Securing a Better Future for Iran's Vulnerable Religious Communities

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Abstract

This essay considers the future for religious minorities and other at-risk communities in Iran. It asks how to retain the legal protections, civic spaces, and communal institutions needed to live without fear. Drawing on scholarship about religion, authoritarian governance, minority discrimination, postwar Iraq, and public spaces, the essay contends that war threatens the social world freedom requires. A better future for Iran would protect plural civic life, not merely alter political leadership.

«ملغمه‌ای از رنج، نگرانی و امید که در مادرانگی روزمره زیر موشک و بمب جلوه می‌یابد.»

> In war, it's always civilians who pay the price. But the perspective from my family, even those living in Iran right now, is different. They would rather endure the bombardments, the lack of internet, the lack of basic needs, if it leads to freedom. They're afraid of a ceasefire deal that leaves the regime intact and even more brutal than before.

These statements capture a painful tension in Iranian life during the 2026 war. One comes from IranWire, an independent outlet run by diaspora journalists and contributors inside Iran, in its portrait of women enduring daily motherhood under missiles and bombs, where suffering, anxiety, and hope exist at once. The other comes from a Stanford peer whose family in Iran fears not war alone but a cease-fire that leaves the regime intact, emboldened, and free to intensify repression. This disagreement matters because it frames the paper's central question: whether war opens a path to freedom or destroys the social world freedom would need. In a widely shared LinkedIn post, Iranian scientist Mehrzad Sajjadi sharpened the second fear, arguing that once foreign bombs strike "power grids and water systems," the question inside Iran ceases to be freedom and becomes survival. In that view, destroying civilian infrastructure is not liberation but a way of weakening the very society that must carry political change.

This paper argues that the most urgent question after war is not simply whether Iran's rulers weaken, survive, or are replaced, but whether Iran's vulnerable communities can still sustain a plural social world. For religious minorities in particular, existential survival means more than remaining alive under a new balance of power. It means retaining the legal protections, neighborhood ties, schools, shrines, institutions, and ordinary civic settings through which faith can be practiced, transmitted, and lived without

terror. If Iran is to emerge from war into something better than Iraq, it will need a stronger civil society and enough material and institutional space for religious difference to endure.

In Iran, the state's legal and political management of religion shapes public space and public life. Sajjad Adeliyan Tous and James T. Richardson show that Iran is a system in which religion is "managed by law and legal mechanisms" and in which those mechanisms are used to maintain an authoritarian order (Adeliyan Tous & Richardson, 2024, p. 1). They describe Iran as "a theocratic polity characterized by Shiʿite clerical governance with the assumed superiority and hegemony of Shariʿa" (Adeliyan Tous & Richardson, 2024, p. 2). That description underscores the problem of institutional design. The repression of minorities is part of how power works.The argument here is directed at the Islamic Republic's institutions of coercion and guardianship, not at Shiʿa Islam as a religious tradition or at ordinary Shiʿa communities, which could themselves become newly vulnerable in any postwar upheaval.

Adeliyan Tous and Richardson are especially clear that even apparently technical restrictions on religion are "important tools by which nondemocratic leaders repress independent civic activity and thus hold on to their power" (2024, p. 3). Long before the war, danger for Iranian minority groups was already a daily reality. The war has raised the serious concern that the crisis will strengthen those regime institutions already equipped to narrow religious freedom, discipline minorities, and criminalize independent civic life.

Abbas Milani helps identify the deeper political structure behind this vulnerability. In his account, the Islamic Republic's central betrayal was to replace citizens with wards and popular sovereignty with guardianship. That matters for religious minorities because under such a system difference is never secure as equal belonging; it is tolerated, managed, or punished from above. The question after war is therefore whether Iran moves even slightly away from guardianship and toward a civic order in which vulnerable communities can live without fear.

That structure of power is reflected in the broader social reality of Iran's minorities. Hussein Hassan's survey of ethnic and religious minorities establishes the depth and breadth of the problem. Iran, he writes, is "ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse," yet "the central government emphasizes the Persian and Shiite nature of the state" (Hassan, 2007, p. 1). He adds that minorities face discrimination "particularly in employment, education, and housing" and tend to live in underdeveloped regions (Hassan, 2007, p. 1). Later he notes that "all religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination" (Hassan, 2007, p. 6). Hassan's report makes plain that many minorities already live with unequal access to education, representation, development, and security. In such a setting, military pressure that is celebrated abroad can easily translate into intensified precarity at home.

Iraq offers a chilling warning about what happens when coercive institutions outlast war and civic trust. Toby Dodge shows that post-2003 Iraq drifted into "competitive authoritarianism," in which elections persisted while civil liberties, independent institutions, and meaningful opposition were progressively narrowed (Dodge, 2013, pp. 244–245). His account is relevant to Iran because it shows how a state can emerge from dramatic upheaval not into freedom, but into a new order where fear, patronage, and coercion still determine who can speak, organize, and belong. For religious minorities, that danger is acute. A postwar Iran that remains dominated by emergency logic, militarized succession, and weak civic restraint would not merely disappoint democratic hopes. It would threaten the practical survival of communities already living near the edge of state tolerance.

