

# Between Tolerance and Exclusionism: Urban Iranian Youth's Attitudes towards Race and Religion

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**ABSTRACT**— *Although the emergence of race and religiosity among Iranians predates the past millennium, it was not until beginning of twentieth century that both religion and race entered the public discourse, gradually becoming the key constituents of Iranian identity. The emergence of the non-conformist young generation in early 1990s, however, raises important questions about the critical role of race and religion in shaping Iranian youth's identities. With a specific attention to the most mature (25-29 years old) segment of the middle-class residents of Tehran, and through conducting a series of focus groups, this study explores how these individuals imagine their selves vis-à-vis the others in relation to race and religion. The findings ultimately point to the participants' oscillation between tolerance and exclusionism towards other races and religions as a way to disentangle the complexities of their identities.*

**Keywords**— Iranian identity, race, religion, youth, focus groups

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of Iranian identity, poses considerable challenges not only because it carries with it the conventional complexities of understanding any national belongingness, but also for having a new set of problematic notions which are unique to the nation and its history. Such challenges range from “the complex legacy of the premodern past to the diversity of ethnic and religious populations, from the history of encounters with multiple imperial powers to the long shadow cast by nationalist ideologies” [1, p. ix]. Equally, there have been various interpretations and understandings of Iranian identity, either as the result of the scholars' different orientations that have given rise to contradictions in existing knowledge, or because of the large ethnic diversity and their varying circumstances and perspectives [2, p. 78]. That being said, social research on Iranian identity has long attempted to understand the sources of the public attitudes towards various categories of nationhood and belongingness, especially those concerning Persian (or as some refer to it as Aryan) race and Shia Islam religion [3].

Such broad efforts, however, have so far led many scholars to unanimously agree upon at least two conceptions central to the Iranian identity: the legacies of both the Persian race (including Zoroastrianism as a cultural element rather than a full-fledged and widely practiced religion), and Shia religion [4]. The legacy of Persian race is broadly referred to the narratives of Pre-Islamic Iranian civilization, and is commonly associated with Aryanism, Farsi language, and Zoroastrianism, dating back to the second millennium BCE [5]. Shia religion, on the other hand, is historically rooted in Safavid dynasty (1500-1722) which eventually established the Shiite branch of Islam as the official state religion after the Arab conquest of Iran that took place from 633 to 654 AD [6]. Although some aspects of Shi'ism have been challenged by modernization processes which were taking place during Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), by inception of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, it eventually re-established itself as political religion under the auspices of the ecclesiastics of the time [7].

In this view, race, far beyond the assumption of being a set of biological characteristics, is a social construction with no objective reality [8]. Yet, it remains as an important source for people to interpret their everyday experiences whenever involving the races of the ‘others’ [9]. Similarly, religion is regarded to be a critical construct for understanding contemporary social life, as it plays a central role in people's daily lives and the ways in which they make sense of themselves and the world around them. Religion is seen to give meaning and purpose to life, promote social

stability/control, and possibly enhance physical and psychological well-being. But it can also perpetuate social inequality and conflict among followers of different religious faiths; it often functions as a mirror of society's broader assumptions and attempts to divide and discriminate, whether that is based on race, ethnicity, nationality, class, social status, gender and so on. It is important, therefore, to pay close attention to the ways in which the notion of race and its associations with biological characteristics has been intertwined with issues such as religion and the idea of nation, among others [10]. In this way, the research on national identity often takes a complex and tortuous path because of partial overlay of race and religion identities both of which can conterminously exist within the boundaries of nationhood.

Nevertheless, to look at the case from postmodernist position, what matters more than accuracy of such historical accounts, national mythologies or collective memories, is the ways in which the public conceive of itself and its national identity at the present time. This, however, does not mean to disregard the significance of historical developments that have led to what is known today as the 'nation', nor to deprioritize the structure of the common public knowledge about itself. Rather, it is the recognition of the interplays of ideas such as self-consciousness, pluralism and cultural relativism, in understanding Iranian identity, and more specifically, the public attitudes towards race and religion. In this view, the present study tries to bypass the debates in Iran's historiography, and pay more attention to how individuals in contemporary Iran think of, feel about or imagine their own race/religion vis-à-vis the others'.

