Chapter 5

Rights of Religious Minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Muslims make up 99.4% of Iran’s population and non-Muslims account for 0.3% while another 0.3% come under the ‘undeclared’ category (National Population and Housing Census 2011). The non-Muslim religious minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran are only about one percent. This chapter focuses on the relationship between the state and non-Muslim religious minorities in Iran. The religious minorities of Iran are Armenians, Assyrians, Baha’is, Chaldeans, Christian, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Iran has many diverse ethnic groups with a total of 96 tribes spread all over the nation. The total population of the country is 74 million consisting of many religious and ethno-linguistic groups. While Persians make up 51% of the Iranian population, the Azeris make up 24%, the Gilakis and the Mazandaranis 8%, the Kurds 7%, the Arabs 3%, the Baluchi, Lurs, and Turkmen 2% each and another 2% consists of the Laks, Qahqai, Armenians, Persian Jews, Georgians, Assyrians, Circassians, Tats, Mandaeans, Gypsies, Brahuis and Hazakhs put together. All other ethnicities make up 1%. (UNFPA IRAN 2011, Samii 2000: 128). The officially recognized regional languages of Iran are Azeri, Kurdish, Mazandaran, Gilaki, Baluchi and Arabic.

The ethnic identities are based on language, religion, cultural specificity, and even territorial identification. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 is interpreted as the victory of the Shi’a religious leadership, as the desires of other groups who had actively participated in and supported it were never recognized. In the last decade of both the 19th and 20th centuries, tremendous changes took place in the social, religious and political arenas of Iran and all these changes
contributed in determining the demography of present-day Iran. The ancient Persian civilization, Zoroastrian religion, Islamic invasion, Shi‘a religious transformation, the reign of the Safavid dynasty and the Qajar dynasty, the discovery of Oil, Russian and British interests, of the reign of Reza Shah of the Pahlavi Dynasty, Tudeh Party, 1953 coup against Mossadegh and Islamic Revolution of 1979 are the major historical milestones for Iran. As these changes took place, the minority communities, while occasionally active, were mostly silent. In the beginning of the 20th century, Iran witnessed a Constitutional revolution and in 1911 a new constitution and parliament were established. For the first time, some minority communities were officially recognized, and their rights specifically mentioned in the constitution. However, the Baha‘is, a non-Muslim religious minority, have no privileges or rights in Iran. The main reason for this is that the Baha‘is were a reformist movement evolved from the Shi‘a sect of Islam. The developmental and existential challenges of the Baha‘is community in post-revolution Iran will be historically explored from the perspective of human rights principles in this chapter.

Post-Revolution Iran formulated the ideology of a state in the form of an Islamic Republic situated within the modern political framework. These new ideas were formulated by the religious and political Islamic intellectual Ayatollah Khomeini. These were mostly borrowed from the ideas of the intellectual trend of Islam that was discussed by the Shi‘a seminary of Qom. Islamic state of Iran was created not only from the Islamic Revolution of 1979; its origin can be traced back to more than half a century of ideological developments. The Islamic religious ideas had been actively developing in the Iranian society as it gave a hope of uprising against the dictatorship and imperialism. The independent stream of the Islamic doctrines of Twelver
Shi’ism was the religious tradition of the state accepted from the earlier times of the Qajar Dynasty.

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutionally recognized few minorities viz, the Armenians, the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Christians, the Zoroastrians, and the Jews. Their identity is a mix of ethnic, linguistic and religious ones. Their religious traditions have been connected with non-Islamic backgrounds such as Christian, Jew or traditional independent preaching. But the Baha’is and their identity were not recognized or considered as Islamic or non-Islamic.

MINORITY RIGHTS IN ISLAM IN IRANIAN LAW

In 622 AD, Prophet Muhammad reached Madina (*the Hijrah*) and preached a monotheist religion. While Islam entered Madina, there were also many who followed different faiths. From this time onwards, Muhammad faced the important question of non-Muslims’ rights. The Prophet prepared and declared a Constitution (*Sahifah*) for Madina in which all the rights and duties of different ethnic or religious groups had been mentioned. Through this processes Muhammad became the supreme leader and established an internal autonomy in Madina. Article 18 of this document sites equal right to protection of life for all Muslims: “The security of God (granted under this constitution) is one. This protection can be granted even by the humblest of the believers (that would be equally binding for all)”. In Article 20, it is written that: “A Jew, who obeys us (the state) shall enjoy the same right of life protection (as the believers do), as long as they (the believers) are not wronged by him (the Jew), and he does not help (others) against them”. Article 63 sites that “Verily Allah and the Prophet Muhammad, the messenger of God, are the protectors of good citizens and of those who fear from Allah” (*Sahifah*). Here it can be understood that since the time of the
Madina invasion, the Islamic community had laws for the protection of the non-Muslim minorities. Islam originated and developed as a religion and a state, hence, the question of consensus with other religions was considered by Muhammad. The Qur’an contains further explanations regarding the rights of non-Muslim minorities in its suras. Majid Khadduri (1946), who studied and published an article titled “Human Rights in Islam”, cited the Qur’anic suras and explained various rights of the non-Muslim minorities. Equality has been ensured in the field of personal safety for every individual living in the Muslim state, irrespective of whether they are Muslim or not: “There is no superiority of an Arab over except as far as his personal piety is concerned” (Khadduri 1946: 78). According to the Shari’a, the People of the Book (ahl al-kitab) were granted protection from the Islamic state, their social intercourse was allowed. In the expeditions and conquest of the new regions, Muslims included some other sections in this recognized categories. In the Qur’an the names of Jews, Sabaeans, and Christians, and later Zoroastrians (Majus) are enlisted and eventually Buddhists and others are recognized. Article 12 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran cites what will be the nature of Iran’s religious policies clearly:

The official religion of Iran is Islam of the Ja’fari, 12 imam sect, and this article is inalterable in perpetuity. The other sect of Islam, whether Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, Hanbali or Zaidi are regarded with full respect and the followers of these sects enjoy complete freedom in performing their religious rituals according to their own jurisprudence, and in respect of their religious instructions and personal status (Including marriage, divorce, inheritance and framing of wills) and the causes relating thereto are considered to be official in courts of law. In every region where the followers of any of these sects
enjoy a majority of local regulations will be formulated according to precepts of the particular sects within jurisdiction of the council of that region with the assurance that the rights of followers of other sects will be preserved (Constitution of Iran 1979).

Article 12 of the constitution stipulates that the official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Shi'ite school of thought. According to this article, the adherents of other Islamic faiths, mostly Sunni schools, who are not defined as religious minorities, are “to be accorded full respect”. They enjoy the right to perform their own religious rites and apply their own Shari'a in personal status. Moreover, municipal laws in areas where the adherents of any of these schools are in the majority, are subject to the standards of that specific Shari'a. However, they face certain limitations and may not hold certain posts such as that of the President. The following article also explains the behavioral pattern and their conduct, that may determine the future of their existence:

National sovereignty, according to the Qoranic verse, “God forbids you not, as regards those who have not fought you in religion’s cause, nor expelled you from your aspirations that you should be kind to them and act justly towards them: surely God loves the just.” (60: 8), the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Moslems are obliged to conduct themselves with moderation, justice and equity towards non-Moslems and should observe their human rights. The provisions of this article hold valid only for those who do not conspire or act against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Constitution of Iran 1979).
The following article explains the religions that are recognized as non-Muslim religions under the new constitution of Iran. Article 13 sited that:

Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are the only recognized minority religious groups who, within the limit of law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and in personal status and religious teaching, they may act in conformity with the dictates their own creed (Const vitution of Iran 1979).

According to the Constitution of Iran, based on Shari'a standards, the principle of religious tolerance is only shown towards the adherents of monotheistic religions (ahl al-kitab). Article 13 states that: “The Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities. They are free, within the limits of the law, to perform their religious rites, and may exercise their religious regulations in personal status”.

However, inter-religion marriage with Muslims is prohibited and missionary work towards converting Muslims are punishable. Although, Iran's legal system does not address Shari'a concept of dhimmis for non-Muslims, it applies Shari'a laws in public areas like criminal law. In other words, non-Muslims are subject to the discriminatory treatment and face many limitations as second-class citizens. In political matters, they are prohibited from holding high public posts or serving in the army ranks. The Constitution, however, provides for separate representation for religious minorities in the Parliament.

