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### **The Islamic Republic of Iran's Policies toward the Baloch as a Religious Minority**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the ethno-religious approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It specifically examines the religious policy of the Iranian government towards its Baloch-Sunni ethno-religious minority. Based upon field work, purposive interviews, newspapers, and reports by international reputable "organizations", it analyzes the ethno-religious policies of the Islamic Republic in the light of 'separation', 'accommodation', and 'assimilation' approaches. The study finds that, although Iran is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country, its political system is deeply influenced by Shia ideology. The political system uses an assimilationist approach and tries to assimilate the Baloch-Sunni into Shia Persain dominated ethno-religious group. The study is a significant case in point on how one Muslim sect, which is itself a minority in the larger pool of mainstream Sunni Muslim World, is treating a national Muslim religious minority, which is part of the mainstream Sunni Mulsim world.

**Keywords:** Iran, Shi'ism, Sunnism, Ethnicity, Sects, Baloch.

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## İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin Beluclara Yönelik Dini Azınlık Politikaları

### ÖZ

Bu alıřma İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin etnik-dini yaklaşımını arařtırmaktadır. alıřma özellikle İran hükümetinin Baloch-Sünni etnik-dini azınlığa karşı dini politikasını incelemektedir. Saha alıřması, amaçlı röportajlar, gazeteler ve uluslararası saygın "örgütler" in raporlarına dayanarak, İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin etno-dini politikalarını "ayrılık", "uzlařtırma" ve "asimilasyon" yaklaşımları ışığında analiz eder. alıřma, İran'ın çok dinli ve çok etnik gruptan oluşan bir ülke olmasına rağmen, politik sisteminin Şii ideolojisinden derinden etkilendiğini ortaya koyuyor. Siyasi sistem asimilasyonist bir yaklaşım kullanmaktadır ve Baloch-Sünni'leri Şii Persain egemen etno-dini gruba asimile etmeye alışır. alıřma ana akım Sünni Müslüman Dünyasının daha büyük havuzunda kendisi bir azınlık olan bir Müslüman mezhebinin, ana akım Sünni Müslüman dünyasının bir parçası olan ulusal bir Müslüman dini azınlığa nasıl davrandığı konusunda önemli bir örnektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İran, Şiilik, Sünnilik, Etnisite, Mezhepler, Beluclar.

## Introduction

Ethno-religious minorities are found in every modern state. Yet, their presence in an ideological state is more visible. Ideological states hardly tolerate the presence of a different ideological entity within their domain. It is truer about Iran, as a theocratic states. 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. This work is a case study of the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy towards this ethno-religious group. The study specifically takes the community as religious community, and analyzes the policies and strategies of the Shia dominated central government for the religious assimilation of this community into the mainstream Shia population of the country. In doing so, the study firstly, presents a precise background to the emergence of Shiism as the religion of the majority and the official religion in Iran. Secondly, the paper, discusses the salience of religion in the Baloch-Sunni community. Finally, it examines different social, political, and cultural policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the Baloch-Sunni community since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

## Analytical Consideration

Out of nearly 200 nation state, fewer than 20 states are homogeneous in terms of ethnicity. As a result, "most governments have to contend with ethnic problems of one kind or another."<sup>1</sup> So much so, most of countries are heterogeneous in terms of religion. Therefore, as countries formulate policies for their economy, education etc., they also follow certain ethno-religious policies in order to avoid any ethno-religious turbulence.

Ethno-religious policies can be categorized based on their nature and underlying principles and objectives. Terrence. E. Cook suggests a three-fold classification of ethnic policies. The first policy is "separation" which is based on real or fictional differences of the groups.<sup>2</sup> These differences could be used to draw a distinctive line between two different ethnic groups. It might be confined only to mental distancing, but it usually involves physical acts of separation.<sup>3</sup> A strong version of this policy may lead to severe violence against a particular ethno-religious group as could be seen in Myanmar with regard to the Rohingya Muslims or in Nazi Germany with regard to the Jews.

The second policy is "accommodation". Based on the principle of pluralism, rival ethno-religious groups reach an agreement of mutual recognition and coexistence, thus expressing their desire for peaceful coexistence.<sup>4</sup> This policy is widely adopted by modern democratic societies and political systems. The third policy is "assimilation". It aims at bringing uniformity to different ethnic groups and making them similar. According to Brewton Berry, assimilation is a "process whereby groups with different cultures come to have a common culture."<sup>5</sup> However, Gordon Milton asserts that assimilation should go beyond tangible aspects of culture such as dress, language, food, etc., to include less tangible items such ideas, attitude and values.<sup>6</sup> In this

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<sup>1</sup> Michael E. Brown & Sumit Ganguly, *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Terrence E. Cook, *Separation, Assimilation, or Accommodation: Contrasting Ethnic Minority Policies* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 2-4

<sup>3</sup> Cook (2003), 2-4.

<sup>4</sup> Cook (2003), 106.

<sup>5</sup> As cited in Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: the Role of Religion and National Origins* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1966), 65.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. See also *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought*, edited by Paul Barry Clarke, Joe Foweraker, 16.

sense Religion is a particularly important element for such a policy and it can be the source of greater cleavage as compared to other differences. According to Marta Reynal-Querol, it is because one person can talk in two languages, but cannot follow two religions.<sup>7</sup>

Against this background, this study aims at examining the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ethno-Religious Policy with reference to its Baloch-Sunni minority. It specifically, deal with the following question: How does the Islamic Republic of Iran implement its ethno-religious policy toward the Baloch Sunni ethno-religious group? However, before attempting the question, one would need to look at the history of Shi'ism in Iran, which is itself a result of an earlier forceful assimilation.

### Shi'ism in Iran: A Historical Background

The Muslim forces conquered Iran in 635, during the rule of Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph. The Iranians embraced Islam and Iran became home to the followers of Sunni Islam.<sup>8</sup>The spread of Shi'ism in Iran and its emergence as the official religion of Iran dates back to the Safavidrule (1502-1736).The Safavid dynasty was founded by Ismail Safaviin 1501, when his army conquered Tabriz then capital of Azerbaijan region. Following the conquest of Tabriz, Ismail declared himself as the king and proclaimed Shi'ism as the official religion of his kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

It is believed that Shah Ismail's decision to declare Shi'ism as the official ideology was a political move in order to distinguish his kingdom from the Sunni Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup>However, one of the fundamental motives for such enmity was driven from his Shia belief system, which regards Sunnis as enemy of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shia Imam.<sup>11</sup> According to Roy and Volk, the Safavid rulers aimed at creating a homogeneous society and a nation loyal to them.<sup>12</sup> Shah Ismail ordered people of Tabriz and other regions under his control to choose between conversion to Shi'ism and death.<sup>13</sup> All Friday prayer leaders were ordered to curse the three Muslim caliphs and Ayesha, the wife of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>14</sup>The anniversary of the assassination of Omar Bin Khattab, second Muslim caliph, was declared a day for celebration.<sup>15</sup>Shah Ismail would employ maximum violence to crush any resistance by Sunni religious leaders. In this regard, his massacre of Sunni civilians and religious scholars in Nishapur and Herat awe worth mentioning.<sup>16</sup>He was determined to abolish the relics of Sunnism. When his army invaded Baghdad, he ordered them to dig the grave of Imam Abu Hanifah (eponymous founder of the Hanafi School of mainstream Sunni jurisprudence) and the famous SunniSufi, AbdulQadir Gilani, and destroyed their tombs.<sup>17</sup> In the meantime, he also brought some Shia clergy from JabalAmel (Lebanon) to preach Shia religion, as Shiism was mainly being

<sup>7</sup> Marta Reynal-Querol, "Ethnicity, Political Systems, and Civil Wars", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 46 No. 1 (February 2002): 32.