As such, the study primarily aims to explore some of the aspects of race and religion categories which are salient for the young generation who appear not fully compliant with the dominant worldviews held by their traditionalist predecessors. In particular, it pays attention to urban youth with more or less similar demographics and living circumstances for two main reasons: firstly, the impracticality of providing a true representative account of any given subnational group, due to the enormous diversity of culture and ethnicity across the vastness of the nation. From this perspective, it is commonplace to think of the possibility of inconsistencies in individuals' attitudes, even among young urban dwellers with different socioeconomic backgrounds. And secondly, the centrality of the urban youth's cultural practices and political positions to the formation of the overall contemporary Iranian youth culture [11].

## **2. THE EMERGENCE OF YOUNG GENERATION IN IRAN**

Soon after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran underwent a sudden political, economic and social change through which it turned from the West's major ally into an internationally isolated nation [12]. Accordingly, the fundamental shift in the government's ideological and structural disposition has had a series of grave consequences for the nation not only on global scale and in terms of international interrelationship, but also within the nation-state and around the public life [13]. The magnitude of such devastating effects on the nation was exacerbated even more with eight years of Iran-Iraq war which began shortly after the Islamic Revolution and lasted up until 1988 [14]. Throughout these years, however, Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has been capitalizing on repressive and ideological state apparatus to reaffirm its legitimacy in the region and maintain its power over the nation [15]. In line with such efforts, the state-controlled social institutions including mainstream media have been incessantly striving for construction of a homogeneous identity based on Islamic, revolutionary and anti-West ideology that would ensure the solidarity of the nation and thus securing the state's power [16]. In so doing, the state attained a considerable success, albeit through making the most of the situation where the nation was still retaining the revolutionary spirit all throughout the warfare with the West-backed common enemy [17].

The period of post-war, has been seen by many as the beginning of a gradual societal change which coincided with some signs of growing cultural liberalization in Iran [18]. At this time, while there were some relaxations in cultural policies [19], the nation witnessed the entrance of the world into a new stage of the globalization, experiencing the upsurge in technological developments and their profound influence on people [20]. Perhaps the most remarkable of such transformative forces behind these changes was the advent of the new media such as Internet and satellite TV and their rapid expansion across the country during 1990s.

In essence these new forms of media brought about an abundance of unfettered information and entertainment contents, liberating many Iranians from restrictions of the state-run mainstream national media that has always been criticized for its lack of quality, limitations, and heavy censorship [21]. More importantly, in tandem with such developments a plethora of political and popular cultural contents with generally anti-regime disposition flooded the free-to-air satellite TV and various Internet-related websites and platforms [22]. This in turn, marked a defining moment for people of Iran as they were able to access to a different narrative about the nation's history as well as an alternative meaning of Iranianness [23].

Nonetheless, at the turn of the last decade of the twentieth century, these collective social and political changes also ushered in the emergence of the young generation in Iran. Age, as Amie Matthews [24] noted, is a key aspect (besides ethnicity, social class, religion, etc.) of our lives that is often deemed to have a significant impact on our experiences of identity and belonging. Rob White also pointed out that "age has a major bearing on where young people fit within the

broad range of social institutions” [25, p. 1]. Being born between early 1990s and the year 2005, these young people are now about 15 to 29 years old, and are predicted to constitute one-third of the 84 million population of Iran by 2020 [26].

Also known as Iranian youth, the young generation are seen to be a distinctive subnational group who claim to have their own specific norms, values and unique experiences of living in Iran [27]. Such uniqueness is seen by many to have its roots in concurring the youth’s formative years with the post-revolution and post-war era, above and beyond this period’s momentous circumstances, the most significant of which was arguably the availability of global media [28]. Indeed, with the advent of the new forms of media and communication technologies, the youth of Iran are connected to the global community, demanding more freedom and finding more opportunities for construction of identity [29].

