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## *Iranian Sunni Muslims and the 2021 Presidential Election: Paradigm Shift or Political Compromise?*

**Irańscy sunniccy muzułmanie wobec wyborów prezydenckich 2021:  
zmiana paradygmatu czy polityczny kompromis?**

**Abstrakt:** W 2018 roku w Iranie doszło do serii powstań ludowych, przy czym szczególnie widoczne było niezadowolenie wśród mniejszości sunnickiej na peryferiach Iranu. W miarę zbliżania się wyborów prezydenckich w 2021 r., gdy preferowani kandydaci irańskich sunnitów zostali zdyskwalifikowani przez państwo, wzmożło się ryzyko przemocy sunnickiej. Jednak ich lojalność polityczna uległa zmianie, co doprowadziło do powszechnego poparcia dla Ebrahima Raisiego, szyickiego dogmatycznego duchownego. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje rolę sunnitów w tych wyborach, pokazując, w jaki sposób aktorzy i instytucje religijne mobilizowały czynniki w kampanii politycznej. W trakcie kampanii sunnicke elity skupiały się wyłącznie na alokacji władzy w określonych elitarnych grupach, ignorując żądania zwykłych sunnitów, by zaradzić nierównościom. Cały proces ilustruje elastyczność podejmowania decyzji politycznych przez irańskich sunnitów i ich zdolność do osiągnięcia porozumień. W związku z tym dochodzę do wniosku, że zmiana lojalności sunnitów może być lepiej zrozumiana jako polityczny kompromis niż jako epokowa zmiana paradygmatu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Iran, sunnici, szyici, mniejszości, geopolityka, wybory

**Abstract:** In 2018, Iran saw a series of popular uprisings, with particularly notable discontent among the Sunni minority in Iran's peripheries. Approaching the 2021 presidential election, as Iranian Sunnis' preferred candidates were disqualified by the state, the risk of Sunni violence intensified. However, their political allegiance shifted, leading to widespread support for Ebrahim Raisi, a Shia hardliner cleric. This paper examines the Sunnis' role in this election, demonstrating how religious actors and institutions were mobilizing factors in the political campaign. During

the campaign, Sunni elites focused exclusively on the allocation of power to specific elite groups, ignoring ordinary Sunnis' demands to address inequality. The entire process illustrates the flexibility of Iranian Sunnis' political decision-making and their ability to reach agreements. As such, I conclude the Sunnis' change of allegiance is better understood as political compromise rather than an epochal paradigm shift.

**Keywords:** Iran, Sunni, Shia, minority groups, geopolitics, elections

## Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, the overall debate on Islam has focused mostly on its anti-modern characteristics. Yet Islamic civilization is highly pluralistic, and the structures found in today's Islamic societies are developing competing conceptual approaches which vary in their ability to engage with societal change. Indeed, in the last decades, political Islam has demonstrated its ability to adapt to new circumstances and engage with political developments. This paper focuses on the latest developments in Iran in the context of inter-confessional dynamics, specifically the political role of the Sunni minority in Iran's peripheries, located at the borderland. The overall goal is to develop a better understanding of Islam and politics in the context of epochal change. Before addressing this political situation in detail, the paper first provides some historical background on Sunni-Shia relations in Iran.

The methodology of this paper relies on descriptive research and qualitative exploration. Further, discourse analysis and genealogy techniques combined with ethnographic fieldwork are used to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This includes a combination of literature review, data analysis, and in-depth unstructured interviews and observations made while undertaking field work. Moreover, the research process of the paper involves collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources, including the study of relevant primary and secondary documentary sources as well as interviews with people from Iranian Sunni communities (religious leaders, tribe chiefs, informal community authorities, and activists). The interviews were conducted in Persian and Kurdish by the author. The interviewees were from Sunni communities from Sistan-Baluchistan, Kurdistan, and Khorasan as well as southern provinces such as Hormozgan and Bushehr.<sup>1</sup> To bring first-hand information on Iranian Sunnis' political behavior

<sup>1</sup> Almost all interviewees asked to remain anonymous, and in certain cases, they also asked that province of origin, which considered in this paper, be anonymized.

during the election, the author joined diverse groups in Telegram/WhatsApp, where various topics are debated on a daily basis.

Many scholars [e.g., Johnson 1994: 123-4; Newman 2008: 2; Dudoignon 2017: 202-4] have claimed the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722) was the starting point of the history of modern Iran, during which Shia Islam was adopted as the empire's official religion. This transformation functioned as a barrier against the Sunni Ottoman Empire from the west and Uzbeks from the east. However, the new ideology did not expand nationwide without difficulty; it created a divergence which is still reflected in Iran's peripheries, where the majority of Iranian Sunnis are located. Despite the lack of comprehensive research on the conversion of Iranian Sunnis to Shia Islam, there is nonetheless valuable historical research pointing out that confessional tension derived from socio-economic factors in Iran's diverse society, particularly in relation to Baluch Sunnis [Johnson 1994; Dudoignon 2017]. As Dudoignon [2017] has explicitly shown, the instability of relations with the central state was based on various factors. The distance (both physical and ideological) between Sunnis living in the periphery and the central government caused a disconnection with border regions, which were transformed "into mosaics of spatially segregated but mutually influential creeds" [Dudoignon 2017: 11]. Even the fundamental socio-political changes of the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) barely reached the empire's peripheral areas such as Baluchistan [ibidem], where the unpopularity of the Qajar dynasty (1789-1925) is reflected to this day among certain Sunni Baluch communities.

The Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) operatively advanced the process of state-building and Western-inspired nationalism as Iran's major state ideology [Litvak 2017a: 2; Elling 2013: 25]. This nationalism, which mostly focused on an official language and unique identity, was based on notions of a specifically Persian sense of history. During the Reza Shah (r. 1925-1941) Sunni religious institutions in Baluchistan and Khorasan had a strategic function as a bulwark against influence from the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia. It was also during this period that local tribal leaderships were replaced by Sunni *ulama* (clerics), who have remained as influential social and political factors among their communities to this day [Sabahi 2013: 164].

Already in the early days of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, a gap between the center and periphery was observed by scholars [Dudoignon 2011; Sabahi 2013; Dudoignon 2013]. In the shadow of foreign pressure and geopolitical rivalry, the question of

ethnicity and confession became a security concern for the central government. In addition, the combined issues of sectarianism and ongoing armed conflicts with leftist militants created a securitized society which particularly affected the Iranian Sunnis and some other ethnic groups in Iran's post-revolutionary era.

After the revolution, the Islamic Republic reemphasized a shared national identity rooted in Shia Islam [Rahimieh 2017: 48]. In this context, Iranian Sunnis were among the first communities to express concerns. Representing about 10-15% of the population, Iranian Sunnis predominantly have a different ethnicity than mainstream Persians (e.g., Kurd, Baluch, Turkmen, Arabs, as well as Persian-speaking Sunnis from Khorasan, whose social and historical identity differs from mainstream Persians). They are economically and ecologically disadvantaged and mostly live in peripheral parts of the country<sup>2</sup>. This continues despite the fact that the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, rejected ethnicity and nationalism (*qomiyat va milliyat*) for being divisive and inspiring hatred among Muslims in Iran and beyond.

In response to the exclusion of Sunni minorities, clashes between the security forces and local communities continued after the revolution in the regions of Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-Baluchistan and among Turkmen communities to the south-east of the Caspian Sea [Ladier-Fouladi 2009: 164; Dudoignon 2013: 134-4; Elling 2013: 47-50]. In this case it is important to mention the heavy fights between the central government with Kurdish opposition in Iranian Kurdish areas, which took place in August 1979. As the conflict in that region increased, Khomeini, as the commander in chief and religious leader, issued a Fatwa sending armed forces to the Kurdistan to control the situation<sup>3</sup>. Dudoignon [2011] described this permanent instability in the border areas as the result of the Shia "colonialization" of Iran's border provinces where Sunni communities lived next

<sup>2</sup> About Sunni exclusion compare with Sabahi [2013: 297, n.9]. A clear example in this regard is Sunni exclusion from high-level political participation. Based on the Islamic Republic's constitution, which (in Article 12) indicates the Shia Jafari school of jurisprudence as the official confession (*mazhab-i rasmi*), the president of the country must believe in the fundamentals of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official religion of the country (Article 115). The latter here refers to loyalty to the concept of *vilayat-i faqih* or Rule of the Jurisprudent, which is derived from Shia ideology and refers to the fact that the highest authority in the country must be a Shia cleric with insight into the Shia Jafari school of law. This excludes all non-Muslims and non-Shia, as well as all women, from the higher level of the political system; see also Elling [2013: 51] and Sabahi [2013: 165].

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the opposition and demands from other ethnic groups, which were less pronounced compared to Kurdish minorities, see: [Entessar 2010: 36]

to predominantly Sunni countries in their neighborhood<sup>4</sup>. From the perspective of the Iranian authorities, Iranian ethnic groups are subjects of “infiltration by the country’s enemies,” including the secret services of foreign powers such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel, as well as neighboring Arab countries, who want to undermine Iran’s territorial integrity by meddling in its religious and ethnic issues. Against this background, in 2017 Ebrahim Raisi (then head of the Judiciary and current president as of August 2021) claimed in a public speech given to influential Sunnis:

Our unity [between Sunni and Shia] is a divine blessing. The security in our country is beholden to awareness of *ulama* and the people, because without their presence, security will be destroyed by the enemies’ infiltration. But you, *ulama*, must sound the alarms in your tribune [so] that no one can infiltrate into the lines of people. This guarding of geographical and ideological borders is very valuable<sup>5</sup>.

The eight-year Iran-Iraq war, starting in 1980, combined with continuous fighting with contra-revolutionary armed guerrillas, meant that minority issues were temporarily overlooked. The focus shifted to the main priority: defending the country and enforcing “national unity”. In this environment, driven by security concerns nationwide and in the peripheral borderlands in particular, all ethnic and confessional demands remained in the shadow of a vulnerable securitized society. In these intensified circumstances, the last thing the Islamic Republic needed was additional internal sectarian conflicts [Elling 2013: 45-6 & 54]<sup>6</sup>.

After the war and death of Khomeini in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became the new supreme leader. In this context—defined largely by the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991—new waves of Islamo-nationalism flourished within the country [Elling 2013: 83-5]. Additionally, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s presidency (1989-1997) saw the beginning of the reconstruction of the country’s infrastructure in war-affected areas [Litvak 2017b: 18]. During that time, a general approach

<sup>4</sup> Dudoignon [2011: 332] used the term “colonization” in order to show the characteristic of the Shia Persian settlement in the Sunni border provinces: “Depuis trente ans, celles-ci sont en proie à un intense phénomène de colonisation persane chiite en provenance du plateau central, à la faveur de la croissance continue de la population.”

<sup>5</sup> Ebrahim Raisi (1396/2017), *khatkishiha-yi mazhabi va siyasi bi naf-i hichkas nist*. <https://raisi.ir>.

<sup>6</sup> On the perspective of the Iranian Baluch *madrasas* to the Iran-Iraq war see: [Dudoignon 2017: 217]

was embedded by the authorities to ease the Islamic Republic's relations with other countries and bring socio-political liberation to Iranians. Nonetheless, the question of ethnic and confessional minorities and their demands remained a part of Iranian social reality and the country's socio-political future.

