

ROUND TABLE

The Armenian Community and Changing Iranian Perceptions of Minority

James Barry 

Deakin University, Burwood, Victoria, Australia
Email: james.barry.cullen@gmail.com

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Until a decade ago, it was unusual for officials in the Islamic Republic to use the word *aqaliat* (minority) to refer to ethno-linguistic minorities or Muslim sect minorities. Efforts to cast Sunni Muslims as a minority, or Azeri speakers, were treated with hostility, as the state, following a specific proclamation on ethnicity and sectarianism by Ayatollah Khomeini, viewed these concepts as divisive to the *ummah* and ultimately a threat to national security. *Aqaliat* was instead reserved for non-Muslims, specifically those recognized as minorities in the constitution: Assyrian, Chaldean and Armenian Christians, and Zoroastrian and Jewish Iranians. It is therefore worthwhile to examine how one such minority community, Iranian Armenians, has reacted to these changes.

The history of Armenians in Iran is mostly channeled, both in the academy and in works meant for a more general audience, through their cultural, economic, and political contributions to Iranian society. These cultural productions reflect and inform representations of Iranian Armenians and defines who they are in popular imagination. However, these representations are not always consistent with the historical record. For example, the origin myth of Iranian Armenians—by “myth,” I refer to a story set in the distant past that is used to explain the present—is that of the deportations of Shah Abbas in the early 1600s. This contributes to the perception of Iranian Armenians as a foreign, migrant presence in Iran, a view shared by both Armenians themselves and other Iranians. This origin myth removes from public consciousness the presence of Armenians in Iran prior to the seventeenth century, as well as the long, deep history of social, political, and military integration of Armenians with the Iranian plateau.

The Shah Abbas myth of origin provides the foundation for a positive framework in which to view Iranian Armenians; it privileges the economic and cultural achievements of the merchants of Julfa following their transportation to the Safavid capital of Isfahan, highlighting how they prospered for the good of both themselves and Iran. This narrative is central to scholarly representations of the Iranian Armenian community in Western academic studies, which usually acknowledge, in passing, that the majority of Armenians in Iran at this time lived in less prosperous and rural environs.¹ Armenian village life, however, is of great interest to Iranian Armenians themselves, as many Armenian-language publications coming out of Tehran in recent decades have focused on villages, the families who trace their origin to these villages, and the peculiar customs and dialects of these villages.² These works of salvage anthropology are aimed at preserving the memory of a way of life that flourished until

¹ Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); Vazken Ghougassian, *The Emergence of the Armenian Diocese of New Julfa in the Seventeenth Century* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998).

² Hovik Minasian, *Arak' K'aghak'i ew K'yazaz Gawari Hay Azgabnakch'ut'iwne* [The Ethnic Armenian Community of the City of Arak and Kazaz District] (Tehran: Nairi, 2013); Levon Minasian, *Patmut'iwn P'eriayi Hayeri 1606–1956* [The History

the 1950s, and afterwards rapidly disappeared due to urbanization and emigration. In addition to the Shah Abbas narrative, Persian-language publications from Iran have focused on Armenian political contributions to the country, including narratives on the Armenian contribution to the Constitutional Movement in the early part of the twentieth century and Armenian sacrifices during the Iran-Iraq War.³ Other scholarly works have focused on Armenians as a non-Muslim minority in the Islamic Republic.⁴

The Shah Abbas narrative creates a minority that is reliable, industrious, open to Western culture, and eager to bring innovations to Iran. These innovations are both industrial and cultural, including the printing press, film, modern music, architecture, fashion, and engineering. In practice, few Armenians are engaged in these industries, which today are dominated by non-Armenians, but the myth persists that Armenians continue to be innovators and leaders in these fields. These narratives contribute to a generally positive perception of Armenians in Iranian society, which is not particularly reflective of how Armenians live but is beneficial to their overall community wellbeing. It is a kind of sub-national grounded nationalism, where the achievements of Iranian Armenians both past and present are owned by the community itself.⁵ For this reason, Armenians tend to stand out as a minority community who are seen as both foreign and positive contributors to Iran.

The Iranian Armenian community, as individuals and as a unit, are conscious of not bringing negative attention to themselves. Therefore, it not surprising that we did not see large numbers of Armenians participating (as Armenians) in recent protests against the government, neither during the 2009 election protests nor recent demonstrations in the wake of the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini. This does not mean that Iranian Armenians are unaffected by the issues at the center of Iranian society; it is more to do with the fear of collective punishment and the eradication of the Armenian left after the 1979 Revolution.

Armenian community leadership is conservative and divided between secular and religious authorities, both of which work together to represent the community's interests to the Iranian government. The community's secular leadership encompasses a range of functionaries, usually volunteers, in Armenian organisations mostly aligned with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (the Dashnaks). The two Armenian members of parliament are the most visible secular representatives of the community. Despite declining numbers due to emigration, constitutionally guaranteed representation for minority communities (Assyrian Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians) remains intact and is an important avenue for communities to communicate with and lobby for their interests to senior members of the Islamic Republic.