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In this study, focus group discussion (FGD) was preferred over other methods mainly due to ‘group effect’, allowing the data to emerge in the form of spontaneous conversations between participants, with minimum interference of a moderator. Here, the group effect was in particular vital for generating the necessary data, since the study dealt with young people’s everyday experiences which were more likely to be revealed through unaffected and ordinary interactions between members in each group.

The recruitment of the research participants was based on a purposive sampling approach that aimed to provide an in-depth account about the under-investigation phenomenon through interviewing only a number of information-rich individuals [30]. This was carried out through snowball sampling technique wherein existing subjects provided referrals from people they knew, such as friends, relatives and colleagues, as long as they fitted the nomination criteria. The criteria required candidates to be 25-29 years old, Shiite, middle-class residents of Tehran, with no affiliation with Iranian political system. In this way, the candidates’ age, religion membership and even political connection were relatively easy to confirm. However, estimating the participants’ social class required extra effort which involved looking into the initial information provided by the referees at the preliminary nomination stage, to see if such descriptions qualify these individuals as middle class or not. The inclusion criteria protocol which was developed for this category considered factors such as the candidates’ residential area (e.g. northern districts, inner city and southern districts respectively represent upper class, middle class, and under class), and the income of their families between \$10 to \$100 per person per day [31].

Since the purpose of the FGDs was to explore some of the less-known aspects of individuals’ identities which not had been adequately addressed before, the interview guide was designed with minimum structure to let up on participants and thereof allow the emergence of varied and new ideas [32]. The topics for discussions were chosen carefully to allow the participants to start thinking about and reflecting on their sense of belonging to the nation as well as their everyday experiences of living in Iran and being Iranian.

Each topic was introduced by asking a general question and then giving the members some time to mull it over, while listening to their responses and observing their nonverbal interactions in order to present the probes and follow-up questions appropriately and at the right time. These interrogation techniques allowed to get a better sense of what individuals were exactly trying to communicate, since their initial responses to the general questions were hardly clear, detailed and meaningful.

The arrangement of the topics to be discussed as well as the wordings of the interview questions were tested out and fine-tuned during a pilot study with a group consisting of 2 males and 2 females. The pilot study also proved to be useful for evaluating the group characteristics such as size and diversity. As such, the focus groups with 4 members were found to be manageable without compromising ‘group dynamics’, not to mention the inconveniences that having larger groups would bring to the host. Conversely, the pilot study provided some clues about unproductivity of the mixed groups, since gender relations between members seemed to sway the participants’ opinions and way of speaking. That is to say, at times male participants seemed to play with words and alter their views in order to appear ‘cool’ or sophisticated. In the same vein, the female participants occasionally united against male peers to signal ‘girl power’ which influenced their overall responses to the questions. Following these observations, and in order to remain sensitive to the local culture and also to be considerate towards the hosts’ expectations, it was decided to have homogeneous groups in terms of gender, each consisting of four members. The decision on the number of the groups, however, was based on data saturation wherein the continuation of the FGDs did not yield any new ideas.

Furthermore, due to the current political climate in Iran where people are generally hesitant to openly talk about their experiences and reveal their views in public or in formal settings, the FGDs were informally conducted in host participants’ homes. A consent form was designed and copies of it were given to the participants at the outset of each session to read and sign if they were willing to take part in the focus groups. The form was also included a section informing the participants about the nature of the research and the ways in which its findings would be used in future. Also, each participant was assigned with a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. Each focus group

lasted about 90 minutes and they were voice-recorded in their entirety. Finally, the discussions were fully transcribed, and then were translated from Farsi to English.

The analysis began with reading through the transcripts of each focus group and in a topic-by-topic order to get a general sense of what participants are saying. This was followed by coding each text segment, starting with the shortest or easiest to access ones. Coding required paying attention to the main idea being conveyed within a text segment and then assigning a single code to it accordingly. After assigning about 18 code labels to the entire text database of 250 pages, the codes were listed and then grouped in order to eliminate the overlaps and redundancies, resulting in emergence of 7 major themes. These themes, then, reflected the range of ideas associated with the participants' perceptions and everyday experiences of being Iranian while dealing with issues of the race and religion.

