



ETHNO-RELIGIOUS POLICY OF POST-
REVOLUTIONARY IRAN:
The Case of the Baloch-Sunni Minority

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the ethno-religious approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It specifically examines the ethno-religious policy of the Iranian government towards its Baloch-Sunni ethno-religious group and assesses the response of the Baloch-Sunni towards the ethno-religious policy of the Iranian government. Based on field work, purposive interviews, newspapers, and reports by reputable international “organizations”, it analyzes ethnic policies of “separation”, “accommodation”, and “assimilation”. The study found that, although Iran is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country, its political system is deeply influenced by the Shia ideology and Persian nationalism. The political system uses an assimilationist approach and tries to assimilate the Baloch-Sunni into Shia Persian dominated ethno-religious group. This policy is resisted by the Baloch-Sunni ethno-religious group in many ways and, as such, its approach is a mixture of accommodation and separation. Although each segment of the Baloch-Sunni society is combatting the central government’s ethno-religious policy in its own way, there is a broad consensus to uphold its ethno-religious values. The study recommends that the Islamic Republic of Iran adopt a pluralistic approach toward its diverse ethno-religious groups in order to enhance national unity.

ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في النهج المتخذ تجاه الأقليات العرقية والدينية في جمهورية إيران الإسلامية، وعلى وجه التحديد تسعى لفحص السياسات العرقية والدينية للحكومة الإيرانية تجاه جماعة البلوش السنة. تناقش الدراسة أيضاً تفاعل البلوش السنة تجاه السياسات العرقية والدينية للحكومة الإيرانية. البيانات المستخدمة في هذه الدراسة تم جمعها من المصادر الأولية والثانوية، مثل الدستور الإيراني واللوائح والقوانين التي تسنها الهيئات الوطنية ذات الصلة، وتصريحات النخب الحاكمة، والعمل الميداني، والمقابلات الهادفة، والصحف وتقارير المؤسسات العالمية المعروفة. واستخدمت الدراسة في تحليل البيانات، المنهج المعروف "بالتصنيف الثلاثي" و هو: 'التمييز'، 'الإقامة'، و 'الاستيعاب'. تؤكد الدراسة أنه على الرغم من أن إيران بلد متعدد الأعراق والأديان لكن النظام السياسي فيها متأثر بقوة بالأيديولوجية الشيعية والقومية الفارسية. ونتيجة لذلك، فإن النظام السياسي يسعى ومن خلال منهج التطبيع والتضعيف لامتصاص البلوش السنة في المجموعة العرقية الفارسية والمذهب الشيعي المسيطر في البلاد، كما تسعى لمسح هوية أهل السنة البلوش. وتكشف الدراسة أيضاً أن المجموعة العرقية والدينية السنية البلوشية تقاوم السياسة الامتصاصية للحكومة المركزية بطرق شتى، ولذا فإن نهجها المفضل يختلف بين الإقامة والفصل. وعلى الرغم من أن كل جزء من المجتمع البلوشي يكافح السياسة العرقية والدينية للحكومة المركزية بطريقته الخاصة، فإن هناك إجماعاً واسعاً بين هذه المجموعات لدعم قيمهم العرقية والدينية. توصي الدراسة بأنه يجب على جمهورية إيران الإسلامية اعتماد نهج تعددي تجاه الجماعات الدينية والعرقية المتنوعة من أجل تعزيز الوحدة الوطنية.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own study, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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This research is dedicated to:

