

Sunnis in Iran: Protesting Against Decades of Discrimination and Repression

by [Mehrzaad Boroujerdi \(/experts/mehrzaad-boroujerdi\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mehrzaad Boroujerdi \(/experts/mehrzaad-boroujerdi\)](#)

Mehrzaad Boroujerdi is Vice Provost and Dean of the College of Arts, Sciences, and Education at Missouri University of Science and Technology. He has written four books, specializing in Iranian history and politics, and he is frequently consulted by both government entities and national and international media outlets.



Brief Analysis

After years of underrepresentation and repression at the hands of the regime, Iran's Sunni population is playing an important role in the current protests.

Iran's Sunni minority—which in the absence of official and authoritative statistics in Iran is estimated to constitute around ten percent of Iran's current estimated population of 86 million—has suffered disproportionately over the last four decades in terms of their political voice and representation. This long-term lack of representation can help explain the recent expressions of support from key Sunni religious figures for the ongoing protests in Iran, in spite of the danger and ongoing suppression that has specifically targeted minorities—including Sunnis.

Sunnis' Political Marginalization

The marginalization of Sunni Iranians is explicit at the highest level of government; Iranians must be Shia to serve in numerous high-level governmental offices—including the Assembly of Experts, the Expediency Council, and the Guardian Council. While not banned from all governmental roles, less explicit discrimination has meant that only twelve of the 277 members elected to the Assembly of Religious Experts (*Majles Khobregan*) have been Sunnis. These members have only come from the two provinces of Iran with overwhelmingly Sunni populations: Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan.

In a similar vein, only six percent (121 out of 1,996) of Iran's elected MPs have been Sunnis since the first post-revolutionary Iranian parliament (*Majles*) began operating in 1980. Notably, these MPs have all been elected from just 22 out of Iran's 206 electoral districts, which together represent some seven percent of the country's total population. These 22 districts are dispersed in seven provinces: Golestan, Hormozgan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Khorasan Razavi, Sistan-Baluchistan, and West Azerbaijan. It was not until 2016 that Bukan MP Mohammad-Qasim Osmani became the first Sunni member of the supervisory board of the *Majles*. And it took another four years after

that for the first and only Sunni woman, Shiva Qasemipur from Marivan, to be elected as a MP.

More specifically, *Majles* elections highlight that Sunni candidates have historically only had electoral successes in districts where the religious makeup trends majority Sunni. In the Golestan province, where the majority of residents overall are Sunni, MPs have hailed from Sunni-majority districts such as Gonbad-e Kavus, Gorgan, Kordkuy, and Minudasht, but not from Aliabad Katul or Ramiyan. In the Hormozgan province, Sunni MPs have been elected from the lesser-populated Bandar-e Lengeh district but not from the larger Bandar-e Abbas or Minab districts. And of the six electoral districts in Kermanshah, only the district of Paveh, which borders the heavily Sunni Kurdistan province, has elected a Sunni to the *Majles*.

This trend repeats itself in other provinces: in the province of Kurdistan, while the four districts of Marivan, Qorveh, Sanandaj, and Saqqez have all elected Sunni MPs, districts like Bijar have never done so. Moreover, of the eleven electoral districts in the Khorasan Razavi province, only Khaf and Torbat-e Jam have been represented by Sunni MPs. In Sistan-Baluchistan, Sunni MPs have represented the districts of Zahedan and Iranshahr in six and seven of the eleven *Majles* sessions respectively. Other than these two standout cases, only the districts of Chabahar, Khash, and Saravan have ever been represented by a Sunni MP. Finally, in West Azerbaijan, Sunni representatives have only been elected from Sunni-majority Bukan, Mahabad, Naqadeh, Piranshahr, and Urmia but not from Khoy, Maku, Miyandoab, or Salmas.

The Intersection of Religion and Ethnicity

While Sunni politicians are only competitive in districts with Sunni majorities, provinces with high proportions of Sunni inhabitants, including the provinces of Sistan-Baluchistan, Kurdistan, Golestan, and even Khorasan Razavi, face specific targeting from the regime. Here, religious divisions overlap with tense ethnic divisions, which have led the state to adopt a heavy-handed strategy in these restive provinces in the name of “national security.” Residents remember a long history of regime violence against ethnic and religious minority dissidents. In March 1979, for example, Kurds demanding autonomy rebelled against the newly established Islamic Republic in the city of Sanandaj, resulting in scores of people being killed in clashes between Kurds and security forces. By September, the Sunni-populated cities of Mahabad and Sardasht in West Azerbaijan had also fallen to government troops. 1979 similarly witnessed the outbreak of violence in Sunni-populated regions including Gonbad-e Kavus in Golestan province in March, Naqadeh in West Azerbaijan from April through September, and in regions of the Khuzestan province in April.