It may be said that although religious minorities are granted religious liberty and enjoy constitutional protection to practice their religious laws in personal matters, the Constitution upholds “the official religion” and accords people's
rights based on religious affiliation. In fact, minorities' rights are limited to what the official religion permits. In theory and practice, they are treated as second class citizens. Religious minorities other than ahl al-kitab, therefore, can’t claim constitutional protection. The Constitution does not grant them religious freedom and they are not allowed to practice their faith publicly. Doing so would invoke the vague concept of anti-Islam or activities against the Islamic Republic mentioned in Article 14. As this Article stipulates, Shari’a standards will determine their status.

The recognized Dhimmis were have right to receive guarantee for life and body, guarantee for their property, freedom of their movement and religious practices. Islamic law and legal theory is not uniform in the Islamic world and not a homogenous in nature, it is varied and depends on the different schools and countries. Whenever the expansion of the Islamic world happened through the holy war “Jihad”, as Mayer explains, “Muslim conquerors presenting the conquered peoples with choice of conversion to Islam or the Sword, conquered Christians and Jews, known as ahl al kitab, or people of the book, were allowed to persist in their belief” (Mayer 2013: 137). Under the International Human Rights law, it is never permissible to discriminate on the basis of religion:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin (UDHR 1948).

This is the basic rights for the life guarantee for the religious minorities. This UDHR article guarantees against the religious or any other form of discrimination. The United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) sited that: “Any advocacy of national, racial or
religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law”.

Article 12 of the Constitution stipulates that the official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Shi'ite school of thought. According to this article, the adherents of other Islamic faiths, mostly Sunni schools, who are not defined as religious minorities, are "to be accorded full respect”. They enjoy the right to perform their own religious rites and apply their own Shari’a in personal status. Moreover, municipal laws in areas where the adherents of any of these school are in the majority are subject to the standards of that specific Shari’a as well in the public domain, however, they face certain limitations and may not hold certain posts such as that of leader or President.

As noted earlier, based on Shari’a standards, the Constitution observes the principle of religious tolerance only towards the adherents of monotheistic religions (ahl al-kitab). Article 13 States that: “The Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities. They are free, within the limits of the law, to perform their religious rites, and may exercise their religious regulations in personal status”. In the first Constitution of Iran 1909 sited that:

All individuals including Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians recognized as full and given equal rights before the law. All individuals (including Foreigners) were safeguarded in respect to their lives, property, homes, and honor, from every kind of interference. The authority and the legitimacy of the king was bestowed or vested by the will of the people. Further protection was offered to individual private ownership (Iranian Constitution 1909).
The first constitution of Iran recognized the minorities are full citizen of the country, such as Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. One of the important things is that at that time also “Baha’is” were not considered as a citizen of the country. The freedom of expression, assembly, press and publication were guaranteed except for heretical books and matters harmful to the principles of Islam. Censorship was prohibited. Women did not have the right to vote and this was one of the important and notable specific laws of the 1909 Constitution of Iran. One of the paradoxes is that women were active volunteers of the Constitutional Revolution in 1909 (Borbor 2006: 267).

The important shift from the first constitution of Iran to the 1979 Constitution in the case of religious minorities is that they were categorized as minorities. Although Iran's legal system does not address Shari'a concept of dhimis for non-Muslims, it applies Shari'a laws in public areas like criminal law, and in other words, non-Muslims are subject to the discriminatory treatment and face many limitations as second-class citizens. In political matters, they are prohibited from holding high public posts or serving in the army ranks. The Constitution, however, provides for separate representation for religious minorities in the Parliament.

Although religious minorities, as mentioned above, are granted religious liberty and they enjoy constitutional protection to practice their religious laws in personal aspects, the Constitution upholds “the official religion” and accords people's rights based on religious affiliation and, in fact, minority rights are limited to what the official religion permits. Religious minorities other than those mentioned above are not accorded the status of recognized minorities by the Constitution and do not enjoy specific rights or freedoms. They are, therefore, subject to the general laws of the country and the provisions of Article 14 of the constitution, which reads: “The government of
the Islamic Republic of Iran and Muslims shall treat non-Muslims according to virtue and public morals and Islamic justice, and to honor their civil rights. This principle will be applied only to those who do not become involved in conspiracies and activities which are against Islam and Islamic Republic of Iran”.

Article 26 of the Iranian Constitution sites that:

The people shall be free to establish religious, political and professional parties, associations and Islamic societies or the societies of recognized religious minorities provided that parties or societies are not inimical to the independence, liberty, sovereignty, national unity of the country nor to the Islamic precepts and the foundation of the Islamic Republic. Individuals are free to participate in such groups. No one may be prevented or forced to participate in such groups (Constitution of Iran 1979).

Article 26 in such a way restrict and curtail the freedom of religious minorities of Iran. “Article 14 and 26 set up the basis for depriving minorities of rights and freedoms for being against the principles of Islam and the Islamic Republic” (Mayer 2013: 144).

Non-Muslim people are responsible to pay poll tax to the Muslim regimes for their permanent residence in the Islamic countries. According to Shari’a, a Muslim is a full citizen in the Islamic country. All others statuses have been determined by what is said about them in the Qur’an and Hadiths. Abdullahi An-Na’im discusses about such stipulations:

*dhimmis* undertake to pay *jizya* or poll tax and submit to Muslim sovereignty and authority in all public affairs. Unbelievers may be granted *aman* or safe conduct which secures their persons and
property for the duration of the *aman* period. Moreover unbelievers that are permanent residents of an Islamic state may be recognized as *dhimmis* (An Na’im 1990: 24).

‘Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights’ (UIDHR) has declared on the Islamic standpoint and world views in the Islamic perspective on rights. It may structurally resemble the UN declaration of ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (UDHR). UIDHR included the articles for the protection and rights of the religious minorities. The UIDHR has provisions for minority rights in the sub-heading of Rights of Minorities:

(a). The Qura’nic principle “There is no compulsion in religion” shall govern the religious rights of non-Muslim minorities. (b). In a Muslim country religious minorities shall have the choice to be governed in respect of their civil and personal matter by Islamic Law or their own laws (UIDHR 1981)

Non-Muslim religious minorities’ right has specified according to the *Sharia* principles. *Shari’a* looks at the individuals of religious minorities not as independent persons. *Shari’a* treats the minorities as not equal to the community of Islam. In the criminal cases and civil cases procedures are implied differently. As explained by An Na’im: “special criminal penalty for an unproven accusation of fornication does not apply unless the victim is a Muslim” (An Na’im 1990: 24).

The Islamic countries are generally looked upon as undemocratic nations since their law is based on the principles of Shari’a. If we look into this subject closely, we could understand that Islam from its beginning, from the time of Prophet Muhammad, insisted on rule of law. According to early practices of Islam, an Islamic nation accommodates other recognized
religions and grants them freedom. But the freedom the Islamic country has
granted to the non-Islamic people was with discriminative principles. But the
merit of the Islamic religious practices in earlier times meant a whole of
advanced practices compared with many other societies. In the twentieth
century, after the World War II, European liberalism and democracy became
more powerful. Islam’s considerable accommodation of others and practices
of laws suited to different times emanate from the freedom of changing the
law through *Ijthihad, reasoned interpretation*.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the decisions of the elected President and the
parliamentarians undergoes the scrutiny of the Council of Guardians, whose
members are nominated from the Islamic seminary, the criteria for their
selection being their scholarship in Shi’a Islamic law. The former reformist
President of the Iran, Mohammad Khatami attempted to make amendments
to increase the power of the President. Such attempts were spoiled by the
intervention of the *Vilayat-e faqih* and the Council of Guardians.

The elected parliamentarians are taking oath by the holy book. Islam using
the Qur’an and the other four minority members are taking oath in the
presence of their own books. Article 67 sited the specific law: “In the name
of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. I do swear by Almighty and
trusting my human dignity to here by undertakes to guard the sanctity of
Islam and the fruit of the Islamic Revolution of the Iranian Nation and the
principles of the Islamic principles and to uphold with the faith and justice”
(Constitution of Iran 1979).