<sup>8</sup> See Maurice Lombard, *the Golden Age of Islam* (New York: American Elsevier, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces* (Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 43.

<sup>10</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, Yann Richard, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (USA: Yale University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad ibn Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, Vol. 8 (Tehran: Dar al-Nashr al-Islamiyah, 1983), 343. See also, Muhammad ibn Ali ibn al-Husien al-Sadūq, *al-Khisāl*(Qom: Jama'tul Mudarrisīn, 1983), Vol. 2, 475.

<sup>12</sup> Olivier Roy, & Carol Volk, *The Failure of Political Islam* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 170.

<sup>13</sup> Badi Badiozamani, *Iran and America: re-Kindling a Love Lost* (USA: Centre for East-West Understanding, 2005), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Elton L. Daniel, Ali Akbar Mahdi, *Culture and Customs of Iran* (USA: Greenwood Press, 2006), 185.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Olivier Roy, & Carol Volk, *The Failure of Political Islam* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 170.

<sup>17</sup> Courtney Hunt, *The History of Iraq* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), 48.

practiced over there.<sup>18</sup> According to Spencer, in order to bring a demographic change, Shah Ismail invited Shias from around the world to migrate to Iran.<sup>19</sup>

Nearly two decades of Shah Ismail's rule was accompanied by massive destruction and bloodshed. During the rule of his successors, particularly Shah Abbas (1587 to 1629), Shi'ism was consolidated in Iran through developmental and cultural programs.<sup>20</sup> To be specific, Shah Abbas's policy of religious transformation was more focused on propaganda and cultural activities.<sup>21</sup>

During the rule of other conquering dynasties, Iran did not see brutalities of the Safavid style. Yet, the presence of the Shia clergy in the royal courts gave them an upper hand. As a result, Iran succumbed to a destiny written by its Safavid rulers.

### **The Baloch-Sunni Minority in Iran**

During the course of history, the central part of Iran became Shia. But, Sunnism survived in periphery and the surrounding regions of Iran. As result, there are still roughly 20 millions Sunnis living in different regions of the country. One of those regions is Balochistan, located in the south-east of Iran. The region is home to the Baloch ethnic group.

Although Balochistan is currently regarded as the most religious province of Iran, in its historical retrospect, religion as a dominant force has been less prevalent among the Baloch. It has also not influenced much of their history or in other words it has played the role of mere religion rather than an action-guiding ideology. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Baloch and Pashtoons (currently dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan) were asked by the British Empire that according to which regime their case should be handled, unlike the Pashtoons who went for *Shari'ah* (Islamic Law) the Baloch replied that their cases must be decided through their *Rawaj* (Baloch customary law).<sup>22</sup>

However, Balochistan is a vast region. It is divided among the three countries. Balochistan province of Iran is the largest province of the country. A larger region under the same name constitutes the largest province of Pakistan as well. Besides, a wide area of Balochistan is also controlled by Afghanistan. The people of this wide region despite being divided by political boundaries speak the same language, have the same culture and follow the same religion. Yet, depending on socio-political ground realities, the unifying factors among the Baloch in different parts of Balochistan are different. While the nationalistic features are more prominent in Pakistani part of Balochistan, religion is playing an important role in Iranian Balochistan particularly since the 1979 revolution in Iran.

Living four decades under Islamic Republic at present the Baloch in Western Balochistan (Iranian Balochistan) are quite religious, and are significantly sensitive over the issue of religion. In their survey on the level of religiosity of Iranian cities, Khalid Rastagar and Misam Mohammadi find that Balochistan is the most religious province of Iran. Zahedan, the capital city of Balochistan, stands at the top in term of religiosity throughout the Iranian cities, even leaving

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<sup>18</sup> Sedaqat (August, 2005), 83-84 & 94.

<sup>19</sup> William Spencer, *Iraq: Old Land, New Nation in Conflict* (Brookfield: Twenty-First Century Books, 2000), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Nikki R. Keddie (ed) *Iran: Religion, Politics, and Society: Collected Essays* (UK: Frank Cass Company Limited, 1980), 91.

<sup>21</sup> William Spencer (2000), 51.

<sup>22</sup> Selig S. Harrison, *In Afghanistan's shadow: Baloch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981), 71.

Qom and Mash'had, two religious hubs of Shia clergy far behind.<sup>23</sup>

The city is popularly known as the city of *Hāfizān-i Qur'ān*, (the city of the memorizers of Quran), given the high number of people who have memorized the holy Quran. Its Grand Makki mosque is the largest Sunni mosque of Iran. Besides, the largest Sunni Jurisprudence learning center, popularly known as *Dar-ulum-Zahedan*, is also located in Zahedan. Its president, Mawlana Abdul Hamid Ismaelzahi, is the most influential Sunni figure among the Sunnis throughout Iran.

The Baloch show strong passion to religious gatherings. Despite their poor economic situation, they intensively donate to their mosques and other religious institutions. It is pertinent to mention here that the Sunni mosques and religious institutions in Balochistan are not receiving any funds from the government. They are entirely dependent on voluntary donations from the Baloch Sunnis, though there might be some contributions from non-Baloch Sunnis as well.

### **The Baloch-Sunni and the Shia Persian Ruling Elites**

Apart from the historical roots of Sunni Islam in Iran, in post 1979-revolution Iran, the Baloch-Sunnis have found themselves a religious minority—a position that makes them subject to various policies of the state. Being secular in nature, the pre-1979 revolution Iranian rulers have tolerated Sunnism as the religion of the people of the area. Therefore, the Baloch up to the 1979 revolution were by and large treated as an ethnic minority and the sectarian nature of their identity did not matter a lot to the then ruling elite as compared to now.

In fact, the focus of Pahlavi monarchs has been on Persian nationalism rather than an ideological nationalism based on Shia doctrine as being pursued by the present political system of Iran. It was in the interest of the central government to view the Baloch as religious people, since their religiosity would keep a check on their nationalistic sentiments. In addition, the Pahlavi policy makers and theoreticians were of the view that once they succeed to Persianize the Baloch and inculcate loyalty towards Iran in them, this would lead to their religious and ideological assimilation as well. That is because, to the Persian elites, Shiism is a constituent part of Iranian nationalism. In fact, the Persian elites and politicians, however secular, have a firm belief that being Shia and Persian is complementary to each other. Therefore, to them Sunnism and Iranianess do not travel along well. Even those who oppose a theocratic political structure in Iran, support this idea.

