

## Iran's Ethnic Tinderbox

Only roughly one-half of Iran's 70 million people are ethnic Persians, the rest being Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Baluchis, and Lors. In the eyes of many observers, this unusual diversity makes Iran not so much a nation-state as a multinational empire dominated by Persians, much as the Soviet Union once was dominated by Russians. Iran's ethnic minorities share a widespread sense of discrimination and deprivation toward the central Tehran government. Tehran's highly centralized development strategy has resulted in a wide socioeconomic gap between the center and the peripheries, where there is also an uneven distribution of power, socioeconomic resources, and sociocultural status. Fueled by these long-standing economic and cultural grievances against Tehran, unrest among the country's large groups of ethnic minorities is increasing.

As of late, they have been empowered by Tehran's international isolation and inspired by the gains of their ethnic brothers in neighboring states, such as the Kurds and Turkmen now playing key roles in the new Iraqi government, to make louder demands for their own rights.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, sensing that their moment might have come, diaspora opposition groups led by Iranian exiles have started campaigning together to garner greater international support. A Washington conference in early 2006, for instance, brought together representatives of Kurdish, Baluchi, Ahvazi, Turkmen, and Azeri organizations that aim to form a strong common front against the Islamic regime.<sup>2</sup> Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made an election pledge that he and his ministerial team would visit all of Iran's 30 provinces within their

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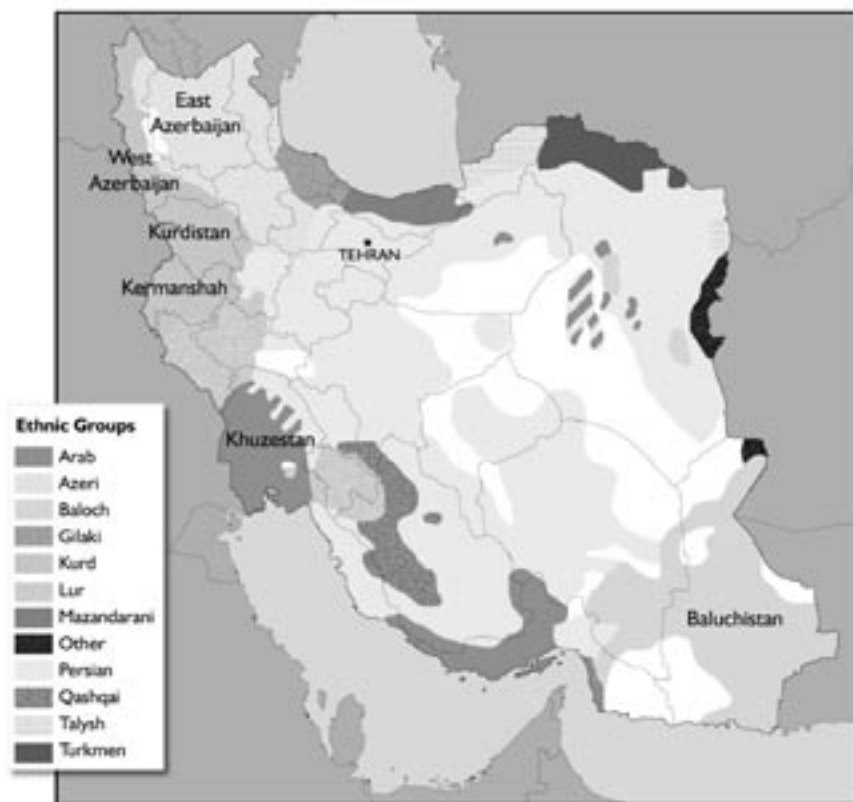
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first year in office to settle long-standing local problems, many of them related to ethnicity or religion. As of his first anniversary as president, however, he had visited only about half of them, and a number had effectively become off-limits for him because of escalating ethnic and sectarian tensions. Indeed, Iran has recently been experiencing some of the worst ethnic violence in its modern history.<sup>3</sup>

**Iran has recently experienced some of the worst ethnic violence in its modern history.**

The Iranian clerical regime does not publicly deny the hazards of the country's multiethnic nature. Official public statements from senior regime figures, however, typically blame "outside interference" for violence in the state. The day after the government closed the state-run *Iran* newspaper for publishing a riot-inducing cartoon likening Azeris to cockroaches,<sup>4</sup> Ahmadinejad accused the United States and its allies of hatching plots to provoke ethnic tensions that would destabilize his country. "The United States and its allies should know that they will not be able to provoke divisions and differences, through desperate attempts, among the dear Iranian nation," Ahmadinejad said in a speech broadcast live on state-run television.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the United Kingdom, widely reviled by the Iranian government and public alike as a perpetual meddler in internal Iranian affairs, is repeatedly blamed for violence in Khuzestan, which is populated by Iranian Arabs who have close historical as well as tribal ties to Iraqi Arabs across the border.

