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# Examining the Response of Baloch Sunnis to the Ethno-Religious Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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## Abstract

This study investigates the response of the Baloch Sunni ethno-religious minority towards the assimilationist approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It argues that the Iranian theocratic political system uses an assimilationist approach and tries to assimilate the Baloch-Sunni into Shia Persain dominated ethno-religious group; but, this policy has been resisted by different strata of the society. The study finds that although there is a general consensus among the Baloch Sunnis to uphold their ethno-religious values, each segment of the Baloch Sunni society is combatting the central government's ethno-religious policy on its own way depending on the means available, ranging from cultural efforts to political and military activities.

**Keywords:** Baloch Sunnis, Ethno-Religious Assimilation, Islamic Republic of Iran, Shia

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# Beluci Sünnilerin İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin Etno-Dini Politikasına Karşı Tepkilerinin İncelenmesi

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## Öz

Bu çalışma, Beluci-Sünni etnik azınlığının İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin asimilasyon temelli yaklaşımına karşı tepkisini incelemektedir. Bu çalışmada İran teokratik siyasal sisteminin asimilasyon temelli bir yaklaşım benimsediği ve Beluci-Sünnilerini egemen etnik-dini grup olan Şii Farmlar içinde asimile etmeye çalıştığı, ancak bu politikanın toplumun farklı kesimleri tarafından direnişle karşılandığı iddia edilmektedir. Sonuç olarak bu araştırma Beluci Sünniler arasında etno-dini değerlerini korumak için genel bir fikir birliğinin olmasına rağmen, Beluci-Sünni toplumunun her bir kesiminin kendine uygun olan ve kültürel çabalardan politik ve askeri faaliyetlere kadar uzanan yöntemlerle merkezi hükümetin etno-dini politikasına karşı mücadele ettiğini tespit etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Beluci Sünniler, Etno-Dini Asimilasyon, İran İslam Cumhuriyeti, Şii

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## **1. Introduction**

Iran is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country. Baloch, Persians, Azeris, Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen have been living in the region currently recognized as Iran since centuries. However, it has always been one particular ethnic group, such as the Persians or the Turks, who has taken control over the political apparatus and economic resources.<sup>1</sup> At present, Persians are the dominant ethnic group and Shiism is the religion of the majority of Iranians.

Non-Persian ethnic groups as well as non-Shia religious groups complain that their culture and religious 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.<sup>2</sup> However, despite Iran's efforts to suppress its ethno-religious minorities and keep them at low profile, these ethno-religious minorities are becoming increasingly visible and vocal.

Among various cases, 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 assimilation policy by the Persian Shia dominated political establishment of Iran.

This study aims at assessing the response of Baloch Sunnis to the assimilation project of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In doing so, the paper looks at the approaches of different segments of the Baloch society toward this assimilation project. First, it gives a historical background on the response of Baloch Sunnis to the assimilation policy of the Persian Shia leaders of the pre-1979 revolution Iran. Second, it examines how the religious class has approached the assimilation project. Third, it discusses

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<sup>1</sup> Alireza Asgharzadeh, *Iran The Challenge of Diversity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 197.

<sup>2</sup> 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. <https://goo.gl/U21oHc>).

how elites and youth have perceived it. Finally, it looks at the Baloch-Sunni radical groups and their activities in defiance of the ethno-religious assimilation policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## 2. Analytical Considerations

Ethno-religious policies are classified in various ways. However, this article is mainly based on Terrence E. Cook's model of *Separation, Assimilation, and Accommodation*. Most studies on ethnic relations by and large use a top-down approach and focus on how a majority can deal with its minorities. Such an approach either ignores or gives secondary importance to the way ethnic minorities try to adjust themselves to their majority environment. The most important advantage of Cook's model is that he gives equal importance to both dimensions. Therefore, he analyzes how and why a particular policy is implemented by the dominant group, and how and why the same policy can be adopted by the subordinate group. In a nutshell, Cook suggests a three-fold classification of ethnic policies. The first policy is "separation" which is based on real or fictional differences of groups.<sup>3</sup> The second policy is "accommodation" in which rival ethnic groups reach an agreement of mutual recognition and coexistence.<sup>4</sup> The third policy is "assimilation" which aims at bringing uniformity to different ethnic groups and making them similar. It is a "process whereby groups with different cultures come to have a common culture."<sup>5</sup>

However, according to Cook, ethno-religious policy is not a one-way road. While on the one side of this policy is the government, at its other end is the target ethnic group. Like the government, the ethno-religious group also decides what policy can best serve its interest. Therefore, each of the above-mentioned three-fold set of policies takes a different direction depending on whether it is championed by the dominant ethnic group or the subordinate one.

While the dominant group adopts separation policy to separate subordinate ethnic groups in the form of social segregation and genocide,<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Terrence E. Cook, *Separation, Assimilation, or Accommodation: Contrasting Ethnic Minority Policies* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 2-4

<sup>4</sup> Cook, *Separation, Assimilation*, 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> Cook, *Separation, Assimilation*, 2-4.

subordinate group opts for it to distance itself from the dominant group.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, while the dominant group tries to settle the issue with minimum concession through accommodation,<sup>8</sup> the subordinate group demands maximum prerogative hoping to get at least closer to its expectations.<sup>9</sup> Also, assimilation, if adopted by a dominant ethnic group is a forceful and painful policy.<sup>10</sup> However, the dominant group can adopt it as a strategy to escape stigmatization and discrimination.”<sup>11</sup>

In this study, the highlighted policies are taken from the subordinate groups' point of view. Therefore, it tries to see how the Baloch Sunnis are defying ethno-religious policies of the Persian and Shia dominated central government.

### **3. The Baloch Response to the Assimilation Project: A Historical Overview**

The assimilation project of the central government in Balochistan is not new. It dates back to 1928 right after the incorporation of Balochistan into Iran by Persian forces. Reza Shah Pahlavi's forces initiated a comprehensive Persianization policy in Balochistan. The first step was geographic changes and redrawing of provincial boundaries of Balochistan. Through a series of administrative divisions in (1938),<sup>12</sup> (1947),<sup>13</sup> and (1955),<sup>14</sup> various Baloch regions were given to other provinces adjacent to Balochistan.

Besides, Many Baloch people were forcefully displaced and subsequently

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<sup>7</sup> Cook, *Separation, Assimilation*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Cook, *Separation, Assimilation*, 113-114.