This first part will be the compulsory part for the every member should take
oath. In the second part individuals can be take their holy book. In this oath
described that the beliefs and teaching of the Islam. The followed part of the
oath has describing some other points: “In upholding the independence and
exaltation of the country and committed to the preservation of the rights of the nation and service to the people, to uphold the integrity of the constitution, and in speaking, writing, and expressing my views, to consider only the independence of the country and the liberty and interests of the people” (Article 67: Constitution of Iran 1979). Article 144 of the Islamic Constitution of Iran sites the Military and its responsibility for protecting nation. “The army of the Islamic Republic of Iran shall be an Islamic army of popular and ideological nature and shall recruit competent person faithful in the objectives of the Islamic Revolution and devoted to the cause of their realization”. Constitutionally recognized religious minority categories are admitted into the army for mandatory military service in college days. But their service will not be considered career military officers. Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution Article 13 guaranteed the educational rights of the recognized religious minorities such as Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians able to “perform their own religious rites, and to act according to their own canon in personal and religious education” (Constitution of Iran 1979)

Article 64 of the Constitution directly addresses religious minorities and their place within the Iranian state by detailing the division of Majlis representatives for minority religious groups. According to this article, the recognized religious minorities are allowed four representatives in Majlis. The Jewish and Zoroastrian communities elect one Majlis representative each, the Assyrian and Chaldean Christians jointly elect a single representative, and the Armenian Christians elect their own representative. In 1980, Ayatollah Allameh Yahya Nuri argued that “an individual’s geographical, national, ethnic, or linguistic background” was not important; as long as “they share the beliefs of Islam,” there would be no discrimination (Sansarian 2004: 30). The Iranian Constitution recognized the specific minorities and they have some rights, but they are not considered as equal
citizen of the country (Sansarian 2004: 30). This inequality continues even today through the Iranian jurisprudence based on Shi’a doctrines. In 1981, Islamic Penal Code of Iran was presented in the Iranian parliament. Within this Act also the religious minorities are discriminated (Price 2005: 311). The Penal Code of Iran classifies the crimes and punishments and it imposes great strictness to the non-Muslims than Muslim citizen (Price 2005: 311). Capital punishment in the case of conviction of persons belonging to the minority community is a normal occurrence (Sansarian 2004: 132-33).

Religious minorities are allowed to manage their lower level courts to resolve their disputes like divorce, personal disputes, marriage, family matters, inheritance etc., but the ratification is required for them from the state authority in the final decisions (Sansarian 2004: 312). However, the dispute between Muslims and Non-Muslims will be accepted at Islamic Courts, but in such cases, the non-Muslims are disadvantaged because of the Islamic court practicing differential treatment to them (Price 2005: 312).

Non-Muslim minorities are facing differential treatment and discrimination in educational institutions. In 1981, Ministry of Education and Training determined to introduce a text book for moral religious learning. It was in the Persian language and no other language was permitted. Wearing the Islamic dress code is mandatory for the girls and women in educational institutions belonging to the minority sections (Sansarian 2004: 80). The posts of teachers and principals are not reserved for these categories and Muslims are normally appointed to these posts (Sansarian 2004: 77).

**Armenians of Iran**

Armenians are one of the recognized non-Muslim religious minority groups in Iran. Their tradition could be traced back to the pre-historic times. Armenian communities primarily dwell in eastern Anatolia and in the
outskirts of Mount Ararat. From the Greek and Persian archival sources from 500 BC onwards there is reference to the land called Armenia, and its people as the Armenians. By 70 BC, the Armenian Empire stretched from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. The territory was frequently a focus of power struggle between the Roman and Parthian Empires. The Armenian Apostolic Church, an ancient branch of Eastern Christianity, became the church of the Armenian state in AD 314. It along with the Armenian alphabet (created in AD 404), enhanced the distinctive identity of the Armenians. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, for three decades, Russia captured all of the Persian territory north of the Arax river and during this period the Armenian communities were under the Russian power. Russia, Turkey and Persia came to a trilateral treaty; through these external interventions many Armenians were forced to migrate from their land. In the early part of the twentieth century they faced genocide in Turkey. Ayhan Aktar, narrating the background of the Armenian massacre, says the following about the justification provided by the Turkish side:

They argued that during World War I the Ottoman Armenians staged an armed uprising in Eastern Anatolia and collaborated with the invading Russian army. Hence the Young Turks in power known as Ittihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (the Committee of Union and Progress, hereafter the CUP) in Istanbul decided to ‘relocate’ the Armenian population to deserts in Syria and Iraq (Aktar 2007: 242).

During the Genocide and displacements, there were attacks based on gender also. Katherine Derderian explained that:

Gender-specific practices marked every stage of the Armenian Genocide. Sexual insults, intimidation, and violence reinforced the everyday marginalization of the Armenian community in the Ottoman
Empire and may have constituted a violent precedent to the 1915–17 Genocide. Gender ideology influenced the perpetration of the Genocide, beginning with the separation and massacre of the men, which left Armenian women and children defenseless. Rape, kidnapping, sex slavery, and forced conversion to Islam furthered the genocidal program, labor and biological assimilation (Derderian 2005: 3).

Between 1894 and 1920, the Ottoman Empire destroyed more than two third of the population in a series of massacres. Armenian circumstances historical challenges sited that:

A certain degree of backlash on the part of Iranians facing general difficulties connected with modernization and Western imperialism, as well as the effects of the 1894-96 massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the “Armeno-Tatar battles” of the Caucasus from 1905 to 1906, and the growth of at times antithetical Iranian and Armenian nationalism created tense situations for Armenians (Arakun 1997: 27).

Aram Arakun explains further that,

The support of the Qajar dynasty and many Iranian officials, along with prodding by Western states and Christian missionaries continued improvements in the status of the Iranian Armenians (Arakun 1997: 27).

Thereafter, there was a period of Armenian recognition in the Iranian soil. Armenians played a key role in the first constitutional movement of Iran during 1906-09 and this was explained by Aram Arakun:
The Gilan Armenians, in particular, played an important role in the constitutional movement. They contributed fighters to reestablish the Iranian parliament and constitution in 1909, and a prominent defender of the new regime, Eprem Khan Dawtean. Locally, they elected a representative to the Gilan Anjuman and helped introduce socialism into Gilan (Arakun 1997: 27).

An independent Armenian Republic was established on 28 May 1918, but it hardly lasted for two years. The Armenian Republic collapsed due to the miserable economic conditions and the inflow of refugees from Turkish Armenia. Sansarian points out that the deterioration was due to “Kemal Ataturk’s successful military ventures against the Allied powers, ideological and personal friction combined with political immaturity within the Armenian leadership; and the advance of Bolsheviks into the Caucasus” (Sansarian 2004: 35). In World War I, Turkey occupied majority area of the Western Armenia, Bolshevik Red Army captured the eastern part of the Armenia and they established “Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic” at last in 1920.

Armenian’s cultural contact with the Persian cultures can be traced back to the Zoroastrian period. Armenian Christianity retained some Zoroastrian practices and rituals. The Armenian presence in Iran predates the Safavid period (1501-1722), the Armenian were mass transported from their ancestral land to Persian territory during the early seventh century by Shah Abbas. Sansarian observed that the reasons for the deportation were:, one, a protective military measure against the invasion of the Ottoman Empire, and two, grand plan to modernize the capital city of Isfahan by advancing international trade (Sansarian 2004: 35).
Ayhan Aktar explains about the past conditions of the Armenians and how they were displaced: the prevailing structure was the unquestioned belief that Muslims and Christians had lived peacefully together within the Ottoman millet system until it collapsed in the second half of nineteenth century. This collapse was, to a large extent, the fault of the Great Powers who intervened in the domestic affairs of the Ottoman Empire and exploited the position of the non-Muslim minorities living there. Later, the Armenian revolutionary elites, captivated by the false promises of self-determination and independence, took up arms and organized rebellions against the Sultan. Finally, during World War One the Armenians sided with the invading Russian army and consequently had to be deported to Syria and Iraq” (Aktar 2007: 242).

Katharine Derderian gives an account of Armenian genocide:

Early in 1915 measures against the Armenian population began with the disarmament of Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman military and the search for arms in private homes. On April 24, 1915, prominent Armenians in Istanbul and other cities were arrested and executed, effectively eliminating the community’s intellectual and political leadership. This was followed by mass killings of men of military age and deportations of the remaining Armenians, during which the CUP and Talaat’s Ministry of the Interior coordinated the activities of the regional authorities.