Over time, the regime’s hostility to ethnic and religious minorities only grew as these minorities continued to push against regime orders. For example, from August to November 1979, during the deliberations of the Assembly of Experts approving the new Constitution, a Baluchi Sunni cleric named Molana Abdolaziz Mollazadeh (1916-1987) strongly objected to declaring Shia Islam as the state’s official religious creed. In that same assembly, Hamidollah Mir Morad-Zehi (b. 1949), a 30-year-old Sunni Baluchi lawyer also raised objections to enshrining the principle of the rule of *velayat-e faqih* in the Constitution. In 1981, Ahmad Moftizadeh (1933-1992)—a respected Kurdish Sunni leader who Ayatollah Khomeini had publicly praised before—formed the Central Council of Sunnis (*Shoray-e Markazi Sonnat* or SHAMS) along with colleagues like Mollazadeh and Molavi Nazar-Mohammad Didgah (1932-2021), an MP who represented the district of Iranshahr in the first *Majles*. Moftizadeh was subsequently arrested in 1982 and spent the next ten years in prison.

As a result of the above tensions and other unaddressed minority grievances against the state, participation in *Majles* elections from 1980 to 2016 have been distinctly lower in Sunni-dominant provinces than nationwide averages. In the two provinces of Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan, for example, the participation rate has respectively been at 58 and 54 percent compared to a national average of 65 percent.

Ultimately, the Supreme Leader recognized the need to reach out to the Sunni population and appointed a “representative and head of the affairs of Sunni Brothers” in Baluchistan and Bushehr provinces. The regime also formed the Planning Council of Sunni Religious Science Schools (*Showray-e Barnamehrizi Madares Ahl-e Sonnat*) in 2007 to better control what is taught in Sunni schools.

Of course, such a move did not sit well with leading Sunni clerics, especially as it curtailed their ties with religious students hailing from Iran’s neighboring states, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan. These students were asked to enroll at the regime-controlled Al-Mustafa International University, which the U.S. government put on its sanctions list in 2020 for nefarious activities.

In 2013, President Hasan Rouhani appointed former intelligence minister Hojatolislam Ali Yunesi as his advisor for Ethnic and Religious Minority Affairs and he served in that role for five years. It wasn’t until President Ebrahim Raisi gave the position to Mamusta Abdolsalam Karimi in October 2021 that a Sunni held this minority-focused advisory role.

Sunni Dissatisfaction and the Current Protests

The creation of outreach programs and appointment of Sunni officials, however, have not proven effective against the cumulative impact of decades-worth of political marginalization, socio-economic deprivation, and historical disrespect towards Sunni-populated regions in Iran, especially as disrespect towards Sunni religious icons and places has continued until today. The death of the Kurdish 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 16 has unleashed a ferocious wave of nationwide protests in Iran—protests that have expanded to encompass long-standing grievances even beyond morality laws. For Iran’s Sunni minorities, this includes the systemic discrimination they’ve faced over the last forty years and a lack of political options through which to address it.

The regime has once again responded to these grievances with violence. According to casualty data compiled by Iran Human Rights (IHRNGO), the regime’s brutal crackdown has once again disproportionately targeted Sunnis and other minorities. 163 of the 378 people killed by security forces as of November 19, 2022 have been in the Baluchistan and Kurdistan provinces. The mostly-Sunni city of Zahedan, which is also one of the country's poorest regions, has borne the brunt of state violence. According to Amnesty International, at least 66 residents of the city were killed on September 30, alone. Furthermore, the Kurdish city of Mahabad has also been the scene of ferocious violence by the state, and at this point the casualty count is still unknown.

In an attempt at damage control, the government has resorted to such moves as sacking a police commander and a police station chief and dispatching a close confidant of Ayatollah Khamenei to the Baluchistan region to meet with Sunni clerics. Meanwhile, although labelled a ‘leaderless’ protest movement, the Sunnis in Baluchistan do seem to have found a leader in the respected Shaykh al-Islam of Zahedan, Molana Abdolhamid. Abdolhamid—who in 2021 had endorsed the conservative Ebrahim Raisi for the presidency—has become much more forceful in his Friday sermons, and after the Zahedan deaths, he put the responsibility for the carnage at the foot of the Supreme Leader and his lieutenants. Forty Baluchi tribes and scores of other Sunni leaders from across the country have so far declared their support for him.

The final chapter of this current wave of protests in Iran has yet to be written, but the events of the last two months—and the dynamics of the last several decades—are bound to leave their indelible mark on Iranian politics at large. Tehran’s window of opportunity to reframe its relationship with the country’s largest religious minority is fast closing. While progressive gender norms will hopefully be one consequential accomplishment of the Iranian people’s movement, less religiously sectarian discourse and a subsequent lessening of official discrimination will likewise hopefully emerge as a result. ❖

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