<sup>9</sup> Cook, *Separation, Assimilation*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Cook, *Separation, Assimilation*, 63-64. Also see. Conway W. Henderson, *International Relations: conflict and cooperation at the turn of the 21st Century* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Cook, *Separation, Assimilation*, 91. Also see. Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Massachusetts, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Official News Paper 1937*, “Islāh-i Qānūn-i Taqsimāt-i Kishvarī, Pāyigāh-i Ittilā’āt, Qavānīn va muqarrāt-i Kishvar, <<http://www.dastour.ir/Brows/?lid=24595>> (Accessed on August 14, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Nematullah Moharrami & Hasan Mehraban, *Majmū’ah Qavānīn va Muqarrāt-i Taqsimāt-i Kishvarī, Vol. 1, 1906-1984*, [a Collection of laws & regulations of administrative divisions] (Tehran: Goharshad Publication, 2006), 76.

<sup>14</sup> See. Taj Mohammad, Breseeg, *Baloch Nationalism: Its Origin and Development* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 2004), 285.

got resettled in other parts of Iran. In the meantime, Balochistan's cities and towns were renamed. Their historic names were replaced with newly invented Persian names.<sup>15</sup> This new naming policy was also applied to tribal identities. To reconstruct the identity of its people, all Baloch were required to choose a surname. In many parts of Balochistan some ready-made Persian surnames were assigned to them.<sup>16</sup>

Due to the underdevelopment of the region and lack of awareness, some aspects of the assimilation did not receive significant reaction. Yet, the Baloch were very suspicious about certain aspects of the assimilation project. For instance, they opposed the national registration scheme or accepting national identity card for decades.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, they opposed the women's 'de-veiling' act enacted on January 8, 1936. According to this act, all types of head covering scarves and veils for women were prohibited. While the program was by and large successful in many parts of the country, the Baloch society strongly resisted the program, which led to the dispatching of military forces from the centre to Balochistan.<sup>18</sup> As intellectual aspects of defying the assimilation project, one can name some poetry works, which were however produced in a very limited way in terms of scope and volume.<sup>19</sup>

In 1941, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi succeeded his father. He continued the Persianization policy of his father even with more intensity. To speed up Persianization in 1947, Balochistan was administratively divided and experienced another change of geography with its large parts given to adjacent provinces.<sup>20</sup>

In pursuit of cultural assimilation Mohammad Reza Shah banned the use of the Balochi language in schools,<sup>21</sup> and government offices. Also,

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<sup>15</sup> Prof. Dr. Jamaluddin Noorzi, Interview by author, UPM, Kuala Lumpur, February 30, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Prof. Dr. Jamaluddin Noorzi, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Nourmohaddad Gamshad, Interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, September 11, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> See. Zarif Maleki, Shoja, "Niġāhī bih Zindagī-i Sardār Jom'ah Khān Barāhūi," [A brief Biography of Sardar Jum'ah Khan Barahui], *Faslnāmah-i Farāsū*, No. 3, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Carina Jahani, "State control and its impact on language in Balochistan," in Rabo, Annika and Utas, Bo (eds), *The Role of the State in West Asia* (Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2005), 156.

<sup>20</sup> Nematullah Moharrami, 76. See also "Breseeg, Baloch Nationalism, 285"

<sup>21</sup> Breseeg, *Baloch Nationalism*, 285.

publication, distribution and possession of Balochi language books, magazines, and newspapers were declared criminal offence.<sup>22</sup>

The overall situation led to sporadic revolts against the central government. Though, the largest part of this resistance has not been documented, accounts of battles with Persian forces have since had a special place in the Baloch folklore and oral history. Some of them do exist in form of poetry.<sup>23</sup> M.G. Pikulin mentions that it took the Pahalvi regime a decade-long counter-insurgency operation to quell the resisting masses in Balochistan.<sup>24</sup>

In the late 1950s, the Baloch resistance resurfaced in a more organized and institutional manner under the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF). The BLF was mainly led by the Baloch in exile in the Gulf states. The BLF activities gained momentum in the 1960s when the Ba'th Party took over Iraq in 1968.<sup>25</sup> However, its heyday did not last long. The Iraqi government withdrew its support to the BLF in 1975 after reaching an agreement with the Pahlavi regime, what is popularly known as the Algeria Accord.<sup>26</sup>

The Pahlavi rulers succeeded in suppressing the insurgency in Balochistan. But this success was largely achieved not through military measures, but economic incentives as it coincided with the 1970s oil price shock, when petro-dollars began pouring into Iran.<sup>27</sup> Yet, the real intention of this economic uplift can be understood by the statement of Amir Abbas Hoveyda, then Iranian prime minister (1965-1977), to the American journalist, Selig Harrison: "if it were not for the Soviet Union and its friends in Iraq, we would not give such inflated importance to such a small part of our population [the Baloch]."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Breseeg, *Baloch Nationalism*, 285.

<sup>23</sup> See. Abdullah Rawanbud's poem on Dadshah Baloch's revolt against Pahlavai forces in: Azim Shahbakhsh, *A Study on Contemporary History of Balochistan*, (Shiraz: Navid e Shiraz, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> M. G. Pikulin, *Baloch Istoriia i Ekonimia* [The Baloch, History and Economy] (Moscow: Nauka Publishing House, 1959). Translated in Urdu by Shah Mohammad Marri (Lahore: Takhliqat, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> See Alexander J. Motyl, *Encyclopedia of Nationalism: Leaders, Movements, and Concepts*, Vol. 2 (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001), 240.

<sup>26</sup> Breseeg, *Baloch Nationalism*, 289-292.

<sup>27</sup> Breseeg, *Baloch Nationalism*, 292.

<sup>28</sup> Selig S. Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baloch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981), 159.

The social and economic uplift of the region, under whatever intentions, brought more awareness about the repressive policy of the Persian-dominated regime. As discussed in the following pages, this awareness clearly showed up in later years, particularly since the 1979 revolution.

## **4. The Baloch Response to the Assimilation Project After the 1979 Revolution**

### **4.1. Religious Elites and Their Response to the Assimilation**

At the threshold of the 1979 revolution, the religious elites were quite influential in Balochistan. The central figure was Mawlana Abdol Aziz Mollazadah. Soon after the revolution he and some other religious leaders realized that their efforts for the establishment of an ideal Islamic political system had gone in vain. Therefore, not only had they lost the battle, but now they also had to prepare themselves for another fiercer battle to protect themselves from the religious and ideological assault, which was to be mounted against them by the new political system.

Along with some other religious leaders, Mawlana Abdol Aziz co-founded a political party, namely the *Hizb-i Ittihādul Muslimīn* (Muslim Unity Party).<sup>29</sup> But, despite his disillusionment with the new political system, his approach to the Islamic Republic's ethno-religious encroachment remained peaceful and pragmatic. He also maintained his relations with the top leadership of the Islamic Republic, especially Ayatollah Khomeini. By virtue of this relationship, he could exercise some influence over the local administrators.

