielding of their Sunni Islam practices. This is mostly the demand of the masses of Kurdish people. They demand more equitable opportunities in job sector, development in their regions and better education facilities. Kurdish majority provinces are one of the least developed provinces in Iran (Zambelis, 2011). They also demand equal representation in politics. Demands of militant groups

are also more or less same but they have lost their hope towards any amicable solution of their issues by the government. Militant groups' grievances have been supported by foreign entities. Likely, it is believed that Israel supports PJAK group (Mattair, 2008).

But there is a group of Kurds minority who belongs to Shia sect of Islam; they associate themselves much closer to the mainstream Iranian community. At various instances they have shown support towards the regime, because of which, Kurdish militant groups had targeted their own kin. Some of the educated people of Kurdish community reject any notion of having separatist aspirations (Khorshidi, Fee, & Soltani, 2010, p. 274). Indeed many of them associate themselves to Iran in their relation with external nationalities.

Irrespective of all this, it is apparent that there is trust deficit in government side regarding the Kurdish people. It is also because of the division among Kurdish people, from its intelligentsia to poor people, from militants to peaceful protesters regarding the political demands where some favor autonomy of government, while others just demand equal rights.

### ***Baloch Involvement in Insurgent Activities***

Baloch ethnic group mainly lives across the borders of two states i.e. Iran and Pakistan. In Iran they live in Sistan Balochistan province, whereas in Pakistan, they live in Balochistan province. Majority of the Baloch people live in Pakistan while their secondary majority lives in Iran. Historically, Baloch people also lived independently for several centuries. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region was distributed in terms of influence between Persian Empire and the British Empire in India (Rehman, 2014). The modern day Sistan and Balochistan was annexed by then Ruler of Persia Reza Shah almost two years after his coronation. While British Empire ruled the modern day Balochistan in Pakistan from 1839 till the independence of subcontinent (Rehman, 2014).

Iranian leaders added Sistan to Baluchistan's name after their control over it. Also the current capital "Zahedan" was previously called "Duzzap" during the Baloch autonomy. The Sistan and Baluchistan region is one of the most impoverished regions of Iran with poor facilities available to its residents by the government. Majority of the region's population live below poverty line (Rehman, 2014, p. 2). In order to fight for the rights of Baloch people, some of the groups have resorted towards violence by picking up arms. Three prominent militant groups operating in Iran are Jundullah, Jaish-ul-Adl and Harakat Ansar Iran. Little is known about Harakat Ansar as it remained active for a very short time, from 2012-2013. It was believed that it formed as an offshoot of Jundullah after its leader was executed. The main difference in this militant group from the other two is in its call more on the basis of ideology than the ethnicity (Rehman, 2014, p. 4).

### ***Jundullah***

It was founded in 2002 but their armed activities mainly started in 2005. They call for the protection of the Baloch people in Iran against the state's injustice.

The group has been involved in killing about more than 150 people while injuring over 300 (CNS News, 2010). Its leader Abdulmalek Rigi was arrested in 2010 and later-on executed by Iranian authorities. The group carried out many terrorist attacks mainly targeting Iranian officials. In 2005, they tried to attack then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in which one person was killed. In another incident they killed 22 people in 2006 (Sahimi, 2009). After killing of its leader few attacks were carried out but largely they went out of operation in 2012.

### ***Jaish-ul Adl***

Jaish-ul Adl believed to be founded in 2012; they mostly attacked Iranian border guards and the personnel of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Some claim that Jundullah actually renamed itself "Jaish-ul Adl". This group is still active in its operations. The group killed about more than 50 people in their attacks. Recent attacks were conducted by Jaish-ul Adl in 2019, the last one on a bus carrying IRGC soldiers.

### ***Demands of Baluch***

Baloch people have long been neglected by the regime. The Baloch people mainly demands development of their region and the protection of their people from state's segregatory behavior. They want the protection of their culture. Language restrictions, where Iranian government only calls for Persian language to be used in public whereas, all other languages are to be used in personal interactions. Same is the case with the Balochi Language. Balochi's are also not been heard for practicing Sunni Islam openly. The regime has not allowed the people to easily built Sunni mosques in the region. Well this case is applicable to all over the country specifically in Tehran where attempts at building Sunni mosques has been denied by the government (Human Rights Watch, 2013). People of the region are also demanding their employment betterment. They are worried about the poor and worst condition of their families.

Although the militants groups' activities were apparently secessionist, their given statements disregarded any of their aim of breaking the Sistanand Baluchistan region away from Iran. Rigi said this once in an interview (Hardy, 2010). Jaish-ul Adl leader also stated that their groups movement is for the national and religious rights of their people (Hussain, 2013).

### ***Iranian Government's Concerns Regarding Kurds and Baluch***

The government reaction to Kurds and Baluchi ethnic unrest was most of the time repressive and wasn't commended by the masses. They tried to quash ethnic movements that criticized the regime. At instances, Iran called groups calling for greater autonomy as "anti-revolutionaries". Iranian government biggest concern regarding the Baluch and Kurdish movements are the foreign involvement aimed at damaging the state's security (Saleh, 2013, p. 80).

When it comes to Kurds, Iran believes that mainly the Israel and USA are using Kurdish people for their nefarious aims against the state (Abramson, 2019). They think that by handling Kurds in their hands, they want to give way to a mass ethnic unrest that will ultimately break the country. Also, regime is concerned that foreign involvement in such activities can threaten the country's nuclear technology. Another cause of concern regarding the Kurds is the presence of semi-autonomous "Kurdish Republic Government (KRG)" in northern Iraq. Iran also considers that KRG might also be involved in some type of support for the Kurdish unrest in Iran's northwest. Iranian regime is also fearful that KRG's model in Iraq might accelerate the demands for a same type of autonomous Kurdish land that will ultimately join hands with KRG. Such a scenario would put Iran's unity at stake.