My beloved father, Haji Noor Muhammad

a committed person who devoted his life for his children's education

and

My beloved mother

for her dedication and support

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Praise be to Almighty Allah, and peace and blessings upon Prophet Muhammad, his household, and companions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Abstract in Arabic	iii
Approval Page.....	iv
Declaration Page	v
Copyright	vi
Dedication	vii
Acknowledgments.....	vii
Table Of Contents	ix
List of Maps	xi
List of Tables & Figures.....	xii
List of Abbreviations.....	xiii
CHAPTER ONE: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem.....	2
1.3 Justification.....	3
1.4 Research Objectives	4
1.5 Literature Review	5
1.5.1 Studies On Ethno-Religious Groups In Iran	5
1.5.2 Studies On The Baloch-Sunni Community	10
1.6 Analytical Framework	13
1.7 Operationalization	19
1.7.1 Ethno-Religious Policy	20
1.7.2 Ethno-Religious Group	20
1.8 Methodology.....	21
1.9 Chapter Outline	22
CHAPTER TWO: ETHNO-RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN	24
2.1 Introduction.....	24
2.2 Ethno-Religious Composition of Iran.....	24
2.3 Constitutional Rights Of Ethno-Religious Groups In Iran	33
2.4 Ethno-Religious Issue in Iran and the Iranian Leadership.....	41
2.5 Conclusion	59
CHAPTER THREE: THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN’S POLICY TOWARD THE BALOCH AS AN ETHNIC MINORITY	60
3.1 Introduction.....	60
3.2 The Baloch Ethnic Group in Iran: A Background	60
3.2.1 The People of Balochistan and their society	63
3.2.2 The Baloch and Their Persian Rulers.....	65
3.3 The Persianization Project Under the Islamic Republic	72
3.3.1 Political aspects of the Persianization project.....	73
3.3.2 Assimilation through Education.....	75

3.3.3 Assimilation through Economy	81
3.3.4 Assimilation through Distortion of Cultural Heritage.....	89
3.4 Conclusion	94
CHAPTER FOUR: POLICIES TOWARD THE BALOCH AS A RELIGIOUS MINORITY	96
4.1 Introduction.....	96
4.2 Shi'ism in Iran: A Historical Background	96
4.3 Saliency of Religion in the Baloch Society	101
4.4 The Baloch-Sunni and the Shia Persian Ruling Elites.....	105
4.5 Socio-Political Policies of the Islamic Republic Of Iran Towards The Baloch-Sunnis.....	108
4.5.1 Representative Office of the Supreme Leader for Sunni Affairs in Balochistan	111
4.5.2 Planning Council for Sunni Religious Schools.....	119
4.5.3 The Shooshtari Project	126
4.5.4 Religious Propagation	130
4.6 Conclusion	136
CHAPTER FIVE: THE BALOCH RESPONSE TO THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN'S ETHNO-RELIGIOUS POLICY IN BALOCHISTAN.....	137
5.1 Introduction.....	137
5.2 The Baloch Response to the Assimilation Project: A Historical Overview.....	137
5.3 The Religious Elite and Their Response to The Assimilation Project.	145
5.4 The Educated Elite and Their Response to The Assimilation Project .	159
5.5 Radical Baloch Groups and The Assimilation Project	168
5.6 Conclusion	175
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	176
6.1 Findings	178
6.2 Responses To Assimilation	180
6.3 Limitations	181
6.4: Recommendations	181
BIBLIOGRAPHY	185
Appendix.....	206

LIST OF MAPS

Maps No.	Page No
2.1, Ethno-Religious Distribution in Iran.....	26
3.1, Demarcation of Balochistan by Goldsmith Commission.....	62
3.2, The Map of Iran based on 1937 administrative divisions.	66
3.3, Location of Sistan and Balochistan within Iran	68

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables & Figures No.

Page No

1.1, Six Main Directions in Ethnic Minority Policy	18
1.2, Assimilation Strategies adopted either by dominant or subordinate group ...	19
2.1, Daily <i>Irān</i> cockroach cartoon controversy.....	52
3.1, Governor General of Balochistan (1979-2014)	74
3.2, Provincial development index, (Three most development and the three least developed provinces -2002 & 2009).....	83
4.1, The top 10 most religious cities in Iran.....	104
4.2, 2005 Presidential election factsheet in Sistan & Balochistan	120
4.3, 2009 Presidential election factsheet in Sistan & Balochistan	120
5.1, Provincial Distribution of Executions.....	165

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Army of Assistance
AJ	Army of Justice
AMFF	Azizyah Micro Finance Foundation
APM	Army of the Prophet Muhammad
BAC	The Baloch Activists' Campaign
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BIOP	Bureau of Information and Opinion Polls
BLF	The Balochistan Liberation Front
BPP	The Balochistan Peoples' Party
CAOWB	Campaign Against the Occupation of Western Balochistan
CCSRs	Coordination Council of Sunni Religious Schools
CENTO	The Central Treaty Organization
CSHR	The Centre for Supporters of Human Rights
DCDUZ	The Decree Centre of the Darul Ulum Zahedan
GC	Guardian Council
GOSI	Global Organization of Sunnis of Iran
IKRC	Imam Khomains Relief Committee
ILNA	Iranian Labour News Agency
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
IRIB	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting
IPF	Iran Participation Front
MCF	Mohseneen Charity Foundation
MSI	Movement of the Supporters of Iran
NOCR	National Organization for Civil Registration

