



## **Difference in Difference**

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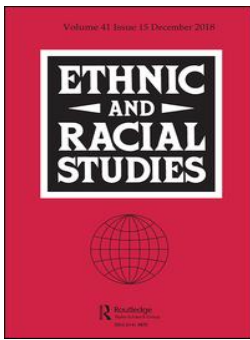
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## Difference in difference: language, geography, and ethno-racial identity in contemporary Iran

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### ABSTRACT

Three approaches to portraying ethno-racial and national identity for Iran are common: a discretizing approach that groups and conflates ethnicity, language and geography; a civic-territorial conception of nationalism as supra-ethnic Iranian-ness; and an ethno-nationalist approach that criticizes the former for privileging a state-centered, Persian-Shiite majority's culture and status. Instead of arbitrating between them, we propose a sociological approach that compares different forms of ethno-racial self-identification in modern Iran. Using the 2016 Iran Social Survey, which asks open-ended questions on ethno-racial self-identification, we find wide variation in how ethnic identity is expressed. On the one hand, the findings suggest that a sizable degree of mismatch exists, where concepts of ethnic groupness are confusing or not fully recognizable to many individuals. On the other hand, we also find that multi-ethnic self-identification is common, including across the ethno-racial boundaries often portrayed as closed and mutually exclusive groups in Western discussions on Iran.

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In one of the final televised episodes of the 2008 Iranian historical serial *In the Wind's Eye*, a scene staged in high dramatic fashion during a famous battle of the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War illustrates a particular account of ethno-racial identity. Aired nearly three decades after the 1979 Iranian revolution and the founding of the Islamic Republic, the episode was set in 1982 during Operation Beit-ol-Moqaddas (Jerusalem) to take back the areas surrounding the southern Iranian city of Khorramshahr, then occupied by Iraqi forces deep into Iranian national territory. A group of Iranian officers crouch in the trenches and peer through binoculars at the opposing Iraqi line. One of the officers asks if anyone in the regiment speaks Arabic well enough. A darker-skinned soldier with a keffiyeh-styled scarf wrapped around his head moves forward and volunteers. The officer asks him to take off his

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headscarf. The soldier does so, revealing a head of kinky black hair, and tells the officer in an audible dialect: "I'm Entezar, from Abadan," a nearby city and the location of one of Iran's largest oil refineries. He claims he has no wife or son and can infiltrate the enemy lines to pass as an Iraqi. The officer tells him to put on a confiscated Iraqi uniform and sends him across the no man's land to test the readiness of Iraqi front lines. Another darker-skinned soldier sidles up to the officer and tells him that Entezar does indeed have a wife and a two-year old daughter, but he selflessly lied so the officer would send him as a volunteer. From afar, Entezar signals the coast is clear for an assault and fellow Iranian troops cross over, resulting in a victorious battle. In the next episode of the serial Entezar is killed, and his death is shot in the hagiographic style common of Iran-Iraq war films.<sup>1</sup>

No ethno-racial category is overtly stated about Entezar in the scene. Instead, markers of difference such as audible dialect, knowledge of a non-Persian language, skin tone, hair characteristics, and territorial origin signify to a contemporary Iranian audience that Entezar could be an Iranian descended from African ancestors. These Afro-Iranians hail from the littoral coast of the Persian Gulf, from Southern Iran all the way up to the southwestern province of Khuzestan, where most of the major battles of the Iran-Iraq war took place and where Arabic-speaking, sometimes darker-skinned men took part on the front lines.

Propaganda emanating from the Iraqi state at the 1980 onset of the Iran-Iraq War specifically targeted these residents of "Arabistan," as Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein occasionally called Khuzestan's territory – a label also used by both the Iranian government and the British Empire until 1925 when the southern half of the area functioned as a semi-autonomous zone with a strong, quasi-colonial British presence. Iraq's Hussein proclaimed that the people in this area would rise up against the "racist clique in Tehran" (Razoux 2015, 8). Yet once hostilities commenced, accounts of the Iran-Iraq War chronicle that most Arabic-speaking households in southwestern Iran stayed firmly on the Iranian side of the conflict, both on and off the front.

The televised portrayal of a darker-skinned and Arabic-speaking Abadani sacrificing his life towards the cause of the Iranian nation-state is emblematic of a common portrayal of Iranian identity. In this depiction, "Iranian-ness" absorbs socio-cultural differences often associated across distinct ethno-racial groups without erasing the marked presence of these differences in everyday social contexts. In other words, rather than a majority ethno-racial group predominant in the population amidst smaller "minority" ethnic groups, Iran is characterized as a "supra-ethnic" nation which contains numerous "sub-national" or "local" groupings.<sup>2</sup> As Hassan Taqizadeh (1878–1970), a seminary-trained intellectual and nationalist politician born in the Turkic-speaking city of Tabriz, jotted in a personal note, "Persians not an ethnic

group ... culture and geographic area is binding force ... language and religion not important ... everyone 100% Iranian even when speaking other languages" (quoted in Ansari 2012, 145). While in other contexts, linguistic practice can be understood not only as a possible indicator of ethnic identity, but as a criterion of ethnic belonging itself, the case of Iran cautions us to keep these two understandings of difference distinct from one another.

With the partial exception of nineteenth-century censuses undertaken by the Ottoman Empire to assess the size and location of confessional communities, West Asian states, particularly in the postcolonial era, have generally not undertaken the practice of census classification with respect to ethnicity and race. Indeed, Iran's government has never taxonomically classified sub-populations into discrete ethno-racial groups, either before or after the country's 1979 revolution, even though local surveys of language usage and religious affiliation have occasionally been deployed (Houshmand 2005).

The common absence of state-driven taxonomy across the Middle East is striking when compared to the successful politics of ethno-racial group recognition through census-making across Latin America (Loveman 2014). Here, intellectuals worked through the state as well as through social movement organizations to coin or repurpose conceptual boundaries around ethno-racial categories in order to shift patterns of self-classification (Paschel 2016; Delgado 2019). These efforts at taxonomic classification do not only make and remake ethno-racial boundaries, as scholars have shown in countries such as Brazil, but also engender significant shifts in individuals' own ethno-racial self-classification over time (De Micheli 2021). More akin to Iran and most Middle Eastern states, though, among 41 countries in Europe and the Caucasus, only 22 collected data on the ethno-racial identity of residents. Moreover, even fewer of these censuses allow for citizens to classify themselves into multiple ethno-racial categories (Simon 2012; Emigh, Riley, and Ahmed 2016). The absence of census-derived ethno-racial classification in Iran, then, is no historical outlier.

However, while unrecognized as a social identity via census validation, or defined legally by personal identity documents, discussion of ethno-racial identity as a marker and mode of difference is common in Iran's domestic media as well as in conventional portrayals outside of the country. Given that twentieth-century Iranian history is replete with political movements for local autonomy and even territorial separation that run tandem alongside the nationalist tale of state formation itself, the topic of ethno-racial, territorial and linguistic identities has generated wide polemics and heated claims. Scholarship on this issue, for the most part, rests on separate and often clashing conceptualizations of ethnic and national identity.