Behind the scenes, however, the Iranian government is more soberly discussing the root causes of Iranian ethnic disturbances. The Islamic Majlis Center for Research, an Iranian government think tank, warned in a 2005 report that the country will face even more serious internal unrest unless the government better addresses the needs of its ethnic minorities and cited two key challenges facing the regime in this regard. First, unemployment among young people across all ethnicities and regions can fan the flames of resentment toward Tehran.<sup>6</sup> The report also cited poverty among border-area non-Persian ethnic groups, who are historically vulnerable to outside manipulation. Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and Baluchis share ties with people in neighboring Azerbaijan, Iraq, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, respectively, all of which are either traditionally hostile to Iran's ruling clerics or which contain U.S. and other Western troops. Does this internal unrest threaten the Iranian government's control of its land and population? Further, with the West's desire for a more moderate regime in mind, can and should it use these developments to its advantage?



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Before the war, however, the province was among Iran's most developed. When Iraq invaded in 1980, hoping to take advantage of the postrevolution chaos to seize the oil fields, then-President Saddam Hussein portrayed himself as the liberator of the Khuzestan Arabs. Although many Iranian Arabs in border towns openly backed Iraq, the majority elsewhere did not, perhaps because they were mostly Shi'ite Muslims whose fellow Shi'ites in Iraq were persecuted under Saddam's rule. Local ethnic Arabs complain that, as a result of their divided loyalties during the Iran-Iraq War, they are now viewed

more than ever by the clerical regime in Tehran as a potential fifth column and suffer under an official policy of discrimination. In an impoverished Arab village about three miles from Ahvaz, oil pipelines that run among homes carry oil from the nearby drilling rigs to refineries near the Persian Gulf. "We don't have any freedom here," says one local young man, who works as an engineer at a drilling rig. "We are standing on all of the country's wealth, and yet we get no benefit from it."<sup>7</sup>

The men said that Farsi is the only language taught in their village school, although all the students are Arab, and that no Arabic-language newspapers are allowed to be published in the province. They said they also suffer much higher levels of unemployment and poverty than Persians. "The government says we are traitors," added another man. Like most members of his family, he said, he is unemployed. "We are Iranians. It is the government in Tehran that is treacherous because it refuses us equal rights."<sup>8</sup> There was no evidence of the anti-Western sentiment held by their tribal cousins across the border in Iraq, and there was a general excitement among those to whom I talked at the stories of a greater Western interest in their plight. One man openly stated that he would welcome British forces as liberators, should they invade from Iraq. At the same time, all were deeply critical of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq itself. "What use is democracy and freedom if there is no security?" was one typical comment.<sup>9</sup>

About 50 Arabs have been implicated by the government in a series of bombings that killed 21 people after antigovernment riots broke out in April 2005. At least 20 were reported killed, and hundreds were injured in the riots themselves. Amnesty International reports security forces summarily executed many of those arrested. Tehran dismissed the charge as false.<sup>10</sup> The scale of the riots probably would have escaped foreign attention if the Qatar-based, Arabic-language Al Jazeera television news channel had not managed to get a video crew into Khuzestan. Al Jazeera was subsequently barred from reporting from the province.<sup>11</sup> The rioters were infuriated by a leaked letter

attributed to former Iranian vice president Muhammad Ali Abtahi, which he denounced as a forgery, that disclosed plans to expel Arabs from the province and replace them with ethnic Persians. Ahmadinejad himself has been forced to cancel three trips to Ahvaz at the last minute. The official reason given each time was bad weather, but the real cause was likely security threats. One of the worst bombings, in which eight were killed, took place just hours before the president was to address a public rally.

Two ethnic Arab men found guilty of bombing a bank in January 2006, killing six people, were publicly hanged from a crane in Ahvaz in March. The day before they were hanged, three other Iranian Arabs were reportedly executed in a local prison; and according to overseas-based opposition groups, a number of other local Arabs face imminent death. Major oil pipelines supplying crude oil to the Abadan refinery on the shore of the Persian Gulf caught fire a few days after the hanging of the two men. Iranian officials said they could not rule out sabotage.<sup>12</sup> Pipelines in Khuzestan were bombed in September 2005, temporarily disrupting supply. In October of that year, Tehran said it had foiled an attempt to bomb the Abadan refinery with five Katyusha rockets.<sup>13</sup>