ROSLASB Representative Office of the Supreme Leader in the affairs of Sunnis in Balochistan

PCSRS Planning Council for Sunni Religious Schools

PRMI People's Resistance Movement of Iran

SCRC Supreme Cultural Revolution Council

UNPO Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

YSVJ Youth Society of Voice of Justice

CHAPTER ONE

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 BACKGROUND

Iran is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country. Persians, Azeris, Kurds, Baloch, Arabs and Turkmen have been living in the region currently recognized as Iran, since centuries. However, these different ethnic groups in Iran have not been equal partners in terms of political power. It has always been one particular ethnic group, such as the Persians or the Turks, that has taken control over the political apparatus and economic resources.¹

Following the 1979 Revolution, the country abolished the monarchy and claimed itself to be an Islamic republic. Since then many changes and reforms have taken place in Iran. However, ethnic policy of the pre-1979 regime has remained intact. In addition, as an ideological regime with Shiism as its belief system, the religious factor has also come in to play a political role. In the present constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran the Twelver Shia Sect is the official religion of the country.² As a result, in addition to old ethnicity-related problems, issues relating to religious minorities are also visible in post-1979 revolution Iran. These issues do not only pertain to the non-Shia Islamic sects, particularly the Sunnis, but have also affected the non-Muslim religious minorities such as Christians, Jews, Bahaaees, etc.

Right after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, non-Persian ethnic groups as well as non-Shia religious groups complain that their culture and religious

¹ Alireza Asgharzadeh, *Iran and challenge of Diversity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 197.

² *The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran*, "Article 12" (Tehran: Islamic Consultative Assembly International Department, 1990), 31.

identities are being endangered by the socio-economic and political policies and practices of the Islamic Republic. International organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other international organizations, also regularly report about various types of discriminations vis-a-vis non-Persian and non-Shia ethno-religious groups in Iran.³

In many cases the problem goes beyond discrimination and involves imprisonment, execution, mass killing, deliberate impoverishment, gerrymandering, pre-planned demographic change, etc.⁴ All of these issues are apparent in provinces and areas where the majority of the citizens are non-Persians or non-Shiites.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Persians are the dominant ethnic group and Shiism is the religion of the majority of Iranians. Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been trying to suppress its ethno-religious minorities and keep them on low profile. Nonetheless, these ethno-religious minorities are increasingly being visible and vocal. One of the most visible and politically explosive ethno-religious minority issues in Iran is the case of the Baloch-Sunni ethno-religious community living in the southeastern part of the country, mainly in the province of Sistan and Balochistan. Given the ethno-religious and cultural differences of the Baloch people with the ruling elites of the country, the province is subject to a comprehensive ethno-religious suppression policy by the Persian Shia dominated political establishment of Iran.

This study aims at analyzing the Islamic Republic of Iran's ethno-religious

³ Ahmad Shahid, "Report by Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran" (Re. No. A/HRC/19/66, presented to the UN General Assembly, United Nations, New York, on March 6, 2012, available at, <<http://yon.ir/i5WP>> (Accessed on September 3, 2012).

⁴ *Iran Human Rights*, "Annual report on the death penalty in Iran", <http://www.abolition.fr/sites/default/files/rapport_iran_2014-gb-030314-bd-e.pdf> (Accessed on February 22, 2015).

policy towards its Baloch-Sunni ethno-religious group. In doing so, first, the study discusses the approach of the Islamic Republic toward the Baloch as an ethnic group. Second, it discusses the approach of the Islamic Republic toward the Baloch as a religious group. The study will further assess the response of the Baloch Sunnis to uphold their ethno-religious identities. The work specifically attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the ethno-religious policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran?
2. How does the Islamic Republic of Iran implement its ethno-religious policy toward the Baloch Sunni ethno-religious group?
3. How do the Baloch Sunnis respond to the Islamic Republic's ethno-religious policy?

1.3 JUSTIFICATION

Diversity in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies is among one of the most contemporary issues that are being discussed both in academic and political circles. Previously, it was believed that the sub-national identity (ies) would fade away with the advent of modernity; however, there is increasing evidence that ethno-religious identities are rather, gaining prominence. It has made the scholars of the field to revisit their stand about ethno-religious dynamics in modern societies. The same is true about Iran. Iranian leaders have been trying to overcome the issue of ethno-religious diversity in Iran over the last 80 years. But, this issue still seems to be unresolved in accordance with the desire of the Persian-dominated Iranian elites.