The above argument bears weight if one observes the ongoing political discourse of West-based Iranian elites, which often appears in social networks and online forums. For instance, on November 7, 2014 in Politik Talk Show, (hosted by the US funded Radio Farda), Masoud Behnood, a renowned Iranian intellectual and political commentator said:

An Iranian enlightened intellectual can only be a Shia, because Iranian enlightened intellectuals is meaningless without Shia culture. It is because, Shiaism is in our blood, and an enlightened intellectual who is not a Shia, cannot be considered as an Iranian enlightened intellectual.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Amir Khaled Rastegar, & Misam Mohammadi, "Taghīrat-ifarhangīvauft-ibarvarīdarĪrān" [Cultural changes, and the decline of fertility in Iran], *Jami'ah Shinasi-i Karburdi*, [Journal of Applied Sociology], Year 26, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer 2015): 171

<sup>24</sup> Masoud Bihnood, Interview with Politik Talk Show, Iran Politik Radio Farda, on November 11, 2014, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFqwnEzx\\_JA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFqwnEzx_JA)> (Accessed on September 17, 2019).

Soon after Behnood's statement, Abdol Sattar Doshuki, a Baloch-Sunni renowned political activist wrote an article, wherein he criticized Behnood for his statement referring to over 20 percent of Iranians who are Sunnis.<sup>25</sup> By the next day, Adib Borumand, the leader of *Jibha-i-Milli-i-Iran* (National Front of Iran), on its party official website responded to Dushuki. His statement reads:

The territorial integrity of Iran is owed to Shi'ism, and to King Ismail Safavi, who by officializing this religion unified Iran and rescued it from the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, Shi'ism is one of the core elements of our nationhood, and every nationalist should be faithful to this religion.<sup>26</sup>

Few days later, on December 1, 2014, Ataullah Muhajerani, the former Iranian Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance, published an article, starting with the following questions: "The Iranian intellectual alien to Persian language and Shia culture want to converse with whom? And where is the scope for his or her intellectuality?"<sup>27</sup> Muhajerani strongly supported the position of Masoud Behnood and Adib Borumand. In order to make his point a bit digestible, Muhajerani argued: "Iranian intellectuals does not need to be Persian and Shia, but they have to adopt these two factors, otherwise they cannot be Iranian intellectual in a true sense."<sup>28</sup>

Influenced by such a mindset, even the political activists have never been ready to include their non-Shia counterparts in their circles, let alone those who are controlling the power in Iran. The anti-establishment Shia Persian groups always regard their Sunni counterparts as minority activists rather than as national activists. To take one example, according to AbdolSattarDoshuki, once he had offered to the authorities of one reputable Persian TV channels to participate as commentator on Iran's nuclear issue, but they responded very brashly to him as follows: "See Mr. Doshoki! Nuclear issue is an important national issue, it is not a local issue which a Baloch or Sunni can discuss".<sup>29</sup>

### Socio-political Policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Balochistan

The situation of Baloch people dramatically changed following the 1979 revolution. From being just an ethnic minority, the Baloch found themselves turned into the largest religious minority in Iran as well. In 1970s, the most charismatic leader of Baloch-Sunni was Mawlana Abdol Aziz. He was widely respected by other Sunnis of Iran as well. In 1969, he met Khomeini in Najaf, Iraq, where the latter was in exile. Both leaders agreed that the new government would be based on Islamic values. Khomeini also promised that the Sunni Iranians would get a proportional share of power in the post-monarchical political set-up of Iran.<sup>30</sup>

Soon after the 1979 revolution, Mawlana Abdol Aziz, along with Hamidollah Mir Moradzehi, a Baloch-Sunni lawyer were elected by the people of Balochistan to represent them at the Constituent Assembly. However, in the Constituent Assembly, the first sign of the sectarian nature of the Islamic Republic emerged while drafting Article 12 of the constitution. The Sunni

<sup>25</sup> AbdolSattarDoshuki, "Rawshanfikr-i-IranībihRivāyat-iMas'ūdBihnūd", November 22, 2014, *al-Arabiya News*, <<https://goo.gl/GMSYjY>> (Accessed on September 9, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> AdibBrumand, "Jibha-i-Millī: BihAdyānIhtirāmMiguzārīm", November 23, 2014, *Milliūn-iIṛān*, <<http://melliun.org/iran/51525>> (Accessed on September 12, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> AtaullahMuhajerani, "Rawshanfikr-iIṛānīvaFarhang-iShī'ī", [Iranian intellectuals and the Shiite culture], December 1, 2014, *Jaras News Agency*, <<http://www.rahesabz.net/story/88140/>> (Accessed on September 10, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Abdol Sattar Doshoki, "Rawshanfikr-i-IranībihRivāyat-iMas'ūdBihnūd", 22 November 2014, *al-Arabiya*, <<https://goo.gl/E1GUFz>> (Accessed on September 9, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Abdol Baset Bozorgzadah and Nurunnisa Mollazadah, *Biography of Mawlana Abdol Aziz Mollazadah*, (Zahedan: Ihsan Publication, 2008), 175.

leaders demanded that Islam should be declared as the official religion of the country, whereas the Shia members were firm to specifically declare Shi'ism as the official religion of the country. Since, there were only two Sunni members in the Constituent Assembly, the majority Shia members succeeded to vindicate their stand on the official religion of the country. Mawlana Abdol Aziz's efforts as well as his meetings with Khomeini did not bring any fruit either. Consequently, the Sunni members walked out from the Constitution Assembly.<sup>31</sup> But, the Islamic Republic seemed firm to establish its own version of the Shia Islamic Republic and eventually passed the constitution with Shiism as the official religion of Iran.

It led to strikes and closure of provincial offices in Balochistan.<sup>32</sup> It also caused security concern about the Shia minority in the province.<sup>33</sup> In view of the worsening situation, Ayatullah Khomeini immediately sent Hujjatul Islam Khamenei, the present Supreme Leader of Iran, to Balochistan in order to negotiate with Baloch-Sunni tribal and religious leaders and bring the situation under control.<sup>34</sup> Khamenei during the Pahlavi monarchy had lived for many years in exile in Balochistan, therefore, he had good connections with different tribal and religious leaders in Balochistan. He used his personal relations to bring the situation under control.<sup>35</sup> Among his initiative was establishment of an office namely *Dāyirah-iNashr-iIslāmī* (Directorate of Spreading Islam) in Balochistan apparently to facilitate a direct contact between the Baloch-Sunni leaders and the revolutionary rulers in Tehran. The office was eventually dissolved in 1990.<sup>36</sup> Yet, as it will be seen in the next section, it was replaced with a more powerful and sophisticated structure with a clear objective of controlling the religious affairs of the Sunnis in Balochistan.