### **Sunni political allegiances since the 1990s**

Rapid geopolitical changes since the 1990s have brought a new dynamic between Iran's Sunni minority and Shia majority [Dudoignon 2009, 2013, 2017: 226; Sabahi 2013]. Precisely since 1993, the resurgence of the "Sunni Vote" made Sunnis part of the project for public participation and vote mobilization<sup>7</sup>. Iranian Sunnis have formed a significant voting base and have tended to support the Islamic left (later reformist) and modernist conservative (moderate) politicians, at least until the last presidential election. In doing so, they have shown their interest in the socio-cultural promises of reformists instead of supporting the traditional conservatives (Principlists)<sup>8</sup>. This support placed Sunnis more or less on the opposition's side, as reformists often criticized the establishment, albeit without crossing any red lines.

Since the fifth presidential election in 1997, during which social demands became a major topic, younger generations, women, and ethnic and confessional minorities have been increasingly inspired to vote. The reformist president Mohammad Khatami's (who served from 1997 to 2005) new discourse of "Iran for all Iranians" (*iran bara-yi hami-yi iranian*) focused on the idea of including all citizens by relaxing social and cultural policies. This led to increased female participation in public life and the discussion of minority rights. In 2001, in the Sunni-majority province Sistan-Baluchistan, 90.97% of people voted for president Khatami's second term. During this time, Iranian Sunnis gained a certain independence through the establishment of decentralized city councils. In addition, the promotion of local languages gave further support to ethnic and religious minorities, for whom Khatami remains their preferred politician<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> For the 1993 presidential election and Iranian Sunni participation, see Ladier-Fouladi [2009: 255-6, 261-2, 289-90], Dudoignon [2009: 50-2, 2013: 154-7, 2017: 222-3, 233], and Gheissari and Sanandaji [2009: 287-96].

<sup>8</sup> On Iran's reformists see Posch [2010: 2-4 (general); 17-20 (clergy); 34-39]. For the historical development of Hizbullah, a radical current of Iranian conservatives with a focus on Rouhani's era, see Posch [2021]. For the reformists and their factional conflicts see Rivetti [2020: 51-7].

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Jalal Jalalzada, May 2021.

During the controversial 2009 election, Mehdi Karrubi came to be known as the protector of all minorities, especially Iranian Sunnis. He visited Sunni-majority cities and met some Sunni leaders including the Shaykh al-Islam Mawlana Abd al-Hamid Ismailzayi [Sabahi 2013: 174-5], Sunni Imam Juma of Zahedan, and the head of Dar al-Ulum Makki<sup>10</sup>. Mir Hossein Mousavi, the former prime minister, also counted on the Sunnis. He travelled to different Sunni-majority cities, prayed in Sunni mosques, and followed Sunni clerics in prayer. In this context, Iranian Sunnis predominantly voted for Mousavi. For instance, around 52% voted for Mousavi in Sistan-Baluchistan. After the 2009 presidential election won by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, during the so-called Green Movement, Iran saw protests in Tehran which were the largest public demonstrations since the 1979 revolution started; they continued on a smaller scale in other major cities such as Mashhad, Isfahan, and Shiraz. Despite their initial support for the Green Movement leaders, Karrubi and Mousavi, Iranian Sunni leaders such as Mawlana Abd al-Hamid played their “double moral benefit” [Dudoignon 2017: 27]: voting for the Green Movement Leaders but recognizing Ahmadinejad’s reelection and inviting the opposition to calm themselves and stop demonstrating.

In 2013, former presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami supported the candidacy of Hasan Rouhani, a moderate politician. Meanwhile, there was a major mobilization for his candidacy among Iranian Sunnis through the Sunni Fraction (*fraktion-i ahl-i sunnat*) of the Iranian Parliament, Mawlana Abd al-Hamid (and his influence among the Hanafi Sunni Muslims), and Abd al-Rahman Pirani (b. 1954, a Kurdish politician and the head of officially established *jama’at-i dawat va islah* [Society of Appeal and Reform], i.e., the Iranian Muslim Brothers)<sup>11</sup>. In this environment, Rouhani won a landslide victory. In Sistan-Baluchistan, Rouhani got approximately 73% of the votes while his opponent, the conservative candidate Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf (the current head of parliament), obtained second place with only around 10.5% of the votes.

<sup>10</sup> Established in 1971 by Abd al-Hamid’s father-in-law Mawlana Abd al-Aziz Mullazada, Dar al-Ulum became the main center of Sunni education. Since 1989 it has been the most important Sunni higher religious school in the Persian-speaking world and a Sunni political institution in Iran [Dudoignon 2017: 220-1, 2013: 152].

<sup>11</sup> The Muslim Brothers (*ikhwan-i muslimin*) appeared in the Kurdish Sunni community and has been active in Iran since the 1970s. For details on the Muslim Brothers among Kurdish Iranian Sunnis, see Dudoignon [2017: 241, 260-63]; regarding the Society for Appeal and Reform and the role its members played during the 2013 presidential election by supporting Rouhani, see *ibidem* [238-46]. For detailed information about the Muslim Brothers in Iran see Dudoignon [2017: 238-46].

In the 2017 election for his second term, Hasan Rouhani got around 73% of the votes in Sistan-Baluchistan, whereas his main opponent, Ebrahim Raisi, won approximately 26%. However, four years later in June 2021, Ebrahim Raisi beat Sistan-Baluchistan with 52.11% of the votes.