#### **4. LIMITATIONS**

As a qualitative study there are a number of limitations most of which are inherent to its non-probability sampling approach. This, ultimately, prevents the generalization of the study's findings to the large and diverse population of the youth in Iran. Nonetheless, both demographic and geographic inclusion criteria within this sampling framework present the two main limitations of the study. In this way, choosing middle-class Tehranis for investigation, as the most relevant group, was primarily due to the feasibility considerations, including time and resources involved in the research. Furthermore, the decision to limit the sampling population to only 25-29, rather than 15-29 year-olds, was based on the idea that participants with any greater age difference are less likely to use the same vernacular, linguistic terminologies and communication styles (considering the urban Iranian culture). Similarly, reducing the geographical scope to the middle-class dominated areas followed the rationale of enhancing group homogeneity, and therefore, encouraging group interaction and dynamics which are essential for generating the quality data [33, p. 44]. Moreover, Tehran has long been the country's heartbeat of culture, commerce and politics, with middle-class Tehranis being an indicator for cultural, political and economic traits across the nation [34]. In addition to this, the capital city's middle-class population have often been the protagonist in political activism and social movements [35].

#### **5. FINDINGS**

##### ***5.1 Our Fictitious Pride***

One of the earliest themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups pointed to the conviction among Iranians that they are heirs of an eminently glorious and conquering civilization. Such prevalent attitude, as they pointed out, has given rise to an overwhelming sense of proudness in collective mind of the public, and fostered an unrealistic image of their present 'selves'. This, in turn, was seen by the participants to perpetuate a false belief in superiority of Iranian race:

We had a superior culture in ancient Iran, but that is long gone now, what about now, what do we have now in Iran today? . . . I think we have a false pride about our superiority over other races.  
(Hamed)

Hamed's above argument, along with many other participants', bring out the group members' obvious disposition against Iranians' fictitious pride, maintaining that even though the pre-eminence of the Persian Empire in antiquity is an undeniable fact, its significance has little to do with the current situation in Iran. In their view, a nation's praiseworthiness is not so much about ancestral achievements, but rather who they are and where they stand among other developed nations today.

##### ***5.2 Unfairly Labelling the Others***

In further discussing the issue of race, the group members frequently talked about a rather unfavourable common practice among Iranians, a general proclivity to attribute certain characteristics to other races, often with the intention of self-admiration and condescending 'Others'. Nima, for instance, regarded degrading and labelling other nations as an indication of disgrace towards humanity and egalitarianism while in his opinion such indelicate characteristics were popular only among Iranians:

We or any other nation is not in a position to judge or label any other nation. Well, this kind of attitude is outdated anywhere else in the world; it can be seen only here in Iran. It is rude and unfair . . . We are all the same, we are all humans.

Surprisingly, despite the participants' general oppositional stance towards labelling other races, they, in a seemingly inadvertent manner, made an exception about Arabs:

Bahrainis like many other Arabs don't know the meaning of work. I think this is true, because they [Arabs] are rich, so they don't have to work to get what they want. I believe if someone's wealth grows his/her culture and intellect declines. (Negin)

Well, I think it's fair to say that Arabs are slothful and less intelligent compared to Iranians . . . because we've seen it. They seek comfort very much. And the reason for it is oil. They are rich and their culture is influenced by that! (Saeideh)

As above examples reveal, the participants' reasoning for such discriminatory position which contradicted their initial view on race, did not seem to be based on rationality or any objective truth, whatsoever. Rather, such self-contradictory responses were more of the consequences of the members' spontaneity during group discussions. On the face of it, they seemed to feel at ease practicing this form of exclusionism without being too concerned about being thoroughly consistent or politically correct in the course of the group interviews.