### Representative Office of the Supreme Leader for Sunni Affairs

In the Iranian political discourse, the second decade after the 1979 revolution is often regarded as the "consolidation decade" during which the new political system succeeded to consolidate its power over the country. The end of war between Iran and Iraq allowed the rulers to pay more attention to internal affairs. It was the time to solve cultural, financial and social problems.<sup>37</sup> The ethno-religious issues were on the table and Balochistan was one of the sources of concern for the ruling elites. On October 21, 1991, a Shia cleric named Hassan Rabbani was appointed, as the representative of the Supreme Leader in the affairs of Sunnis in Balochistan with a mammoth administrative apparatus called "Representative Office of the Supreme Leader in the affairs of Sunnis in Balochistan", (hereinafter referred to as the ROSLSAB).<sup>38</sup> Being the

<sup>31</sup> Bozorgzadah (2008), 156.

<sup>32</sup> *Rūznāmah-iIttilā'āt*, [Daily Ittila'at Tehran], "Havādis-iEidgāh-izahedan", December 20, 1979. 1. See also *Rūznāmah-ijumhūrīIslāmī*, "Intizāmāt-iShahr-iZahedānbihArtishsepurdahShud", December 23, 1979. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Rūznāmah-ijumhūrīIslāmī*, [Daily JumhuriIslami Tehran], "MuhandisNikbakhtMas'ul-iTarh-i Jihad darBalochistanbih shahadat rasid", August 8, 1979.

<sup>34</sup> Rouhulall Khomeini, *Sahifah -ilmām: bayānāt, payāmāh, musahibah'havanāmah'ha*, [Sahifah Imam; statements, messages, interviews & letters](Tehran: Muassisah-iTanzimvaNashr-iĀsar-iilmāmKhomeynī, 1999). [Foundation for Collection and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Thoughts and Ideas], Vol. 6, 429.

<sup>35</sup> Hashemi Rafsanjani, *InqilābvaPirūzī: KārnamahvaKhātirāt-isālhā-yi 1357/1358*, [Revolution and victory: Records and memories of 1979-80], Edited by Abbas Bashiri (Tehran: Daftar-iNashr-iMa'arif-iIslāmī, 2009), 240.

<sup>36</sup> Ibrahim Ahrari, Interview by Author, Kuala Lumpur, 10 February 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Abdol Rahim Evazi, MurūriPadidārShināsānah bar Inqilāb-iIslāmī; dahah-itasbīt, islāhvahirāsatazmahiyat-iInqilāb- Islāmī, [A Phenomenological overview of Islamic Revolution: the decade of Decades of reform, consolidation and security], *Faslnāmah-iZamānah*, [Journal of Zamanah], No. 9 (December 2009): 12.

<sup>38</sup> Sayed Ali Khamenei, "Hukm-iIntisāb-iHujjatullislām Sayed Hasan Rabbānībihsimat-inamāyandagī-irahbarīdarumūr-iahl-isunnat-imantaqah-iBalochistān", [Appointment order of Sayed Hasan Rabbani as thr representative of the Supreme Leader in the affairs of Sunnis in Balochistan], *Bānk-ijāmi'-ināmah'hā-*



direct representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader, the office had a mandate higher than any other government institution in the province.

The office started with Sunni traditional religious institutions (*madrassah*) where the Sunni belief system and jurisprudence are taught. There are several of such institutions operating in Balochistan, officially known as *Hawzah-yi 'Elmīyah* or *madrassah*. The alumni of these religious schools by and large work as prayer leaders and also teach the basics of the religion to Sunni children in their respective communities. In fact, for a majority of them this is their only option, since the Iranian educational authorities do not recognize their educational qualifications. Therefore, they are officially seen as uneducated and as a result do not qualify for any employment in the public sector.

Given the strong role for teaching the basics of religion to Sunni children and having control over other religious rites and rituals, these schools were considered as the main obstacle for religious assimilation of Sunnis. Therefore, to bring all *madrassahs* under the control of the establishment became the most immediate task of the ROSLSAB. For this purpose, Rabbani adopted a salami strategy to make the students of these *madrassahs* dependent on the ROSLSAB in one-way or another. In this regard, temporary exemption from the two-year Compulsory Military Service proved to be an effective instrument.

Generally, all Iranian youth at the age of 18 are required to go for compulsory military service for two years.<sup>39</sup> Without completing this compulsory service, they are not issued passports, driving licenses, work permits, etc. However, university students as well as those studying in Shia seminaries get a temporary exemption from appearing for military service until the completion of their studies. Given that the Iranian education authorities do not recognize the Sunni religious institutions, the students of these institutions were expected to join the military as soon as they reach the age of 18. Taking this opportunity, the Iranian Shia authorities offered students of the Sunni *madrassahs* to appear in a test to be held by Qom Seminary, the Shia religious hub in Iran, in order to get temporary exemption from military service. The principal institution in charge of the test was *Mudīriyat-iHawzah-yi 'Ilmīyah-i Qom* (Directorate of Qom seminary).<sup>40</sup>

Soon after its establishment, the responsibility of holding the aforementioned test for Sunni students was delegated to ROSLSAB. Therefore, the ROSLSAB as its first step succeeded in getting connected with the students of all Sunni learning centers. Meanwhile, some other policies were also introduced. For instance, the ROSLSAB took over the charge of issuing medical insurance policy to students as well.<sup>41</sup> And within a short span of time, the ROSLSAB succeeded to establish a tight working relationship with some Sunni centers particularly those associated with small and less known *madrassahs* and mosques.

But the ROSLSAB wanted to have access to ordinary people as well. That was possible only through controlling the administration of the Sunni worship places, particularly those mosques where Friday sermons were observed. Interestingly, the ROSLSAB resorted to the edicts

*yimaqām-imu'azzam-irahbarī*, [A comprehensive database of the Supreme Leader] (Isfahan: Markaz-iTahqīqāt-iRāyānah'i-iQa`mīyah, 2011), 52.

<sup>39</sup> *Nizām-ivazīfahvaKhidmat-iSarbāzī*, "Tamām-iafrād-izukūr-ilranikihibih 18 sāl-itamāmmīrasandazavval-imāh-itavalludmashmūl-ivazīfah-i'umūmīmīgardand", [All male Iranians who reach the age of 18 are required to join military service], Military service webpage, <<https://goo.gl/p25bcL>> (Accessed on February 20, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> *Bāshgāh-iKhabarnigāārān-ijavān*, "Mu'āfiyat-itahsīlī-itullāb-i 'ulūm-idīnī", [Temporary exemption of the students of religious schools], BKJ Webpage, <<https://goo.gl/vf277C>> (Accessed on February 10, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> *ROLSAB*, "Bahramandshudan-itullāb-iahl-isunnatazkhadamāt-itamīn-ijjtimā'ī", [Sunni students have been offered medical insurance by the ROSLSAB], <<http://nahadsb.ir/?p=1889>> (Accessed on February 12, 2017).

of the Sunnis, particularly the Hanafi school of thought, as the mainstream denomination of the Sunnis in Balochistan. According to some references of the Hanafi School, the Friday prayer leader should be an appointee of the Muslim Political leader of the time.<sup>42</sup> In fact this principle is mentioned in the classic religious text of the Sunni tradition, though it is perceived by Sunni scholars in different way.<sup>43</sup> But, the authorities of ROSLSAB would argue all Friday prayer leaders in Sunni mosques ought to be the appointees of ROSLSAB, as an institution representing the will of the Supreme Leader, as *valī-ifaqih* (juris-consult) which is itself in complete contradiction with Sunni core principles.