“Teskilati Mahsusa”, a special organization which was formed for the operations of deportations and Genocide, did this job as a resettlement of the Armenians. Since the deportation started, many of the Armenian male
population vanished, it has immediately affected to the women and children of that society. In the Syrian desert have a concentration camp was opened for Armenians; they were victim of hunger, thirst, exhaustion, illness and massacres. (Derderian 2005: 2). According to the report of the eye witness, Sansarian reports, “Forced conversion to Islam, discriminatory measures, high taxation, and instances of clerical agitation against the Christian population”. (Sansarian 2004: 36). The period saw struggle to sustain their beliefs in Christianity and Armenian identities.

In twentieth century, in the capital of Iran, Tehran and north western provinces, the Armenians became a significant visible demographic group. Armenians in Persia excelled as small artisans, and within a short period, they involved in international trade, and they were integrated into the modern Iranian economy. Armenian people were actively participating in the constitutional movement of the Iran, in the beginning of the twentieth century. Reza Shah was sympathetic to the Armenians in the beginning, and then a deputy was allowed to the Malis and permitted their cultural autonomy in Iran. But very soon in 1938-39, Reza Shah ordered to close down all the minority schools of the Armenians. They were avoided from the government employment.

Sansarian observed that: “While the British saw this as part of a pro-Nazi tendency designed to arouse the fanatical religious segments of the population, most Armenians attributed it to Reza Shah’s connection to and personal admiration for Kemal Ataturk of Turkey” (Sansarian 2004: 38). Reza Shah had his own policies for building Iranian nationalism. His mission was to strengthen the nationality as well as to decrease the foreign involvement and dependency in the development of the Iranian nation. Sansarian observed that:
Others have seen it as part of the grand plan of pan-Iranian activities in the country. Many villages in Iranian Azerbaijan had ancient Armenian names until the 1930s when Reza Shah Persianized their names. Both closure of minority schools and the changes in the names of villages, cities, streets, etc (Sansarian 2004: 38).

During the rule of Reza Shah, Armenian internal autonomy was permitted and the state granted security to the minority communities. Under the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah, the state became more powerful, and then the local clergy’s involvement in the rule decreased. Socio-economic condition of the religious minority of Armenians has improved through the higher level of business relations and development. Under the Shah’s authoritarian system, the Armenian deputies were prioritized than the Muslim deputies. Armenians were active in various areas of the society, except politics and military. Armenians published many journals in Persian and Armenian language, most of the articles narrating the story of the Armenian Republic of 1918, Armenian grievances against Turkish government and details pertaining to the story of Armenian genocide of 1915.

Sansarian observed that still the Armenians were treated with suspicion. The Iranian political realm was never opened to non-Muslims in the ministerial and high ranking posts; frequently they were accommodated in the lower rank of the military and was considered for the post of assistant ministers etc. Armenians are well aware about their marginal social status in Iran.

Sansarian evaluated that Armenians: “…as indigenous Christians more at ease with Western ways, they satisfied the Iranian thirst for Western economic connections, lifestyle, and ethos”(Sansarian 2004: 39). Armenians were conditioned now to surrender every aspiration before the big narrative of the Shi’a religion, as Sansarian says: “With no territorial claim on Persian
sovereignty, the Armenians were safe subordinates who could not and would not rebel. They really had no basis for a rebellion; they had cultural autonomy and relative respect’ (Sansarian 2004: 39).

Armenians are the largest Christian minority in Iran. During the period 1980-1990, their number was estimated to be around 200,000. Majority of the Armenians belong to the denomination of Apostolic Church, which had the Archdioceses in the city of Tehran, Tabriz and Isfahan. A minority of them follow the Catholic and Protestant belief system. Since the time of the Pahlavi Dynasty, they have two deputies in the parliament, one is representing from south and other north.

**Assyrians and Chaldeans**

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, there are negligible number of the Christian ethnic groups such as Assyrians and Chaldeans. Assyrians and the Chaldeans have a complex historical legacy. Majority of the Christians in the Mesopotamian and Persian region belonged to the East Syrian Church or the Nestorian Church. In Syria, the dominant group is West Asian Church, they are known as Jacobites. Since the nineteenth century, Nestorian denomination totally transformed their Catholic identity to call themselves Assyrians. Anglican missionaries propagated that the Nestorians were the decedents of ancient Assyria. They are from diverse faith and ethnic backgrounds while residing in the lands around the present Iran-Turkish border. Sansarian explains their distinct traditions:

> Within this ethnic point of view, Assyrians are divided along various denominations including the Nestorian Church, its Chaldean offshoot, the Russian Orthodox Church, Protestant churches, and the Jacobite Church. From this perspective, the Chaldeans are ethnically Assyrians who refuse to give up their
traditional name. These are merely confessional divisions and
do not impact on the social and cultural unity of the ethnic
identity. The Catholic Church, however, is larger than the
Nestorian Church, which has only one diocese in Tehran. The
Catholics have three dioceses, in Tehran, Urmieh, and Ahvaz
(Sansarian 2004: 41).

There are many of the Assyrians who claim themselves as Chaldeans, at the
same time they differentiate their identity from the Assyrians. They ask for
the separate deputies in the Parliament of Iran. In the 1979 constitutional
discussion about the religious minority’s participation in the Parliament, the
then revolutionary regime decided to grant one seat for both Assyrians and
Chaldeans combined. However this one seat was availed by the Assyrians.
During the Islamic rule in history, many Christian religious missionary
groups were the residents of Persia; they were from different denominations
of the Christian Church. Roman Catholic Church sent missionaries to Persia
during the reign of Shah Abbas I (1588-1629). French Roman Catholics and
Protestant Christian missionaries went to Iran. Missionaries started many
schools and hospitals, and many of the Muslim elite sent their children to the
Missionary schools. Reza Shah decided to end the missionary activities Iran.
Village evangelism of the Christian Missionaries was prohibited in 1931 and
in 1932, children of all sections were prohibited to be sent to missionary
schools. Instead of missionary schools, Reza Shah started many schools for
boys and girls.

The Anglican Church Mission Society had run many hospitals in Iran. In
1951, Bishop Dehqani ordered to close down all hospitals, when the
Mossadeq government was nationalizing oil companies, as he feared the
same would happen to their institutions as well. American Presbyterian
Missionaries closed down their seven hospitals in northern Iran. Bishop Dehqani feared that from 1953, his moves were closely under the surveillance of the SAVAK and the Islamic vigilante groups. Conversion from Muslim community to Christian churches was very few. Ethnic and minority identity is closely related with religious traditions, because this conversion is not possible normally.

**The Jews**

Iranian Jews, numbering between twenty six to forty thousand, are almost exclusively of eastern heritage, with a small group from Iraq. The majority of them are residing in Tehran, Shiraz, Kermanshah, and Isfahan and a few are spread across other small cities all over Iran.

The Jewish communities of Iran were the oldest Jewish population outside the Holy Land. Historical documents related Jewish presence in Iran to 721 BC, when Sargon II, the King of Assyria, settled the Jews in Western and Central Iran. Life flourished under Persian rule after the establishment of the Achaemenid Empire of Cyrus the Great in 550 BC. Under the Sassanian Dynasty, which ruled Iran from the third century BC to the Islamic invasion in the seventh century, Zoroastrianism became the state religion and, as the power of its clergy grew, so did religious intolerance.

Under the Islamic rule, Jews were treated as Dhimmis; the attitude towards Jews varied from ruler to ruler. At times they were treated with humiliating regulations. During the period of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries under the Mongol rule, Jewish people got support from them. According to the Jewish writings, in the Sixteenth century Safavid dynasty that came to power in Persia initiated the process of conversion of the population to Shiite Islam. The period was a turning point as Jews and all non-Muslim religious minorities were considered as a “Najis”, which literally means ritually
unclean. But at the same time, the Islamic empire of Ottoman Turkey granted self-governing status for the Jews and other non-Muslim minorities.