### **5.3 We are not Arab**

After the focus of the discussions shifted towards Arabs, the group members engaged in a series of dialogues which ultimately led to the emergence of yet another theme. In this way, as the majority of the participants' comments suggested, they were somehow frustrated with a common worldwide slant that to date continues to identify or equate Iranians with Arabs:

In Westerners' eyes Iranians and Arabs are the same, just because we are Muslims. We never want to be recognized as Arabs. We always try to show our differences with them. In fact, we often respond harshly when someone mistakenly regards us as Arab. (Fatemeh)

In Western countries Arabs are associated with being Muslim, and vice versa. Westerners equate Arabs with Muslims and vice versa. In Iran same thing is happening too. If you talk among friends about being Muslim, they might ridicule you and say: "Oh, so you want to say that you are an Arab!" . . . that's what we commonly hear among our own people. (Forouz)

As exemplified in above comments, the participants neither seem to be too worried about appearing xenophobic, nor did they seem to be able to provide a sound explanation for having such a chauvinistic perspective on Arabs. Instead, they were more concerned about risking their racial status if they were to be identified as Muslim. Nonetheless, in addition to the aforementioned scenarios in which the participants felt to be troubled and insecure, they came up with certain clues for explaining where such attitudes towards Arabs have been originated from in the first place:

The adversarial relation between Iranians and Arabs has its roots in their history where Shias and Sunnis didn't agree on certain matters. (Yashar)

The roots of this tension lie in the history when Arabs started to invade Iran . . . our problem with Arabs is just like the problem between India and Pakistan. (Parisa)

I cannot say much about them [Arabs], I haven't been there [Arab country] to see how they really are. What I know about them comes from what I've been told from childhood . . . We've been learning that Arabs are like this or that . . . our mind is set in that way. (Aylar)

The above quotes can clearly show how the participants tried to vouch for their unfair assessments on Arabs by pointing the finger at a variety of cultural and political circumstances. As such, they considered the widespread ill feeling among Iranians to be partly rooted in historical Arab-Iranian encounters, and partly the consequences of the discursive discourses of otherness that permeated the society and ultimately constructed a negative image of Arabs.

#### **5.4 We Made the World**

Another issue recurrently talked over during the discussions was centered on the idea that Iranians have always played a pivotal role in the world's cultural and technological developments since antiquity up until now. The emergence of this theme revealed the participants' narcissistic and favourable opinion on the importance of Iranian race; a belief that the world as we know it would not exist without the intervention of magnificent Aryans in the past, or the intelligence and talents of their direct descendants today:

Iranians are descendants of Aryan race, and Aryans were inherently intelligent, wise, and cultured. The evolution of all the other human races has been possible through the influence and intervention of the Aryan race. We are an intelligent nation. The NASA in US is dominated by us, Iranian scientists! What do you call this? Isn't it something to be proud of? Aren't we feeling proud of it? NASA is managed and operated by Iranians. If one day one, two or three of the Iranian scientists stop working in there, what will happen to NASA!?! (Ashkan)

What these comments reveal is just another prejudiced way that the group members thought about their racial superiority. At this point, the participants' adoption of an egoistic and Panglossian view on Iranians seemed to be the result of either their excessive reliance on exaggerated version of Iran's history, or their failure to critically evaluate the overstated hearsays that dignify Iranians.

#### **5.5 Tolerating other Religions**

Shifting the focus of the discussions from race to religion, the group members reflected on a number of major issues, the first of which dealt with their opinions on other religions. In so doing, the participants demonstrated their overall fair and unprejudiced perspectives on world's religions and asserted that what people believe in is in fact a matter personal choice, and therefore, religion should not be a basis for passing judgement:

Religion is something personal. Anyone can have faith in anything he or she wants. It has nothing to do with one another. I don't like to tell others about my beliefs and I don't like others to convince me about what they believe in. (Ali)

Every person's belief is respectable. I think it is a wise saying that 'religions are all the same'. The arguments between religions are not necessary at all, because they are all saying the same thing. They don't have any right to insult each other. It is everyone's duty to respect other religions and their followers. (Peyman)

In addition, as shown in above quotes, although the participants exhibited a notable amount of tolerance towards other religions, the very fact that they used positive phrases like, "I don't like others to convince me", "arguments between religions" or "duty to respect", is indicative of an intense and contentious climate surrounding the notion of religion in Iran. Nevertheless, what mattered most at this point, were these individuals' recognition of equal rights across religious groups as well as repudiation of the external forces that have long denied people's freedom to choose their own faiths.