In this article, we analyze three common approaches to portraying ethnic and national identity in Iran. First, we highlight a discretizing approach,

particularly present in Western policy documents and journalistic coverage, that conflates ethnicity, language and geography. This perspective reduces ethno-racial diversity to discretely bordered, mutually exclusive groups that can be neatly mapped across Iran's territory. Second, as illustrated in our introductory discussion of a television war serial, we describe a civic-territorial, nationalist approach which tends to subsume, neglect, or even outright dismiss ethno-racial diversity under a putatively supra-ethnic Iranian-ness. Lastly, we discuss an ethno-nationalist approach that criticizes the former perspective for privileging a Persian-Shiite majority's culture and status within portrayals of Iran's state-society relations. These latter two approaches are not only common in Iran, we suggest, but are relationally and oppositionally bound up with each other.

While a thorough explication of each of these approaches is beyond the scope of this article, we outline them to instead propose a sociological approach that historicizes and compares different modes of ethno-racial ascriptions that have concurrently taken shape in modern Iran. After summarizing these approaches, we introduce the Iran Social Survey: a nationally-representative survey fielded in late 2016 across the country (Harris and Tavana 2019). Unlike surveys which force respondents to choose from a pre-selected list of ethno-racial categories for demographic self-classification, as often practiced across Europe and Asia, the Iran Social Survey asks open-ended questions about ethno-racial identity and allows for respondents to select into multiple categories. Through a method of prompting ethnic self-identification as distinct from linguistic practice, arguably the first such survey conducted in Iran at a national level, we document wide variation in how differing categories of group identity are understood and utilized (or not). On the one hand, the findings suggest that a sizable degree of *mismatch* exists in Iran, where concepts of ethnic groupness are confusing or not fully recognizable to many individuals. On the other hand, the survey findings also suggest that self-ascribed *multi-ethnic* identity is common in Iran, including across the major ethno-racial boundaries which have often been portrayed as closed and mutually exclusive groups in Western scholarship and public discourse.

As for any survey with novel methods, a word of caution is necessary. While the 2016 Iran Social Survey provides empirical data in the context of a sometimes sensitive and divisive debate on identity, a survey tends to capture variation in answers to broadly-scoped questions rather than emphasizing qualitative depth. It is particularly important to note that the survey instrument did not attempt to capture crucial issues of perceived discrimination based on ethno-racial identity. Hence, the findings presented here should be treated as an invitation to further research, including refinement of survey instruments in Iran and the broader Middle East that adopt open-ended approaches to ethno-racial self-identification.

Moreover, our findings should not be mistakenly interpreted as static or timeless. Changes in Iranian society over the past several decades have likely led to increased awareness of ethnicity as an identity marker – though not necessarily expressed in contradistinction to national identity (Bayat 2005, 2008). The increasing integration and modernization of Iranian society throughout the twentieth century up to the present did not displace the presence of ethnic self-identification by cause of a Persian-centric and homogenizing nationalism, we argue, but rather contributed to the increasing salience of these forms of self-identification. If this account is tenable, then national and ethno-racial identity in Iran have not been mutually exclusive, but rather co-constitutive.

For the purpose of this article, then, the term “ethnic” and “ethno-racial” are used interchangeably as objects of analysis, drawing on the sociological tradition which “construes ethnicity, race, and nationhood as a single integrated family of forms of cultural understanding, social organization, and political contestation” (Brubaker 2009, 22). This intellectual tradition foregoes the assumption that ethno-racial identity is necessarily demarcated by territory, language, lineage, phenotype, or nationality across all contexts. Pertinent to the Iranian case and West Asia as a whole, moreover, is that “treating race as fundamentally different from ethnicity overlooks the fact that one and the same group might be treated as a race at one point in history and as another type of ethnic category at another” (Wimmer 2013, 8). After discussing the Iran Social Survey findings, we conclude with an appeal for methodological approaches that can situate and nuance claims of ethno-racial and nationalist “common sense” while attending to the everyday mechanisms by which these powerful social facts organize life across the Middle East.

### **The discrete charm of Western cartography**

According to Iran’s 1986 census, the first decennial census conducted after the 1979 revolution, 7% of urban residents and 23% of rural residents out of a population of 49 million did not understand Persian at a spoken level (SCI 1986, 3). While subsequent censuses did not include questions on language use, a large survey conducted in 2002 reported that while only 5.4% of sampled households could neither speak nor understand Persian, 44.5% were still familiar with at least one other language (SCI 2002, 14). While the Persian language had long functioned as a lingua franca across Asian empires (Green 2019), hundreds of languages and dialect sub-groups had been documented across Iranian territory by the mid-1970s. These included Turkic languages in the northwest and northeast, Kurdish languages in the west (with pockets in the northeast), Baluchi in the southeast, Arabic and Lori “dialects” in the south and west, and Caspian languages in the north. Maps were periodically constructed out of ethnological surveys from



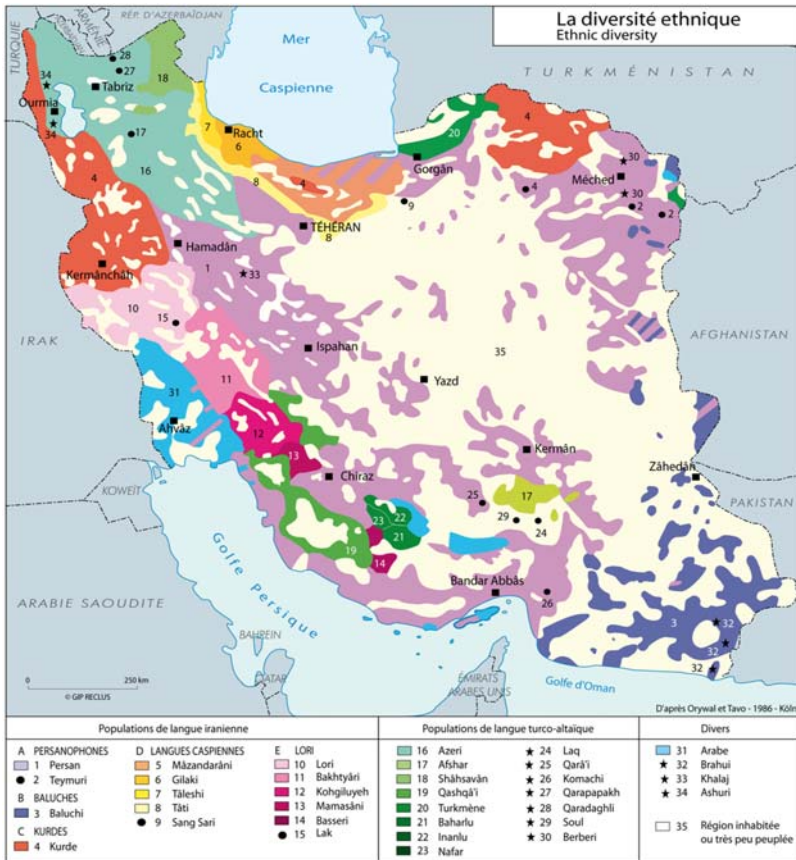
**Map 1.** Main languages and multi-linguistic areas of Iran as recorded per village unit in 1986 (CNRS 2013).

the pre-1979 era, detailing where languages and dialects were spoken in select locales (see Anonby, Taheri-Ardali, and Hayes 2019). Yet over time, maps of *linguistic* diversity in Iran often metamorphosed into maps of *ethnic* diversity, including most maps used in journalistic and scholarly coverage of the country today. In [Map 1](#), displaying linguistic diversity, the primary cartographic unit is the majority-language spoken at the village level as recorded in the 1986 census, with additional sources added by a team of French scholars.