There have been a few studies on ethno-religious issues in Iran. However, most of them focus on non-Muslim minorities such as Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, as they are the only recognized minorities according to the Article 13 of

the Iranian constitution.⁵ As a result, very little is known about other non-Persian and non-Shia ethno-religious groups in Iran. This is particularly true about the Baloch-Sunni community. One can hardly find a work which critically explores the case of the Baloch. Although, there exist studies that examine the Baloch case but they are by and large confined to historical analyses, dealing with the history and culture of the Baloch thus, overlooking its current socio-economic and political condition. This work aims to redress this imbalance.

Articles 2, 10 and 153 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, clearly mention that the Islamic republic of Iran is obliged to protect the oppressed people and ethno-religious minorities throughout the world.⁶ There is a growing academic interest among scholars as to how the Islamic Republic of Iran is treating its own non-Persian and non-Shia ethno-religious groups. Finally, the findings of this work will be equally useful for policymakers in other diverse societies, while formulating policies for their respective societies.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives are to:

- Understand the Islamic Republic of Iran's ethno-religious policy with particular reference to the Baloch-Sunni ethno-religious group.
- Analyze the methods and strategies through which the Islamic Republic of Iran implements its ethno-religious policy toward the Baloch-Sunni ethno-religious group.
- Discuss the response of the Baloch-Sunni to the Shia Persian dominated

⁵ *The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran*, "Article 13" (Tehran: Islamic Consultative Assembly: International Department, 1990), 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Article 2, 10, 153, 27, 30 &70.

ethno-religious policy.

1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a number of studies related to ethno-religious groups in Iran. These studies can be divided, for our purpose, into two major categories: studies which focus on religious minorities and Iranian ethnic groups in general, and studies that are related to the Islamic Republic of Iran's approach towards the Baloch-Sunni ethno-religious group.

1.5.1 Studies on ethno-religious groups in Iran

A number of scholarly works are identified as covering the discourse related to ethno-religious groups in Iran. These studies can be classified under two sub-groups. Those work written by Iranian Persian elites and those produced by non-Iranian western scholars. Works written by Persian-speaking writers usually toe the official position on the political system of Iran, especially on the state sponsored concept of 'Muslim unity' and/or so called 'Iranian-ness'. Focusing on these concepts, they try to keep the issues of ethnic and religious minorities less visible in political discourses in Iran. Therefore, issues such as national integration and internal solidarity are given prominence in such discourses, while topics on ethnic minorities are discussed in security related realms.

From this category of literature, one can mention a work produced by Touraj Atabaki.⁷ He discusses ethnic diversity in Iran from the point of view of government's strategy and the challenges of non-Persian ethnic groups with respect to the territorial

⁷ Touraj Atabaki, "Ethnic Diversity and Territorial Integrity of Iran: Domestic Harmony and Regional Challenges" *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 38, No.1 (2005): 23-44.

integrity of Iran. Atabaki traces the current concern of territorial integrity back to 17th century Safavid Persia and its contestation with Othman Sunni Empire. He emphasizes how the contestations eventually led to the idea of self-identification.⁸ Through this, a distinct Shia identity is given prominence over the collective Ottoman Islamic identity and it is this Shia identity that has survived even after the post-Safavid Iranian regimes.

Farhad Darvishi and Azam Imami in their study discuss the role of ethnicity in the national integrity of Iran.⁹ They argue that international powers, local organizations, ethnic and religious elites, and geographical locations of ethnic minorities are responsible for ethnic conflicts in Iran. To them ethno-religious issues in Iran are not natural but fabricated in nature.

Aliasghar Ghasimi, Majid Khurshidi and Hussein Haidari, discuss the Assimilation Policy of the current political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran and demand for self-determination by four non-Persian ethnic groups such as Kurds, Baloch, Azeris and Arabs.¹⁰ The authors discuss ethnic identity versus national identity. They differentiate the case of ethnic diversity in Iran from that in the other parts of the world and argue that the demand for self-determination by the aforementioned ethnic groups is a secessionist intention.

The most interesting work is written by Hamind Ahmadi, who completely denies ethnic diversity in Iran. He believes that Iran has diversity only in the religious and linguistic sense. He argues that ethnic diversity in Iran does not have any reality

⁸ The term self-identification is used by the author.