In 1987, Mawlana Abdol Aziz passed away and was succeeded by Mawlana Abdol Hamid, popularly known as *Shaikhul Islam*. The new leadership did not enjoy a close relationship with the power brokers in Tehran as the late Mawlana Abdol Aziz. In fact the relationship between Mawlana Abdol Aziz and Khomeini was at a personal level, while the new leadership did not have that benefit. Later, a leadership crisis within the top cadres of the Islamic Republic distanced the Baloch-Sunni further from them. Because, although Mawlana Abdol Aziz was close to Khomeini, it was Ayatollah

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<sup>29</sup> Abdol Baset Bozorgzadah & Nurunnisa Mollazadah, *Biography of Mawlana Abdol Aziz Mollazadah* (Zahedan: Ihsan Publication, 2008), 99.



Hussein Ali Montazeri, the then speaker of the assembly of experts and the likely replacement of Ayatollah Khomeini, who had a soft approach toward the Sunnis.<sup>30</sup> Montazeri was disgraced and eventually sacked from his position by Khomeini. Not much later, Khomeini also died in 1989. As a result of these events, the direct communication channel between the Sunni leadership in Balochistan and the top revolutionary leadership of the Islamic Republic was almost closed.

Like his predecessor, Mawlana Abdol Hamid was also a pragmatic person. In the absence of a direct channel with the top leadership of the Islamic Republic, he tried to convey the grievances of the Baloch through the representative of the Supreme Leader in Balochistan.<sup>31</sup> He also took a number of initiatives to counter the religious assimilation project of the Islamic Republic. He tried to promote religious awareness by supporting and sponsoring madrasas and mosques. As part of his goals, he urged all small and major madrasas and religious schools to organize themselves under a single umbrella. They succeeded in establishing an institution called the Coordination Council of Sunni Religious Schools (CCSRS).<sup>32</sup> The CCSRS significantly contributed to sensitization of the students about the religious assimilation project. In recent years, it has been playing a vital role in resisting the reorganization of Sunni religious schools initiated by the Planning Council for Sunni Religious Schools (PCSRS). The PCSRS is an institution established in 2009 by Iran's Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (SCRC) to reshuffle the curriculum of Sunnis religious schools in line with the state's official ideology.<sup>33</sup>

At the social level, Mawlana Abdol Hamid focused on the unification of the Baloch-Sunni by mediating between different tribal groups and settling tribal feuds in Balochistan. He eventually succeeded in brokering a multi-lateral tribal accord signed by many tribal leaders before the Holy Qur'an

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<sup>30</sup> See. Hosseinali Montazeri, *Katerat*, [the memories], Vol. 1 (Qom: Ittihād-i nāshirān-i Irānī, 2000), 123, 126, 133, 140, 144, 150, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Mawlana Ahmad Naruei, Deputy President Darul Ulum Zahedan, interview by authors, Zahedan Iran, November 28, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Mawlana Mohammad Yousof Huseinpur, the first head of CCSRS, interview by authors, Zahedan Iran, December 12, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> See. *Shūrāy-i ālī-i Inqilāb-i Farhangī*, [Supreme Cultural Revolution Council] (act No. 613 of 30 October, 2009).

that they would not take the law in their own hands, but would rather resort to legal means (state judiciary) or religious leaders to solve their disputes in the future.<sup>34</sup>

In a close political environment under the Supreme Leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei and the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsenjani, (1989-1997) Mawlana Abdol Hamid became the sole voice from the Baloch and the Sunnis throughout Iran. By the same token, the Sunni community of Balochistan became the most sensitized ethno-religious group in the country.

In this regard, the year 1993 was a major breakthrough for the Baloch Sunnis. On February 9, 1993, the Iranian security forces with full support of other state institutions destroyed the *Shaikh Fayz* mosque, the biggest Sunni mosque in Mash'had city, the capital of Iran's Khorasan province. It took the Islamic Republic only one night to destroy and turn this famous and historical mosque into a public park.<sup>35</sup>

On the very next day, the Baloch Sunnis gathered at the Makki mosque in Zahedan, the capital city of Balochistan. As the crowd stood up for afternoon prayers, the Iranian security forces, who had already come prepared for confrontation, fired on them inside the mosque. Dozens of people were killed and injured. In the following days and weeks, hundreds of Baloch Sunnis were arrested. Among them were some top religious scholars and allies of Mawlana Abdol Hamid such as Mufti Qasem Qasemi, Ahmad Naruei, Abdol Majid and other prominent Sunni scholars of Iran.<sup>36</sup>

The following Friday, the Makki mosque experienced one of the largest ever congregations for prayer, as tens of thousands of people had gathered in a show of solidarity with Mawlana Abdol Hamid. The Makki mosque slaughter popularized the Sunni issue in Iran and beyond Iranian borders. In the meantime, Mawlana Abdol Hamid emerged as the unchallenged charismatic leader of the Baloch-Sunni population with a strong influence

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<sup>34</sup> See. Khan Mohammad Kord, *Rivayātī az tārikh-i mu'āsir-i Balochisān*, [A narration on the contemporary history of Balochistan] (Zahedan: Nasim-i Hijaz Publication, 2013), 38-39.

<sup>35</sup> Faal Baloch, "Masājīd va Madāris-i Pulump shudah-i ahl- Sunnat dar Zamān-i Hākīmīyat-i Jumhūrī-i Islāmī" The Baloch Activists' Campaign, July 10, 2017. <http://www.balochcampaign.info/?p=2001>.

<sup>36</sup> Kord, *Rivayātī az tārikh-i*. 38-39.

over Sunnis throughout Iran. Nevertheless, the incident eroded his relationship with the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader in Balochistan (ORSLB). It also meant that the main indirect communication channel of communication to the top leadership of the Islamic republic was now closed.

By virtue of such popular support, Shaikhul Islam's tone became more critical towards the ethno-religious policies of Iranian leaders. He started using his Friday sermons to criticize the government's policies and focused on the ethno-religious rights of Baloch Sunnis on a regular basis, and as such, became the focal person championing the fundamental rights of them. Yet, he always discouraged resorting to violence, rather he strongly believed in democratic means and pragmatism.

With the passage of time, Mawlana Abdol Hamid has succeeded to mobilize the Baloch and other Sunnis of Iran. He had also successfully managed to face the Iranian government's tactics of undermining his authority as the most powerful social, religious and political leader in Balochistan. It is necessary to note that Mawlana Abdol Hamid, does not have any traditional or legal-rational source of power. He was fully aware that his charisma and popular support is the only source of his authority. Therefore, he tried to utilize and demonstrate his source of authority in an optimum way. For this purpose, he has always been seeking to impress the establishment by showing maximum solidarity to Baloch Sunnis, which in turn triggered their unlimited support for him. In this context, he organized several annual religious and cultural gatherings. Eid and Friday prayers of the Baloch Sunnis in Zahedan are one of the largest religious gatherings in the region. Balochistan is home to the largest Sunni mosques in Iran. The famous Sunni learning centre known as Darul Ulum Zahedan is the largest educational institution for learning Sunni jurisprudence and theology in Iran. Its annual convocation is also one of the largest religious gatherings in the region, which attracts Sunnis from every corner of Iran; from Khorasan to Kurdistan, Fars, and even Tehran, the capital. Although the establishment tries to stop people from other provinces of Iran to enter Balochistan at the outskirts of the city during these events, many of them walk to the venue on foot to attend these gatherings.<sup>37</sup> All these activities and institution are under the direct supervision of Mawlana Abdol Hamid.