### **From reconciliation to oppression (the Rouhani era)**

Rouhani entered office when state relations with ethnic and confessional minorities were experiencing increased securitization, which had emerged during Ahmadinejad's presidency. In this social environment, Rouhani [1392/2013 May] obtained Iranian Sunnis' support by providing a "declaration" (*bayani-yi shumari 3, huquq-i aqvam, adyan va mazahib*) with the overall message of "no intervention in the religious and confessional affairs" of Iranian minorities. Importantly, the declaration focused on the right to use ethnic languages in the education system, which was already declared in article 15 of the constitution but had not been coherently implemented.

Later on, in November 2016, Rouhani published the Citizen's Charter (*manshur-i huquq-i shahrvandi*), which specifically addressed cultural, ethnic, and religious issues (including the variety of confessional groups) without using the word minority. Given that these issues appeared at the beginning of the Charter shows their importance to Rouhani [Citizen's Rights 1395/2016 November]. Rouhani also appointed a Special Advisor of the President in Affairs of Ethnic and Religious/Confessional Minorities (*dastyar-i vizhi dar umur-i aqvam va aqalliyatha-yi dini va mazhabi*). This advisory office was established to assist Rouhani's administration and implement the rights of Iranian citizens belonging to religious, confessional, and ethnic minorities. The first advisor to this institution was Ali Yunesi, who had been the Minister of Intelligence under President Khatami, 2000–2005. Some political hardliners and conservatives among Iranian political elites criticized the Citizen's charter, claiming it undermined the Islamic Republic's "values" [Posch 2017: 1-2]. There were also critics among Iranian Sunnis, who questioned Rouhani's Special Advisor. First, they asked why the post was given to a Shia cleric and not a Sunni. Second, the fact that the Special Advisor had a security background made some Sunni activists claim that Iranian Sunnis were still under the security lens<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a Sunni religious teacher in Sistan-Baluchistan, June 2021 (interviewee wanted to remain anonymous).



It is clear that Rouhani's reform policies regarding minorities, specifically relating to Iranian Sunnis, failed. The Sunnis were not only excluded from higher posts in Rouhani's ministerial cabinet, but his promise to decrease "the security view" was completely broken; securitization increased dramatically during his second term. Arrests and executions of Sunnis from different provinces proliferated during 2019 and 2020 [Iran Human Rights Watch 2020]. This made the Sunni community as a whole express their concerns and discontent more publicly. The most influential Iranian Sunni leader from Sistan-Baluchistan, Mawlana Abd al-Hamid, enunciated in a 2020 letter to Supreme Leader Khamenei that the Iranian Sunnis were still suffering as "second-class citizens." Ultimately in March 2021, Abdullah Suhrabi, a Kurdish Sunni deputy of the Sixth parliament (2000–2004), personally sent a complaint to the Iranian Supreme Court with claims of Rouhani's inefficiency and unfulfilled promises to ethnic and confessional minorities [Sunnion Online 1400/2021 April].

Among the many candidates of the 2021 presidential election disqualified by the state, Sayyid Mustafa Tajzada had already criticized Rouhani's administration during its first year, pointing out the absence of Sunnis among his ministers and reminding Rouhani that "making use of Iranian Sunnis at different management levels of the country will be a win-win for everyone, especially in times when there are bloody conflicts amongst the various Islamic groups in the region" [Islahweb 1392/2013 September]. He further published on 9 May 2021 a public letter to the Supreme Leader reflecting on some of the political issues related to the election, citizen's rights, gaining the public's trust, and other ideas similar to those of Rouhani, indicating that "if we want a civic and peaceful life, we do not have any other way than to talk with each other and ensure participation in the country's management of people from all religions, confessions, ethnicities, races, languages, classes, and women and men" [Instagram sayed.mostafa.tajzade]. His statement has been to some extent reflected by Sunni communities, for example by Mawlana Abd al-Hamid after the Eid prayer on 13 May: "we do not accept that Iran belongs to just one group, confession, or clan" [Abdulhamid 1400/2021 May].

One of Rouhani's main promises, together with improving the economy and mending Iran's relationship with the West, was enhancing the state's relations with its minorities. This included guarantees of public freedom of political association and thought, and more liberty for the religious activities of non-Shia confessional groups. One of Rouhani's main policy slogans from the beginning was the notion of "Win-Win policy." He used this in his election campaign, during the nuclear

deal process, in domestic communication with his political rivals, and in relation to minorities. However, the end of his era, at least with regards to minorities, turned into a “Lose-Lose” situation. Unsatisfied socio-economic promises, for instance the absence of Sunnis from the higher posts and the general center-periphery disconnection, raised critical voices among Sunni communities. During the last two years of Rouhani’s presidency, economic hardship caused increased smuggling, especially fuel from Iran to Pakistan, through the border in Sistan-Baluchistan, causing several incidents between the security forces and smugglers. The deaths of fuel smugglers (called *sukhtbar*)<sup>13</sup>—either shot by security forces or following accidents on dangerous roads—were reflected in the public religious sermons of Sunni clerics.

In fact, from 2017 onwards, the discourse of Sunni *ulama* in Sistan-Baluchistan became more critical. Towards the end of the Rouhani era (2019-2021), the state’s approach to Iranian Sunnis became more securitized, which made sense in the international, regional, and domestic context. Internationally, the situation was defined by rivalry with Saudi Arabia and the military escalation with the US (started by Donald Trump’s policy of “Maximum Pressure” following his withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal [JCPOA], reached in 2015). Domestically, since 2017, due to economic and political grievances, there had been hundreds of demonstrations in Iran, especially in rural areas, leading to oppression in the public domain, including among Iranian Sunni communities. The tremulous socio-political situation peaked on 15 November 2019, when petrol prices tripled. Civil protests erupted across Iran soon after. Sunnis were among the first critics of the state, for example, Mawlawi Fazl al-Rahman Kuhi, Imam Juma and the headmaster of Anvar al-Haramayn *madrasa* (seminary) in Pashamag in Iranian Baluchistan, who was arrested in Mashhad at the end of November 2019 and sentenced to six years’ imprisonment. For Iranian Sunnis this event, together with underlying socio-economic issues, brought Rouhani’s era to an unhappy end. An Iranian Sunni from the city of Khwaf summarized the situation as follows:

<sup>13</sup> *Sukhtbr* (lit. energy carrier) transporting gallons of diesel with their cars and motorcycles to Pakistan where it is sold at higher prices and mostly paid in US dollars. According to the 2017 Islamic Republic state media reports, around 100 million liters were smuggled from Iranian Baluchistan on a monthly basis. See IRNA [1396/2017 November], *qachaq-i mahani hudud-i 100 million litr sukht az sistan va baluchistan*, <https://www.irna.ir>. A similar situation also exists in Iran’s western border areas, where cross-border porters (*kulbar*) carry heavy goods between Iran and Iraq. Based on a UN [2019] report on human rights in Iran, there are up to 84,000 *kulbar* in Iranian Kurdistan and 75 of these were killed and 117 injured in 2018 alone. Further details are elaborated in Habibi Doroh [2020].

“What was brought to the Iranian Sunnis after eight years? Nothing but empty promises and security pressure. In eight years, [Rouhani] had several reformists in his cabinet, but the Iranian Sunnis got nothing. Where were all the reformists, who claim they support Sunnis, in these years? The reformists should receive a big no from our side [i.e., withdrawn electoral support] to show that we are deciding for ourselves”<sup>14</sup>.

### **2021 presidential election: A paradigm shift?**

As Rouhani’s presidency came to an end, there was a sense of insecurity regarding the Iranian Sunnis’ situation. First, supporting reformist-minded politicians would have involved repeating their usual, unsuccessful strategy, not to mention the minimal chance that reformists would be qualified by the Guardian council<sup>15</sup>. Second, supporting hardliners could put the Sunni elites in Iran in a difficult position. As a Sunni activist in Sistan-Baluchistan told the author: “a political shift among Sunni *ulama* could impact the people in their communities and decrease the credibility of *ulama*. Although reformists failed to satisfy Iranian Sunnis, the idea of reformism is part of Sunnis’ political worldview”<sup>16</sup>.

During the five days of candidate registration, 592 men and women signed up, even though the law only allows only men to run for presidency. From these, the Guardian Council announced seven approved candidates on May 25; at the forefront was the cleric and current head of the Judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi. Based on a national survey conducted around a month before the election, Raisi was the most well-known politician among all the candidates [Akharinkhabar 1400/2021 May]. Further, 47.7% of those surveyed said that they would vote for him. Raisi also had strong support from the Iranian parliament; 208 out of 290 signed a paper inviting him to be a candidate in the election. On the other side of the fence, the reformists tried to encourage the foreign minister Javad Zarif to register, although he decided not to run. All other candidates were disqualified, including the main candidates who were suggested by the moderates/reformists, such as Tajzada, Rouhani’s Vice President Eshagh Jahangiri, and even the ex-parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, supposedly a trusted politician and regime loyalist. The latter was one of the potential candidates whom Iranian Sunnis would have supported<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, June 2021 (interviewee wanted to remain anonymous).

<sup>15</sup> A 12-member council (selected by the Supreme Leader and the head of the Judiciary) in charge of supervising elections, i.e., approving candidates.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, June 2021 (interviewee wanted to remain anonymous).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Jalal Jalalizada in June 2021.

The decision by the Guardian Council basically leveled the playing field in such a way that Raisi remained the only realistic candidate for president and, as public rumors suggested, a potential Supreme Leader successor.

Accordingly, around a week before the election on June 11, Iranian Sunnis faced limited possibilities. The first option was boycotting the election and discouraging people to participate. This idea was present among Iranian Sunni communities and other communities in Iran who did not vote. For the Sunni elites, however, this was not an option. They certainly did not want to put themselves on the same side as the opposition, especially those in favor of regime change. The major argument against the boycott was that “the Iranian Sunnis are already under the security prism and boycotting the election would certainly make the situation worse”<sup>18</sup>. A softer version of this option, i.e., encouraging people to vote without supporting a specific candidate, was also mostly rejected by the Sunni elites, as it would exclude Iranian Sunnis from participating in vote mobilization processes and establishing a channel of communication with the potential president. The second option would be to play the old game and support candidates backed by reformists (Abd al-Naser Hemmati and Muhsen Mehralizada). This option was unappealing because of their general dissatisfaction with Rouhani and reformists/moderates in general. In addition, it was understood that only Ebrahim Raisi had a realistic chance of winning; as such, voting for him was the third, last, and only rational option.

However, choosing Ebrahim Raisi as preferred candidate was a difficult decision for Iranian Sunnis. Furthermore, as there is no centralized community or association which can bring all Iranian Sunnis together, making a united decision was quite a challenge. In a spontaneous manner, an unofficial council was constituted approximately two weeks before the election. The Strategic Council of Iranian Sunnis (SCIS; *shura-yi rahburdi-yi ahl-e sunnat-i iran*), later named the Consultatory Council of Iranian Sunnis (*shura-yi hamandishi-yi ahl-i sunnat-i iran*), played an extremely important role in this regard. The council, which acts as a self-organized unregistered association, has been active since the 2008 election. In this council, influential Sunni elites from religious communities across Iran gather in Tehran to identify which presidential candidate they should support in the election. In the 2021 presidential election, the council had 15 members, with approximately two people from communities in provinces with many Sunni residents, and some from Tehran. The 2021 council’s members included former and current members