⁹ Farhad Darvishi & Azam Imami, "Qawmiyat va Hambastagi-i Millī dar Jumhūr-i Islāmī-i Irān", [Ethnicity Versus National Integrity in the Islamic Republic of Iran: the Challenges and Solutions], *Islamic Revolution Studies A Quarterly Scientific Journal*, Vol. 7, No 20 (Spring 2010): 117-144.

¹⁰ Aliasghar Ghasimi, Majid Khurshidi, & Hussein Haidari, "Hamsāzi-i Hūvīyat-i Millī va qawmī dar Irān va Rūyikard-i Aqvām-i Irānī bih Vahdat-i Millī va Haqq-i Ta'īn-i Sarnivisht", [Integration in National and Ethnic Identities: Approach of Ethnic Groups Toward National Unity and Self determination] *Faşlnamah-i 'Ulūm-i Ijtīmā'ī*, [Journal of Social Sciences], No. 55 (2012): 58-91.

and is only a mental projection of some scholars. He specifically blames international forces, political elites, and the central government during the previous monarchic political system of Iran for this.¹¹

However, there are scholars who at least accept the reality that Iran is an ethnically diverse country, and do not differentiate the case of ethnic diversity in Iran from that in the other parts of the world. In this regard one can cite the work of Mehdi Amirkafi and Ibrahim Hajian, who in their study focus on concepts such as social identity, identity formation, acculturation and culture conflict, and they also discuss ethnic identity vis-à-vis National Identity in Iran.¹² The authors examine inter-ethnic relations among ethnic minorities with the dominant group through an assessment of the sense of belonging and national cohesion among different Iranian ethnic groups.

Similarly, Kavous Sayed Imami in his study finds that the Iranian ruling elites since Reza Shah have been focused on assimilation.¹³ He believes that this approach has been effective to certain extent only in Iran's big cities. Therefore, he argues that Iranian leaders instead of denying diversity should emphasize on "unity despite diversity". In a bolder way, Ali Asghar Sad Abadi, Ali Asghar Pour Ezzat and Tayyebeh Abbasi¹⁴ in their work try to explore the proximity factors among the different ethnic groups in Iran. In fact, they try to formulate how the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of Iran can be transformed into an opportunity for six Iranian

¹¹ Hamid Ahmadi, *Qawmīyat va Qawmgarāi dar Īrān: az afsānah tā vāqa'īyat* (Tehran: Nashr-i Nay, 2009).

¹² Mehdi Amirkafi & Ibrahim Hajian, "Nisbat-i Huvīyat-i qawmī va Millī dar Jami'ah-i Chand qawmī-i Īrān", [the Relation between National and Ethnic Identities in Multi Ethnic Society of Iran] *Faslnamah-i Rāhburd*, [Journal of Strategy], Year 2, No. 66 (2012): 117-146.

¹³ Kavus Sayed Imami, "Qawmīyat az Manzar-i Stīyāsathā-yi Hūvīyat", [Ethnicity, from identity politics approach], 2 *Faslnāmāh-i Dānish-i Stīyāsī*, [Journal of Political Sciences], No.3 (Spring & Summer 2006): 143-165.

¹⁴ Ali Asghar Sadabadi, Ali Asghar purizzat and Tayebeh abbasi, "Shināsāi-i Muallifahā-yi Hambastagī-i Millī dar Aqvām-i Irānī", [Identification of the components of national solidarity among the Iranian ethnic groups], *Faslnāmāh-i Rāhburd-i Difā'ī*, [Journal of defense strategy], Year 11, No. 42 (Summer 2013): 174-197.

ethnic groups namely, Baloch, Kurd, Persian, Turkmen, Arab, and Lur. Yet, this work also has a clear security-oriented approach, which is perhaps why it has also been published by the Journal of Strategic Defense, which is sponsored by the Iranian National Security Council.

Among the Iranian writers, Alireza Asgharzadeh's work is of significance, given the writer's Turkish ethnic background.¹⁵ He traces the current unequal distribution of opportunities in Iran and the primacy of Persian culture. The two phenomena are traced back to a period during which elements of Aryanism existed and contributed to the awakening of Persian racism. Being an Azeri Turkish speaker, he couldn't forget the sad memories of his early school years and the insults he faced then. He employs different methods, including discourse analysis, to prove that the present emphasis on Iranian culture by the ruling elites has a racist undertone.