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<sup>37</sup> Kord, *Rivayāt az tārikh-i*. 38-39.

Despite his growing influence, Mawlana Abdol Hamid has remained moderate in his ways of countering state assimilation. As noted earlier, he has been trying to avoid any clash with the establishment, and has used to seek appropriate and non-violent means to put forward the demands of Sunnis and the Baloch within the framework of the constitution of the Islamic Republic.

Besides insisting on the demand for constitutional rights of Baloch Sunnis, he has also been trying to be effective in national and provincial politics. He has particularly contributed to nurture a participatory political culture among Baloch Sunnis. This change in the political culture of Balochistan is manifested in the political development of Balochistan even at the national level. Perhaps one of the major signs of this participatory culture among the Baloch is their support for Baloch-Sunni candidates in municipal and parliamentary elections in Balochistan, as well as their support for moderate Shia Persian candidates with a soft approach to ethno-religious issues in presidential elections. For instance, in the presidential elections, at which Baloch Sunnis are constitutionally not allowed to contest, Mawlana Abdol Hamid has been supportive to the reformists and moderate Shia candidates, who have promised to respect the constitutional rights of ethno-religious minorities in Iran. By virtue of his support, the moderate candidates have garnered the highest votes, in terms of percentage, from Balochistan. For instance, before the year 1997, the average turnout ratio for the first six presidential elections in Iran was 43 percent, however in the 1997 presidential elections this ratio jumped to 70 percent.<sup>38</sup> In all the elections since then, the moderate candidates have grabbed the highest percentage of votes from Balochistan out of 30 provinces in Iran. Similarly, the pattern of parliamentary elections changed and for the first time in many cities Sunni candidates were elected into the parliament. While the majority of Zahedan's population are Baloch-Sunni, a Shia Persian candidate has always won the elections until the 3<sup>rd</sup> parliamentary elections. However, in the 4<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections, held on April 10, 1992, for the first time, a Baloch-Sunni won the elections. Since then, in all but one parliamentary

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<sup>38</sup> *Institute of research and Political studies*, “Tahlīl-i Ustānī-i intikhābāt dar dahah-yi akhīr”, [A study of provincial participation in elections in the last decade], *Pāyigāh-i jāmi'-i tārikh-i mu'āsir-i Irān*. February 12, 2017. <http://revolution.pchi.ir/show.php?page=contents&id=12512>.

election, any Baloch-Sunni candidate supported by the Sunni leadership has proved to be undefeatable.

In addition to his political engagements, Mawlana Abdol Hamid has also been active in socio-economic activities in Balochistan. Given the discrimination of Baloch Sunnis in government departments, he has tried to replace state institutions, instead of confronting the state. For instance, Article 12 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic mentions that in Sunni majority areas, laws should be based on Sunni jurisprudence.<sup>39</sup> But this article is not being implemented. Besides demanding the implementation of this clause, he has created a parallel institution for the realization of this purpose called the Decree Centre of the Dārul ‘Ulūm Zahedan (DCDUZ).

The DCDUZ has emerged as the hub for Sunni jurisprudence. The centre is beyond traditional biases and is systematically organized. It serves as an alternative to the people, who are suspicious of state judiciary especially in religious and civil issues, such as the matters of divorce, inheritance, etc. thus, saving them from verdicts based on the Shia interpretation of Islamic laws.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, the Sunni leadership has also established a micro finance institution called Azizyah Micro Finance Foundation (AMFF). Given the interest-based banking system of Iran, the Baloch Sunnis with strong religious sentiments, have always been reluctant to apply for any financial services. Therefore, the AMFF is serving as an alternative for Sunnis. There is also another institution engaged in philanthropic activities called the Mohseneen Charity Foundation (MCF). It aims to provide basic services to the poor population of the suburban areas of Zahedan and other cities, where the government’s civic services are almost non-existent.<sup>41</sup>

However, the most important achievement of the Sunni leadership has been to ensure security in Balochistan. Given that Balochistan shares a long border with two volatile countries – Pakistan and Afghanistan – law

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<sup>39</sup> *The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran*. (Tehran: Islamic Consultative Assembly: International Department, 1990), 31.

<sup>40</sup> Mufti Abdol Qader Arefi, a member of DCDUZ, interview by author, Zahedan Iran, November 24, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Mawlana Abdol Ghani Badri, the deputy president Darul Ulum Zahedan and the director of MCF, interview by author Zahedan Iran, December 11, 2010.

and order in Balochistan is highly vulnerable. Besides, as discussed in the next section, some militant groups are also operating in the region. This situation has provided the authorities the pretext to increase the military's presence in the region and convey to Iranian Shia Persians that Baloch Sunnis are unreliable. Therefore, Mawlana Abdol Hamid has always played a mediatory role in all these conflicts. In addition to his strong belief in democratic values, Mawlana Abdol Hamid believes that such incidents provide the centre with justification to deny the rights of Baloch Sunnis. He has been particularly active in securing the release of Iranian security forces in the captivity of militant groups. Due to his active role, on December 23, 2014, he was appreciated with a peace award by the Centre for Supporters of Human Rights (CSHR).<sup>42</sup>

It is necessary to note that although all religious efforts in Balochistan are popularly attributed to Mawlana Abdol Hamid as the most popular religious and political leader of Balochistan, he has been accompanied by a group of top Baloch-Sunni religious scholars within the CCSRS, who have equally contributed to the religious awareness of the Baloch Sunnis. For instance, under the influence and efforts of Muftī Qasem Qasemi, his deputy, and the current head of DCDUZ, a translation movement started in the 1990s, hundreds of books and literature on Sunni tradition, particularly those produced by the Sunni religious scholars of the Indian sub-continent, were translated. Although the government complicated their publication, and often enforced censorship, the very availability of Sunni literature nonetheless contributed to the religious awareness of the people in Balochistan.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, Mawlana Abdol Hamid has successfully taken on board the majority of the mainstream religious leaders across the province, as well as from other regions of Iran. Together, they have been trying to have a single voice against the ethno-religious assimilation. For instance, on December 17, 2011, the principals of the Sunni religious schools wrote a letter to Hujjatul Islam Abbas Sulaymani, the Supreme Leader's representative in Balochistan. The letter reads as follows:

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<sup>42</sup> *BBC Persian*. "Jāyizah-i Sālānah-i Kānūn bih Mawlavī Abdol Hamīd Ta'alluq Girift," [The annual human rights award was given to Malavi Abdol Hamid], December 1, 2017. [http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/12/141223\\_139\\_human\\_rights\\_prize\\_abdolhamid](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/12/141223_139_human_rights_prize_abdolhamid)

<sup>43</sup> Mufti Qasem Qasemi, Interview by authors, Zahedan, Iran, October 15, 2010.