Whereas the issue of Kurd militants is concerned, Iran thinks the same that foreign involvement has been there for such groups. But as the militant activities are not openly supported by majority governments, PJAK is declared as a terrorist organization both by Iran and the US (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2009).

About the Baluch, Iran thinks more or less same in terms of foreign involvement that U.S. and Israel as well as Saudi Arabia are involved in supporting these organizations. At times Iran has accused even Pakistan for its involvement in supporting the Baluch militants. Iran as well as U.S. designated Jundullah and many of its affiliates as terrorist organizations (Rehman, 2014).

### ***Government of Iran Recent Behavior***

In the wake of US sanctions on Iran, recently Iran has initiated talks with some of the Kurdish groups with an aim change its perception of being a maligner of minorities (Badawi, 2019). The November 2019 protests by the Iranian people against the hike in fuel prices went into large-scale protests in Iran especially in the capital city, Tehran. Iran curbed the protests but it is believed that about 100 protesters were killed (Jedinia & Hussein, 2019). Iran blamed United States of America for the protests and also blamed him for supporting the ethnic minorities especially the Kurds. A UK based scholar Kamran Matin told VOA that:

"In the current conjuncture, it is likely that Iranian regime unleashes its most brutal suppression against the Kurdish people as a means to intimidate the rest of Iran into acquiescence" (Jedinia & Hussein, 2019).

So, these developments show that Iran's behaviour towards them is an amalgam of mixed approach where at one side they are reaching the Kurds while on the other hand they are also suppressing them and blaming them of anti-state activities.

Recently, with regard to the Baluch ethnic group, currently an issue of a Sunni Cleric's detention by the government is a cause of concern for the people. It has been more than a year that Molavi Fazl al-Rahman Kouhi has been detained.



The allegations on him are mainly based on criticising the regime. A London based Baluch activist Abdol Sattar Doshoki while speaking with VOA said:

“Iranian Sunni cleric MolaviFazl al-Rahman Kouhi has been imprisoned for six months in the north-eastern city of Mashhad on the orders of a Special Clerical Court that summoned and jailed him last November. The Iranian court handles crimes allegedly committed by clerics and are accountable only to the supreme leader of the predominantly-Shiite Islamist-ruled nation, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei”(Lipin, Haghjoo, & Samadbeygi, 2020).

Although, Iranian constitution guarantees the free practice of all sects of Islam but in reality, there is variation and discrimination in implementation of these laws. Ethnic minorities have long been facing discrimination on the basis of their sect, ethnicity and culture. A US report said:

“Residents of Iranian provinces containing large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan and Baluchistan, reported continued repression by judicial authorities and members of the security services, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, and torture in detention. It also cited human rights activists as saying Baluchis faced government discrimination both as Sunni religious practitioners and as an ethnic minority group”(Lipin, Haghjoo, & Samadbeygi, 2020).

So, recent developments have not shown a drastic change in regime’s behaviour towards the minorities.

### ***An Attempt at Resolving Ethnic Unrest and Militancy***

Solution to the ongoing ethnic unrest can be found in many ways. Most of the regime’s concerns regarding ethnic protests and movements emanates from the fear of foreign involvement aimed at destabilizing the Iranian government. This issue should be addressed by raising it with the suspected states and an open dialogue between the parties should be mediated by allies of both groups. By doing so the concerns of both the parties should be addressed. As a supporting hand, UN should also play its role in building trust among the parties.

The concern of the state regarding secessionist aspirations of Kurds and Baluch can be addressed by creating a grand representational group of both the Kurds and the Baluch that will meet with government’s delegation to give confidence to the regime that they have not any aspirations to break away from the Iran. The same should be done with the militant groups with maximum efforts focusing on making them to a level where they voluntarily drop the weapons against the state.

The aforementioned ideas cannot be fulfilled if Iranian government is not willing to resolve the issues of ethnic minorities specifically the Kurds and the Baluch. Iran needs to provide the ethnic groups betterment in economic, political and cultural spheres:

- Economically they need to provide better jobs to the Kurds and Baluch as they have been living in worst conditions for a very long time. Specifically the Baluch who are living in the worst conditions as compared to other communities in Iran. So providing them employment opportunities, development of better housing, services infrastructure should be bestowed with better living.
- Politically they should not be segregated from the dominant Persian ethnic group. Their aggregate representation should be provided in assemblies and other law enforcement agencies. Political targeting of prominent ethnic leader should also be eliminated
- Culturally, the regime should allow the Kurds and Baluch to openly practice their religious beliefs. Government should allow the Sunni Majority Kurds and Baluch for opening their mosques which is their basic right according to the constitution's article 19. Their segregation on the basis of language should also be removed and they should be allowed to openly converse in their language.

### CONCLUSION

Ethnic Conflict in Iran is a question that has been there in both pre and post Iranian Revolution. But the issue was never resolved as the core concerns of ethnic minorities were never fully addressed. Specifically the problem of Kurds and Baluch remain the most concerning issue within the state with its affects across the border. Long-term non-attendance towards there issue has generated space for some groups to pick up arms against the state which resultantly has caused much complexity towards the issue. The concerns about the foreign involvement have added fuel to the fire. Need of the hour is to utilize all the available resources toward the purposeful resolution of concerns expressed by these ethnic minorities in Iran. Iran's security can be increased by increasing development within the regions of Kurdistan and Sistanand Baluchistan. Once the living standard of these minorities reaches at par with the dominant Persians, situation will take a good turn.

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