However, in consonance with the above plan, a unit was set up under the title of Secretariat of Friday Prayer Leaders (*Dabīrkhānah-iA'immah-ijum'ah*).<sup>44</sup> All Friday Khatib as well as prayer leaders of some important mosques were requested to come and register with ROSLSAB. Those who voluntarily registered were offered financial aid and other socio-economic bonuses such as medical insurance policy, while those who defied the call, were harassed by the Iranian intelligence service.<sup>45</sup>

It is necessary to note that the ROSLSAB did not remove any of those Friday prayer leaders who got themselves registered. All of them simply were issued appointment letters confirming them as prayer leaders, though, in most cases, the ROSLSAB designated one or two deputies, which was not conventional. The aim was to institutionalize this tradition, thus preparing it to be effective in the long run, particularly in the case of the demise of a Friday *Khatib*, as happened in later years. In this regard, one can mention the case of the Abu Hanifah *Madrassah*, in the Sistan part of the province. After the demise of its founder, the authorities sealed the Centre and later reopened it under a new administration with one of Mohammad Gol's sons. But, the students and the local people resisted. Understanding that he was appointed by authorities and any direct challenge to him would have been interpreted as standing against the will of the establishment, the local people and students collectively relocated to another village named Azimabad. The students and their teachers were donated a piece of land by the people of the village, who had been hurt by the incident. The authorities did not allow any construction on the land. Notwithstanding this, the students with the help of some donors arranged some conex boxes and started their classes there. Since, all 600 students and their teachers had moved to Azimabad campus, the former *madrassah* could not function.<sup>46</sup> In August 2008, the Iranian authorities equipped with heavy machinery razed the *Azimabadmadrassah* and within a few hours turned it into a huge pile of debris along with its facilities and books including the holy Qur'an.<sup>47</sup>

Meantime, the growth of cities in Balochistan provided the ROSLSAB with enough opportunities to establish its relations with Sunni religious institutions. The ROSLSAB emerged as the supreme authority for issuing all kinds of permissions for building mosques and madrassahs in new settlements. In most of these cases, applications of the residents were turned down forcing the Sunni residents of the newly settled areas to convert residential places into

<sup>42</sup> 'Alī ibn Abībakr Al-Marghīnānī, *Al-Hidāyah: Sharh-iBidāyatulMubtadī*, Vol.1 (Karachi: Al-Bushrā Publication, 2008), 373.

<sup>43</sup> See Abūbakr ibn Masoud al-Kāsānī al-Hanafī, *Badāy' al-Sanāy'fīTartīb al-Sharāy'*, [Marvelous innovations at the disposal of sharia laws], Vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1986), 261.

<sup>44</sup> See Nahād-inamāyandagimaqām-imu'azzam-irahbarī, [representative office of the supreme leader], "mu'arrafi-I nahād", [an introduction to ROSLSAB], <[http://www.nahadsb.com/?page\\_id=2](http://www.nahadsb.com/?page_id=2)> (Accessed on March 19, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> EmranSarbazī, interview by author, Istanbul Turkey, November 10, 2015.

<sup>46</sup>Hafiz Mohammad Ali, Former principal of Abu Hanifah *madrassah*, interview by author, Zahedan Iran, December 6, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> *Sunni online*, "Takhrīb-i madrasah-idīnī-ilmāmAbūHanīfah-iAzīmābād", [Destruction of Abu Hanifah Religious School in Azimabad], August 27, 2008, Official Website of Sunni Community in Iran, <<http://sunnionline.us/farsi/2008/08/sp-923187998/>> (Accessed on January 10, 2019).

worship areas, which often exposed them to legal charges such as ‘misuse of residential lands’.<sup>48</sup> In the same way, over time, some villages grew in size and thus became qualified for holding Friday prayers as prescribed by the Hanafi School. But by then it had become almost impossible to hold Friday or Eid prayers without the permission of the ROSLSAB.<sup>49</sup>

However, the ROSLSAB authorities soon realized that the madrassahs and mosques were not the only source of power for the Sunni religious leadership. And as such, the religious leadership owes its strength in Balochistan to the Baloch tribes and the tribal structure of Balochistan. Therefore, in order to counter the influence of the Sunni religious leadership, restructuring the tribal structure, and effective control over the tribal chieftain seemed a must. In line with, this the ROSLSAB raised the tribal issue and tried to get tribal elders, who were hitherto disgraced being labelled as ‘cronies of the previous regime’ out of isolation. For this purpose, the ROSLSAB activated its directorate for Clans and Tribes (*Vāhid-iQabāyilvaTavāyif*),<sup>50</sup> with a Shia cleric named Hujjatu Islam Sulki as its head. Sulki started empowering some tribal elders and getting them out of isolation by awarding them with political and economic leverage. The ROSLSAB would sponsor social events for tribes, which often involved full media coverage.

Notwithstanding all these efforts, the ROSLSAB failed in marginalizing the religious leadership in Balochistan. Sunni religious authorities were often involved in settlement of social issues and would serve as informal judges for the tribes and individuals.

### Planning council for Sunni religious schools

Despite their efforts, the ROSLSAB could not achieve the desired outcome as set by the establishment. There were many reasons behind this failure. Essentially, there was already a negative view about the ROSLSAB’s intentions among the religious class, as well as the common people. Even a new term “*daftari*” was developed among the people. The term “*daftari*” is an adjective form of the word for “office”, which referred to a person who has connections with the ROSLSAB.

Moreover, the ROSLSAB was directly linked with the Supreme leader. Therefore, any pressure on the Baloch-Sunni from that office was coming at the cost of the Supreme Leader’s popularity. On the other hand, in 1997 the reformist Mohammad Khatami won the presidential election. During his time, the political atmosphere of the country changed significantly. Under him, public institutions were not ready to cooperate wholeheartedly with the ROSLSAB.

However in 2005, the reformists lost the election. Mohammad Khatami was succeeded by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). Allegedly he was associated with Hujjatiyah Society, a Shia hard-core religious group with strong anti non-Shia sentiments.<sup>51</sup> He was backed by the hard liners and anti-Sunni clerics in Qom, such as Misbah Yazdi, Makarem Shirazi, Vahid Khorasani, etc. President Ahmadinejad was also personally upset with the Sunnis as Balochistan was the only province where Ahmadinejad gained lesser votes than his rival Ali Akbar Hashemi

<sup>48</sup> Hamid Saleh, a member of Imam Bukhari mosque Board of Trustees, interview by authors, Zahedan Iran, December 9, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Hamid Saleh.

