

# Armenians in Iran: A Brief History



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## Author's Note:

As an Iranian-Armenian, seeing all the negative – mostly outrageous lies – news reported on Iran by international media outlets and social media, I strongly felt that there was a need to clear some things from the first hand observer's angle. When I see how religious and ethnic minorities are treated in some of the Middle East and North Africa region, I know that I must speak out in the defense of Iran and Iranians.

I was born in Iran and have spent over half of my adult life in the country, both prior to the '79 Revolution and after (been living in Iran again since 2000). I never experienced any sort of prejudice or discrimination in either period. In this article I will attempt to as briefly as I can go through the history of the Armenian people in Iran.

## History:

Armenians are a part of the Indo-Iranian Aryan race (note: not in the Nazi ideology sense)<sup>1</sup>. They settled mainly in the region today known as the Caucasus (modern day Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan Republic). Throughout history, due to the geographic location of Armenia, it was always caught between the Persian, Greek and the Byzantine Empires. At various periods Armenia was either an ally to or part of one of these empires.

Armenia is a unitary, multi-party, democratic nation-state with an ancient cultural heritage. Urartu was established in 860 BC and by the 6th century BC it was replaced by the Satrapy of Armenia. In the 1st century BC the Kingdom of Armenia reached its height under Tigranes the Great. Armenia became the first state in the world to adopt Christianity as its official religion. In between the late 3rd century to early years of the 4th century, the state became the first Christian nation. The official date of state adoption of Christianity is 301 AD. The ancient Armenian kingdom was split between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires around the early 5th century. Under the Bagratuni dynasty, the Bagratid Kingdom of Armenia was restored in the 9th century. Declining due to the wars against the Byzantines, the kingdom fell in 1045 and Armenia was soon after invaded by the Seljuk Turks. An Armenian principality and later a kingdom Cilician Armenia was located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea between the 11th and 14th centuries. Between the 16th century and 19th

century, the traditional Armenian homeland composed of Eastern Armenia and Western Armenia came under the rule of the Ottoman and Iranian empires, repeatedly ruled by either of the two over the centuries. By the 19th century, Eastern Armenia had been conquered by the Russian Empire, while most of the western parts of the traditional Armenian homeland remained under Ottoman rule. During World War I, Armenians living in their ancestral lands in the Ottoman Empire were systematically exterminated in the Armenian Genocide. In 1918, following the Russian Revolution, all non-Russian countries declared their independence after the Russian Empire ceased to exist, leading to the establishment of the First Republic of Armenia. By 1920, the state was incorporated into the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, and in 1922 became a founding member of the Soviet Union. In 1936, the Transcaucasian state was dissolved, transforming its constituent states, including the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, into full Union republics. The modern Republic of Armenia became independent in 1991 during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. <sup>2</sup>

### **Armenians in Iran:**

Although Armenians have a long history of interaction and settlement with Persia/Iran and within the modern-day borders of the nation, Iran's Armenian community emerged under the Safavids. In the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran divided Armenia. From the early 16th century, both Western Armenia and Eastern Armenia fell under Iranian Safavid rule. Owing to the century long Turco-Iranian geo-political rivalry that would last in Western Asia, significant parts of the region were frequently fought over between the two rivalling empires. From the mid-16th century with the Peace of Amasya, and decisively from the first half of the 17th century with the Treaty of Zuhab until the first half of the 19th century, Eastern Armenia was ruled by the successive Iranian Safavid, Afsharid and Qajar empires, while Western Armenia remained under Ottoman rule. From 1604 Abbas I of Iran implemented a "scorched earth" policy in the region to protect his north-western frontier against any invading Ottoman forces, a policy which involved a forced resettlement of masses of Armenians outside of their homelands.

Shah Abbas relocated an estimated 500,000 Armenians from his Armenian lands, during the Ottoman-Safavid War of 1603-1618, to an area of Isfahan called New Julfa and the villages surrounding Isfahan in the early 17th century, which was created to become an Armenian quarter. Iran quickly recognized the Armenians' dexterity in commerce. The community became active in the cultural and economic development of Iran.

Bourvari (Armenian: Բուրվարի) is a collection of villages in Iran, between the city of Khomein (Markazi Province) and Aligoodarz (Lorestan Province). It was mainly populated by Armenians who were forcibly deported to the region by Shah Abbas of the Safavid Persian Empire during the same as

part of Abbas's massive scorched earth resettlement policies within the empire. The following villages populated by the Armenians in Bourvari were: Dehno, Khorzend, Farajabad, Bahmanabad and Sangesfid.