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a teacher at a religious school in the city of Khwaf in July 2021 (interviewee wanted to remain anonymous).

of parliament, as well as religious figures or their representatives from Sunni *madrasas*. However, during the election period, certain Iranian Sunnis claimed that they had not been informed about the council. Among them, a Sunni cleric from Iranian Kurdistan, Kak Hasan Amini, published an official statement criticizing the non-democratic character of the council [Telegram Kak Hasan Amini 1400/2021 June]. Jalal Jalalizada, a Kurdish reformist politician, scholar, intellectual, and deputy member of Sanandaj to the sixth parliament had mixed feelings about SCIS: “The existence of this council is important as its members talked with a majority of candidates (except Raisi, Zakani, and Jalili) and managed to reflect a major concern of Iranian Sunnis. But in their decision making they failed to reach a goal, which was unifying Iranian Sunnis in reaching a final decision”<sup>19</sup>.

Ten days prior to the election, while the SCIS could not agree on their preferred candidate, Raisi sent his advisors to meet them and convinced them to mobilize voters. Raisi’s representative Muhammad Asefi Yazdi met with Mawlana Habib Al-Rahman Mutahhari (the most prominent Iranian Sunni figure and head of Ahnaf of Khwaf, one of Iran’s major Sunni educational institutions), which was reflected in Mutahhari’s Telegram [1400/2021 June] channel together with certain demands regarding Iranian Sunnis’ rights<sup>20</sup>. Meanwhile, another representative of Raisi, Musa Qazanfarabadi<sup>21</sup> went to Zahedan and visited Mawlana Abd al-Hamid, though this did not lead to immediate support for Raisi. Mawlana Abd al-Hamid’s son-in-law, Mawlana Hafez Ismail Mullazayi, claimed on June 9 that Shaikh Al-Islam of Zahedan was still observing the situation and remained undecided [Ilna News 1400/2021 June], which was also reflected in Mawlana Abd al-Hamid’s Friday sermon<sup>22</sup>. Following Abd al-Hamid’s speech, another important figure among Iranian Sunnis, Shaykh Al-Hadith Mawlana Muhammad Hussein Gurgij, at that time the Imam Juma of Galikesh in northern Iran and the headmaster of Dar al-Ulum of Faruqiyya, also indicated that the decision was in the Council’s hands:

<sup>19</sup> Interview June 19.

<sup>20</sup> In this statement Mutahhari described the issue of Iranian Sunnis’ exclusion from higher positions as cabinet members or even the president. Furthermore, he raised another issue regarding the independence of Sunni educational institutions: “[Sunni] higher religious schools must be independent and no one shall intervene in their affairs ... based on the constitution, ethnic and confessional groups are free in their religious affairs.” For Raisi’s speech see: [Raisi 1400/2021]. He mostly emphasized that these issues were more related to the economy and mismanagement and to a certain extent repeated slogans from his 2017 presidential campaign: [Raisi 1396/2017 May] (*khatkeshiha-yi mazhabi va siyasi bi naf-i hichkas nist*).

<sup>21</sup> Head of the legal and judicial commission of the Iranian parliament.

<sup>22</sup> See his full speech on Friday June 11 on Telegram [Telegram Mawlana Abdulhamid 1400/2021 June].

“The Iranian Sunnis will not boycott the election, as the destiny of the country has to be decided. However, we have requests and expectations. The strategic council is in Tehran negotiating with candidates and the decision will be communicated. If there is no agreement with any candidate, then the people are free to choose by themselves”<sup>23</sup>.

Independently of SCIS, certain Sunni communities immediately supported Raisi, leading to criticism and dissatisfaction from other Iranian Sunnis. In the province of Kermanshah, Shahab Nadiri, the deputy for the city of Pave in the 10<sup>th</sup> parliament, was appointed as the head of Raisi’s presidential campaign for ethnic groups and confessions on May 29 and was made responsible for mobilizing voters in Iran’s western Kurdish areas [Telegram Shahab Nadiri 1400/2021 June]. Soon afterwards, Sheikh Khalil Afra, the Imam Juma of Kangan in Bushehr province, was appointed as Raisi’s representative among Iranian Sunnis in Bushehr. On June 7, 11 days before the election, a group of Turkmen *ulama* of North-Khorasan province stated their participation in the election and support for Raisi in a published letter. In Iran’s northeastern borderland in Raz and Jargalan county, which share 165 km of borders with Turkmenistan, Haj Akhund Galdi Kamali played an active role in mobilizing the Sunni Turkmen communities [Dana 1400/2021 June]<sup>24</sup>. To complete Raisi’s vote mobilization on June 10, around 500 Iranian Sunnis, from religious communities in various regions, were invited to meet with Raisi and brought by a private airplane to Tehran (Mutahhari Mosque)<sup>25</sup>. However, influential and well-known figures from Iranian Baluchistan were absent. On the same day, the Sunni parliamentary group of the 11<sup>th</sup> parliament also met with Raisi, presenting him the Sunnis’ overall demands and their general interest to vote for the Principalists (*usulgarayan*).

<sup>23</sup> His speech on Friday June 11 essentially encouraged people to participate and described the importance of the election, as well as the “unity” of people in Sistan-Baluchistan with other Iranians, without showing support for any specific candidate [Telegram Mawlana Gurgij 1400/2021 June].

<sup>24</sup> In an interview (June 2021) with a Sunni cleric from the Turkmen community of Golestan province, the interviewee mentioned that among Bandar’s Turkmen Sunni community of Turkaman (the major city and capital of Turkaman County in Golestan province), Sunni clerics were still undecided.