In [Map 2](#), published in a French atlas in 1998, the wide linguistic diversity across Iranian territory can be seen in the taxonomy displayed in the legend. Given that swaths of the Iranian plateau are sparsely inhabited, this map also attempts to depict variations in population density of the country. Yet the map is titled “Ethnic Diversity,” cartographically enforcing the assumption among twentieth century ethnologists that language usage is synonymous with ethnic identity.

Lastly, [Map 3](#) was prepared by the United States Central Intelligence Agency’s Cartographic Center as part of a 2004 country profile. The map, cut into a standalone image from a larger poster on Iran, is commonly





**Map 2.** Linguistic diversity among populated areas in Iran, titled as “Ethnic Diversity” (Hourcade et al. 1998).

used in its cropped form by Western sources as a reference on the subject of Iran’s ethnic diversity. This map resembles the previous two maps in its cartographic basis but further conflates language and ethnicity with geography. Ethnicity is neatly bounded into discrete territories.

Compared to the previous maps’ attention to multi-lingual zones, there are barely any multi-ethnic zones identified on the CIA map. Moreover, the map lays a problematic religious dichotomization on top of the distribution of the country’s population into distinct Shi’i and Sunni territorial zones, without identifying how these divisions were arrived at. This map, or cruder versions, is often used by US policymakers and human rights foundations. The map is easily obtained through an online search of related keywords without any mention of its provenance. The political implication of the map can be construed as positive, displaying Iran as a cohesive mosaic of discretely bounded ethnic groups. The implication can also be rendered as



**Map 3.** Map entitled “Ethno religious Distribution,” cropped from Iran Country Profile (CIA Cartographic Center 2004).

negative, all but predicting that the center cannot hold the centripetal forces of ethnic difference which surround it.<sup>3</sup> Yet in both iterations, the conflation of geography, language, and ethnic identity is nearly absolute. This includes the transformation of (some) Persian-language speakers into a coherent majority-ethnic group identified in territorially distinct terms on the map as “Persian.”

Why would maps of Iran, not to mention the broader West Asian region, portray difference in this manner? After all, as Michael Hanchard and other comparative scholars of ethno-racial identity have noted, heterogeneity has “been the rule rather than the exception among national societies governed by states” (2018, 191). Set against these customary experiences, however, is the powerful conflation of language, religion/sect, and geography with ethnicity and nation. The merging of varied categories of difference into the fused image of a discretely bounded collective of autochthonous people is a hallmark of what Andreas Wimmer identifies as our modern inheritance

of “Herder’s heritage.” Wimmer refers here to the nineteenth-century German classicist Johann Herder in the common practice whereby scholarship and journalism “take it for granted that dividing society into ethnic groups is analytically and empirically meaningful ... characterized by a specific culture, dense networks of solidarity, and shared identity” (2013, 10).

Indeed, much of the scholarship on minorities in the Middle East produced in the twentieth century suffered from a Herderian common sense that assumed *a priori* what was needed to be explained and documented; namely, the existence of discretely bordered ethno-racial groups (see critical reappraisals in Robson 2016; Pursley 2019). This Herderian frame is itself a historical product. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the shattering of West Asian empires followed by direct and indirect European colonial rule augmented the relevance of claims to autochthony (indigeneity) and role of romanticized heritage as a tool for postcolonial state-building (Reynolds 2011). In a rapidly coalescing world of territorial nation-states, intellectuals and political elites projected an essentialized authenticity, pigeonholed cultural differences, and invented ancient pedigrees to justify and demarcate the political community of a “people” (Wimmer 2002). Exercises in mapping ethnic groups that discretely demarcate these categorical identities to bind them alongside linguistic practices and geographical areas, therefore, flatten and homogenize the various ways by which ethnic identity forms and functions in modern societies.

### **Iranian-ness: inclusive and supra-ethnic or exclusive and mono-ethnic?**

For all of the conflict and turmoil that accompanied and engendered the transformation of a nineteenth century empire-state into a twentieth century nation-state - colonial occupations, democratic uprisings, territorial secessions, forced settlement of nomadic kinship-networked polities, pogroms against religious minorities, and the circulation of Persian-centrist chauvinism alongside orientalist notions of Iranian or Muslim backwardness - one stylized fact about modern Iran is that the country largely escaped the horrors of mass population expulsion and ethno-racial genocide which so often formed part of modern state-making projects (Wimmer 2002, 67). One key difference is that, unlike the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires, the Iranian empire neither fought as a belligerent nor experienced cataclysmic territorial and human losses in World War I, an empire-imploding experience for the former three polities. An additional, and likely related, explanation is that apart from episodes of violent disruption of localized nomadic polities which reacted against the monopolization of political violence, early twentieth-century state-building attempts at “pacification” in Iran also involved a degree of incorporation of provincial

elite networks into relations of patronage (Bayat 2005; Schneider 2006; Cronin 2007; Burbank and Cooper 2010).

How did national identity in Iran take shape, then, amidst a global shift from empire to nation-state? As elsewhere, intellectuals that imagined and invoked the nation often preceded the administrative construction of the modern nation-state itself (Hroch 2000; Karataşlı 2020). By the late nineteenth century, lettered elites, many in fact originating from non-Persian speaking areas, argued that successful nation-state formation depended on a common story of the Iranian “we” through a nationalist recasting of history and a canonized set of literary, linguistic, mythical, and folklore elements (Kashani-Sabet 1999; Marashi 2011; Amanat 2012; Schirazi 2016). While the Persian language was and is often stressed as the “glue” in this nation-making process, recent scholarship points to a wider range of non-linguistic characteristics with which intellectuals attempted to delineate the contours of the nation. This meant casting non-Persian-speaking communities as members of the nation through their imagined transhistoric defense of Iranian territories against external conquest or domestic threats (Vejdani 2014; Gustafson 2014). In doing so, Iranian nationalism produced a civic-territorial conceptualization of the nation where Iranian-ness operated as a supra-ethnic category associated with popular sovereignty and facilitated, but not circumscribed, by the Persian language (Elling 2013). Localized cultural differences were nested within, rather than opposed to, the nation; and in which, allegedly, no ethno-racial group could be singled out as a dominant majority.