With increasing encroachments of the expanding neighbouring Russian empire towards the south at the expense of Qajar Iran and Ottoman Turkey, in the course of the 19th century Qajar Iran would lose all its integral territories in the Caucasus region through the Russo-Persian Wars to Russia. This included the irrevocable loss of Eastern Armenia (roughly equivalent with modern-day Armenia) in 1828 per the Treaty of Turkmenchay.

From 1795 to 1804 during the earliest clashes leading up to the 19th century wars between the Russian and Persian Empire Armenians were taken as captive in Iran. There were also 20,000 Armenians who moved for Georgia. Following the results of the Russo-Persian War (1804-1813), Qajar Iran was forced to irrevocably cede swaths of its territories in the Caucasus, comprising modern-day Georgia, Dagestan, and most of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Russo-Persian War (1826-1828) that followed afterwards forced Qajar Iran to irrevocably lose the complete remainder of its Caucasian territories, comprising modern-day Armenia and the remainder of the Azerbaijan Republic. All abovementioned territories, which had made part of the concept of Iran for centuries, were ceded to Imperial Russia as confirmed by the 1813 Treaty of Gulistan and 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, respectively. The ceding of what is modern-day Armenia (Eastern Armenia in general) in 1828 resulted in a very large amount of Armenians falling now under the rule of the Russians.

The Treaty of Turkmenchay further stipulated that the Tsar had the right to encourage Armenians who were still living within the now drastically shrunk borders of Iran to settle in the newly conquered Caucasian territories. This resulted in a large demographic shift as many of Iran's Armenians followed the call, while many of the Caucasian Muslims migrated towards the newly established borders of Iran.

As a result, an estimated 40,000 Armenian refugees from Persia returned to the territory of the Erivan khanates after 1828, while about 35,000 Muslims (Persians, Turkic groups, Kurds, Lezgis, etc.) out total population of over 100,000 left the region, many going to the newly established borders of Qajar Iran.



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With these events of the first half of the 19th century, and the end of centuries of Iranian rule over Eastern Armenia, a new era had started for the Armenians within the newly established shrunk borders of Iran. The Armenians in the recently lost territories north of the Aras River as a result of the Russian conquests now would go through a Russian dominated period, until 1991.

The Armenians played a significant role in the development of 20th-century Iran, regarding both its economical as well as its cultural configuration. They were pioneers in photography, theater, and the film industry, and also played a very pivotal role in Iranian political affairs.

The Revolution of 1905 in Russia had a major effect on northern Iran and, in 1906, Iranian liberals and revolutionaries, demanded a constitution in Iran.



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In 1909 the revolutionaries forced the crown to give up some of its powers. Yeprem Khan, an ethnic Armenian, was an important figure of the Persian Constitutional Revolution.

Armenian Apostolic theologian Malachia Ormanian, in his 1911 book on the Armenian Church, estimated that some 83,400 Armenians lived in Persia, of whom 81,000 were followers of the Apostolic Church, while 2,400 were Armenian Catholics. The Armenian population was distributed in the following regions: 40,400 in Azerbaijan, 31,000 in and around Isfahan, 7,000 in Kurdistan and Lorestan, and 5,000 in Tehran.

In 1914 there were 230,000 Armenians in Iran. During the Armenian genocide about 50,000 Armenians fled the Ottoman Empire and took refuge in Persia. As a result of the Persian Campaign in northern Iran during World War I the Ottomans massacred 80,000 Armenians and 30,000 fled to the Russian Empire. The community experienced a political rejuvenation with the arrival of the exiled Dashnak(ARF) leadership from Russian Armenia in mid-1921; approximately 10,000 Armenian ARF party leaders, intellectuals, fighters, and their families crossed the Aras River and took refuge in Qajar Iran. This large influx of Armenians who were affiliated with the ARF also meant that the ARF would ensure its dominance over the other traditional Armenian parties of Persia, and by that the entire Iranian Armenian community, which was centered around the Armenian church. Further immigrants and refugees from the Soviet Union numbering nearly 30,000 continued to increase the Armenian community until 1933. Thus by 1930 there were approximately 200,000 Armenians in Iran.