#### **5.6 Our Religion's Omnipotence**

Maintaining their overall tolerance towards other religions, the participants raised another equally important issue as they directly criticized Shi'ism for upholding its position of superiority over other religious beliefs. In doing so, while they questioned the authoritative nature of Shi'ism, they drew on their own lived experiences to make a point:

We Muslims always claim that our religion is the superior one. Muslims, for example, go to England and freely promote their own religion . . . seriously, do you think Christians can come here and do the same in Iran? Surely, they cannot! That's unfortunate! When it comes to Islam, we are unnecessarily intolerant. We, too, should learn to respect other religions. (Hamed)

Another day I went to church, not far from here, and I told the person at the entrance "Excuse me, can I come in and visit your church?" and he smilingly said "Of course, please come in." On the

other hand, once a visiting Christian friend of mine asked me to bring him to a mosque, and you know what? We were denied entrance right after the doorkeeper found out that he [the friend] wasn't a Muslim! (Peyman)

We encourage the followers of other faiths to convert and become Muslim, but we don't allow Muslims to change their religion. This is so unfair! (Mehdi)

Filled with deep feelings of rebuke and lament, the above remarks point to various astonishing real-life instances whereby the participants managed to make a case for objectionability of their own religion. Hence, these comments, once again instantiated these individuals' affirmative position in regard to religious pluralism and equitability.

### **5.7 The Problem with Baha'ism**

During the conversations about Shi'ism and its domineering relations to other religions, a particular, but contradicting subject that from time to time came forth, was the notion surrounding Baha'ism, a major minority religion in Iran. Although the participants' overall view on other religions was positively a fair and even-handed one, yet, they thought of Baha'ism quite differently.

Personally, I don't have any problem with ancient religions which have been on earth for thousands of years but I have problem with those which are newly surfaced out of nowhere. You cannot call them genuine religions! (Reza)

Baha'is don't have a book, like Torah, Bible or Quran. We don't accept this! Religions like Baha'ism and Wahhabism are the products of the political games played to weaken the major religions. (Narges)

As these quotes show, while the participants excluded Baha'ism from other more prominent religions, they failed to provide any sagacious justification for their particular ostracism. Apparently, though, the only basis on which such mindset of theirs seemed to be founded was the thought that Baha'ism did not have a relatively long historical background or a distinguished and high-profile holy book. Furthermore, at times they appeared conspiracist as they showed traces of cynicism in their words, suspecting the emergence of Baha'ism to be merely political in nature. That being said, despite turning their back on Baha'ism, the participants stood up for Baha'is and maintained that indeed they did not see any reason for animosity against the followers of this religion minority:

We have Baha'i friends, they come to our home, and we are very good with each other. It has nothing to do with anything, for example, she believes in something and I don't, it's not important at all. (Elmira)

I had two Baha'i friends. My relation with them was quite OK. Personally, for me it doesn't make a difference what religion you follow. But they [Baha'i friends] were telling me that they are under so much pressure here in Iran. They're given political asylum anywhere in the world because everyone knows about their unfair and difficult situation in Iran. They are not recognized here in Iran. They are very good people. Baha'ism's principle is set on the idea that one should be good enough so that it [Baha'ism] appears attractive to others. It's kind of setting example by doing good deeds, not forcing their belief. (Saleh)