“We refuse acceptance of any new program such as the reorganization plan by any governmental or non-governmental institutions which aim at violating the constitutional freedom and independence of the religious schools, and we demand independence and freedom of activities on the subjects related to the training and education of our children in tandem with Article 12 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps the cleverest strategy of the Baloch-Sunni religious leaders has been their efforts to mobilize Sunnis throughout Iran, particularly in the capital, Tehran, under a single leadership. They knew that the whole of Iranian Sunnis, who account for more than 20 percent of total population, can better counter the assimilation project as compared to only the Baloch, who number just three percent of the population and are settled in Balochistan, one of the most deprived and remote provinces of Iran. As part of his idea of Sunni unity, Mawlana Abdol Hamid revived the Sunnis’ old demand for permission to establish a Sunni mosque.<sup>45</sup> This permission had been promised to Mawlana Abdol Aziz by Ayatollah Khomeini,<sup>46</sup> although he dishonoured his promise later.

Apart from the religious orientation of Baloch-Sunni leaders, the idea of Sunni unity was a strategic choice. Mawlana Abdol Hamid believed that a unified ideological front could counter the ideological project initiated by an ideological political system. By focusing on the Sunnis in Tehran with over a one million population, he chose to fight for Sunnis rights from Tehran rather than Balochistan. In other word, he wanted to bring the Sunni issue, which was hitherto a local issue confined to Balochistan and other Sunni majority regions, to the national mainstream.

The Sunni unity initiative of Mawlana Abdol Hamid significantly contributed to the religious awareness of the Sunnis throughout the country including Tehran. Although the Sunnis’ demand for a mosque in Tehran is not yet fulfilled, the support of the Baloch leadership for such a basic right has changed the religious culture of Sunni residents of the Iranian capital. It has in return brought a significant popularity for Mawlana Abdol Hamid

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<sup>44</sup> Letter of the principals of the Sunni religious schools to the representative of the supreme leader of Iran in the affairs of the Sunnis in Sistan and Balochistan Province, dated 17 December, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Mawlana Abdol Hamid, Friday speech (video record), July 31, 2015, Makki Mosque Zahedan.

<sup>46</sup> Mawlana Abdol Hamid, Friday speech.

among them to the extent that, at present, his representatives in Tehran are operating dozens of Namāz Khānah (prayer houses) in this metropolitan city.

Although, by virtue of his background, Mawlana Abdol Hamid has been more active in the religious sphere, his overall efforts show that, he is trying to defy both the religious and ethnic aspects of the assimilation project of the Islamic Republic vis-a-vis the Baloch Sunnis, in a very pragmatic and moderate way. Therefore, the overall approach of the Baloch-Sunni religious elites is based on the accommodation of all ethno-religious groups in Iran.

#### **4.2. Educated Elites and Their Response to The Assimilation**

The educated class of Balochistan by and large is the product of post-1979 Iranian education system. As noted earlier, modern education was introduced in the 1970s during the last decade of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule. Prior to the 1979 revolution, the number of those with higher education in Balochistan was only about 100 individuals. After the 1979 revolution, this number increased sharply. As of 2011, the total number of university graduates was estimated to be between 10,000 and 12,000 persons.<sup>47</sup> A small portion of this educated class are state employees. However, as noted by Taheri the educated class, particularly those working in the government departments, are not representing Baloch Sunnis. As such their role is confined to settling their own personal and family affairs.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, those Baloch Sunnis, who are employed in the public sector, are carefully chosen. Some of them are highly Persianized, and as such are rather serving the interest of the Persian dominated centre. They detach themselves from their Baloch brethren. There are cases, in which some state-employed Baloch Sunnis have even changed their family names in order to completely hide their Baloch identity. Additionally, many of the Baloch, who serve in public institutions in Balochistan usually do not wear their local dress, but rather prefer to wear the official dress, seemingly to avoid any discrimination at their work place.<sup>49</sup> This observation can be realized in the argument put by the Durans. They argue:

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<sup>47</sup> Ahmad Reza Taheri, "The Sociopolitical Culture of Iranian Baloch Elites," *Iranian Studies* Vol. 46, issue 6 (July, 2013): 9.

<sup>48</sup> Taheri, "The Sociopolitical Culture," 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ahmad Reza Taheri, *The Baloch in Post Islamic Revolution Iran: A political study*, (Ph.D Thesis, University of Pune, India, May 2009), 217.



Once a group of people have been assaulted in a genocidal fashion, there are psychological ramifications. With the victim's complete loss of power comes despair, and the psyche reacts by internalizing what appears to be genuine power—the power of the oppressor... At this point, the self-worth of the individual and/or group has sunk to a level of despair tantamount to self-hatred. This self-hatred can be either internalized or externalized.<sup>50</sup>

Notwithstanding, in recent years there have been attempts by some Baloch-Sunni politicians inside Iran to raise their voice against the policy of the establishment. For instance, the Sunni members of the Iranian consultative assembly, in their letter dated December 19, 2011, demanded elimination of discrimination against Sunni citizens. In their letter, the signatories demanded the amendment of Article 115 of the Iranian constitution. The letter was signed by the Baloch and other Sunni members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly.<sup>51</sup> The letter in fact had been written amid increasing pressure during President Ahmadinejad's government. The signatories were demanding the implementation of Article 12 of the Iranian constitution.

But, the Baloch-Sunni politicians have failed in their efforts to overtake the local Shia Persian politicians in Balochistan, whose majority is from Shia Zaboli ethnic group, who always try to criticize any concessions made to the Sunnis in Balochistan. For instance, Mehdi Jahantighi, one of the local influential Shia politicians of Zaboli origin in Balochistan, criticized the reformist government of Mohammad Khatami for a relatively softer approach towards Baloch Sunnis. He wrote in *Daily Kyhan*:

The reformist government deviated itself from the revolutionary and Islamic principles in the province [Balochistan] which is the target of Wahabism and Al-Qaeda. Instead of emphasizing upon pure Islam [Shia Islam] that originates from the advanced ideas of Imam Khomeini and is loved by the nationalities of the province [Balochistan], [the reformist government] opted for a deviant version of Islam.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Eduardo Duran, & Bonnie Duran, *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 29.

<sup>51</sup> *Fraction of the Sunni members of the eighth Islamic Consultative Assembly*, "Nāmah-i frāksion-i ahl-i sunnat bih rahbarī," [Letter to the Supreme leader Sayyid Ali khamenei], No. M/12395 (December 19, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Mehdi Jahantighi, "Rīshah-hā-yi aslī-i Nā-amnī dar Sīstan va Balochistan," [The Main Causes of insecurity in Sistan & Balochistan Province], *Kayhan*, (14 September, 2008), 11.