Certain Ahvazi Arab tribal leaders have reportedly been armed by the regime to help guard oil installations. As a result, they have in-depth knowledge of the pipeline infrastructure, according to the British Ahwazi Friendship Society, which lobbies on behalf of Iran's ethnic Arabs. If the current ethnic repression continues, it is possible that some members of these tribes will attack the installations they were meant to be guarding, the group predicts.<sup>14</sup> Disruptions to oil supply in Ahvaz could have global economic and political implications. A major attack on the Abadan refinery, which represents about 30 percent of Iran's total refining capacity, or Ahvaz's export pipelines would severely disrupt both Iran's oil exports and domestic fuel supplies. Indeed, global oil prices would shoot through the roof if locals were to strike Iran's oil industry with any degree of success. This strategy of economic terrorism has not been lost on Al Qaeda, which is reportedly shifting the focus of its campaign in the wider Persian Gulf region to sabotaging oil facilities.<sup>15</sup>

Iranian officials have partly blamed the rise in violence in Khuzestan on exiled separatist groups operating from Iraq and are furious that Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States allow opposition groups based there to operate freely. At least 60 Arabic-language opposition radio and satellite television stations are beamed into the province from around the globe. "These groups incite terrorist acts and inflame the situation by spreading false reports," says Khuzestan's deputy governor, Mohsen Farokhnejad. "Why do these Western governments allow them to do this when they claim to be fighting terrorism?"<sup>16</sup> All of the main, overseas-based Arab opposition groups have denounced the recent terrorist attacks. Yet, an analyst with inside knowledge of the opposition groups said that the National Liberation

Movement of Ahwaz, a very popular group that operates from Canada and runs a widely watched satellite TV station, does seem at times to verge on advocating armed resistance.<sup>17</sup>

## **Sunni Resistance in Baluchistan**

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The remote southeastern province of Baluchistan has witnessed similar unrest and violence. Baluchis have long resented the regime in Tehran. They say the central government brutally oppresses and neglects the Baluchi population, 35–50 percent of whom are unemployed and most of whom are Sunni.<sup>18</sup> For years, the Iranian army has been fighting a bloody campaign against organized drug-smuggling networks that run heavily defended convoys through Baluchistan along the heroin route from Afghanistan to Europe. The province is particularly crucial for Iran's national security, as it borders Sunni Pakistan and U.S.-occupied Afghanistan. Like Khuzestan's ethnic Arabs, Baluchis complain of discrimination in the education and employment sectors and say that manifestations of their local culture are discouraged.<sup>19</sup> Also as in Khuzestan, locals claim that a systematic plan has been set in motion by authorities over the past two years to pacify the region by changing the ethnic balance in major Baluchi cities.<sup>20</sup> At least two political groups, the leftist Baluchistan Liberation Front and the more centrist Baluchistan Protection Council, claim to be active in the province. Both had headquarters in Baghdad before 2003 and, according to one prominent Iranian exile, may now have transferred to Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> The government in Tehran has accused the United States of supporting Sunni insurgents.<sup>22</sup>

Armed with assorted rifles, hand grenades, and a few anti-aircraft guns, the Sunni rebel group Jundallah has been operating from Iran's lawless borderlands for the past four years and claims to have killed 400 Iranian soldiers in hit-and-run operations.<sup>23</sup> In January 2006, Abdul Hameed Reeki, the self-declared chief spokesman of the Jundallah, gave a revealing interview while his organization held eight Iranian soldiers hostage.<sup>24</sup> Although Jundallah had only 1,000 trained fighters, he said, it had the dedication needed to defeat the Iranian army, particularly if the West were to provide some help.

In fact, the Sunni Baluchi resistance could prove valuable to Western intelligence agencies with an interest in destabilizing the hard-line regime in Tehran. The United States maintained close contacts with the Baluchis until 2001, at which point it withdrew support when Tehran promised to repatriate any U.S. airmen that had to land in Iran due to damage sustained in combat operations in Afghanistan. These contacts could be revived to sow turmoil in Iran's southeastern province and work against the ruling regime, according to at least one analysis.<sup>25</sup>

Another option for the Jundallah was to assassinate Iranian leaders, perhaps even Ahmadinejad himself.<sup>26</sup> The group had already been accused by the Iranian government of an attack on presidential security forces before Reeki made that statement. The semiofficial *Jomhouri Islami* Iranian newspaper acknowledged on December 17, 2005, that Ahmadinejad's motorcade was attacked three days earlier by "armed bandits and trouble-makers" on the Zabol-Saravan highway in Baluchistan.<sup>27</sup> According to Iranian government officials, one of Ahmadinejad's security guards and a locally hired driver died in the attack, and another security guard was injured. Two gunmen also reportedly died in the firefight.