<sup>25</sup> For a visual detail, see: [Mashreghnews 1400/2021 June] Iranian Sunnis who had not agreed to support Raisi at that stage criticized this participation and described the scene as “humiliating rather than productive” (from a conversation with an event participant on June 11). Another participant described the whole event as well-arranged and important, as Iranian Sunnis from western and eastern parts of Iran were present and had the chance to talk on stage and send their message to Raisi (interview with a participant in the event from Iranian Kurdistan on June 12).

On June 12, SCIS identified Raisi as the preferable candidate, undoubtedly after being given the green light by Mawlana Abd al-Hamid. The Sunni parliamentary group also declared their immediate support for Raisi [ISNA 1400/2021 June]. To finalize the decision from the Dar al-Ulum Makki, Mawlana Abd al-Hamid's representative met on the same day with Sayyid Hamed Alam al-Huda (director of Raisi's Headquarters in Affairs of Ethnicities, Confessions, and Religious Minorities), the older son of Sayyid Ahmad Alam al-Huda (Raisi's father-in-law, Mashhad's Imam Juma, and Khamenei's representative in the province). Although certain people could not accept this decision, the office of Mawlana Abd al-Hamid issued a statement confirming his approval of the decision [Abdulhamid 1400/2021 June]. Consequently, the majority of Sunni *madrastas*, as well as influential people close to Dar al-Ulum Makki, declared their support for Mawlana and his political decision<sup>26</sup>. In this way, the main decision of the most important Sunni institution and its leader spread through his channels all over social media—an effective and often-used strategy which shows the connectivity of certain Sunni institutions and their main figures.

Subsequently, critical voices were raised within Sunni communities. The first and among the most important claims came from The Society for Appeal and Reform (*jamaat-i dawat va islah*). In a short and clear statement, published on June 13 on the website of the society and their social media [Islahweb 1400/2021 June], the first point they made was that a decision by a single civil organization should not be presented as a collective decision of all Iranian Sunnis. Further, the last point clarified, “the Society for Appeal and Reform, as lots of other [Sunni] organizations and Sunni figures, did not intervene in the process of the creation and management of this decision and is worried about its outcomes and their impact.” Following that, the general director of a Turkman Sunni association, United Front of Sympathetic People of Sahara (*jibhi-yi muttahir-i hamdilan-i sahra*), Abd Al-ghaffar Radmehr, reacted more critically in a statement on June 15, which was distributed in several Turkman Sunni community channels. He states the decision from SCIS was “far away from the political and electoral ethic” [Ulkamiz 1400/2021 June]. The main assertion of the text was that following reformist currents is part of Iranian Sunnis' political thinking and they should continue to support reformism even if reformist politicians had fallen short of expectations. Regardless of their low chance of winning, the Turkman association suggested supporting Hemmati and Mehralizade

<sup>26</sup> See statements from Mawlana Mutahhari [Ahnaf Khaf 1400/2021 June]; Mawlana Gurgij [Sunni Online 1400/2021 June]; the headmaster of Anvar Al-Ulum Khairabad [Anvarweb 1400/2021 June]; and Imam Juma of Saravan, Mawlana Sayyed Abd Al-Samad Sadati [Avayesunnat 1400/2021 June].

as the two remaining reformist/moderate candidates [ibid]. Some people went even further and connected reformism to their ethnic and religious identity. A Kurdish Sunni intellectual from Sanandaj emphasized, “I cannot understand how some Sunni elites came to this conclusion to support hardliners (*tundra-ha*)! But I am even more surprised by the Kurdish Sunnis ... I believe a Kurd, who does not support reformism, is not a real Kurd!”<sup>27</sup>.

By supporting Raisi in Iran’s 2021 presidential election, Iranian Sunni elites supported a preferred candidate of the establishment, instead of supporting the opposition, as they had generally done since 1993. However, before jumping to the conclusion that this decision represents a paradigm shift, we have to consider the following points which were reflected in this section:

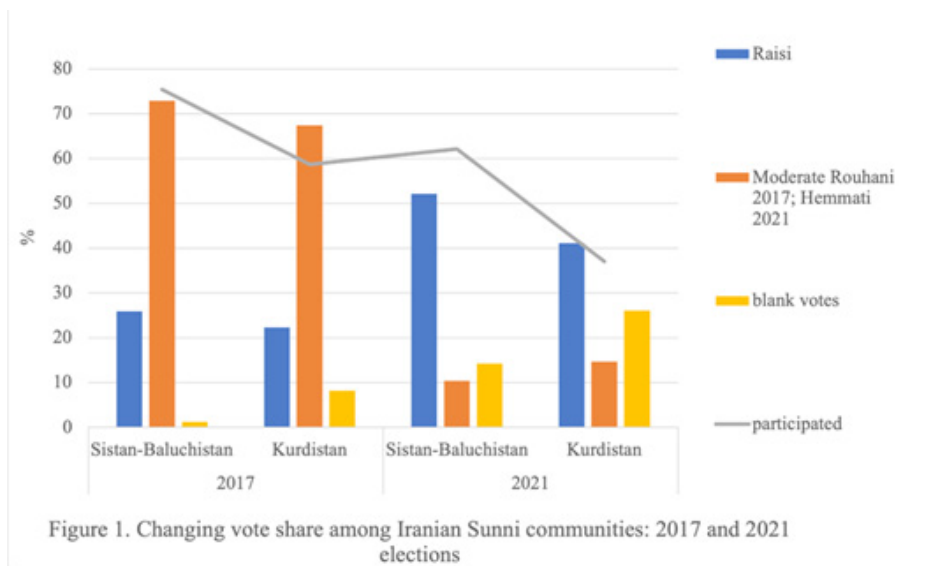
- 1) The decision to support Raisi was not a full reflection of all Iranian Sunni communities. As already discussed, several people among the Sunni elites came to a different conclusion and disagreed with the SCIS’ final decision.
- 2) As the result of the election has shown, despite generally high levels of support for Raisi, not all Iranian Sunni voters followed their leaders’ suggestion. As Figure 1 shows, compared to the 2017 presidential election, Raisi’s vote in Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan in 2021 almost doubled, while the vote for the reformist/moderate candidate decreased dramatically (approximately 11% for Hemmati in Sistan-Baluchistan and 15% in Kurdistan) compared to 2017 (approximately 73% for Rouhani in Sistan-Baluchistan and 67% in Kurdistan). The Iranian Sunnis described this outcome as resulting from “political wrath” (*qahr-i siyasi*) with reformists/moderates<sup>28</sup>. Looking at total participation, we see a significant decrease in Kurdistan (by almost 37%) and Sistan-Baluchistan (by 17.5%). The numbers in these two provinces represent a general trend in Iran. Another phenomenon which was also significant in the 2021 election was the issue of blank (or invalid) votes. In Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan, almost 15% and 26% of the total votes were blank, respectively.
- 3) Because several candidates were disqualified by the state, the pre-election calculation was clear: Raisi was going to win. Thus, for the Iranian Sunni elites, supporting him was the only rational option to not lose their connection with the state. In addition, the Iranian Sunni elites correctly observed the lack of interest in reformists/moderates among the wider population. One SCIS member described the situation as follows:

<sup>27</sup> Interview on June 15, 2021 (interviewee wanted to remain anonymous).

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jalal Jalalizade on June 17, 2021.



“What is the point of supporting the reformists anymore? What will they bring us except security issues and problems with the state? Look at the current situation of reformists themselves! Most of their politicians are either in exile, in jail or house arrest, or were disqualified. The situation of reformists is like a grave with no dead body inside [a Persian metaphor for describing something pointless] ... A reformist president cannot work under this situation and cooperate with the parliament, and this is the expediency for the establishment [to have a conservative government] ... Iranian Sunni communities are active and dynamic, know our interests and understand the situation of our society. It was difficult to take this decision, but we had to think beyond our ethnic and confessional preferences and think about our national interest and future challenges. We should not create a barrier between us as Sunnis and the state and the supreme leader”.



Source: [Irandatportal 2017; MOI]

### The big picture

The decision by the Iranian Sunnis to support the traditional conservative current (i.e., the right) in the 2021 presidential election can be observed as a political shift within the Islamic Republic. Further, the election has demonstrated once again the authority of Dar al-Ulum Makki in Zahedan and the role of Mawlana Abd al-Hamid, and the way he and his other Sunni counterparts operate politically. In the light of different regional and international developments—renegotiating the historical nuclear deal, ongoing talks with arch-rivals Saudi Arabia—it is reasonable to ask whether a new Sunni-Shia dynamic is being shaped.

However, despite the attempt to change the political behavior of Iranian Sunnis, the situation might not represent a paradigm change at this stage. Indeed, a wider socio-political shift has still not occurred. The recent decision by Iranian Sunnis should be understood mainly as a rational act based on political compromises with Iran's dominant political current. This decision may open a new chapter in relations between Sunnis and the state in Iran. However, as of February 2022, six months after Raisi came to office, the taboo of having a Sunni in the presidential cabinet has yet to be broken. Raisi has made no significant Sunni appointments, except for a new religious minority advisor, Mamusta Abd al-Salam Karimi [Dolat 1400/2021 October] from Kurdistan. More welcoming was Ali Khamenei's appointment on 17 August 2021 of Amir Shahram Irani, a Kurdish Sunni from Sanandaj, as the Commander of the Iranian Navy, which is to this day the highest position achieved by a Sunni in post-revolutionary Iran. Nevertheless, prominent Sunni scholar Mawlana Gurgij was dismissed on 17 December 2021 from his role as Imam Juma, which raised major concerns among the Sunnis. This decision came from the office of Ali Khamenei's representative in Golestan province and led to protests in the city of Azadshahr<sup>29</sup>, and a wide range of reactions from Iranian Sunni communities on social media. In the latest move, Mawlana Abd al-Hamid sent a public letter to Ali Khamenei asking him for "urgent measures to solve the issue" [Abdulhamid 1400/2021 December]. On 9 January 2022, Khamenei signaled his awareness of Sunni-Shia dissonance in Iran, but warned that people should approach it cautiously and not "prolong the issue" [Nournews 1400/2022 January].

As has always been the case, the religious and political dimension of Sunni-Shia relations in Iran is related to regional geopolitical evolutions. Indeed, in the wider Middle East sectarianism has played out on different grounds and created conflicting relations between the religious and political field. Similar to Iran, Iraq's 2021 parliamentary election saw a record-breaking low turnout destabilize the political domain, which also put Tehran in a paradoxical situation – as the Fatah coalition of the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Units saw a defeat in the election, which they claimed was caused by election rigging. Meanwhile, the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan provided Iran with new opportunities but also potential threats. Although Sunnis and Shias have coexisted in the face of their shared goals and threats, the new geopolitical and ideological transformation may challenge their relations in Iran in the long run. On the one hand, the 921

<sup>29</sup> For background information to this event see: <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/protest-over-dissmissal-sunni-clergy/31634791.html>

km border with Afghanistan and the ideological ties between Iranian Sunnis in eastern provinces with the Taliban has put Iran in a difficult position. Specifically, in light of Mawlana Abd al-Hamid's welcoming message to the Taliban, followed by other Sunni clerics aligned with him, we see the complexity and connectivity of sectarian relations. In summary, different sides from the state and confessional groups are playing different political games for their own interests to build their own capabilities. If any side miscalculates or has their interests ignored, increasing sectarian division and tension is inevitable.

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