While these local Shia politicians were supporting the repressive policies of former president Ahmadinejad, they are now worried about any softer approach towards the Baloch Sunnis by the incumbent moderate President, Hassan Rouhani. For instance, Hussain Ali Shahryani, Shia Zaboli member of the Islamic consultative assembly, expressed his concerns on November 11, 2014, at the Islamic Consultative Assembly's floor and said: "I am really worried that the incidents which are taking place in Mosul [Iraq] would repeat themselves in Balochistan as well."<sup>53</sup> He was referring to the fall of Mosul province of Iraq to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and making an analogy that any concession to Baloch Sunnis would encourage them to take control of Balochistan, and establish a terrorist state.

In addition to local Baloch-Sunni politicians, who are gradually raising their voices against the discrimination and the oppression they suffer, there exists also a group of Baloch educated elites that has preferred to go into self-exile. One portion of them migrated to Europe, particularly to Scandinavian countries, where they established political parties. Their approach to the ethno-religious question in Balochistan has been a mixture of accommodation and separation. For instance, while the Balochistan National Movement (BNM) and the Campaign Against the Occupation of Western Balochistan (CAOWB) believe in independence,<sup>54</sup> the Balochistan Peoples' Party (BPP) believes in accommodation under a pluralistic political system, such as a federation in Iran.<sup>55</sup> Yet, they unanimously agree that the Islamic republic of Iran is conducting a full-fledged project of assimilation in Balochistan, which needs to be countered. They are engaged in affirmative action in alliance with other Iranian ethno-religious rights activists. They are also active in international fora such as the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). At present, the

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<sup>53</sup> Hussein Ali Shahriari, "Nigarānam Zamānī Birasad kih Sīsatān va Balochistān Tabdīl bih Musil Shavad," [I'm afraid that one day Sistan & Balochistan turned into Mosul], *Islamic Consultative Assembly News Agency*. June 15, 2017. <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/266089>.

<sup>54</sup> Mehrab Sarjau, a member of Campaign Against the Occupation of Western Balochistan, online correspondence with authors, February 21, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> *Balochistan Peoples' Party*, "Barnāmah va asāsnāmah-i hizb-i mardum-i Balochistān," [Program and Constitution of Balochistan People's Party]. April 26, 2009. <https://goo.gl/48mYfH>.

president of the UNPO is Naser Bulideh, an exiled Baloch.<sup>56</sup>

Although the achievement of Europe-based Baloch-Sunni elites has not been significant in the political sphere, their very presence in Europe has been fruitful. While the Baloch culture has been completely neglected in Iran, the Baloch-Sunni diaspora has been successful in introducing it to their host societies. They organize Baloch folk music and other cultural events, which are equally well-received in their host societies as well as in Balochistan. More importantly, while inside Iran Balochi language has been left to become extinct, some of the best studies on Balochi language have been produced in Scandinavian countries. The Baloch-Sunni diaspora has significantly contributed and facilitated the conduct of this research. For instance, the most important studies about Balochi are produced in Norway, one of the major hubs of the Baloch-Sunni diaspora, by the Department of Linguistics of the Oslo University.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to self-exiled Baloch-Sunni elite in Europe, whose main concern has been ethnic issues, a smaller group of Baloch-Sunni elites with religious concerns migrated to Iran's neighboring countries, especially Pakistan. They aimed to sensitize the Sunni-dominated governments of their host societies about the Iranian government's treatment of Sunnis in Iran. Some of these individuals, such as Abdol Malek Mollazadeh, Hamid Nohtani, Abdol Naser Jamshidzahi, and Balochkhan Sahbakhsh and many others were assassinated by Iran's overseas death squads,<sup>58</sup> although the Iranian government has always declined being linked to these killings. However, for the first time, on December 6, 2014, Haidar Moslehi, the current Iranian intelligence minister, admitted that his ministry had been involved in the killing of the Iranian opponents outside of Iran. He produced a list of victims, and not surprisingly, most of them were Baloch. Moslehi asserted that the victims had become "the targets of the secret bullets of

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<sup>56</sup> See. *Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization*, "About". January 7, 2018. <http://unpo.org/section/2/15>

<sup>57</sup> See. Carina Jahani and Agnes Korn, *The Baloch and their neighbours: ethnic and linguistic contact in Balochistan in historical and modern times* (USA: the University of Michigan, 2003). See also Carina Jahani, *Standardization and Orthography in the Balochi Language* (Sweden: Uppsala University Press, 1989).

<sup>58</sup> See. *Amnesty International*, "Document - Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against The Baluchi Minority." January 5, 2017. <https://goo.gl/XZ5ija>.

God”.<sup>59</sup> A small number of the aforementioned groups got frustrated and returned back to Iran. However, some of them such as Dr. Ahmad Mirin, Mawlana Murad Barakzehi, Habibullah Huseinbor, and many others were also assassinated along with many other non-Baloch Iranian political activists in the late 1990s during a series of killings known as the “Chain Murders”.<sup>60</sup>

In the category of the Baloch educated elite, one should also include the Baloch youth who have been critical of the assimilation project of the Islamic Republic. In fact, the price for resistance against the ethno-religious assimilation policy is being mainly borne by these youth. Dozens of them are being executed every year.<sup>61</sup>

In this regard, the most notable example is Yaqub Mehrnahad, popularly claimed to be the first executed blogger in the world. He established the first civil society platform of Balochistan in the real sense. The name of his society was “*Anjuman-i Javānān-i Sidā-yi ‘Adālat*” [Youth Society of Voice of Justice (YSVJ)]. Being afraid of his popularity, the Iranian government arrested him in May, 2007. He was eventually executed on August 4, 2008 on the charge of “waging war against God”.<sup>62</sup>

In the aftermath of his execution, some other Baloch youth also realized the importance of social activities to uphold their cultural and religious identity and embarked on the same path as Mehrnahad. However, given the fate of Mehrnahad, the later generation of Baloch-Sunni civil society activists preferred to operate from outside the country. In this regard, one can mention the Baloch Activists’ Campaign (BAC), *Kampain-i Fa’alin-i Baloch*, established by some Baloch youth living in self-exile. The BAC is particularly active in cyber space and social media. One of the most effective campaigns of the BAC was its online campaign against the

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<sup>59</sup> *Rūznāmah-i I’timād Tehran*, [Daily Itimad Tehran], “Vazīr-i Ittilā’āt fihrist-i afrādī rā kih bih tīr-i ghayb griftār shudand i’lām kard” [the minister of intelligence announced the list of those targets of the secret bullets of God] (December 7, 2014), 3.