<sup>50</sup> Nahād-inamāyandagimaqām-imu’azzam-irahbarī, [representative office of the supreme leader], “mu’arrafi-I nahād”, [an introduction to ROSLSAB], <[http://www.nahadsb.com/?page\\_id=2](http://www.nahadsb.com/?page_id=2)> (Accessed on March 19, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> For more information about Hujjatiyah Society See Abbas Vali & Sami Zubaida “Factionalism and Political Discourse in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1985): 139-73. See also Ronen A. Cohen, *The Hojjatiyeh Society in Iran: Ideology and Practice from the 1950s to the present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 65-96.

Rafsanjani.<sup>52</sup>

This overall situation made the ROSLSAB hand over the plan of controlling Sunni religious institutions to the executive administration. Therefore, the plan could get a legal shape under an enactment, which was to be supported and implemented by a republican apparatus. Eventually, President Ahmadinejad through the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (SCRC), an institution headed by the President of the Islamic Republic, took charge of implementing the plan for controlling the Sunni Religious institutions.<sup>53</sup>

It is necessary to note that the history of SCRC dates back to 1981, when Ayatullah Khomeini ordered the formation of the Cultural Revolution Headquarter (CRH), (*Sitād-iInqilāb-iFarhangī*) to purge the Iranian education sector.<sup>54</sup> In 1984, the CRH was institutionalized as the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (*Shūrāy-i'ālī-iInqilāb-iFarhangī*). It has been assigned to redesign different aspects of the country's education system to match the political and ideological goals and objectives set by Ayatullah Khomeini and his successor, the current Supreme Leader.<sup>55</sup>

In line with its ideological objectives, the SCRC in its session held on 30 October 2009, passed bill No. 613.<sup>56</sup> The bill suggested establishing an institution called Planning Council for Sunni Religious Schools, (PCRSRS), (*Shūrā-yiBarnāmahRizī-iMadāris-i 'Ulūm-iDīnī-iAhl-iSunnat*). According to the bill, this institution would work under the direct supervision of the Council of Representatives of Supreme Leader in Sunni Affairs, (*Shūrā-yiNamāyandagān-iValī-iFaqīhdarUmūr-iAhl-iSunnat*).<sup>57</sup>

The bill highlights a number of objectives for the PCRSRS. Notable among these are: 1) To train aware, committed and creative *ulama* (religious scholars) to respond to the religious needs of the Sunni community of Iran; and 2) To reshuffle and reorganize educational and cultural affairs of Sunni community with particular emphasis on comparative studies and official language of the country.<sup>58</sup>

According to the bill, the Council would consist of the following members: 1) Head of the Council of the Representatives of the Supreme Leader in the Affairs of Sunnis; 2) Secretary of the Council of the Representatives of the Supreme Leader in the Affairs of the Sunnis; 3) Minimum three individuals from the Council of the Representatives of the Supreme Leader in the Affairs of the Sunnis; 4) Representative of the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council; 5) Head of Organization for Endowment and Charity; 6) President of the University of Islamic Sects, Tehran; 7) Three individuals from the Sunni religious scholars, preferably from the Sunni members of the assembly of experts.<sup>59</sup>

As can be seen, except three, the rest of the council members are Shia. The three Sunni members also are supposed to be chosen from the Sunni members of the Assembly of Experts, which means that they have already passed through the Guardian Council's vetting procedure, and their loyalty to the Supreme Leader, and the doctrine of *vilāyat-iFaqīh* (Rule of Juris consult)

<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Interior, "Ustān-iSistānva Balochistān", *Portal Vizārat-iKishvar*, < <https://goo.gl/Uj9ws2> > (Accessed on September 12, 2019).

<sup>53</sup> *Shūrāy-i'ālī-iInqilāb-iFarhangī*, [Supreme Cultural Revolution Council] (act No. 613 of 30 October, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> See. Rouhulall Khomeini, *Sahifah -ilmām: bayānāt, payāmhā, musahibah'havanāmah'ha*, [Sahifah Imam; statements, messages, interviews & letters](Tehran: Muassisah-iTanzīmvaNashr-I Āsār-ilmām Khomeynī, 1999). [Foundation for Collection and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Thoughts and Ideas], Vol. 12, 431.

<sup>55</sup> Abdol Moghset Bani Kamal, "Soft power and national interest: evaluating the Islamic Republic of Iran's public diplomacy strategies" (Ph.D Dissertation, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2015), 68-71.

<sup>56</sup> *Shūrāy-i'ālī-iInqilāb-iFarhangī*, [Supreme Cultural Revolution Council] (act No. 613 of 30 October, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

is confirmed.

That said, Article 5 of the bill enumerates the following responsibilities for the Council: 1) approval of plans, rules and educational, research and cultural policies; 2) approval of rules and regulations related to the assessment of educational certificates of Sunni madrassah students; 3) supervising the quality of education in Sunni madrassahs and their constant assessment; 4) entertaining permissions for the establishment of Sunni madrassah in line with the predetermined and approved policies; 5) formulating administrative, financial and operational rules and policies for the Sunni learning centers. The same article asserts that all of the above responsibilities should be performed within the framework of the policies and regulation approved by the Council of the Representatives of the Supreme Leader in the Affairs of the Sunnis.<sup>60</sup> Article 6 of the bill also asserts that the provincial secretariats of the PCSRS will perform their duties in coordination with the Representative offices of the Supreme Leader in Sunni Affairs in their respective provinces.

The structure and composition of the PCSRS clearly shows that it is directly linked with the ideological elements of the Islamic Republic and, as such, to the Supreme Leader, and the executive is only a cover to it. The very nature of the PCSRS clearly reflects the level and the range of interference that the Islamic Republic has been trying to exercise in relation to the religious affairs of the Sunnis. One can compare PCSRS with Spiritual Directorates established by the Soviet Union leaders in their central Asian republics in order to fabricate an official version of Islam acceptable to the Politburo.<sup>61</sup>

Within a short span of time the PCSRS had come up with different by-laws, aimed reorganizing and controlling all Sunni learning institutions and mosques through a centralized system of authority under the PCSRS. To take a few examples, on 8 March 2009, it passed a by-law on the assessment and issuance of educational certificates of madrassah students. The by-law asks the students to register with ROSLSAB and pass some tests held by the ROSLSAB.<sup>62</sup> On 28 July 2009, it passed an executive by-law for the establishment of Sunni Schools. Article 5 of the bill asserts that the necessity for establishing a madrassah must be affirmed by the ROSLSAB.<sup>63</sup>

All Sunni madrassahs and mosques were required to register with the PCSRS. However, anticipating defiance and resistance by major Sunni madrassahs and prominent Sunni leaders, particularly in Balochistan, the PCSRS attempted to present them with a fait accompli. Therefore, it began with Sunni religious institutions in other parts of Iran. When it came to Balochistan, it also began with the small madrassahs. So many tactics were used to force the teachers of the marassahs to register with PCSRS. For instance, on 23 January 2014, Human Rights Activists News Agency reported that any Sunni Imam or madrassah teacher applying for pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) has been asked to endorse the reorganization plan, otherwise their application would not be entertained.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, those few who had endorsed the plan came under heavy cultural and training programs and the news of these programs were given full media coverage with attractive headlines aimed at projecting the PCSRS's plan as a successful

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> See Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejey, "Official Islam in the Soviet Union" *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol.7, No.3 (autumn 1979), 148-160.

