

Jonathan Fox (106), 9/12/95

## **Update**

Victor Assal, June 1999

## **Turkmen in Iran (Islamic Republic of)**

Total **Area** of Iran: 1,648,000 sq. km.

**Capital:** Tehran

**Group Population:** 1,379,000 (2%)

**Country Population:** 68,960,000(1998 estimate, US Census Bureau)

**Religion:** Sunni Islam.

The Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979.

## **Overview**

The Turkmen live along the northern border of Iran across from what is now the state of Turkmenistan (previously a part of the USSR) where the majority of this ethnic group lives. They have traditionally led a nomadic lifestyle. However, due to government policies, many have settled and now engage in agriculture. They are divided into several tribes and are Sunni Muslims.

The Turkmen arrived in the region at about the time of the rise of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries. They remained fairly free of outside control until the decline of the Qajar dynasty, which they helped to bring to power, at the end of the 19th century. In 1925, Reza Shah, Iran's leader, ordered a pacification campaign against the Turkmen. This caused many Turkmen to flee to the Soviet Union but most returned in the 1930s due to the Soviet policies of collectivization and religious prejudices. Some tribes rebelled during the Soviet occupation of Iran that occurred during and shortly after World War II but these rebellions ended shortly after the Soviets left in 1945.

Shortly after the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Turkmen rebelled against the new government demanding autonomy, official recognition of their language and representation in local revolutionary councils dominated by Shi'i Muslims. However, this rebellion was crushed shortly thereafter and their demands were not met. Since then, the Turkmen have suffered from the terror of Iran's revolutionary guards. In 1983, violence broke out when the revolutionary guard tried to prevent Turkmen women from working on farms and going about unveiled. This type of persecution, along with the Iran-Iraq war, caused many of them to flee to Turkey.

Aside from the government's thwarting the Turkmen's desires for autonomy, the Turkmen suffer some discrimination due to their status as Sunni Muslims. Although Sunni Islam is a recognized religion in Iran that is not subject to a great degree of official discrimination, in practice, Sunni Muslims suffer from political, cultural and economic discrimination.

Although there is little information on the Turkmen in Iran on this subject, it is likely that they are restricted from holding important government positions and they are probably also discriminated against for lower level positions.

Political parties, other than Iran's ruling party, which was disbanded in 1987, are illegal in Iran. The Turkmen, despite their desire for autonomy do not have an independent illegal political or military organization. Turkmen activists tend to become members of Iran's other opposition parties and organizations.

### **Chronology**

**October 22 1990**: Iran and the Soviet Republic of Turkmania agree to arrange cross-border pilgrimages and sightseeing tours in order to help establish relations between Turkmen living on both sides of the border. From this point in time onward, Turkmania's (later to be called Turkmenistan) economic and political relations with Iran steadily improve.

**October 27 1991**: Turkmania, until this point in time part of the USSR, declares itself independent and eventually renames itself Turkmenistan.

**October 1992**: Turkmen activists attend an opposition congress held in territory held by Iraqi Kurds in Northern Iraq.

**November 30 1993**: During a security conference between Iran and Turkey on Kurdish sovereignty, the head of the Iranian delegation states that Iran has no intention of allowing Iran's various ethnic groups, including Turkmen, to have autonomy.

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### **Update June 1999**

**March 10 1996** Reformers gain a majority of seats in first round polls. (ABC CLIO)

**April 21 1996** Conservative parliamentarians in Iran's Islamic consultative Assembly lost more seats in the run off elections held on April 19. (ABC CLIO)

**May 23 1997** Khatami, a moderate is elected president with 69% of the vote. Khatami promised in the campaign to reduce censorship and support a diversity of attitudes. (ABC CLIO)

**October 25 1998** Conservatives dominate election to the council of experts when many of the reformist candidates were disqualified. (ABC CLIO)

**March 8 1999** Moderates win in first local elections in 20 years. (ABC CLIO)

### **Risk Assessment**

The situation of the Turkmen remains unchanged since 1989. Their desires for autonomy and to speak their language are still repressed. However, the newfound independence of their brothers in Turkmenistan in 1991 has the potential to be a rallying point for these desires. However, there is no indication that this has yet occurred.

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