Of course, this civic-territorial story sounds too exceptionally good to be true. Indeed, as Fariba Adelhah notes, the “gradual naturalization of the national narrative” glossed over the pervasive cultural fluidity and hybridity that had marked Iranian empires, and the Persian-speaking world more broadly, before the sinews of the nation-state had connected (2016, 31). With the 1925 founding of the Pahlavi monarchy, this narrative was adopted as official policy and used to legitimize aggressive state attempts to “see” a legible population for purposes of taxation, conscription, cultural homogenization and other projects often grouped under a campaign of defensive modernization. Local political and social organizations which flowed through extensive kinship networks and fell across two or more demarcated boundaries were often perceived as security threats linked to the “outside” (Atabaki 2014). Indeed, during periods of state weakness in the political center (in the 1920s, 1940s, or 1980s), some peripheral zones with ethnic and linguistic minorities or nomadic kinship polities, though not all, became hotspots for modern movements of local autonomy or secession (Elling 2013, 28–41).

In response to claims of supra-ethnic Iranian-ness as a national essence, a range of ethno-national activists and historians have argued that Iranian

nationalism contains at its core an ethno-racial chauvinism where Persian identity - a closed ethnic category based on the Persian language and Shiite creed - is universalized into a national identity which erases the cultural differences or distinct lineages of other ethnic groups. The not-so-hidden sense of superiority whereby early nationalist intellectuals claimed Iranian-ness as part of an "Aryan" ethno-racial group distinct from other Asian peoples, a claim still widely heard in diasporic circles today, provides ample ammunition for the ethnicization of grievances related to inequality or discrimination (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016). Indeed, the historiography of Iran itself is largely self-contained within the field of Iranian Studies, suffering from a methodological nationalism wherein the nation, with or without a state, is taken for granted as the proper unit of analysis. This includes oppositional claims which speak of the Iranian people as a collective and organic entity that has historically resisted despotism, whether under monarchical or theocratic guises as well as colonially-instigated separatism (Adelkhah 2016, 15). From the perspective of self-identified members of minority ethnic groups, the end result of twentieth-century Iranian state-building can be seen as an exclusionary nationalism which partly masks the domination of a Persian ethno-racial majority group that gets to define the contours of Iranian-ness (e.g. Tohidi 2009; Posch 2017; Tezcür and Asadzade 2019; Akbarzadeh et al. 2020).

However, not all linguistic or geographic differences are politicized as *ethnically* salient in contemporary Iran. The four main categories which are usually grouped as four distinct ethnic minorities – Azeri, Kurd, Arab, and Baluch:

... have in their histories a number of similarities: a tribal past and/or present, which has intertwined the political trajectories of their communities with the centrifugal and centripetal fluctuations of Iranian state-building; historical periods of autonomy, secessionist activity, insurgency or banditry that are today hailed by ethnicists as symbols of a drive toward self-rule; and a geographical location in areas that are at once on the peripheries of the central authority in Tehran and within the spheres of interest of Iran's various historical foreign rivals and colonial powers. (Elling 2013, 42)

As the maps displayed in the previous section suggest, however, these four terms are not the only ones which could act as grounds for self-characterization of categorical difference in Iran. Instead, *historical* processes made some categories of difference more salient rather than others, in some places rather than others, and in some times rather than others. As one of us has previously written, these four terms "were originally socioeconomic, geographic and linguistic categories used situationally according to changing contexts throughout history; these categories were invested with groupness through particular politicized social actions vis-à-vis modern state formation in the twentieth century" (Elling 2013, 43).

From a sociological standpoint, then, both of the above portrayals of ethnic and national identity in Iran are correct inasmuch as individuals practiced one, either, or both across different social spaces. Yet what the conflation of language, territory, and ethno-racial identity tends to hide is that even individuals who might be externally classified as a minority may not recognize themselves as belonging to, or act as part of, a coherent group with shared interests. Above the individual level, the social salience of ethno-racial identity across space and time could either rise or decline through processes such as exogamy, internal migration, formal education, or generational change.

On a topic where wild guesses about relative population shares of assumedly discrete ethno-national groups in Iran are wielded and weaponized, the variation and forms of self-classification across the population should be an object of careful inquiry rather than a set of givens. We take inspiration from scholars in other postcolonial regions who use sociological methods which recognize that ethno-racial categories are historically constructed, comparatively variant, and used by individuals in heterogenous fashion. Their approach is not to debate the epistemological existence of categories of difference, but to analytically compare when and where certain forms of difference are conceived of and practiced as ethno-racial difference. This has led to the use of more precise methodological tools to assess the salience of ethno-racial categories across variegated social spaces (e.g. Telles 2014; Bailey, Fiahlo, and Loveman 2018). Careful attention to “everyday ethnicity” can highlight a “disjuncture between the thematization of ethnicity and nationhood in the political realm and their experience and enactment in everyday life” (Brubaker et al. 2006, 363).

What Eric Hobsbawm wrote about nationhood and nationalism could also be said about ethnicity: these social processes are “dual phenomena” that are “constructed essentially from above” yet “cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below” (1991, 10). Ethnographic methods may be best attuned to observe everyday processes of ethnic boundary-drawing via self-identification and external ascription in their situated social spaces in Iran. However, as we show, survey polling can also contribute knowledge by asking: what can we learn when we allow non-elite Iranians to self-ascribe ethno-racial differences without imposing these classifications in advance? In the next section, we lay out the methodology of the 2016 Iran Social Survey and our findings regarding ethnic self-identification(s).

### **Methods and mismatch in ethno-racial self-identification**

Scholars have repeatedly identified a key problem for census and survey methods which rely on a single set of mutually exclusive ethno-racial categories. This methodological approach treats a “multi-dimensional, fluid,



and contextually and relationally specific concept as if it were uni-dimensional, fixed and stable" (Burton, Nandi, and Platt 2010, 1334; also see Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2007). Such problems often occur in the fielding of the questionnaire itself. Individuals may or may not recognize themselves in the categories proffered by a survey. Ethno-racial categories that are recognized as salient in one location by respondents might not be recognized in another location. Moreover, responses to surveys where a choice set of ethno-racial categories are read out loud – "choose from one of the following" – may prime the respondent to answer according to the classification logic of the survey designers rather than a differently understood self-identification of the interview subjects.