Obviously, the participants' resilience and fealty towards Baha'is, as exemplified above, goes against their earlier discriminatory perspective on Baha'ism, precisely because it is unlikely to marry abhorrence towards a religion with reverence for the very same religion's followers. That is to say, an attitude is not formed independently in a vacuum, but it is part of a gestalt, encompassing a person's thoughts, beliefs and experiences. Hence, from this standpoint, distinguishing and treating a disciple differently from his/her faith seems to be problematic, if not impossible. Nevertheless, the participants' dichotomous approach to Baha'i, at this point, presented a paradoxical case, the one that only can be justified as the consequence of the contradiction between dominant discourses and individuals' lived experiences.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the group discussions around the issues of race and religion yielded seven major themes, the first four of which were centred on the former and the three others concerned the latter. In summary, while discussing ‘race’, the participants demonstrated a non-discriminatory attitude, as they disfavoured Iranians’ excessive reliance on their ancestral background, and their exploitation of such historical accounts in order to gain advantage over other nations. In a similar vein, they decried the tradition of labelling others, a common practice in which Iranians seek their own supremacy through attributing derogatory characteristics to other races. Yet, in a sharp contrast, the continuation of the discussions represented an abrupt volte-face in group members’ way of thinking about race as they made an exception to Arabs and ascribed apotheosis to Aryans. Parallel to their initially fair and positive outlooks on race, the participants displayed a great deal of tolerance towards other religions, as they cherished the idea of equality and sameness of all the world’s religions, while denouncing the oppressive nature of Shi’ism. Diametrically opposite to their democratic views on religion, participants singled out and had a prejudiced take on Baha’ism, albeit without extending such unjust evaluations to the followers of this minority religion.

These findings, for all intents and purposes, reflect the participants’ generally non-discriminatory perspective on other races and religions, indicating the existence of a cosmopolitanism spirit among Iranian youth; a belief that regards all human beings ‘citizens of the world’ and members of a single community with equal rights. The presence of such attitudinal patterns among participants, however, makes more sense when we consider the zeitgeist and underlying socio-political structure during the past three decades in Iran that gave rise to youth’s movements, in the first place. As discussed earlier, the emergence of the young generation was part of the larger process of a social change that began since early 1990s through a number of transformative political and sociocultural circumstances. On the one hand, the widening generational gap resulted in youth’s disassociation with several aspects of their ancestral tradition that for long cultivated a range of intransigently jingoistic worldviews. This in turn, provided youth with an opportunity to break away from such prevailing attitudes and to pursue a more open-minded and liberal way of thinking about race and religion. On the other hand, concurrent to such developments, the arrival of new forms of media opened up a possibility for sharing, comparing, and reflection upon issues of race and religion.

In contrast, the participants’ reductionist reflections on Arabs and Baha’ism signalled a distinctive form of ethno-/religiocentrism held by them; a conviction that regards the aforesaid racial group and religion, respectively inferior and invalid. Perhaps, the best place to search for the origin of this kind of antagonistic dispositions among participants would be the dominant discourses in society where Arab-Iranian, Shia-Sunni, Shia-Baha’i oppositional binaries have historically resulted in formation of such ideologies [36]. This in turn suggests that although youth have considerably distanced themselves from older generations and their time-honoured dogma, they still, in some respects, continue to subscribe to their antecedents’ reactionary ideals. It also indicates that such beliefs have neither challenged critically enough by Iranian youth, as they have shown to be much more active and analytical in challenging many other illiberal aspects of the status quo. Nor have they gained sufficient attention of the key players in dissident alternative media institutions whose preoccupation with wrangling for more prominent and pressing political concerns have left little room for questioning the presumably trivial issue of Arab-/Baha’i-phobic attitude in Iran [37].

Nonetheless, while race and religion continue to shape the contours of Iranian identity, the growing complexity of the interplays between various forces of traditionalism and liberalism seem to influence youth’s attitudes towards such categories. Whereas axioms of liberalism have more and more gained momentum through acceleration of globalization processes in recent years, the apparent stagnancy of traditionalism’s ideals have shown no substantial sign of recoil or resilience, whatsoever. From a more optimistic angle, however, although certain contemptuous and inhuman ethos have hardened into the existing state of affairs in Iran, every move towards democracy and social change is a judder to the foundation of such longstanding ideologies. At the same time, such development will have the potential to bring Iranian youth one step closer to their cosmopolitan aspirations, a juncture where they begin to question the validity and rightfulness of the powerfully conditioned dominant discourses of race and religion in Iran.

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