Partnering with the community's secular leadership is its religious leadership, comprised of senior clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church who are historically aligned with the Dashnaks through the Catholicos of Antelias in Lebanon. The religious leadership is integral to the community's reputation under the Islamic Republic, which prioritizes religious representation, both Islamic and non-Islamic, in the public sphere. This creates a sense of piousness among Armenians in the eyes of the Islamic Republic, giving the government an ideologically sound framework for positioning the Armenians as well as other religious minorities.

of the Armenians of Fereydan] (Glendale, CA: Color Depot, 2001); Vahik Ratevosian and Vazgen Movsesian, *Gharaghan: Hay Azgabnakh'ut'awn* [Kharqan: An Ethnic Armenian Population] (Tehran: Hashemyoun, 2004).

³ For Armenian contributions to the Constitutional Movement, see Arpi Manukian, *Hezb-e dashnak va jaryan-e nehzat-e mashruteh* [The Dashnak Party and the Course of the Constitutional Revolution] (Tehran: R&R, 2004).

⁴ Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Robert Safarian, *Sāken-e do farhang: Diāspurā-ye armani dar irān* [An Inhabitant of Two Cultures: Armenian Diaspora in Iran] (Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz, 2020); Claudia Yaghoobi, *Transnational Culture in the Iranian Armenian Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023); James Barry, *Armenian Christians in Iran: Ethnicity, Religion and Identity in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁵ Sinisa Malesevic, *Grounded Nationalisms* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

At an official level, as Christians, Armenians have constitutional protections as “People of the Book.” In practice, however, most Armenians do not view this arrangement as benevolent. The recognized religious minority status affords protections and autonomy, but also fundamentally entrenches their second-class citizen status. For the state, this arrangement is a sign of Muslim progressiveness, the tolerant nature of Islam as opposed to Western Christianity, at least from a historic perspective. The leadership of the Armenian community therefore pays lip service to this arrangement while at the same time lobbying for equal status under the law.

The Iran-Iraq War has been a cornerstone of the state’s view of minorities over the past thirty to forty years. The fact that members of each minority group, either through voluntary enlistment or conscription, willingly fought and died for Iran is put forward as evidence of their virtue. In recent years, this has also been extended to ethno-linguistic and sect minorities, particularly those with a volatile relationship with the state, such as the Baluch and Kurds. Armenians also embrace the narrative around their soldiers, reinforcing their loyalty to Iran and emphasizing that their community is inseparable from other Iranian communities. The Iran-Iraq War is a valuable avenue connecting Armenians to high levels of the government. However, this does not mean that, in the minds of most Iranians, Armenians figure prominently when discussing the war; rather, they are a footnote to the narrative, used by the state for propaganda purposes.⁶

The cultural sphere is another area where the borders between Armenians and the rest of Iran are increasingly challenged. In recent decades, several Iranian Armenian intellectuals have sought to break down the notion that Persian and Iranian literature are synonymous, akin to Iranian film, music, and other forms of cultural expression. A series of Iranian Armenian novelists, poets, and journalists have worked on avoiding the silos of “ethnic” literature so that Armenian literature produced in Iran or by Iranian Armenians—similar to Kurdish, Azeri, and other minority-language literature—is considered part of Iranian literature. This challenge works in two ways: contributing to both Armenian diaspora literature and Iranian literature in both the Armenian and Persian languages.

Iranian Armenian journalist, critic, and documentary filmmaker Robert Safarian is an example of an intellectual trying to bring this narrative to a mainstream Iranian audience. Safarian’s film about Isfahan-born poet Azad Matian, *Dar Fasleyeh-ye Do Kuch* (Between Two Migrations), positions Matian as an artist whose inspiration and canvas are Iranian. Safarian sought to introduce Matian to non-Armenian Iranians so that they could appreciate him as an Iranian poet and poet of Isfahan.

Elsewhere, Claudia Yaghoobi has worked on bringing these examples to the English-speaking world.⁷ Yaghoobi argues that Iranian Armenian literature, art, and film engages with the concept of *verants’ughi*, a transformational passageway, which she describes as “a liminal space... [a] threshold to shifting consciousness, border-crossing and perspective” that Iranian Armenians use to move beyond the confines of nationalism into a more flexible and porous transnationalism.⁸ Iranian Armenian writers, poets, artists, and others therefore engage with Iranian themes, history, and culture as Iranians and as Armenians, and, with the community’s migration abroad, more frequently also as Americans, Canadians, Germans, and so forth.