Consequently, when unprompted open-ended queries on ethnic self-identification are asked in surveys, sizable levels of *mismatch* between open and closed methods have been discovered (Bratter 2018). The presence of categorical mismatch has been documented by surveys across many post-colonial countries. For example, in the 2015 inclusion of a new intercensal survey question in Mexico asking whether individuals identify as "Afro-mexican or Afrodescendent," 1.2% of the population answered "Yes," 0.5% answered "Yes, partially," and 1.4% of the population replied "I don't know" (Delgado 2019, 51). In the case of Iran, similar concerns have been raised by historians, as the Persian-language neologism for ethnicity – *qowmiyat* – contains an ambiguous etymological root (Ahmadi 2017). In English, it can be translated literally as "people-ness" or "family-ness," since the noun *qowm* can signify an extended family network, a kinship structure, a tribal clan, as well as a religious group such as the Jewish "people" (Elling 2013, 17).<sup>4</sup> Yet the term *qowmiyat* is also used in Iranian media and the public sphere as synonymous with the concept of ethnicity as connoted in English. As a result, there is likely variation in the ways in which individuals understand the term itself, especially when used in a survey instrument.

With these concerns in mind, the Iran Social Survey (ISS, hereafter) fielded a set of questions on ethnic identity which used both *open-ended* and *closed-ended* prompts after pilot testing various question formats. The nationally-representative ISS, fielded in late 2016 by phone across the country via landline to 5005 randomly-selected respondents, is arguably the first survey in Iran to allow for multi-dimensional responses on ethnic identity and linguistic practice. All calls were made from within Iran; interviews were conducted in Persian (95%), Azeri Turkish (4%), and Kurdish (1%); and the survey response rate was 64%, excluding partial interviews.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 displays pertinent descriptive statistics of respondents in the ISS sample, which approximately resembles the demographic composition of the country.

The ISS interview contained separate sets of questions on household language usage and questions on ethnic self-identification. The language usage questions, asked in the middle of the 30-minute interview, queried

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for respondents in the Iran Social Survey (2016, n=5005).

	Number	Relative Distribution
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	2369	47.3%
Female	2636	52.7%
<b>Age</b>		
18–24	769	15.5%
25–29	608	12.2%
30–39	1266	25.5%
40–49	988	19.9%
50–59	678	13.6%
60–69	425	8.5%
70+	238	4.8%
<b>Settlement Type</b>		
Cities > 1 million	1293	25.9%
Cities 500k-1m	251	5.0%
Cities 100k-500k	973	19.5%
Cities <100k	1052	21.0%
Rural	1431	28.6%
<b>Educational Attainment</b>		
No formal education	617	12.7%
Primary	1397	28.7%
Secondary	1435	29.5%
Tertiary	1415	29.1%

the primary language used in the respondent's household, primary language used when the respondent was a child, and primary language used by the respondent's father and mother when they were children. This allows for the estimation of "mother tongue" native speakers of various languages, irrespective of ethnic self-identification. These questions were open-ended, without any listed languages provided, and answers were subsequently coded by the interviewer.

Questions on ethnic self-classification were asked near the end of the 30-minute interview, in order to not directly associate language usage with ethnic self-classification. In this sequence, an open-ended question was first asked: "*To which Iranian ethnicity do you belong?*".<sup>6</sup> After a pre-survey pilot testing of the instrument with multiple forms of the question, the ISS used the modifier "Iranian" to prompt the respondent into distinguishing between official nationality and one or more ethnic categories. Open-ended responses were coded by the interviewer into a common list of ethnic categories.

Notably, out of 5005 respondents, 23% (1129) answered "I don't know" to this open-ended question, while 77% of the sample stated an ethnic category. Given the large sample size of the ISS, 1129 individuals stating "I don't know" to a question asking about ethnic identity is a non-trivial finding. Certainly, there is more than one reason why a respondent might answer "I don't know" to an open-ended question on ethnic identity. As noted above, the term *qowmiyat* does not have a long pedigree in the



Persian language, and the respondent might not have understood what the term was referring to. The phrase “Iranian ethnicity” could have contributed to a sense of *mismatch* between alternative understandings linked to kinship or geography, given the phrasing of the question. There are other forms of survey bias, the most important of which is that public securitization of ethnic issues in Iran could lead to hesitation to declare ethnic self-identification out of fear of reprisal from state authorities (Elling 2013). Nevertheless, as surveys with questions on ethno-racial classification in other countries illustrate, the relatively large size of the “don’t know” answer to an open-ended survey question on ethnic identity in Iran suggests that a portion of the population may not recognize ethnic identity as primarily salient when asked in a survey format.

To parse this category further, additional information on the pool of respondents who answered “I don’t know” to an open-ended question on ethnic identity can be gained from ISS questions on language use. Given the common conflation of “mother tongue” with ethnic belonging in prior scholarship, we use the ISS question which asked respondents to state “the primary language that your mother spoke in her household when she was growing up.” 99% of the 5005 respondents answered this question by stating a particular language spoken by their mother.

Of the 1129 respondents who answered “I don’t know” to the open-ended question on ethnic identity, 514 (46%) stated their mother tongue as “Persian,” 206 (18%) as “Turkish,” 95 (8%) as “Kurdish,” and 91 (8%) as either “Gilaki” or “Mazandarani.” Less than ten respondents from the “don’t know” group each stated their mother tongue as “Arabic” or “Baluchi.” This distribution of “mother tongues” suggests that, while numerous reasons for answering “don’t know” to an open-ended question on ethnicity could have affected how respondents acted during the survey, languages often associated with minority ethnic status (Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, and Baluchi) in Iran are not inordinately represented.

Given that the ISS was administered in multiple languages depending on the preference of the respondent, we can also examine variation in languages preferred by this “don’t know” sub-sample. While close to 95% (4745) of the interviews were given in Persian, 220 surveys were administered overall in Azeri Turkish and 28 in Kurdish. Among the “don’t know” sub-sample, however, only 11 were administered in Azeri Turkish and 10 in Kurdish. 98% (1108) of the “don’t know” respondents preferred the interview given in the Persian language. While these additional questions cannot fully account for the variety of contexts in which different languages may be preferred or utilized, these data suggest that respondents which did not openly self-identify with a particular ethnic category were not likely *overrepresented* among individuals associated with Iran’s minority ethnic groups.