<sup>62</sup> *Shuray-iBarnamih RiziMadaris-iUlum-i Dini-iAhl-iSunnat*, [Planning Council for Sunni Religious Schools] (act of 8 March, 2009). Via < <https://goo.gl/392yKc>>. (accessed December 2, 2019)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> *Humam Rights Activists for Democracy in Iran* (Report, January 23, 2014). "T'māl-iShartbarā-i 'Ulamā-yiAhl-iSunnatbarā-il'zāmbih Hajj", [Application requirements for Sunni scholars for Hajj], Hrana news org, < <https://goo.gl/T4A3yr>> (Accessed on September 1, 2019).

initiative.<sup>65</sup> Meantime, propaganda against those religious leaders who were opposing the PCSRS plan was intensified. All of them were name-called as *Wahhābīs*. It is pertinent to emphasize that with regard to Iranian Sunnis, anyone who does not agree with the principle of *vilāyat-ifaqīh*, he or she is automatically considered a *Wahhābī*.<sup>66</sup>

## Religious Missionaries and Propagation

Apart from the tremendous efforts of the Islamic Republic to control the Sunni religious institutions and bring about a religious assimilation with a top-down approach, the Shia rulers of Iran have also been active in preaching Shia belief system at the mass level. As observed by Salzman, "Governance in Baluchistan[Balochistan] is largely by Shi'a Persians for Shi'a Persians. Shi'a religious authorities are present, and Shi'a rituals and displays are prominent. It has been alleged recently that Shi'a missionaries are active among the Baluch [Baloch]."<sup>67</sup>

These missionaries are operating under different names. They regularly go under training workshop for effective preaching and propagation. For instance on 21 September 2008, the Islamic Preaching Organization of Balochistan organized a training workshop for Shia preachers in Zahedan, which was also attended by the representative of the Supreme Leader in Balochistan. During the occasion, Hujjatul Islam Ghurbanpur, President of the Islamic Preaching Organization of Balochistan, disclosed that in the year 2008, over 600 preachers had been sent to Balochistan for preaching.<sup>68</sup>

On 5 January 2016, Hujjatul Islam PurBagheri, from the Propagation Working Group, said that during the 10 days of the *Safar* month (Islamic calendar, a month religiously sacred in Shia belief system), 350 propagators have been preaching Shiism in Balochistan. He added that by organizing religious, cultural and divinity programs these preachers would be responding to the religious needs of the people in different parts of Balochistan.<sup>69</sup> On 11 March, 2013, in his meeting with the authorities of Shia religious schools, AyatullahMakaremShirazi urged them to focus on remote areas, particularly areas where there was a *Wahhabi* threat,<sup>70</sup> a code name which has been always associated with Sunni areas particularly Balochistan.

On 10 November 2014, the head of the Baloch Activist's Campaign, HabibullahSarhazi, conducted a telephonic interview with Rezaee, the deputy of Group of Propagators of Religion, which is highly active in Balochistan. The conversation gives a significant insight into the nature and the range of activities that these preachers are doing in Balochistan. Rezaee discloses that his group has the required base and infrastructure for preaching in all Sunni majority areas, but he emphasizes that their main area of activities is Balochistan and its adjacent regions. He also mentions that his group has good working relations with the Representative of the Supreme

<sup>65</sup> A. Shadadi, "Barnāmah-hā-yiUrdūy-iRizvānBisyārbāNishātvaJazzābast", [The Rizvan camp programs are conducive and attractive], Planning Council for Sunni Religious Schools, <<http://www.dmsonnat.ir/News/News-30823.aspx>> (Accessed on December 6, 2019).

<sup>66</sup> Isa Amiri, Interview by Author, Dubai UAE, 12 February, 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Philip Carl Salzman, "Persians and Others: Iran's minority politics", April 14, 2009, Middle East Strategy at Harvard, <<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2009/04/persians-and-others-irans-minority-politics>> (Accessed on February 14, 2019).

<sup>68</sup> Ghurbanpur, "MuballighīnBimahKunandah-iFarhang-iMazhabīvaDīndārīānd", [Our missionaries are ensuring religious culture and religiosity], *Daily Risalat Tehran*, No. 6531, September 21, 2008, 16.

<sup>69</sup> *The Baloch Activists Campaign*, "T'zām-ibīshaz 350 muballigh-iShī'ahbihmunasibat-idahah-iākhār-i Safar bihBalochistān", [Dispatching more than 350 Shiite propagators on the occasion of last 10 days of Safar month to Balochistan], January 5, 2016, BAC news agency, <<http://www.balochcampaign.info/?p=2425>> (Accessed on December 13, 2019).

<sup>70</sup> NaserMakaremShirazi, "Bihmanātiq-iMahrūmtavajjuhshavad" [You should focus on remote areas and deprived people], *Weekly UfuqHavzah*, Year 11, No. 360, (March 11, 2013), 3.

Leader in the province and their main focus is to train local preachers for effective propagation.<sup>71</sup>

It is necessary to note that poverty and underdevelopment of Balochistan has provided the Shia preaching groups with a suitable ground to exploit people's grievances regarding the backwardness of their region for the promotion of Shi'ism. The missionaries also take advantage of illiteracy of local people in remote areas of Balochistan. There have been cases where people have been told that Sunnis no longer exist in Iran and in the rest of the world; therefore, there is no need for them to follow such an ancient religion.<sup>72</sup> As noted in the previous section, every single socio-politico-economic policy in Balochistan is designed to facilitate this mission. And as such, there is a complete separation of the Sunnis from Shias economically, socially and politically. In Balochistan, even a patient before being admitted to a hospital has to declare what sect he or she follows.<sup>73</sup> The Sunni-Shia factor is evident in the city layout as well. For instance, those parts of cities where the inhabitants are Shias are more developed.