While the majority of Iranian scholars, given their Persian ethnic background, are biased in their studies, the non-Iranian writers seem to be more objective in approaching the subject. Although, they seem to lack important information about the ethno-religious minorities in Iran, as they hardly visit the periphery areas where these minorities live. The reason for this is largely security. Most of these writers are confined to Tehran and other major Persian cities during their visits. Among them is Rasmus Christian Elling.¹⁶ He discusses ethnic identity and the so-called Iranian-ness. His study is based on his experience and group discussions in Tehran. He argues that during his discussions with various classes of Iranians, he noted signs of increasing interest in the issue of culture and ethnicity among the Iranian masses. Further, Elling highlights that the ethnic discourse is seriously challenging the Persian ethno-linguist

¹⁵ Asgharzadah, 198.

¹⁶ Christian Elling Rasmus, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

status quo. He terms the phenomenon as “ethnicism”.

The most interesting findings of Elling include two things that are almost ignored by Iranian scholars on the subject. First, the increasing demands by the minorities for ethno-cultural rights, including administrative autonomy or even outright independence. Secondly, there is acute anxiety among policymakers, intellectuals and the dominant Persian ethnic group that view these demands as threats to the territorial integrity of Iran although, according to Elling, some politicians use the minority issue only during their election campaign.

Another important issue in Elling’s work is his discovery that the Persian scholars are less sensitive toward identities that are based on geography and regions. But they have strong reservations towards those identities, which originate from linguistic and ethnic differences. Elling concludes that the concept of Iranian-ness, when seen from a minority perspective, is exclusivist and primarily based on culture, language, religion and set of symbols associated with Iran's Persian-speaking People.¹⁷

The work by A. William Samii is another effort, which highlights the factor of religion rather than ethnicity.¹⁸ He focuses on the unequal allocation of opportunities in politics and bureaucracy positions to the disadvantage of the Sunni Iranians. Then, he argues that the Sunni community seems to have less in common with the government in Tehran than they do with their co-ethnic groups across the borders in Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, due to the discriminatory behavior of the Iranian political apparatus towards the Sunnis.

¹⁷ Rasmus, (2013).

¹⁸ A. William Samii, “The Nation and Its Minorities: Ethnicity, Unity and State Policy in Iran” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XX, Nos. 1&2, (2000): 128-142.

1.5.2 Studies on the Baloch-Sunni Community

Studies specifically dealing with the Baloch-Sunni are few. Besides, these studies have a different orientation and thematic focus. While some perceive the Baloch-Sunni ethnic group within the ethnocentric context, others regard it as a religious minority. Furthermore, a significant part of this category of literature is contributed by Persian scholars and is, therefore, heavily influenced by their cognitive bias.

The most important work about Balochistan is written by Mahmood Zand Moghaddam.¹⁹ His voluminous work is entitled ‘*Hikāyat-i Baloch*’ [the story of the Baloch]. Although the work lacks a proper analytical framework, and smacks of his bias, it does give a good account of the Baloch-Sunni in Iran and the policies of the Iranian State, both pre- and post-Revolution, towards them. As such, the book is often regarded as the encyclopedia of Balochistan. The significance of the book lies in the fact that besides discussing the policy of the central government towards the Baloch-Sunni, it also includes the views of the Baloch-Sunni. This aspect of the book owes its strength to the background and position of the writer. He has lived and worked as focal person in conducting assimilation projects in Balochistan, especially in the cultural and educational milieus.²⁰ He is one of the founding fathers of Balochistan University and has served as Rector of Chabahar Marine University.²¹

As noted earlier, other works produced by Persian scholars are also security oriented. For instance, Mohammad Reza Hafeznia and Murad Kaviani discuss the

¹⁹ Mahmood Zand Moqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baloch*, [The Story of the Baloch], (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āsār va Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 1999).

²⁰ Mohammad Ali Talghani, “Naqd va Barrasī-i Kitāb Hikāyat-i Baloch ” [a Review of Hikayat Baloch] *Majallah Iranshinasi*, [Journal of Iranian Studies], No. 46 (Summer 2000), 427.

²¹ Pejman Mousavi, “Guftugū ba Mahmood Zand Moghaddam, Hikāyat-i Balochistān va Mardumān-Baloch” [A Discussion with Mahmood Zand Moghaddam, the story of Balochistan and the Baloch People], *Sharq Daily*, via < <http://anthropology.ir/article/8308> > (Accessed on December 11, 2015).