8 The Minorities Question in Iran*

In the Middle East as in the West, the concept of a "minority", covering both religious and ethnic minorities within a state, is a modern one. Today, ethnic minorities are important in much of the Middle East. In the pre-twentieth-century Middle East, however, as in the pre-eighteenth-century West, the only minorities generally considered important were religious ones, who might be either unbelievers (in the Muslim world divided into protected "People of the Book" – monotheists with scriptures – and unprotected polytheists) or heretics, whose beliefs related to the dominant religion but were judged to diverge so seriously and dangerously as to merit punishment, sometimes death. The only religious minority sometimes tolerated in the West were the Jews, who were, however, increasingly expelled and forced to move to Eastern Europe or to Morocco and the Ottoman Empire. Peaceful coexistence between Catholics and Protestants as well as tolerance and legal emancipation for Western Jews are eighteenth- and nineteenth-century phenomena. The twentieth-century Holocaust, the continuation of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslims prejudices in the West (where Muslim populations are now significant – for example, about 3 million in the United States), and revived intra-Christian tensions in parts of the West should warn Westerners against thinking that religious prejudices and persecutions happen only elsewhere.


Valuable suggestions for revision were made by the editors of this volume and by Ervand Abrahamian, Lois Beck, Gene Garthwaite, and Leonard Helfgott, all of whom are owed thanks. Part of this work was done under a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship and a Woodrow Wilson Center Fellowship, for which I am grateful. Juan Cole provided some useful materials and original summaries, and Eric Hooglund provided bibliographic assistance.
RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN THE MUSLIM MIDDLE EAST

For centuries, the Muslim world showed greater tolerance of minority religions (sometimes including theoretically forbidden “polytheistic” religions like Hinduism) than the West. In return for a special tax and sporadic and only rarely unbearable marks of second-class status, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Mandeans (Sabeans) were allowed to follow their religions and be governed (on matters not involving conflict with Muslims) by their own laws. Both Shi’a Iran, which was never part of the Ottoman Empire, and Sunni-Shi’a Iraq, long part of that Sunni Empire, housed significant communities of Jews, Sabeans, and Christians of various denominations; and Iran also had Zoroastrians. Both also contained smaller religious groups influenced by Islam, chiefly among a minority of their ethnic Kurdish and Turkish populations: notably the Yezidis, whose syncretic religion of ancient origin was wrongly stigmatized as “devil worship,” and the Ahl-i Haqq or Ali Ilahis, who are said to incorporate pre-Islamic Kurdish or Turkish beliefs and to deify the first Shi’ite imam, Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali. Both Iraq and Iran have large Twelver Shi’a and Sunni communities, and both have also had Sevener Shi’as (Ismailis), who have now dwindled to a small minority.

In the Iraq-Iran area, the main struggle having religious overtones has been between its two largest communities, the Sunnis and the Twelver Shi’as. Like the “religious wars” between Catholics and Protestants in early Modern Europe, however, Sunni-Shi’a struggles were not purely confessional in origin. They largely reflected struggles between an Iran that was made Shi’ite by the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century and the Sunni Ottomans, who failed to conquer Shi’a Iran (whereas they succeeded in most Sunni lands they attacked). The Ottoman Empire and its successor Arab states were politically identified with Sunnism, and Iran with Shi’ism. Both were (and mostly still are) thought of by their adepts as true Islam, from which the other group had deviated. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Sunni-Shi’a struggles declined, and there were moves for a Pan-Islamic unity of the Muslim world against the threat of Western infidel conquest or control. Most believers do not change their ideals quickly, however, and Sunni-Shi’a hostilities remain below the surface, especially ready to break out when one community feels oppressed or persecuted by the other.

Persecution of non-Muslim religions has occurred sporadically in the Muslim Middle East, resulting, for instance, in the medieval