The modernization efforts of Reza Shah (1924–1941) and Mohammad Reza

Shah (1941–1979) gave the Armenians ample opportunities for advancement, and Armenians gained important positions in the arts and sciences, economy and services sectors, mainly in Tehran, Tabriz, and Isfahan that became major centers for Armenians. From 1946-1949 about 20,000 Armenians left Iran for the Soviet Union and from 1962-1982 another 25,000 Armenians followed them to Soviet Armenia. By 1979, in the dawn of the Islamic Revolution, an estimated 250,000 - 300,000 Armenians were living in Iran.

Armenian churches, schools, cultural centers, sports clubs and associations flourished and Armenians had their own senator and member of parliament, 300 churches and 500 schools and libraries served the needs of the community. Armenian presses published numerous books, journals, periodicals, and newspapers, the prominent one being the daily “Alik”

Many Armenians served in the Iranian army, and many died in action during the Iran–Iraq War. Due to the war, the number of Iran’s 250,000 Armenians further decreased to its current 150,000.

Later Iranian governments have been much more accommodating and the Armenians continue to maintain their own schools, clubs, and churches. The fall of the Soviet Union, the common border with Armenia, and the Armeno-Iranian diplomatic and economic agreements have opened a new era for the Iranian Armenians. Iran remains one of Armenia’s major trade partners, and the Iranian government has helped ease the hardships of Armenia caused by the blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey. This includes important consumer products, access to air travel, and energy sources (like petroleum and electricity). The remaining Armenian minority in the Islamic Republic of Iran is still the largest Christian community in the country, far ahead of Assyrians.

The Armenians remain the most powerful religious minority in Iran. They are appointed two out of five seats in the Iranian Parliament (the most within the Religious minority branch) and are the only minority with official Observing Status in the Guardian and Expediency Discernment Councils. Today in Iran there are about 120,000–150,000 Armenians left. Half of which live in the Tehran area. A quarter live in Isfahan, and the other quarter is concentrated in North-western Iran or Iranian Azerbaijan. The majority of Armenians live in the suburbs and centre of Tehran, most notably Narmak, Majidiyeh, Nadershah, Sanaee St., Bahar St. etc.

### **Laws for Armenians**

Some of the Iranian laws do not apply to religious minorities. Marriage and divorce and inheritance laws for example are set by the minorities for themselves. Aside from birth and death certifications which are done in Iranian registry offices across the nation, marriage and divorce certificates are issued by a government registry office located in main churches in different towns and cities. The marriage and divorce registry office in Tehran is located in the building adjacent to Sourb Sarkis (Saint Sarkis) Church, which is the

Armenian Prelacy where Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian has his office.

The Iranian inheritance laws are based on Islamic Sharia Laws. For example only one third of property can be put in a will in the way the writer of the will wishes how his property is divided to his next of kin. The remaining two-thirds go under the inheritance laws. For example if a man who is married and has a son, daughter and a wife, the inheritance law is such that – in the event of there being a will – one-eighth of the remains of the estate goes to his widow, and rest is divided into the children in such way that the daughter gets half of what the son gets.

These laws do not apply to Armenians. The full estate or property can be put into a will and the writer of the will can choose who gets what to what amount. In other words an Armenian can if he chooses so not to for example include his wife in the will and will everything he owns to his children equally regardless of gender; or any other combination that he chooses. In the event that there is no will, the property is equally divided among the immediate family members (widow, children) of the deceased. In the event that there are no immediate survivors the property goes to the siblings of the deceased, and so on and so forth.

In December 2011 significant developments occurred in the Dia or bloody money/compensation Law for religious minorities. Prior to that religious minorities were entitled to receive half of their Muslim counterparts. But thanks to the joint campaigns of minorities' leaders and Islamic scholars and jurists, ultimately thanks to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's decree, the law changed and religious minorities became entitled to equal compensation as their Muslim counterparts. It must be mentioned that according to Iranian laws women are entitled to half compensation as men, and since the law for religious minorities is equal to the nation's laws, the same ration applies to religious minorities, a significant step nonetheless.