<sup>60</sup> See. Akbar Ganji, *Ālījināb Surkhpuš va Ālījibāb Khākistārī*, [Their Excellency, red and gray Eminences] (Tehran: Tarh-i Naw Publication, 1999), 58-202.

<sup>61</sup> See. *Iran Human Rights*, “Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran 2014: Provincial Distribution of Execution.” June 4, 2017. [http://iranhr.net/media/files/Rapport\\_2014\\_BDEF02.pdf](http://iranhr.net/media/files/Rapport_2014_BDEF02.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> *Khatt-i Sulh* “Yaqūb Mehrnahād; Qalamī kih shikastah shud,” [Yaqub Mehrnahad; a Penman who was destroyed], No. 39 (August 2014), 27.

division of Balochistan under the slogan of “Balochistan is one”. The campaign was very innovative and unique in the context of Balochistan.. Within a short span of time, the BAC succeeded in generating a significant wave against the division, making the establishment to shelve its plans for dividing Balochistan into smaller provinces under different names.<sup>63</sup>

### **4.3. Radical Baloch Groups and the Assimilation**

Right after the 1979 Revolution, some radical groups emerged in the chaotic situation of the early days of the revolution. These radical groups became particularly active, when the early optimism of the Baloch faded. As a result several radical groups came into the scene. The notables were *Sāzmān-i dimukrātīk-i Mardum-i Balochistān* [Balochistan People Democratic Organization], and *Baloch Rāj-i Zrombesh* [Balochistan National Movement]. The latter was a coalition of several leftist revolutionary Baloch youth organizations. The unifying point among them was their anti-assimilation sentiments. Their demands included redrawing the boundaries of Balochistan based on historical realities, declaration of Balochi language as the official language in Balochistan, provincial autonomy for Balochistan, and recognition of the Baloch paramilitary forces for Balochistan.<sup>64</sup>

However, soon after the approval of the Iranian constitution, which had been boycotted by the Baloch, all nationalists in Balochistan were disarmed by Khomeini, who stated that there is no nationalism in Iran.<sup>65</sup> When on December 3, 1979 the Assembly of Experts approved the new constitution of the Islamic Republic, the Baloch Democratic Organization *Sazemn-i Demokratik Baloch* and other Baloch civil society organizations protested and clashes took place with Revolutionary Guards. The situation de-escalated, when Khomeini in January 1980, promised to amend the constitution, and give them regional autonomy. But it was merely a tactic, as in 1981 all Baloch organizations were banned. Nonetheless, the radical groups found an opportunity, when Iraq attacked Iran. Radical Baloch

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<sup>63</sup> Habibullah Sarbazi, Director of BAC, interview by author, Dubai UAE, February 14, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Breseeg, *Baloch Nationalism*, 361-364.

<sup>65</sup> Rouhullah Khmoeni, *Sahifh Imam*, (Tehran: Foundation for Collection and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Thoughts and Ideas, 1999) Vol. 13, 88.

groups got Iraq as an international backer once again.<sup>66</sup> Two groups, namely, *Wahdat-i Baloch*, and *Junbish-i Mujāhidīn-i Baloch* were of particular influence. In 1984, they intensified their activities. But their activities once again stopped following the Iran-Iraq ceasefire in 1988.<sup>67</sup>

In the 1990s, Baloch radical groups re-emerged one after another. But, whereas up to 1980s ethnic aspects of Baloch radicalism were predominant in their activities, this time their religious radicalism was also evident. The first religious Baloch radical group is associated with Molavi Murad Barakzehi, who was the principal of a religious school in Saravan. He along with another Baloch-Sunni activist named Habibullah Huseinbor, co-founded of *Sāzmān-i Jahānī-i Ahl Sunnat-i Īrān* [Global Organization of Sunnis of Iran (GOSI)].<sup>68</sup> The GOSI from the very start had a militant approach and its militant wing was operating under a Baloch guerrilla called Hamid Nohtani. It had also a cultural wing, which published a magazine titled *Azān-i Mujāhid* from Quetta, Pakistan with Habibullah Hussainbor as its chief editor.<sup>69</sup> Belonging to a well-known family and being the son of Sufi Dost Mohammad, a famous theologian in Balochistan, Molavi Murad succeeded in attracting a good number of people around himself. But, lacking a powerful backer, the GOSI was short-lived. Following a general amnesty, many of its members including Molavi Murad and Habibullah returned Back to Balochistan. Shortly thereafter, in 1984 the intelligent agency of Islamic Republic summoned Habibullah Hussinbor to Tehran and since then nothing has been heard about him. Over time, almost all key figures of the GOSI either were assassinated or disappeared.<sup>70</sup>

In the early 1990s, a radical religious group called *Sipāh-i Muhammad Rasūlullāh* [the Army of the Prophet Muhammad (APM)], was founded by Mawla Bakhsh Drakhshan. The APM started series of attacks on Iranian outposts. This group was less organized as compared to GOSI. Its cultural

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<sup>66</sup> As mentioned earlier, Iraq was supporting BLF but stopped supporting it in 1975 after reaching an agreement with the Pahlavi regime, what is popularly known as the Algeria Accord.

<sup>67</sup> Breseeg, *Baloch Nationalism*, 368-372.

<sup>68</sup> Javad Haydari, a former member of GOSI, interview by author, Dubai UAE, February 9, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Haydari, a former member.

<sup>70</sup> Haydari, a former member.

activities were confined to cassettes of the speeches of Derakhshan, in which he would criticize the Islamic Republic's religious assimilation policies. The AMP was also disintegrated after the assassination of its leader in 2006. Following that, in 1996 another radical organization namely *Gurūh-i Furqān* [Furqan Group] emerged under the leadership of a person named Abdol Jalil Kambarzahi. It also carried out some attacks on Iranian security personnel. The group disintegrated following the assassination of its leader on March 21, 2012.<sup>71</sup>

The most important radical group in post-1979 Revolution Balochistan has been *Jundullah* (Army of God) founded by 18-year-old Abdolmalek Rigi in 1990s.<sup>72</sup> The founder of the *Jundullah* had gained his early education in a madrasa. Learning from the experience of its predecessors, *Jundullah* proved to be the most effective group to violently confront the ethno-religious assimilation project in Balochistan. This group also attracted the attention of international media, and gained much more popularity among the foreign-based Iranian opposition. It succeeded in killing hundreds of Iranian military personnel, including many high-ranking generals.<sup>73</sup>

With the passage of time and following the course of his interaction with the opposition groups, Abdolmalek became clearer about what type of ethno-religious demands should be made. While his earlier demands were confined to some basic religious, social, and political demands, such as the release of a few Baloch-Sunni religious activists, the scope of his demands later on widened to include regional autonomy, constitutional change, cultural freedom and above all a stoppage of ethno-religious assimilation policies. In one of his video messages to the Iranian authorities, he said: "Our religions are different, our languages are different, our cultures are different, our regions are distinct and our histories are different. Why are you [the Shia Persian] making rules of life for us?"<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Sunni News*, "Molavī Abdol Jalīl Rahbar-i Hizbul Furqān Irān bih Shahadat rasīd," [Mawlavi Abdol Jalil, the leader of Furqan Prty martyred]. March 22, 2012. [http://www.sunni-news.net/en/articles.aspx?article\\_no=21517](http://www.sunni-news.net/en/articles.aspx?article_no=21517).