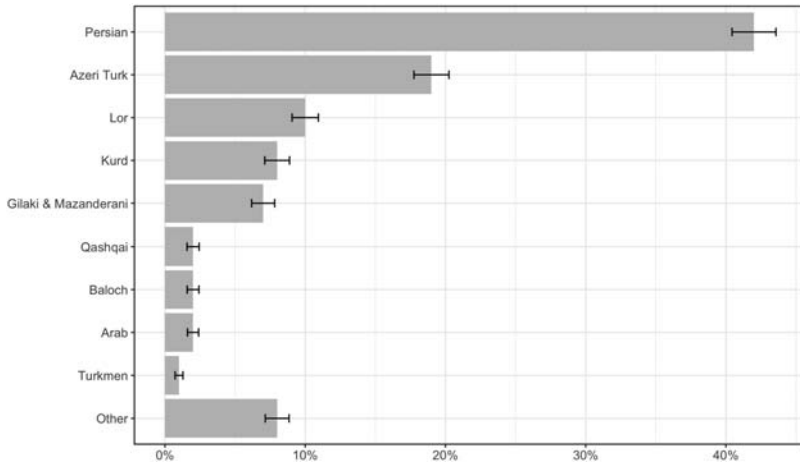
Other ISS data points to some provisional suggestions, however, on predictors for those who were more likely to positively answer an open-ended question on ethnic identity. We conducted a binary logistic regression model to estimate the probabilities of key demographic variables on the likelihood of a respondent stating any ethnic identity at all to the open-ended question (model is shown in [Appendix A](#)). Our predictor variables were age of respondent, urban density of household location, household income, and educational attainment. Educational attainment of the respondent was the largest relative predictor, followed by urban density and income.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, higher educational attainment among ISS respondents significantly associated with higher likelihood to state an ethnic identity when prompted in an open-ended question format. These findings suggest that individuals who possess higher levels of education, income, and residency in large cities are perhaps more familiar with societal trends toward multiculturalism or ethnic diversity, and thus may be more likely to identify with an ethnic group. This indicates that theories of ethnic mismatch in survey responses based on *stigmatization* of minority ethnic identities, where individuals do not self-identify due to the relatively lower status of that category, may not fully account for the Iranian case (for a discussion see Villareal and Bailey 2020). Here we reiterate that, while novel, these findings should be construed as an invitation to further research, including refining survey methods to more accurately capture the understandings of ethnic self-identity across multiple contexts. Another novel finding, detailed in the next section, is the prevalence of multi-ethnic identity among survey respondents.

### **Mono-ethnic and multi-ethnic identities**

More than three-quarters of ISS respondents did provide an ethnic category to the open-ended survey question on self-classification. [Figure 1](#) shows the relative distribution of the most common answers to the open-ended question on ethnic self-identification, excluding respondents who proffered “I don’t know.”

For readers familiar with commonly assumed estimates of ethnic group sizes in Iran, [Figure 1](#) will not look too surprising. 42 percent of respondents who provided an ethnic self-classification stated Persian as an unprompted category, which suggests that the concept of Persian (*fārs*) as ethnonym is not alien to many Iranians. Among the more prevalent ethnic categories, 19 percent stated Azeri/Turkish, nearly 10 percent stated Lor, 8 percent stated Kurd, 7 percent stated Gilaki or Mazanderani, and between 1 and 2 percent stated either Qashqai, Baluchi, Arab, or Turkmen. Note that 8 percent of those who provided a self-classification are shown in an “other” category, which includes numerous additional ethnonyms from specific locales in Iran.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1.** To which Iranian ethnicity do you belong? Distribution of unprimed responses of self-identification coded into most common ethnic categories (Source: 2016 Iran Social Survey).

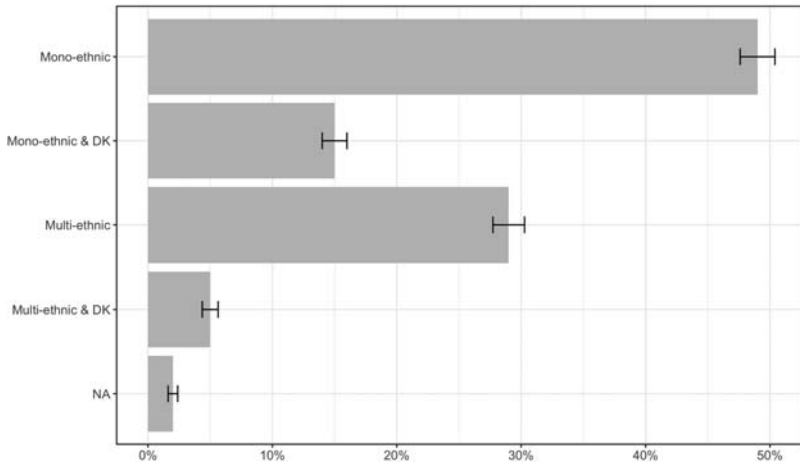
Note: N=3,816 respondents based on a nationally-representative sample; bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Only respondents who stated a category to the open-ended question on ethnic self-identification are included in Figure 1.

The distribution of answers in Figure 1 was given in response to an open-ended question on respondent ethnicity. The next question in the ISS primed the respondent with a depiction of *multi-ethnic* identity in Iran, as follows:

Some people describe themselves as having more than one single ethnicity. For example, a person might say that they are both Kurd and Persian, or another person might say they are both Azeri and Lor. Does this apply to yourself? Do you belong to any of these Iranian ethnic groups [*aqvām-e Irāni*]?

The respondent was then read a randomized list of prevalent Iranian ethnic categories to which a yes/no answer was solicited. If the respondent had previously identified a particular ethnic category in the open-ended question, this category was skipped in the closed-ended questions. Respondents could answer yes or no to all categories offered in the closed-list questions. Moreover, even if the respondent had answered “I don’t know” on the open-ended ethnicity question, they were still primed and prompted to answer these closed-ended questions.

In Figure 2, we combine the distribution of answers across open-ended and closed-ended questions to divide respondents into five analytically distinct categories: *mono-ethnic* (stated an ethnicity in the open-ended question and no additional ethnicities in closed-ended questions), *multi-ethnic* (stated an ethnicity in the open-ended question and one or more additional ethnicities in closed-ended questions), *don’t know/mono-ethnic* (stated “don’t know”

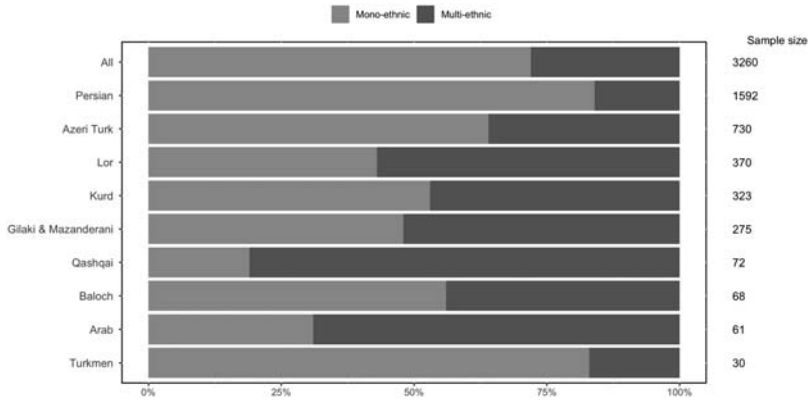


**Figure 2.** Distribution of ethnic self-identification patterns in the 2016 Iran Social Survey.

Note: N=4,911 respondents based on a nationally-representative sample; bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Terms are defined as: *Mono-ethnic*: stated an ethnicity in the open-ended question and no additional ethnicities in closed-ended questions. *Mono-ethnic & don't know*: stated "don't know" in the open-ended question and one ethnicity in closed-ended questions. *Multi-ethnic*: stated an ethnicity in the open-ended question and one or more additional ethnicities in closed-ended questions. *Multi-ethnic & don't know*: stated "don't know" in the open-ended question and two or more additional ethnicities in closed ended questions. *NA*: respondents who answered "don't know" to the open-ended question and "don't know" or "no" on the closed-ended questions.

in the open-ended question and one ethnicity in closed-ended questions), *don't know/multi-ethnic* (stated "don't know" in the open-ended question and two or more additional ethnicities in closed-ended questions), and a residual category containing respondents who answered "don't know" to the open-ended question and "don't know" or "no" on all of the closed-ended questions.