Haideh Sahim explains that the Safavid Dynasty was the darkest period in the history for the Jews of Iran. Under the ruler Shah Abbas I (1588-1629), serious humiliations and horrendous acts of torture started and it continued up to the end of eighteenth century. By the end of that time, the Jewish population decreased, many of them emigrated from Iran, many were forced into conversion and many were killed (Sahim 2002: 368). Before the Safavid regime, many cities had Jewish dominated areas, known as “Yahudiyya”, but later those places completely disappeared.

The Qajar Dynasty (1779-1925) began the modernization program, but that was a slow process. Haideh Sahim evaluates that many of the religious minorities had foreign relations. Sometimes they may be the protectors, in the case of Armenians, they had good relations with the Europeans. Zoroastrians had good relations with Indian Parsis and the British. Until the seventeenth century, the Iranian Jews had no protectors (Sahim 2002: 368).

The forced conversion to Islam and forced immigration decreased the population of Jews in Iran. The freedom Jews enjoyed in the pre-Safavid period was not retained. Haideh Sahim explains that they had lost land and property rights, were not permitted to operate own shops and prevented from practicing many professions. They were doctors (apothecaries), goldsmiths and silversmiths, peddlers, musicians, entertainers, and wine sellers. Few managed to become merchants, and small group led a prosperous life (Sahim 2002: 369).

Haideh Sahim narrates the story of a riot against the Jews in Tabriz around 1830. The riot started with the accusation that Jews used the blood of a Muslim child in making Matzo ball soap. This riot resulted in the death of
seven thousand Jews (Sahim 2002: 369). In another riot against the Jews in 1839 in Mashad occurred as Muslims claimed that the Jews had deliberately insulted the Muslims. The imam issued a fatwa ordering the killing of all the Jews in the city. Mob destroyed the synagogue, attacked and looted Jewish houses, and killed thirty six Jews. Twenty Seven Jewish men approached the imam, and promised that the willingness of all Jews to convert into Islam. Then they had stopped the mob, the entire city of the Jewish population were converted to Islam in one day. The imam pacified the crowd and then married four converted Jewish girls himself (Sahim 2002: 369).

Haideh Sahim explained that in Mashad Jews led a double life, outside the home they were Muslims and inside the home they practiced the Jewish traditions, dangerous if discovered. They would open their shops on Saturday, but may find excuses not to sell. They would buy meat from Muslim butchers but would dispose of it quietly (Sahim 2002: 369). Haideh Sahim explained well what was the dual nature and dangerous life they had led:

Jewish women of Mashhad were particularly tenacious in preserving Jewish life; until a Jewish butcher was established who could secretly provide kosher meat, they refused to touch meat. Mashhadi Jews even took Muslim names. They sent their children to the mosque for Muslim religious studies and held secret Talmud Torah classes. Couples went through two marriage ceremonies; one presided over by the Muslim clergy and one by the secret rabbi. To ensure that they could secretly gather for prayers or meetings, they lived close to one another, with their houses connected through the basements. More than a century of such life—they gradually left in the 1950s—has left its mark and made the Mashhadi community today a close-knit and
rather insular group. They rarely marry outside the community and are usually distrustful of outsiders (Sahim 2002: 369-370).

By the end of the 19th century, Nasir al Din Shah (1848-96) went to Europe in connection with the modernization program. During his European tour he met well settled, economically and socially developed European Jews. He had meeting with their representatives and with the Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU), and this eventually led to the new opening of the first Alliance school in Tehran in 1898, followed by the starting of schools in other cities of Iran.

In 1878, the affairs of the Jews were entrusted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Two years later, Shah declared that Muslims had no right to claim the inheritance of their Jewish relatives. By the end of the 19th century, Jews were allowed to open shops in Bazaars, but some restrictions and regulations were there particularly for them. Haideh Sahim explained that their testimony was not valid in the court; if a Jew was converted to Islam no claim to inheritance was valid; Jews were not allowed to ride horses; Jews were forbidden to walk ahead of Muslims on the street; Jews visiting the house of a Muslim were not allowed to touch anything, and they were not allowed to touch fruits and vegetables when shopping (Sahim 2002: 371). Sahim explains the social restrictions and customs particularly for the Jews:

A Jewish woman had to reveal her face or wear a two-colored chador instead of the customary black; a Jewish man was not allowed to wear socks or matching shoes. Jews had to wear an identifying red patch. The door of a Jewish house had to be low, and Jews were not allowed to build nice houses or new synagogues. They were not allowed to enter the city after sundown. A Jew’s voice should not be heard during prayer. The enforcement of any or all of these rules
depended at any given time on the local ruler or Mulla and the decency of the individuals in power. The struggle for respect and dignity was a daily effort. By the end of the nineteenth century, only physicians commanded respect. Iranian Jews were still struggling with injustices and persecutions instigated by Mulas and not prevented by the weak Shah (Sahim 2002: 371-372).

In 1898, Mr. Joseph Cazes opened a new school at Tehran. He was received positively in Iran by Shah, and the Shah donated an amount for the construction of the school under AIU. Cazes demanded to stop red badges to the students, instead of that a new badge of AIU was introduced with European dress totally changed the attitudes of the students as well as gradually changed the attitudes to the Jewish communities in Iran.

In the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, Jews participated and took a role for empowering the movement. The intellectuals published the first Jewish Iranian newspaper named Shalom. Many of the articles contained the ideas of democracy and women’s equality, the message of the Russian Revolution also was discussed in this paper. It was an effort for reducing the prejudices against Zoroastrians, Armenians and Jews (Sahim 2002: 372).

Iran’s first Constitution allowed each of the major religious minorities to have a representative of their choice in the new Majlis. The first Jewish representative in Iranian Majlis was Azizollah Simani. He was not effective and soon resigned. Armenians also got representation but both are avoided by influential clergyman. But in the second Majlis, Dr. Logman Nehorai, a French educated doctor, represented several sessions for Jews.

**Jews under the Pahlavi Rule**

In 1921, Reza Shah captured the regime of Iran by a bloodless coup, and by 1925, the Shah deposed the Qajar dynasty and established the Pahlavi
dynasty. He was influenced by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey. Reza Shah reduced the influences of clerics and introduced secular education and law. He abolished the turban and ordered all men to wear European clothing and a hat similar to French kepi. In 1936, he banned the veil for women. Under the Reza Shah’s regime, the life of the Jews changed significantly, the emancipated Jews finally advanced in number of areas. The Jews gradually left from their hamlet to migrate to the major cities of Iran. They sent their children in private schools. After the Tehran University was established in 1935, many Jews entered the university based on merit. Jewish association with Muslims in schools, enforced western style clothing, and compulsory military service for all Iranian males began to reduce the anti-minority sentiments among Iranians. Under the rule of Reza Shah, many favourable regulations and policies were created for minorities. Haideh Sahim explains, “the jizya, a head tax imposed on minorities, was still in effect at the time of Reza Shah and was abrogated only after an appeal to him by Jewish, Armenian, and Zoroastrian delegates to the Majlis” (Sahim 2002: 373).

With the attack of Germany on Russia in 1941, anti-Semitic sentiments increased, and the Muslim zealots were prepared to massacre the Jews and seize their property. During that time, Tehran granted visas for Jews to flee to European countries. At the same time, from the many parts of the neighbouring countries, the Jews escaped to Iran. From Iraq ten thousand Jews escaped to Iran; they had coreligionists very early immigrated to Iran, and they joined with them in Tehran. Later they established their synagogue and schools in Tehran (Sahim 2002: 374).

In 1941-42 a large group of Polish Jews escaped to Iran via Soviet Union. In that group there were 871 children, the Jewish group of Iran took responsibility of their care. Sahim observes:
In Bandar-e Pahlavi (Anzali) representatives of the Jewish Agency met these children and brought them to Tehran, where camps were set up for them. Known as yaldei Tehran, the Children of Tehran, the children (and adult Jews) were supported and cared for by the local Jewish community at a time when Iranian Jews were themselves in crisis. The Tehran community also assumed responsibility for their religious education (Sahim 2002: 374).