<sup>72</sup> Zahid Ali Khan, "Balochistan Factor in Pak-Iran Relations: Opportunities and Constraints" *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (January-June 2012): 130.

<sup>73</sup> Khan, *Balochistan Factor*.

<sup>74</sup> Abdol Malek Rigi, "Speech audio file," n/d. *Adalat News*, June 22, 2016. <http://bit.ly/30jJaAr>

Later on, in order to get more international support for its demands, and to attract non-Sunni Iranian opposition groups, the organization renamed itself as the People's Resistance Movement of Iran (PRMI).<sup>75</sup> The PRMI succeeded in damaging the prestige of the Islamic Republic that claimed to be very powerful and secure. While earlier groups would attack soft targets such as ordinary security outposts in remote areas of Balochistan, PRMI's attacks were very objective and symbolic. For instance, on March 20, 2006, it attacked the convoy of the governor of Balochistan, killing dozens of people. Similarly, on Feb 2, 2007, a dramatic attack was launched on a bus full of Islamic Revolutionary Guards officers in the heart of Zahedan city, Balochistan.<sup>76</sup> The PRMI was also the first organization, which used suicide bombs to carry out its objectives in Balochistan. In one of its suicide attacks in October 2009, the PRMI killed General Commander Noorali Shoostari, a high ranking commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps along with his entire team.<sup>77</sup>

Apart from being successful in its military activities, the PRMI widened its ethno-religious demands further and began championing the cause of ethno-religious rights for all ethno-religious groups in Iran. Consequently, the non-Baloch ethno-religious groups in Iran also began developing sympathy for the PRMI. This was a serious warning to Iran's ruling Shia elite, who has tried to keep the PRMI at a low profile, and referred to it as an anti-Shia terrorist group, or a drug-trafficking miscreant group. Therefore, the Islamic Republic intensified its efforts to control it at any cost. Finally, on February 23, 2010, the Iranian government claimed that it had captured Abdolmalek through a complicated intelligence operation, and on June 20, 2010, it was announced that he had been executed in the Evin prison of Tehran.<sup>78</sup>

The PRMI chose a new leader, and carried out some retaliatory attacks. In order to rejuvenate the organization, the new leadership attempted to

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<sup>75</sup> Khan, *Balochistan Factor*, 131.

<sup>76</sup> Khan, *Balochistan Factor*, 131.

<sup>77</sup> *Rūznāmah-i Jumhūrī-i Islāmī*, "Sardār Shoostari bih Shahādat rasīd," [chief commander Shoostari martyred], *Daily Jumhuri Islami* (October 19, 2009), 1.

<sup>78</sup> Ali Behmanesh, "Shikār dar Āsimān: Nāguftahā-yi Dastgīrī-i Abdol Malek Rīgī bih Rivāyat-i Mas'ūl-i Parvandah," [Hunting in the sky: the narration of secret arrest of Adol Malek Rigi by the person in charge], *Sharq*, 25 February 2016, 2.



restructure it. As a part of its restructuring, the name of the organization was changed to *Jaishul Adl* [Army of Justice]. However, it seems that the restructuring did not work well. There arose a split between the moderate and hardline members of the group, as the former wanted the group to focus only on religious demands, while the latter wanted to struggle to achieve wider ethno-religious demands. As result, the hardliners under the leadership of Abdurrauf Rigi, the elder brother of Abdolmalek, defected from the Army of Justice (AJ), and formed a new group called Army of Assistance (AA).<sup>79</sup> The AA was very short-lived, as within a few months after its inception in August 2014, its founder and leader Abdurrauf was assassinated.<sup>80</sup> Not much later, some members of the AJ also defected, and founded *Harkat-i Ansār Īrān* [Movement of the Supporter of Iran (MSI)] under the leadership of Shafi Muhammad Miri, a former colleague of Abdolmalek Rigi. This organization was also short-lived, as its leader Shafi Mohammad was kidnapped and so disappeared.<sup>81</sup> However, *Jayshul 'Adl* is still operating under the leadership of Sallahuddin Faruqi, formerly Abdolmalek Rigi's deputy for military operations. It is still carrying out attacks on Iranian security outposts. But it is not as popular as its mother organization – the PRMI.

## 5. Conclusion

As tried to be shown throughout this study, Baloch Sunnis have been resisting the ethno-religious assimilation policy of the Shia Persian dominated centre since the very incorporation of Balochistan into Iran in 1928. However, the level of resistance and its nature have been different. The overall nature of the Baloch-Sunni response to assimilation policies has been a mixture of accommodation and separation. The most effective force resisting the ethno-religious assimilation policy has been the religious

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<sup>79</sup> *BBC Persian*, “Abdurrauf Rigi rahbar-i gurūh-i Jayshunnasr dar Pakistan kushtah shud,” [Abdurrauf Rigi the leader of Jayshunnasr was killed in Pakistan]. January 4, 2017. [http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/08/140828\\_u14\\_iran\\_rigi\\_pakistan](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/08/140828_u14_iran_rigi_pakistan).

<sup>80</sup> *Deutsche Welle Persian* “Abdurrauf Rigi, sarkardah-i gurūh-i Jayshunnasr kushtah shud,” [Abdurrauf Rigi the head of Jayshunnasr was killed]. January 4, 2018. <https://goo.gl/hgWbza>.

<sup>81</sup> *Hasht-i Subh News Agency*. “Halākat-i farmāndah-i sīāsī, nizāmī-i gurūhak-i tirurīstī-i Ansārul Furqān,” [Military and political leader of the terrorist group Ansaralfqan was killed]. February 10, 2017. <https://goo.gl/RfCPvQ>.

class. This class is the most organized and popular force in Balochistan, which also effective in defying the assimilation policy of the centre with an accommodation-oriented approach. Besides the religious class, the educated elite including Baloch-Sunni politicians and youth have also started to play a role in countering the assimilation project. Finally, there have also been some radical movements, who are by and large separatist in nature, and have been trying to resist the ethno-religious encroachment of Tehran through armed struggle, but with little success. Looking at the fate of radical militant organizations, both with nationalistic orientation and religious orientation, one can argue that civil society activists and the religious leadership with an accommodation-oriented approach have been more successful in countering the assimilation project of the Islamic Republic than those, who have opted to use violence against it.

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