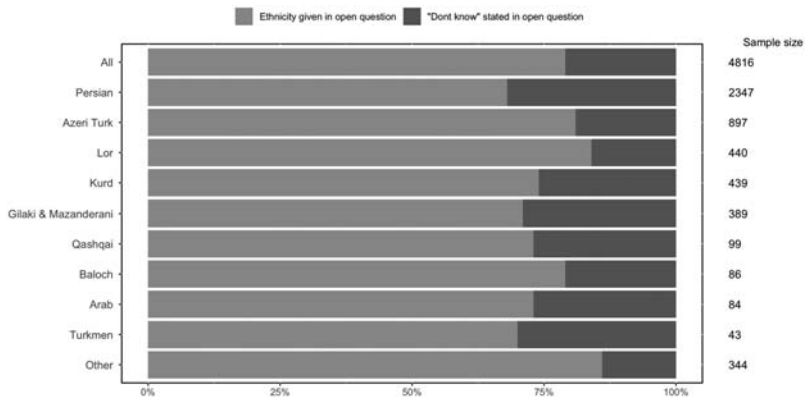
Given the assumption in much research, news coverage and public debate on Iran of mutually distinct and categorically discrete ethnic groups, [Figure 2](#) shows a more nuanced portrayal of how "everyday ethnicity" may vary within the country at the contemporary moment. While around 49 percent of respondents knowingly stated they belong to a single ethnic group, 29 percent stated that they belong to two or more ethnic groups. Even for those who did not originally self-identify with an ethnic group, when primed and presented with a closed-set list of common ethnic categories, 15 percent stated that they belonged to one ethnic group, while five percent stated they belonged to more than one ethnic group. The ISS data thus suggests that while a sizable proportion of the population may express a *mismatch* between, on the one hand, the concepts of ethnicity or ethnic group, and, on the other hand, their own identity, another sizable proportion of Iranians express their identity as *multi-ethnic*.



**Figure 3.** Proportion of Iranians stating mono-ethnic identity vs. multi-ethnic identity, grouped by answer to open-ended question on ethnic self-identification (Source: 2016 Iran Social Survey).

Note: N=3,620 respondents based on a nationally-representative sample; as with any sample, proportional means for smaller sub-samples are less precisely estimated. Terms are defined as: *Mono-ethnic*: stated this ethnicity in the open-ended question and no additional ethnicities in closed-ended questions. *Multi-ethnic*: stated this ethnicity in the open-ended question and one or more additional ethnicities in closed-ended questions.

Figures 3 and 4 probe deeper into variation in the ISS across different ethnic self-identifications. Figure 3 displays the relative proportion of



**Figure 4.** Proportion of Iranians initially answering “don’t know” vs. stating ethnic category to open-ended self-identification question (Source: 2016 Iran Social Survey).

Note: N=4,816 respondents based on a nationally-representative sample; sub-sample counts add up to more than total N given that in cases of “don’t knows,” each ethnicity given in closed-ended questions is included in the given row. As with any sample, proportional means for smaller sub-samples are less precisely estimated. Terms are defined as: *Ethnicity given in open question*: stated this ethnic category in the open-ended question and none or more ethnicities in closed-ended questions. *“Don’t know” stated in open question*: stated “don’t know” in the open-ended question and stated one or more ethnicities in closed-ended questions, with this row’s ethnic category stated by respondent.

respondents who stated an ethnic category in the open-ended question and no additional ethnicities (*mono-ethnic*) compared to those who stated an ethnicity in the open-ended question and subsequently identified with additional ethnicities in closed-ended questions (*multi-ethnic*).

Figure 3 shows a wide variation in the likelihood of mono-ethnic and multi-ethnic self-identification across different ethnic categories. While the point estimates for smaller sub-samples should be treated with caution, especially for any groups under 100 respondents, the findings suggest that multi-ethnic identity in Iran may be widely present across individuals who claim belonging to prevalent “minority” ethnic categories. While only sixteen percent of self-identified Persian respondents stated they belonged to an additional ethnic group, this is not surprising given the relatively large weight of self-identified Persians in the sample. Moreover, Figure 3 displays relative proportions of multi-ethnic identity ranked by initial ethnicity stated in the open-ended question: for example, an individual who identified as Kurdish in the open-ended question, then subsequently as Persian in a closed list, would be located on the “Kurd” row in the “multi-ethnic” segment. Displayed proportions in Figure 3 should therefore not be taken as mutually exclusive.

Figure 4, by contrast, examines respondents which stated “don’t know” for the open-ended ethnicity question but subsequently answered yes for one or more ethnic categories in closed-ended questions. Note that, in this figure, “don’t know” respondents who subsequently identified with *more than one* ethnic category are counted in any rows where this ethnicity was stated, not just in a single row.

Figure 4 shows that a large portion of these “don’t know” respondents subsequently identified as Persian in closed-ended ethnicity questions. In fact, 755 respondents stated “I don’t know” and then subsequently chose Persian in the closed-ended questions, compared to 1592 respondents that stated Persian as an ethnic category when asked in the open-ended question. This suggests that “Persian-ness” is not entirely conceptualized as a closed ethnic group by many Iranians. Many individuals had to be primed, prompted, and then nudged into a Persian ethnic self-classification. In addition, however, a substantial number of respondents stated “I don’t know” and then identified with one or more minority ethnic categories in closed-ended questions. While there is substantial variation across minority ethnic categories on the relative size of “don’t know” respondents compared to self-identified ethnic minorities, albeit with caveats for smaller groups given the lower sub-sample sizes, the ISS data suggests that concepts of ethnicity and ethnic group identity are not immediately salient among many individuals before they are prompted and nudged into a minority ethnic self-classification.

In sum, categories and forms of ethnic identity exhibit wide variation in our survey data, including across minority ethnic boundaries as well as a putatively majority category. As discussed above, the type of respondents who answered “don’t know” to the open-ended question were those more likely to possess lower educational attainment, less household income, and reside in less densely populated areas as compared to respondents who stated an ethnicity to the open-ended question. While this cannot be established from current ISS data, but could be further investigated through historical and ethnographic methods, it is conceivable that ethnic self-identification *as a social practice* has become more common in Iran over time and is associated with processes usually lumped under the rubric of modernization: rising educational attainment, urbanization, psychological individuation of selfhood, and the demographic transition to small family sizes (Harris 2017; also see Brubaker 2015, 148–151).