In 1941 September, the Allied powers forced Reza Shah to exile. His son Muhammad Reza Shah was appointed as the second king of the Pahlavi dynasty. The first decade of his reign marked an unprecedented freedom for non-Muslim religious minorities. Around one hundred and seventy Jewish newspapers and more than twenty political parties appeared at that time. When Allied forces arrived in Iran, the Jews were given certain preferences, but after the withdrawal of the Allied forces in 1946, the condition became worse. Sahim explains that:

Recognizing that they could not rely upon the forces of the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, Iranian Jews cultivated ties with the court and government circles. Their political activities, however, led to some antagonism among domestic rightists and religious newspapers, which accused the Jews of being a foreign group in the country and urged that they be eliminated. With the withdrawal of the Allied forces from Iran in 1946, anti-Jewish riots broke out in many cities. The worst was in Mashhad, where some jadids (Jewish converts) were killed and their houses looted. As a result all Mashhadi Jews left for Tehran, Israel, and other countries. At the time of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, about thirty-thousand Iranian Jews lived there (Sahim 2002: 375).
The Islamic influence in the Revolutionary movement in 1978-79 created much concern among the Jews, because in the initial stage Ayatollah Khomeini expressed anti-Jewish remarks but later it became anti- Israeli. The Jewish intellectuals who were keenly watching the developments, created a crisis committee for making anticipatory arrangements. The Jews immediately turned to the supporters of the Islamic Revolutionary movement. They revealed their solidarity through a demonstration in the public. Sahim explained that:

By the beginning of the summer of 1978, when demonstrations became widespread, a crisis committee consisting of about five young professionals and older Jewish leaders met to address concerns of the Jewish community. Initially, most members were not much concerned, but by November they recognized that a change of government was a real possibility. In view of the Jewish community’s past experiences, and with the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini gaining power, the fate of the Jews in a clergy-run country seemed bleak, and some protective measures were necessary (Sahim 2002: 375).

The Central Governing body of the Jews of Iran formed a Jewish Intellectual Society; they encouraged the Jewish people to participate in Pro-Khomeini demonstrations under its banner. In December 1978, the major Shiite mourning day on Ashura, the Jews conducted a demonstration of seven thousand Jews, which attracted millions of the Islamic community. It expressed their solidarity with the Islamic Iranians, and expressed political support for Khomeini.
Jews in Post-Revolutionary Iran

The end of the World War II to the 1978, the Jews enjoyed privileged circumstances and economic freedom. The young Jews had no good relations with Israel in a religious sense. Israel had absorbed the poor and needy Iranian Jews. In the late 1960s and 1970s, they voluntarily learned Modern Hebrew and went to Israel to study. Jews made harmonious relations with Muslims in Iran. Through this good relation they achieved economic prosperity, improved living conditions, and professional opportunities. During that time persecutions of the past were replaced with some degree of prejudice and discrimination, but riots were rare. Sahim observed about that period:

As Jews became more comfortable in Iranian society, they neglected their Judeo-Persian culture. Young Jews did not become assimilated, but they did become acculturated. In 1974 the Center for the Cultural and Social Advancement of the Jews of Iran was established to promote awareness of Jewish and Iranian culture among the Jews and to promote awareness of Jewish culture among other Iranians (Sahim 2002: 377).

In the post-Revolutionary Iran, the conditions had totally changed. In the beginning, the Islamic government frightened Jews, large numbers of them fled to Israel, the United States and Europe. Khomeini changed his standpoint from anti-Jewish to anti-Israeli position, as noted earlier. In the early days after the Revolution, Habib Elghanian, a prominent businessman and philanthropist was executed on charges of Zionism and spying for Israel. Haideh Sahim explains about the new situation: “Since the revolution the treatment of Jews has varied over time. They are permitted to consume wine and alcoholic beverages, but all non-Muslim food stores must display a sign
saying they are not for Muslims. For a period of time Jews were refused exit visas” (Sahim 2002: 377). The Mohammad Khatami’s period from 1997 to 2005 is considered as a phase of moderate principles and policies. He opened the dialogue on civilizations, and moderate principles of civil rights, democracy and human rights were mooted. Sahim explained the new apprehensions of the Jews about the new situation:

Government statements assure the safety of Jews, but there are fears that they could become pawns to use against possible attacks by Israel. Jews who have remained in Iran live in a sensitive and unpredictable situation that requires constant vigilance. More Jews have been going to synagogues, which now serve as places for meeting and socializing. In 1998 Tehran had twenty-three synagogues, and there were fifty in other cities (Sahim 2002: 378).

Kosher food has become expensive and difficult to obtain. The government demolished the Jewish cemetery in south Tehran for a housing project, and in 1999, a road was built over the Jewish cemetery in Mashhad. The Jewish community of Iran remained despite all restrictions.

**Zoroastrianism**

Zoroastrianism was the religion of ancient Persia, and is also considered as the first religion in the world. This religion is known after its Prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster), who lived most probably in the location of today’s Eastern-Northeastern Iran between 1700 and 1500 BC. The root of this religion have Indo-European religious tradition and Zoroastrianism was dualistic in ethics and monotheistic in belief. This religion may have influenced religions like Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

Zoroastrianism was the state religion in Iran in the pre-Islamic time. Zoroastrian population quickly reduced after the Islamic conquest in the
seventh century. With thousands of years’ history of Zoroastrians without resistance or rebellion, they suddenly had to receive Islam, through sudden conversion and intermarriage. Gradually they disappeared in an unbelievable fashion. Indeed, as Iran was integrated into the Islamic realm, we hear less about the activities of the Zoroastrians and even less about their participation in the government of the new Muslim empire. The other non-Muslim religious minorities like Christian Armenians and Chaldeans, Jews, remained prominent in political spheres.

Vartan Gregorian examined the national policies of Iran:

The Safavid religious and "nationality policies" first of all had to deal with the question of non-Shi’ite Muslims, then the problem of Shi’ite and non-Shi’ite Muslim Turkic elements who were extremely powerful, and then with the presence and fate of non-Muslims: in the first rank the ahl al-kitab (People of the Book), namely Christians (Georgians, Armenians and Assyrians) and the Jews. Lastly it had to cope with the Zoroastrians, who represented a special and unique problem (Gregorian 1974: 652).

Aptin Khanbaghi raises the genuine question regarding the historical hiding of the Zoroastrians and the silent history of Zoroastrians of Iran:

The fading of the Zoroastrians from the historical annals should not be interpreted as a sign of their passivity and inferiority to Jews and Christians. Rather, their sudden change of fortune should be questioned, as a people who skillfully dominated an immense empire and influenced the culture of so many societies could not have left the historical scene without a struggle (Khanbaghi 2006: 21).

Until the Arab invasion, the Zoroastrians dominated Iran politically and formed the majority of the population of the country outside Mesopotamia.
The end of the religious and cultural hegemony after 634 made their situation at first similar to that of Jews and Christians. After the rule of the Arabs, the Zoroastrian influences and their significance slowly went down and later they gradually reached to a diminishing stage. Before 661 AD, the Zoroastrian Iranians and the Muslim Arabs were in a series of war and conflict. The 8th and 9th centuries are very significant with regard to the fate of the Zoroastrian population as thereafter the population soon started diminishing. Islamic historians mainly focus on the Abbasid revolution and are not preoccupied by the other uprisings that have shaken the regime. These uprisings had a peculiar nature, the elements of anti-Arab feeling was the underpinnings of these movements. These movements had the long lasting effect, it had created the Iranian and Central Asian Islam. These regions were converted to Islam, but their traditions of ethnic memories continued, often the political and historical studies more emphasized it as a nationality. During the 8th and 9th centuries, the Zoroastrian population came to a crisis of their sustainability; consequently they migrated from Khorasan area to state of Gujarat in India, and they are known as Parsis and they have had full freedom for religious practice in India.

Zoroastrian intellectuals were active participants in the first Constitutional Revolution of Iran. Some wealthy Zoroastrians families provided financial help to the movement. Zoroastrians lobbied the Muslim merchants, Ulama, preachers and the press for the passage of provisions on equal rights for all citizens. However, different from the minorities like Jews and Armenians, Zoroastrians didn’t get more, but only one deputy represented in to the Majlis.

Under the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the approach and attitudes towards the Zoroastrians was not different from that towards the other minorities. But he
adopted the many symbolic and other cultural values from the tradition of the Iran’s Zoroastrianism. The name “Iran” was adopted from the “avestha”, the holy book of the Zoroastrian religion and the name “Persia” was changed to Iran. Zoroastrian cultural elements have been used for the nation-building processes by Reza Shah (Sansarian 2004: 49).