### **Social, Cultural and Sports Clubs and Centres and Schools**

As mentioned Armenians, and overall all religious minorities have their own social, cultural and sports clubs which are exclusively for them. i.e. only Armenians can use their own clubs and centres, Assyrians can only use their own centres, and the same for Jews and Zoroastrians. Since this article is focused on Armenians in Iran, it will concentrate on the workings of these clubs and centres. There are a number of social, cultural and sports centres in Tehran, one of these is the massive Ararat sports and recreation complex which is located in the Vanak district of the city. The complex includes a football stadium, volleyball and basketball court, an open air garden restaurant which operates in spring and summer, indoor restaurant, conference and reception halls. With the reception hall being very spacious it is a very popular venue for wedding and other occasion receptions. Unlike Iranian wedding receptions where men and women are segregated, in the Ararat receptions hall and in other Armenian facilities across the city, receptions are held in the mixed

form where families and friends can sit and dance together. Also to prevent tensions and incidents from breaking out, there are guards inside the gates of the complex and also Iranian police outside the gates.

There are numerous football volleyball and basketball sports teams for boys and girls and men and women, and unlike the Iranian sports venues where unfortunately women are still not allowed, women spectators are allowed to the venues.

Armenians also have their own boy and girl scouts in their various clubs and schools, who follow the internationally recognised Boy and Girl Scout rules.

Prior to the revolution there were both

mixed schools, and boy and girl schools for Armenians. I myself, attended a mixed school up to eighth grade before leaving the country in 1976.

In post revolution Iran schools became segregated for boys and girls. In Armenian schools as well as all the nationwide curricula that is taught, the students also learn the Armenian language, grammar, history and religion. It must be noted that these schools are not private schools and are state run schools.

The social and cultural centres also host various venues ranging from lectures in Armenian matters and history to dance and musical groups performances.

### **Armenian Churches**

There are approximately 200 operating churches across Iran the oldest of which date back to the 12th Century. Some of these churches are now closed for various reasons, the main one of which being not enough Armenians left in the community to make up a significant congregation, but they are preserved as churches nonetheless.

Armenian churches are concentrated in the following provinces and cities: Tehran (15), Isfahan (11), West (67) and East (18) Azerbaijan Provinces, and Ardebil, Shiraz, Bushehr, Bandar Abbas, Rasht, Qazvin, Hamadan, Arak, Mashhad<sup>3</sup>, Masjed-l-Soleiman, Abadan and Ahwaz towns and cities (12).

### **The Future of Armenians in Iran – Shortfalls and Challenges**

In the 1950s and 60s, some Armenians emigrated to Soviet Armenia from Iran, some, regretting their irreversible move. In the early 70s some Armenians emigrated to Australia, Europe and North America, but following the Islamic Revolution of 79, the number of Armenians leaving the country notably



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increased. Among today's Armenians in Iran, hardly a family can be found who does not have a member that lives in America or Europe, including the author of this article whose sister and her family have been living in America for more than three decades.

Some of the common reasons for Armenians leaving Iran include, welfare and healthcare, job opportunities, children's education, and social "freedoms"<sup>4</sup>. With welfare and healthcare for example, Armenian senior citizens get these facilities in most of the western countries including the United States and Canada, where they receive pensions and free medical care.

With myself it is a different story. Having lived outside the country for 24 years, I decided to move back to Iran for personal and family reasons, and as I look back at the last 17 years I am very happy with my decision. I lead a comfortable life with a modest income.

So overall, Iran has historically been a very kind and generous host to Armenians. But I believe there are some minor improvements that can be made. For example, Armenians or overall, religious minorities (Assyrians, Jews and Zoroastrians) cannot be candidates for elections to high civil service positions such as city or borough or town mayorship. Apart from the two seats that are allocated for Armenian members of parliament, Armenians cannot run as independent candidates for parliament.

I believe that the criteria that should allow individuals of all ethnic and religious backgrounds should be factors in the eligibility of an individual to hold a high office. The individual should be a true patriot, care for the community and the nation and have a passion to serve the country.

My argument is, if London can rightly so, have a Muslim mayor, why can't Tehran have an Armenian mayor for example?

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<sup>1</sup>- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aryan>

<sup>2</sup>- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenia>

<sup>3</sup>- Note: Mashhad is a Holy City where the Shrine of the Shia 8th Imam, Imam Reza is located, and it has an Armenian church. Whereas there is not a single church of any denomination in all of Saudi Arabia, let alone in its two Holiest Cities of Mecca and Medina.

<sup>4</sup>- The reason for the quotation marks is because of the interpretation of social freedoms. Many Armenians living in Iran are content with the freedoms that they have.