That same week, however, the Iranian government then released a statement that said Ahmadinejad was not present at the time of the attack and that the firefight was not an assassination attempt on the Iranian president. Moreover, government officials claimed that the vehicle that was assaulted was not part of the president's caravan and that security guards traveling along the highway were deployed as part of the security measures for the president's upcoming visit. According to a Stratfor analysis of the incident, the "contradictory reports on the incident raise more questions than answers, and are likely part of a disinformation campaign launched by Tehran to downplay any potential threats against the Iranian president."<sup>28</sup> The lack of clarity surrounding the reports and the delayed statements on what actually occurred, the analysis concluded, reveal the Iranian regime's confused state, and it predicted mass arrests to crush the fledgling resistance movement in Baluchistan.

Unrest stirs in other regions as well. No one has taken credit for explosions in May 2006 in Kermanshah, home to many of Iran's 4.8 million Kurds, but the July 2005 shooting of a young Kurd by security forces led to demonstrations in several northwestern cities that resulted in civilian and police officer deaths. In May 2006, thousands of Iranians in several cities of the province of East Azerbaijan publicly protested after the official government newspaper *Iran* published the cartoon likening Azeris to cockroaches.<sup>29</sup> The Azeri, a Turkic ethnic group who make up about one-quarter of Iran's population and who speak a Turkic language shared by their brethren in neighboring Azerbaijan, are Iran's largest minority, and they too are becoming more vocal in their demand for rights such as the freedom to operate schools in their own language.<sup>30</sup> Encouraged by the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991 from the Soviet Union, the level of Azeri nationalism in Iran and their demand for greater cultural and linguistic rights has risen.<sup>31</sup>

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## The Western Calculus

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Western policymakers have historically paid little attention to Iran's ethnic tinderbox but are now taking a greater interest in the country's internal ethnic politics, focusing on their possible impact on the Iranian regime's long-term stability as well as their influence on its short-term foreign and domestic policy choices. According to exiled Iranian activists reportedly involved in a classified U.S. research project, the U.S. Department of Defense is presently examining the depth and nature of ethnic grievances against the Islamic theocracy. The Pentagon is reportedly especially interested in whether Iran would be prone to a violent fragmentation along the same kinds of fault lines that are splitting Iraq and that helped to tear apart the Soviet Union with the collapse of communism. U.S. intelligence experts infer, according to one article, that this investigation could indicate the early stages of contingency planning for a ground assault on Iran or is an attempt to evaluate the implications of the unrest in Iranian border regions for U.S. soldiers stationed in Iraq and for Iranian infiltration into Iraq.<sup>32</sup> U.S. investigative journalist Seymour M. Hersh separately claimed that the United States already has troops on the ground in Iran, although some argue that Hersh may have been used by his Washington-based sources as part of their psychological warfare campaign against Iran.<sup>33</sup>

In October 2005, a conservative, Washington-based think tank held a conference on Iran that reportedly triggered uproar among exiled opposition groups and especially among Persian nationalists. The conference was entitled "Another Case for Federalism?" but its chairman denied it sought to foment separatism.<sup>34</sup> It would indeed be a grave mistake for the West to attempt to involve itself in Iran's ethnic tensions for short-term political and military gain. Based on historical precedent, this would likely unleash a wave of Iranian nationalism and a massive backlash against any minority group seen as colluding with outsiders. Even the right-wing Iranian exile Amir Taheri, usually a strong backer of the Bush administration's interventionist policies in the Middle East, has warned that although fanning the flames of ethnic and sectarian resentment is not difficult and that a Yugoslavia-like breakup scenario might hasten the demise of the Islamic republic, it could also "unleash much darker forces of nationalism and religious zealotry that could plunge the entire region into years, even decades, of bloody crises."<sup>35</sup>

In any case, with the possible exception of the Kurds, none of Iran's ethnic groups are presently seeking to secede from the Iranian state. The violence in remote regions such as Khuzestan and Baluchistan clearly has ethnic components, but the far greater causes of the poverty and unemployment that vexes members of those ethnic groups are government corruption, inefficiency, and a general sense of lawlessness, which all Iranians, including Persians, must confront.



The Bush administration earlier this year asked Congress for \$75 million to promote democratic change in Iran.<sup>36</sup> Rather than seeking to explicitly use this money to manipulate ethnic tensions in a futile request to change Iran's regime, the money could be used more effectively to highlight to the Iranian people how struggles for ethnic rights are part and parcel of the struggle for greater human rights for all Iranians and as part of wide democracy-promotion efforts aimed at fostering a more moderate government. The emphasis should be on creating partnerships with Iran's ethnic minorities to stimulate democracy and promote their situation, not on targeting the regime in Tehran, fomenting riots, or destabilizing the regime or its borders.

## Notes

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