This is considered as the new acceptance of the Zoroastrian cultural heritage because of the Zoroastrians’ immense support to Reza Shah. Arbab Keikhosrow Shahrokh, the Zoroastrian deputy in the Majlis, worked tirelessly to improve the conditions of the Zoroastrian communities throughout the country and was a strong advocate of the development program for Iran. Zoroastrian relations with Reza Shah Pahlavi were considered as better than previous governments. He supported them for the first Zoroastrian World Congress meet in Tehran in 1960 and one member of the community was placed in high position in the government. Some members of the community joined the Tudeh, the left wing party of Iran. Sansarian quoted the increase of the Zoroastrian population in Iran from the beginning of the twentieth century,

One source states that the number of Zoroastrian residents in Tehran increased from only 3000 in the first decade of the twentieth century to around 15,000 in the 1980s. Worldwide, their numbers are about 125,000 concentrated mainly in India, Pakistan, and Iran. Before 1979, their numbers in Iran were 30,000. By the mid-1990s, the Zoroastrian population numbered 50,000. Today, in addition to the above-mentioned cities, Zoroastrian worship centers can be found in Shiraz, Isfahan, and Ahvaz. There are still Zoroastrians residing in villages, especially around Yazd (Sansarian 2004: 50).
The Baha’is

In 19th century Babism or Baha’ism was established as a messianic movement in Iran and Iraq under the overall charismatic leadership of Sayyed Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab (1819-1850). Babism was the only millenarian movement in Shi’ite Islam. Shirazi opened the new way to the Hidden Imam, later he declared himself the Hidden Imam, known as Bab. He, in his early teachings, never projected himself as a new prophet; they were within the bounds of Shi’ism. But later, such apposition changed.

One of the important studies about Babism by Abbas Amanat traced it not as a conventional movement, but one with the energy of a revolutionary movement. Bab’s teachings were for the rebellion against the injustice and mischief. Bahaullah (1817–92) designed his religion to incorporate a number of different contemporaneous centers of authority. Denis MacEoin traced the roots of controversy of Baha’i faith in Iran by observing that:

…understanding the reasons for the particular animus against the Baha’is that has existed in Iran for over a century. Official Iranian accounts serve to demonstrate that there is a perception of Baha’is as foreign agents, subversives, exploiters or whatever that is enough in itself to convince the man-in-the-bazaar or the judge on his bench that members of the sect are public enemies who must be controlled, punished, or—and this is significant—forcibly deconverted (and, ideally, reconverted to Islam). But such accounts do not help to make clear why there should be such a perception of this particular minority (rather than, say, Jews or Christians) in the first place, nor do they show any
necessary correlation between public perceptions and actual Baha’i beliefs or practices (MacEoin 1987: 77).

Baha’is have been facing serious human rights violations; the story of persecutions have been a continuous affair. Juan Cole explained that the founder of Babism from which Baha’ism emerged, was Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad (1819-1850), who believed that he got a divine calling. He was “Bab”, the intermediary between God and human; ultimately he said he is the “Mahdi”, the promised imam of Twelver Shi’ism, which has the ultimate belief in the expectation of the promised Mahdi (Cole 1997: 48). The Shi’a Islamic regime recognized the dangerous power of his teachings. The Bab eventually was arrested for heresy and imprisoned in the Iran’s northwest part. In 1848, at Tabriz he was examined and finally the Shi’a Jurists decided to give capital punishment to him. The Bab revealed his own holy book, the Bayan, to replace the Qur’an, and laid great stress on the coming of a further messianic figure after him, “He whom God shall make manifest” (Cole 1997: 48).

Cole explains that in 1850, the Iranian state had taken the decision to execute the Bab at the public square in Tabriz in the wake of outbreaks of violence between Shi’ites who rejected the Bab and the 100,000 or so who had accepted him. In 1852 a faction of Babis in Tehran attempted to assassinate Nasiru’d-Din Shah (1848-1896) but failed (Cole 1997: 48). As noted by Walbridge (1996); a divine preacher from Zanjan became a Bab, a divine preacher and he had several thousand followers and supporters. The Bab was arrested from Azerbaijan in 1847. Open fighting occurred for the first time in 1848; several thousand Babis travelling from Khorasan to the south were besieged in Mazamdaram Fort. Three more insurrection movement was emerged followed from Zanjan movement and twice in Fars. Bab was
executed in 1850 and by 1852 most of the remaining leaders were killed. The Bab had openly declared Prophethood, had abrogated Islamic Law and replaced a system of Babi law; he established a new religion the teachings of which were different from Islam. Walbridge explains about the religious tradition and movement thus: “The Babi religion was a dramatic instance of the revolutionary tradition in Iranian religion and the last major religious movement in Iran not shaped in fundamental ways by the challenge of the West” (Walbridge 1996: 340).

Reza Shah conducted a nationwide raid against them; through this raid thousand more were dead and it drove the religion underground. Mirza Hussain Ali Nuri was arrested in this raid, he was known as Bahaullah, an increasingly prominent thinker and leader from an Iranian noble family.

In 1863, Bahaullah declared himself the promised one of the Bab and for all religions. Ottoman government knew this revolutionary movement and about the Bab, the Ottoman government captured him and brought him to Istambul.

In 1868, he was exiled to Acre, a city on the coast of Ottoman Syria and he lived there until his death in 1892. His prominent teachings focused on the unity of the World religions, and need for world unity, collective security and peace. Baha’ism took shape as a religion under his leadership. Bahaullah is widely considered as the founder of the modern religion of Baha’ism.

His disciples’ community grew between 50,000 and 100,000 by the 1890. Most of them artisans, merchants, and members of the new middle class and many village peasants also became members of the new religion. By1990, their number became to 5.5 million.
Udo Schaefer writes about the belief system of Baha’is:

Baha’is believe that around the same time as philosophers were announcing the "death of God," a new Epiphany took place in which "the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob"s once again revealed Himself to humanity. The cradle of the Baha'i Faith was nineteenth-century Iran. This religion, whose relationship to Shi’a Islam is comparable to the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, sees itself as the fulfillment of Islamic eschatology, and also as the fulfillment of the promise found in all religions concerning the coming of a World Reformer at the "end of time" (Schaefer 2003: 308).

Ismael Velasco evaluates that:

in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Baha'i faith could be aptly described as an underground messianic movement. Nevertheless, it was not the first such movement. The tradition of Persianate religious radicalism goes back to the origins of Persianate Islam and has always been linked in significant and often predominant ways to chiliastic fervor (Velasco 2001: 189).

Bahaullah’s teachings are the basic foundation of the religion of Baha’ism. Bahaullah’s teachings followed the revelations he got in 1863, according to the believers. Bahaullah’s grandson prepared a good public administrative system, and he is known as guardian of faith (Dorraj et. al. 2008: 61). Bahaullah (1817-1892) is the founder of the the religion considered, as Cole observes, “Manifestations of God” (mazhar-i ilahi), theophanies which mirrored forth the names and attributes of God on the human plane, as an important aspect of Baha’i faith. These previous divine Manifestations
included Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Bab in the West, and Zoroaster and the Hindu figures in the East” (Cole 1997: 47). Firuz Kazemzadeh notes that according to the belief system of the Baha’is, their philosophical arguments basically conflict with the ideologies of Islam and Shi’a beliefs. They declared that the revelation was progressive and without end, meaning that the line of prophets extended from the legendary Adam into the most distant future. Kazemzadeh observed that: “Under this assumption, Muhammad was not the last prophet (as Islam claims) but rather one in a chain of revealers of divine will, a chain that includes not only Jesus and the Prophets of Israel, but the founders of Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and other religions that Islam does not recognize” (Kazemzadeh 2000: 239). According to the Baha’i teachings, men and women are equal, and there have no priest; these specific qualities are the very important and exceptional (Kazemzadeh 2000: 239).

The Baha’i Experience in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Baha’is are the largest non-Muslim religious minorities of Iran. Baha’i’s status in Iran is in the un-protected category. In the revolutionary time of 1978, more than two hundred Baha’i leaders were executed. Many of the institutions were closed down, community properties were confiscated, and holy places related with Baha’is were demolished and cemeteries desecrated. Baha’is have no civil rights. They cannot hold government jobs, enforce legal contracts, practice law, collect pensions, attend institutions of higher learning, and openly practice their faith; they are a closed community (Kazemzadeh 2000: 537).