In this paper, "better than Iraq" should mean that Baha'is, Sunni minorities, Sufis, Christian converts, Jews, Zoroastrians, Armenians, Assyrians, women, and dissidents do not emerge from war into an order where the state is more suspicious, civil society more broken, and shared civic life more afraid.That principle should include ordinary Shiʿa communities as well. The Islamic Republic has long claimed to speak in the name of Shiʿism, but Shiʿa life in Iran is not exhausted by the state, the Revolutionary Guards, or the clerical establishment. Many Shiʿa civilians, women, dissidents, and even religious figures have also lived under coercion, censorship, and fear. In a postwar setting, they too could face retaliation, collective suspicion, or the dangerous collapse of distinction between regime institutions and communal belonging. A humane future for Iran would therefore protect both those minorities marginalized by the state and Shiʿa communities as communities of faith rather than instruments of state power. Religious diversity survives through places and habits of life. Minority communities endure because there are neighborhoods where they still gather, schools where traditions can still be taught, shrines and cemeteries that anchor memory, charitable institutions that sustain mutual care, and mixed civic spaces where difference does not immediately become danger. When war or emergency rule destroys those settings, faith communities may remain on paper while becoming far more fragile in lived reality. Benjamin Isakhan and Lynn Meskell make a related point when they argue that post-conflict heritage reconstruction "requires ongoing, nuanced and careful engagement with local populations to succeed" and that failure to do so leaves "both local people and their heritage sites vulnerable to renewed attacks" (2019, p. 1190).

Urban spaces in Iran have long been a site of struggle between official ideology and ordinary social practice. Seyed Hossein (Iradj) Moeini explains that after the revolution, the state sought to make architecture and urban design serve an official "Iranian-Islamic" vision, one meant to crystallize both the religious character of the regime and a particular national identity in the built environment (Moeini, 2020, p. 16). From this perspective, architecture was supposed to teach, discipline, and

symbolize. Moeini notes that this vision was "written into law" that Iranian-Islamic architecture and urban design should guide the country's future development (2020, p. 14). What followed was an effort to regulate buildings as well as cultural meaning. Moeini describes how officials and regulators pushed for built forms that would visibly encode regime values, including the use of early Islamic symbols, vernacular materials, and spatial arrangements such as central courtyards (Moeini, 2020, pp. 16–17). The point was to produce a city whose public face would naturalize a particular political and moral order. As Moeini puts it, the urge to impose Iranian-Islamic style was widespread among "politicians, regulators, theologians, academics and other experts" who sought to "construct the images of a nation" (2020, p. 16). For religious minorities, that symbolic ordering helps determine how visibly, safely, and legitimately non-dominant communities can inhabit public life.

Tehran also reveals the limits of government control. Even in the regime's own flagship cultural district at Abbas Abad, the built environment repeatedly drifted away from the official script. Moeini's central irony is that many of the most prominent structures in this state-monitored zone do not in fact follow the traditionalist idiom the regime prescribed. Instead, they draw on modernist, high-tech, or hybrid forms, so that the district demonstrates a gap between ideological command and actual urban production (Moeini, 2020, pp. 13, 21). He observes that what emerges, even within post-revolution Tehran, is "the possibility of an architecture of resistance," and elsewhere in the article cites earlier work showing how "a soft mode of resistance emerges from the city's middle classes to reclaim their share of public spaces, and shap[e] them in a bottom-up manner" (Moeini, 2020, pp. 13, 23).

The stakes of that struggle become clearer in wartime, when ordinary places reveal conditions of communal survival. An Associated Press photo gallery from Tehran records daily urban continuity under pressure: cafés, parks, bakeries, and Tajrish Bazaar still functioning despite war. A bazaar, a park bench, or a neighborhood bakery remains politically significant. In diaspora commentary sharply critical of the regime, Mehrzad Sajjadi makes the same point through intimate memory, describing civilian infrastructure as the street to school, the bakery on the corner, and the hospital where one's family was born. Once that environment is destroyed, he argues, the politics of freedom can collapse into the politics of survival. Salari Sardari's history of modern architecture in Iran helps explain why such places matter beyond sentiment. She argues that Iran developed a distinct local modernism in which schools, museums, tombs, and public buildings often combined modern functions with local materials, poetic inscription, and enduring Iranian spatial traditions. These spaces carried civic memory and social continuity. To destroy them is to damage the lived settings in which civil society and historical belonging are sustained.

So a key question for Iran's future is whether cities such as Tehran retain enough social and material density to sustain plural

life afterward. If urban culture remains something dictated from above, then the future will be dim, surveilled, and brittle even without open war. If, however, markets, libraries, galleries, bridges, parks, schools, shrines, and ordinary streets remain socially meaningful, then some basis for a more plural and livable Iran remains. Moeini's account suggests that the future lies partly in this tension between architecture as an instrument of ideological control and architecture as a medium through which people preserve room to gather, remember, and imagine otherwise.

The literature points to a single standard by which Iran's future should be judged. The question is what kind of governance can protect the conditions of plural life after war. That requires preventing the security state from turning wartime emergency into permanent civic narrowing. Protections for minorities must be legal, physical, and institutional rather than merely rhetorical. Reconstruction must serve living communities and preserve the social and material settings in which different faiths and ways of life can still inhabit the same country without one being forced into invisibility. A postwar settlement that leaves minorities formally recognized but socially exposed is no success.

Abbas Milani helps clarify the final stakes. His argument is that the Islamic Republic's deepest betrayal was to replace citizens with wards, popular sovereignty with guardianship, and political life with a clerically managed order. That history matters here because religious minorities know the costs of such a system with particular force. Under guardianship, difference is tolerated, managed, or punished from above; it is not allowed to flourish as a matter of equal belonging. A decent future for Iran therefore cannot mean only a change at the top or a pause in violence. It must mean movement away from the logic that treats people as material to be administered and toward a civic order in which vulnerable communities can live without fear.

For Iran's minorities, existential survival after war will depend on whether they still have the communal settings in which faith can be practiced, transmitted, remembered, and made publicly visible, and whether the state becomes less committed to turning religious difference into political vulnerability. That is why the survival of civil society, lived places, and plural public culture remains central. It is where faith diversity actually lives. If Iran is to emerge from war into a better future than Iraq's, it will have to protect physical survival, territorial stability, and the civic and communal conditions in which people of different faiths, and none, can still live together.

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