### **The coterminous construction of ethno-racial and national identity**

As the Iran Social Survey suggests, everyday practices of self-identification into ethno-racial categories may not fall completely within either of the two main approaches to portraying ethnic and national identity in Iran; that is, according to competing civic-territorial or ethno-nationalist frameworks. However, the findings do not necessarily contradict or preclude the assumptions underlying those portrayals. What we *can* say is that the tendency to reduce ethnic complexity by “mapping” out neatly bordered, mutually exclusive ethno-racial groups – the discretizing approach to portraying ethnic and national identity in Iran common in Western accounts – is *not* reflective of social reality.

We began this article with a story of the television portrayal of a black-skinned and Arabic-speaking Iranian sacrificing himself in a nationalist war saga. The man identified himself by city of origin and linguistic identity, not by an ethnic group. While this accords with a state-centered understanding of Iranian-ness as a national-level category of identity containing ethnic groups nested within, the portrayal is not entirely inaccurate given the array of possible configurations of ethnicity and nation in the country. At the same time, modern concepts of ethnic belonging are widely expressed in Iran, with even the majority category of “Persian” conceivable to many as an ethnic group rather than solely a linguistic community.

Using a novel method of asking open-ended and closed-ended questions on ethnic self-identification, arguably the first such survey conducted in Iran, the Iran Social Survey provided evidence for wide variation across the population. On the one hand, the findings suggest that a sizable degree of *mis-match* exists in Iran, where the modern concept of ethnic groupness is

either not fully recognizable to many individuals or not preferred in an open-ended survey format. On the other hand, the survey findings also suggest that *multi-ethnic* self-identity is common in Iran, including across the major ethnic boundaries which have long been portrayed as closed and mutually exclusive in Western scholarship and public discourse.

Given the common trajectories of post-imperial state-building projects, this diversity in how ethno-racial identity is understood and practiced “from below” may be the case across other parts of West and Central Asia as well. Ethnographic and historical methods would be well suited to complement or refine the findings from the Iran Social Survey. Rather than assuming a coherent practice of ethnic identity across all social spaces (including answering a telephone survey), researchers should be more attuned to observing and explaining not just when and where ethno-racial identity matters, but when and where it does not matter.

## Notes

1. *Dar Cheshm-e Bād* [In the Wind’s Eye], episode 43, dir. Masoud Jafari Jozani (2008), can be seen at <https://www.aparat.com/v/NH4jF> [accessed November 15, 2019]. Earlier cinematic portrayals of sub-national differences included *Bashu, The Little Stranger*, a film shot during the Iran-Iraq War era itself. The film tracks displacement of an Arab-Iranian child from near the southern front to the Caspian Sea area of northern Iran (dir. Bahram Beyzai, 1985). The film featured three languages (Persian, Arabic, and Gilaki) and deployed Persian subtitles for the domestic audience. As historian Hamid Naficy notes, the use of multiple languages in the film points to Iran’s complex “personal, ethnic, regional, racial, gender, and national dimensions of identity and difference.” The pacifist film portrays Iran as “a cauldron of races and cultures [with] reconciliations and cross-communications of various interethnic ... sorts” (Naficy 2012, 35–36).
2. For the concept of supra-ethnic nation applied to Mauritania, see Eriksen (1992). For Iran, Elling has described how elites from Persian-speaking, Shi’i communities tend to present themselves as the embodiment of a “supra-ethnic Iranian-ness” (2013, pg. 26-27).
3. For instance, see the CIA Cartographic Center’s map cropped from its original context and displayed on the first page in the European Union-funded report by the International Federation of Human Rights, “The Hidden Side of Iran: Discrimination against Ethnic and Religious Minorities” (2010). The report’s text subsequently criticizes the map for not capturing the spatial diversity of Iran’s ethnic groups. The report’s authors then blame the Iranian government for secrecy on the true distribution of ethnic groups and incorrectly claims that Iran’s decennial state census collects ethno-racial classifications.
4. This is not too different than the historical usages of the term “people” itself in English. Additionally, the term which is translated from “race” into Persian – *nezhād* – is also synonymous with “people” or “descendants” and rarely connotes the essentialist flavor of the term as used in English or European romance languages. As with many languages, however, the translation of



ethnicity and race as phenomenological concepts are subject to linguistic slippage in their everyday meanings. The 1930s Nazi sympathizer Arya Part, née Shervin Bavand, even complained that the Persian language was ill-suited to effectively capture the racialist concepts used by his fascist heroes, including the notion of race itself (Bayat and Nouri 2014, 17). The same slippage can be seen in sociological works about ethno-racial identity in Iran, where authors both dismiss “race” as a relevant analytical category and yet still end up employing it in crude fashion (e.g., al-Taie 1999, 166-167).

5. For extensive elaboration on sampling design and polling methods in the ISS, see Harris and Tavana 2018.
6. In Persian: *shomā mote'aleq be kodām yek az qowmiyat-hā-ye irāni mi-bāshid?*
7. Briefly stated, for each additional unit of educational attainment (less than secondary education, secondary education, tertiary and higher), a respondent was 40% more likely to state an ethnic category (see Appendix A). We also ran an OLS model with the same predictors to check the findings. Both binary logit and OLS models exhibited similar findings in terms of the direction, relative effect size, and significance levels of predictor coefficients on the outcome measure.
8. Aside from the main ethnonyms shown in Figure 1, smaller groups in Iran include Talyshis (Talysh), Laks, Armenians, Assyrians, Georgians, Mandaeans, Shahsevan, Afshar, and Hazara peoples. Many but not all of these groups also have their own languages and/or minority religions or belong to particular sects. Moreover, there are historical regions, cities, and towns where local traits are perceived to constitute a distinctly bounded cultural identity. Examples include the Persian-speaking Shi'ites of Eastern Iran known as Sistanis, the inhabitants of Semnan province in central Iran (Semnanis), Dashtestanis and Larestanis from southern Iran, or inhabitants of the city of Dezfūl in western Iran. Others may self-identify in terms of the geographical province in which they live or were born. These factors probably explain why a province such as Hormozgan in southern Iran, for instance, had a high degree of respondents (45% in the ISS) self-identify in a manner coded here as “other” ethnicity by the interviewers. Finally, it can be surmised that across the country, a small number of Afghan migrants without citizenship might have either been reluctant to answer questions about Iranian ethnicity or identified themselves as Afghan and were thus coded in the “other” category.

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## Appendix A

Binary logistic regression analysis of predictors of respondent stating ethnic category in open-ended question on ethnic self-identification.

Predictor	Variable Description	Estimate	SE	Z	<i>p</i>	Odds ratio
Educational Attainment	3-category ordinal	0.352	0.054	6.51	< .001	1.422
Urban Density	4-category ordinal	0.164	0.053	3.11	0.002	1.178
Household Income	4-category ordinal	0.096	0.045	2.16	0.031	1.101
Age	continuous	-0.005	0.0025	-2.1	0.036	0.995
Intercept		0.734	0.109	6.73	< .001	2.083

N=4639 respondents; Source: 2016 Iran Social Survey