According to Said Madani, a Persian Shia human rights and developmental activist, who has been involved in field work in Zahedan:

If I myself was not the active supervisor, perhaps I would have believed that civic services even in Zahedan between Shia and Sunni dominated localities are offered in a discriminatory way. For instance, collecting the garbage in Shia localities was a common service and was even conducted in non-legal settlements. But in areas where Sunnis were living, this service would be rarely offered. I as a Shia Muslim always was and am ashamed of this situation.<sup>74</sup>

The systematic underdevelopment of remote areas of Balochistan is more severe. As a result they are the prime targets of Shia missionaries. Economic and developmental incentives are used as a leverage to get the people to convert to Shi'ism. That is why those few Sunnis who have converted into Shias are settled with good facilities in those areas of Balochistan. For instance, while no village in Sarbaz district has electricity, the government provided the one most remote village of the area with electricity and water supply after their conversion to Shi'ism.<sup>75</sup> The government also built a *Husayniyah*, a Shia worshipping place for them. One person who was better off in terms of activity and understanding was appointed as the head of the village. Later on the whole village was named after him.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, there are pockets of Baloch Shia in Dalgan region of Balochistan, although some of them had converted into Shiism before the revolution when some Shia clerics such as Ayatullah Khamenei, the present supreme leader, had been in exile in these areas.<sup>77</sup>

However, upon conversion they are being highly facilitated in terms of education and development. The government is also trying to relocate them into adjacent regions for demographic purposes. That is because mostly the Persian Shia can only be relocated to the cities of Balochistan; therefore, it is difficult to get them settled in rural areas. Secondly, these Shia Baloch can adjust themselves better than their Persian counterparts. Their relocation sometimes involves protests from the local people. For instance, on 22 December 2014, residents of Sirik city protested against what they called demographic changes in their region. The protest

<sup>71</sup> Rezaee, Interview by Habibullah Sarbazi (Audio file), The Baloch Activists' Campaign, 10 November 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Isa Amiri, Interview by author, Dubai UAE, 18, February, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> See *The Baloch Activists' Campaign*, "Su'alazmazhabdar form pazirish-ibimārān", Campaign Fa'alan-i Baloch, <<http://www.balochcampaign.info/?p=7396>> (Accessed on January 6, 2018).

<sup>74</sup> Said Madani, "Hamah-isarzamān-i man: az Shīrābād ta Challiābād" [My motherland: from Shirabad to Challiabad], *Khatt-i-Sulh*, No. 39, (August 14, 2014), 14-15.

<sup>75</sup> Habibullah Sarbazi, interview by author, Dubai UAE, February 15, 2012.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> See Sayed Ali Khamenei, "Sāl hāy-i Āshnāibā Javānān-i Sīstān va Balochistān", [Recalling years of intermixing with the youth in Sistan & Balochistan], Official website of Supreme Leader, <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=5165>> (Accessed on December 10, 2019).

sparked following the dissemination of information about the allocation of 20 acres of land adjacent to Sirik city to the people of Bashagard. According to an eyewitness over 500 people gathered, as to them migration of the Bashagard people who are the followers of Shia sect was preplanned and aimed at bringing about demographic changes in the region. He says that for some days they noticed that the some bulldozers were paving a vast area, but they did not know what was going on. A few days later, they noted that the people of Bashagard are coming and erecting their tents. He mentioned the government's stance that these people are flood affected people and, therefore, being relocated to Sirik. But he asks if that is the case, then why is the government moving them to Sirik and not resettling them in Bashagard.<sup>78</sup> It is important to note that the cities of Sirik and the Bashagard are 188 km apart from each other.

In addition to these micro propagation initiatives specifically designed for Balochistan, the national media of Iran is also playing an important role in the assimilation of the Sunnis. Yet, one should keep in mind that the political system of Iran is totalitarian in nature. To the Iranian religious elite media is an important tool for ideological indoctrination.<sup>79</sup> That is why private TV channels are not allowed in Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is one of the most sensitive institutions, which is directly functioning under the control of the Supreme Leader. It has a huge apparatus producing hundreds of books and other cultural materials aimed at promoting the official ideology of the country.<sup>80</sup>

On 29 July 1990, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, in his address to the staff of the IRIB stated: "Our take from the IRIB is to consider it as a university for teaching Islamic and revolutionary principles. What is taught in this university includes messages, principles, concepts, and lessons related to pure Islam, revolutionary Islam and real Islam".<sup>81</sup>

Similarly, among the seven defined long terms goals of IRIB, three goals clearly highlight the religious mission of this institution: They include: 1) safeguarding and promoting Iranian-Islamic culture and identity; 2) Promoting and internalizing the values and thoughts related to the Islamic revolution, political system of Iran, and 3) propagating the ideology of *Vilāyat-ifaqih*.<sup>82</sup>

Given the above, the IRIB is playing an important role in the assimilation of the Baloch Sunnis into the official ideology of the Islamic Republic. In line with this, the national and provincial channels are regularly engaged in airing drama series, which insult the religious symbols of Sunnis such Ayesha, wife of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), Umar Bin al-Khatib, the second caliph and the other companions of the holy prophet (PBUH). As such, all these narrations are based on the Shia version of Islamic history. Taking advantage of people's unawareness, these channels regularly host people as experts in the Sunni belief system, who try to introduce Shia core values as part of the Sunni belief system. Additionally, these TV channels give full coverage to the so-called ceremonies where people convert from Sunnism to Shiism.

<sup>78</sup> AyubShanbahzadah, an eyewitness, Interview by Authors, 9 December 2015, Isanbul Turkey.

<sup>79</sup> AzamRawadrad, "Naqsh-iBarnāmahā-iDīnīva Ghayr-iDīnī-iTelivīsīondarAfzāyishyāKāhish-iDīndārī", [The role of religious and non-religious TV programs in increasing and decreasing of religiosity], *Faslnamah-iTahqiqat-iFarhangi*, Vol. No. 6 (Summer 2010), 53.

<sup>80</sup> *Open Source Centre*, "Structure of Iran's State-Run TV IRIB" (16 December 2009), <<http://fas.org/irp/dni/osc/iran-tv.pdf>> (Accessed on January 5, 2018).

<sup>81</sup> AliasgharTurkashvand, *Ulgū-ihanjārī-irisānah-imilliazdidgāh-irahbarān-inizām*, [Normative pattern of national media from the perspective of Iranian leaders] (Tehran: Imam Sadiq University Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>82</sup> Ravadrad, Azam. (2010, Summer). "Naqsh-iBarnāmahā-yiDīnīva Ghayr-iDīnī-iTelivīsīondarAfzāyishyāKāhish-iDīndārī", [The role of religious and non-religious TV programs in increasing and decreasing of religiosity]. *Faslnāmah-iTahqiqāt-iFarhangī*, [Journal of Cultural Research], Vol. 2 No. 6, 49-77., 53



## Conclusion

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, 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. As a result, issues relating to religious minorities are visible in post-1979 revolution Iran, though it has been trying to suppress its ethno-religious minorities and keep them on low profile. 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. As shown in this study, besides being considered as an ethnic minority, the Baloch are also a religious minority given their sectarian differences with the mainstream Shia Persians.

Being subject to various forms of discrimination, the religious sentiment among the Baloch is quite prominent. The Shia religious authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, since their ascendance to the power structures of Iran, have been trying to assimilate the Baloch-Sunni with the majority Shias. In this regard, they have chalked a comprehensive program to convert the Baloch-Sunnis into Shias. They are trying to achieve these objectives through a range of policies. First, through the control of religious institutions of the Baloch-Sunni and then a gradual change of direction based on top-down approach. Second, the Iranian Shia leadership is trying to concentrate on downtrodden layers of the Baloch society, assimilating them through an extensive propagation and preaching program. Thirdly, the Baloch-Sunni are not only excluded from the central political structure of the Islamic Republic, but their participation in the administration of their province, Balochistan, is also quite limited. Finally, the Islamic Republic is using civic services as a leverage to further its religious assimilation projects in Balochistan.



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