Over the past century, Iranian Armenian musicians, filmmakers, and writers—such as Vigen, Samvel Khackikian, and Zoya Pirzad respectively—have all been accepted as Iranian artists by mainstream Iranian society. Alongside them, more recognizable Armenian writers such as Leonardo Alishan and Varand have placed the Iranian Armenian experience at the center of their depictions of Armenianness. Such artists stand in contrast to prominent Iranian Armenian writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth

⁶ Yaghoobi, *Transnational Cultures*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

century, who were more concerned with contributing to an Armenian cultural awakening. Artists, such as Iranian-born prose writer Raffi, often focused only on Armenian themes of homeland and history, at times treating their Iranian surroundings as foreign. Raffi in particular writes of his birthplace as a foreign country, largely because he sought to define a sense of Armenianness and Armenian homeland that had no need for diaspora.

As a recognized religious minority, the Armenian community is most closely interlinked with the other constitutionally recognized minority communities: Assyrians, Chaldeans, Jews, and Zoroastrians. However, beyond ceremonial engagements, members of these different communities do not necessarily share a close relationship. Furthermore, apart from the Assyrian community, who are religiously similar, Armenians generally keep to themselves when it comes to identity-based relationships. Workplace and neighborhood friendships with non-Armenians are not subject to identity. Some Armenians do befriend other religious minorities through the education system, particularly those who attend the Firuz Bahram Zoroastrian School in Tehran, which is open to all recognized religious minorities and is attended by Jewish and Armenian students as well as Zoroastrians.

Recognized religious minorities are also most closely associated with the term *aqaliat* (minority). However, in both academic and non-academic circles, *aqaliat* has increasingly come to include ethno-linguistic minorities and Sunni Muslims. The degree to which this has entered the mainstream is evident in the Iranian parliament, where minority blocs have formed, especially for Azeris and Sunni Muslims, even when discouraged by the Supreme Leader.⁹ The Rouhani administration contributed to normalizing this wider use of the term *aqaliat* by creating the position of Special Aide to the President for Ethnic Groups and Religious and Sect Minority Affairs.

This position was held by Ali Younesi, the former Minister of Intelligence under President Mohammad Khatami, from 2013 until his retirement in 2017. While this post was primarily focused on Sunni Iranians and particular ethno-linguistic groups, such as the Arabs of Khuzestan, it also looked at the Armenians, often as a good news story. Ali Younesi engaged with Armenians in the way that government officials usually did, sending greetings to the community on religious occasions and visiting the families of martyrs from the Iran-Iraq War. The only policy change that engaged Armenians in any significant way was the president's suggestion that the term *aqaliat* (minority) be replaced with *irāniyān gheyr-e mosalmān* (non-Muslim Iranians). This suggestion met with mixed response from community members, some of whom saw the term "minority" as carrying stigma and others seeing advantages to it.¹⁰ However, an overall policy change never occurred, and the Rouhani administration lost interest in minority issues in its second term (2017–2021) as political and economic failings, especially the Trump administration's abandonment of the nuclear deal, altered the political landscape.

In sum, the Armenian community tends to avoid building connections with other minority groups. This is not unique to the Armenian community or specific only to religious minority communities in general, and indeed works both ways, with Armenians and other minorities also experiencing majority settings as unwelcoming. While religious and secular figures have attempted to build connections across minority communities, the tendency for inter-ethnic rivalry more often persists. The Armenian community tends to be inward looking, and although some of its corners express concern about other ethnic groups, mostly fear of pan-Turkism, the community does not generally relate, at either official or quotidian levels, to other Iranians on an ethnic basis.

In this short piece, I have highlighted some common themes necessary to discussing the place of Iranian Armenians in Iranian society, especially in light of the changing nature of the term *aqaliat*. The first is the retelling of their history, the narratives of which are

⁹ James Barry, "Sectarianism and National Cohesion: Sunni Political Activism in Iran," in *Ethnic Religious Minorities in Iran*, ed. Behnaz Hosseini (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023).

¹⁰ Barry, *Armenian Christians in Iran*.

more often bent on representation of the historical record rather than reflecting it. Then there is the community's relationship with the state and the avenues of communication meant to keep Armenian people separate from, but deeply rooted in, the Iranian landscape. Amidst this arrangement are those who challenge the idea that Armenians are separate from other Iranians: the cultural intelligentsia pushing for Armenian culture to be accepted as Iranian culture, and thereby contributing to the movement that separates "Iranian" from "Persian," a movement with repercussions for other minority groups. Finally, there is the issue of homeland, always ambiguously clear for Iranian Armenians, as a place and an idea, of being at once at home and not at home. It is colored crimson by ethnic cleansing, a situation that continues well into the present day. As the community declines due to emigration, and as Armenia—itsself a distant homeland despite neighboring Iran—faces an uncertain future of its own, the survival of Iranian Armenians' distinctive culture remains a source of anxiety.