According to Price, the population of the Baha’is during the 1979 revolution was estimated to be between 150,000 and 300,000. According to Dorraj, there are totally five million Baha’is in the world and 300,000 In the Iran
alone. The Baha’i sources estimated their population as follows: 400,000 (March 1979) and 300,000 (December 1981); another source said that the numbers were 350,000 (September 1979), 295,000 (Mid-1975) and 340,000 (Mid-1980) (Smith 1984: 296).

In 1983, Iranian Prosecutor General Seyyed Hossein Musavi Tabrizi definitively stated: “any organized Baha’i activity was against the Law” (Sansarian 2004: 119). The Hojjatieh Society, of which former President Ahmadinejad is a member, consider one of its ultimate aims as “to eradicate Baha’i faith in Iran” (Dorraj et.al. 2008: 62). Hojjatieh members infiltrated Baha’i groups and organizations, gaining access to Baha’i registration books and confidential correspondence. All their dealings are under the surveillance of the secret police of Iran. Many Baha’i people are arrested, executed and jailed in post-Revolutionary Iran (Sansarian 2004: 120). The Hojjatieh society, SAVAK and some clerics are the prominent antagonists of the Baha’is (Kazemzadeh 2000: 240). Kazemzadeh observes that the Iranian government officially raised the allegation against the Baha’is that they have connection with foreign countries:

In the last twenty years Iranian representatives at the UN have on occasion referred to it as proof that the Baha’i Faith is not a religion but a political movement serving foreign interests. As enemies changed, so did the accusations. Baha’i’s have been alleged to serve the Russian or British intelligence, the CIA, or Israel, depending on which country happened to be in disfavor at the time the allegations were made (Kazemzadeh 2000: 241).

The arrest of eminent leaders of Baha’is, Mehdi Anvari and Hidayatullah Dihqani in Shiraz on March 17, 1981 was especially significant. The Iranian state charged them for espionage activities on behalf of Israel. The two men
were executed after the guilty verdict, but this created a fueling of the fire as many people embraced Baha’ism (Nash 1982: 115-116). The attitude towards Baha’is is critical in Iranian history. On August 21, 1980, Revolutionary guards arrested nine spiritual assembly leaders of Baha’is. In December 1981 eight leaders were secretly executed (Sanasarian 2004: 116).

The humiliations faced by the Baha’is at the hands of the Iranian Government is continuing story. On 24 March 1980, the house of Bab in Shiraz was destroyed, which was considered as the Baha’is as one of the prominent holy place of Iran, with the help of local government of Shiraz (Dorraj et. al. 2008: 62). Islamic regime explained that, it was an incident of damage and not destruction. Baha’is said that it was demolished by nearly 25 Revolutionary Guard members (Nash 1982: 76). Majority of the Baha’is administrative centers, holy places and cemeteries, if not destroyed, remained confiscated by the state (Sansarian 2004: 121). In 1993, Baha’i cemetery was destroyed in Tehran Municipality and a cultural center was constructed in its place (Cole 2005: 142). The Islamic regime consciously restrict the social life of the Baha’is, they are banned in the government positions, teaching posts, formal educational institutions, bureaucracy, universities and even in the cemeteries (Cole 2005: 157). The post-Revolutionary Iran’s reform policies in the educational sector had immediate negative effects for the Baha’i communities. The first order of Minister for Education, Mohammad Ali Rajai, who was appointed in November 1979 was to dismiss all the teachers belonging to the Baha’i community, all of them were asked to repay the whole amount received as a salary (Sansarian 2004: 120). The post-Revolutionary Iran ordered dismissal of the all faculty members belonging to Baha’is from the universities in Iran. In the 1980s, schools were opened for children in the primary and secondary levels but the
higher educational institutions banned the admissions of Baha’i students (Kazemzadeh 2000: 545).

There are several reasons why the Baha’is was excluded entirely from recognition and representation in the government. They have been constructed to be the “other” threatening the Islamic Republic and its power structure. The concept of religious minorities as the “other” threatening the new Iranian nation became institutionalized with the rise of the Islamic regime (Cole 2005: 159). The group’s connection to Israel, where the Baha’i World Center is located, was presented as a connection to the state of Israel itself.

It was believed that Baha’ism was constructed not as a religion, but rather as a political entity created by anti-Islamic and colonial powers. The fact that the group had been integrated at some level into society, albeit highly discriminated against, fueled conspiracy theories and paranoia, and it was profiled as the internal enemy of Iran (Sansarian 2004: 122-23). Instead of viewing Baha’is as a recognized religious minority, a label that would entail legal rights, the Islamic regime dismissed the Baha’is as “perverted… instruments of Satan and followers of the Devil and of the superpowers and their agents” (Cole 2005: 137). In the aftermath of the Revolution, Khomeini stated that the Baha’is were “a political faction; they are harmful; they will not be accepted” (Nash 1982: 77). However, Baha’ism is apolitical and the religion does not allow its believers to participate in political movements; these religious convictions did not even permit them to vote in the national referendum to the Islamic Republic (Nash 1982: 80).

Given Khomeini’s view that there was no distinction between religion and politics in Islam, it was easy to characterize the apolitical Baha’i as a subversive political group threatening Islam and the state (Dorraj et. al. 2008: 261).
While nations are comprised of religious and ethnic communities, “civic nations make a place for them as constituents of the nation, whereas exclusionary nations achieve their unity precisely by singling out the unabsorbable minority within as a cultural and political fifth column” (Cole 2005: 159). In such a nation, as spoken of by former President Mohammad Khatami, “thousands of Iranians remain under the sentence of civic death” (Cole 2005: 159).

Islamic clerics believe that Baha’ism is a threat to Islam and Shi’a Islamic theocracy. The role that clergy is not there in to the religion of Baha’ism and their practices of women being considered as equal to men and practices monogamy, and the interpretation of religion in Baha’ism as an individual matter -- all these go against the ideology of the Islamic clerics. The Baha’i members of their governing bodies were executed in Tabriz, Rusht and Tehran by the government in 1980. The Baha’is filed a memorandum for detailed investigation and appealed to President Bani-Sadr to intervene, but there have been no response. In February 1983, Shiraz Judge, Hojjatol- Islam Qazi declared, as cited by Kazemzadeh, that:

The Iranian nation has arisen in accordance with Koranic teachings and by the will of God has determined to establish the government of God on earth. Therefore, it cannot tolerate the perverted Baha’is who is the instruments of Satan and followers of the Devil and the super powers and their agents. It is absolutely certain that in the Islamic Republic of Iran there is no place whatsoever for Baha’is or Baha’ism. Before it is too late the Baha’is should recant Baha’ism, which is condemned by reason and logic. Otherwise, the day will come when the Islamic nation will deal with the Baha’is in
accordance with its religious obligation and will. ...God willing, fulfill the prayer of Noah, mentioned in the Qur'an, and Noah said, Lord, leave not one single family of infidels on earth (Kazemzadeh 2000: 548)

In short, the Post –Revolutionary Iran’s theocratic Shi’a government adopts an antagonistic position towards Baha’is. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini has expressed his own views on Baha’is publically in an interview. Adam Berry quoted the dialogue between Khomeini and Professor James Cockroft of Rutgers University in December 1978:

Question [Cockroft]: "Will there be either religious or political freedom for the Bahá’ís under an Islamic government?"

Answer [Khomeini]: “They are a political faction; they are harmful. They will not be accepted”.

Question: “How about their freedom of religion-religious practice?”

Answer: No. (Berry 2004: 140).

The attitude towards Baha’is is expressed in different official sources; it reveals official hostility towards the community. One letter from Aireza Farrakhrouz of the Iranian embassy in London to Ken Weetch, Member of Parliament states that:

Baha’ism is in fact not a religion but an ideology created by colonial powers to help the past illegitimate government of Iran in their oppression of the brave people of Iran and to invalidate Islam as a divine religion and revolutionary ideology... The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has never oppressed them, although their beliefs have not and will never be considered as a recognized religion by Iranian authorities and therefore, unlike Christians, Jews etc.
they do not have priorities such as the right to elect representatives for the Parliament (Quoted in Berry 2004: 141).

Because Baha’is were exempted from the constitutional protection, their human rights are very severely curtailed.