

“Bordering” the Nation: State Intervention and the Production of Order in Iran’s Sistan-Baluchistan

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Introduction

This chapter investigates the relationship between bordering practices and state intervention in the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan. Drawing on theoretical approaches from border studies, and particularly on the concept of “bordering,” the chapter understands the border not merely as a territorial line, but as an ongoing political and social process. The main focus of the chapter is on the ways in which the state has intervened in the province through economic regulation, securitized governance, and the management of religious affairs. The chapter argues that the case of Sistan-Baluchistan represents a significant example of how modern state power continuously negotiates and reproduces centre–periphery relations through bordering practices, which are linked not only to material dimensions but also to ideological ones.

Methodologically, the chapter combines theoretical analysis with historical data and empirical observations drawn from the author’s previous fieldwork and interviews. In addition, local testimonies, official state documents, and secondary literature in Persian have been utilized in order to contextualize and deepen the theoretical discussion. Structurally, the chapter begins with a comprehensive theoretical discussion of bordering, engaging with critical border studies. It then provides a historical and socio-political background concerning the understanding of the concept of “ethnicity” in contemporary Iran, with a particular focus on Sistan-Baluchistan. Thereafter, the chapter examines three main domains of state intervention – economic activities, governance and securitization, and religious affairs – in order to elaborate on the contested relationship between the centre and the periphery while linking the theoretical concepts to the empirical case examined here.

Theoretical Discussions: Border and Bordering

It's insightful to recall that the discipline of border studies, essentially conceptualized by Ratzel in his groundbreaking 1897 work "Politische Geographie," finds its roots in the rich soil of historicist and cultural determinist traditions. These traditions drew inspiration from the interpretations of thinkers such as Herder, Hegel, Darwin, and Fichte. Within this intellectual framework, the formation of nation-states and their delineated borders were perceived as manifestations of historical imperatives or divine providence or "God's will".¹ The advent of globalization has introduced layers of complexity to this narrative, highlighting the ongoing (re)construction of borders within the frameworks of social-political organization and nation-building processes. This issue remains at the forefront of border studies. Paasi eloquently posits that comprehending borders transcends mere geography; it's about understanding the operational dynamics of states. He suggests that borders serve to mobilize and solidify aspects such as territory, security, identities, emotions, memories, and the mechanisms of national socialization.²

Border studies have evolved from a primary focus on state frontiers and ethno-cultural distinctions to embrace a broader spectrum of socio-spatial and geographical scales. This evolution spans from local and municipal levels to the global, regional, and supra-state domains. Consequently, border studies have grown to incorporate a diverse array of disciplines, including political science, sociology, anthropology, history, international law, and recently, the humanities, with a notable emphasis on art. Current debates within the field reveal that border studies have paved the way for critical examinations of the underlying rationales of everyday border-making practices. This discourse frames borders as dynamic entities – comprising institutions, processes, and symbols – that materialize through the socio-political processes of border-making or bordering within societies.³

¹ James W. Scott, "Bordering, Border Politics and Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe." In *Neighbourhood Policy and the Construction of the European External Borders*, edited by Filippo Celata and Raffaella Coletti, 27-44, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015.

² Anssi Paasi, "Commentary: Border Studies Reanimated: Going Beyond the Territorial/Relational Divide." *Environment and Planning A*, 44(10), 2012, 2305-2309.

³ Vladimir Kolossov and James W. Scott, "Selected Conceptual Issues in Border Studies." *Belgeo: Revue Belge de Géographie*, 1, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4000/belgeo.10532>.

Historically, border studies displayed a preoccupation with states and territories, anchored in the belief that borders are tangible outcomes of political, social, and economic processes. This perspective aligns with the principle that international relations unfold between sovereign states, as formed by Westphalian norms. However, the contemporary discourse in border research signals a broader shift away from the notion of “spatial fixity”. It acknowledges that what are considered natural borders result from human efforts to characterize spaces as such. Moreover, it recognizes that political boundaries often do not coincide with ethnic, linguistic, or cultural boundaries.⁴ Jenkins (2015) underscores that the social sciences’ engagement with themes of ethnicity and nationalism is full of references to boundaries and borders.⁵ In this context, ‘boundary’ pertains to ethnic considerations, while ‘border’ relates to national dimensions. Jenkins differentiates ‘boundary’ as a demarcation of where one entity ends and another begins, contrasting with ‘border,’ which carries a richer set of meanings, including the notion of a district at the edge of a country or territory. Through this comparison, Jenkins elaborates on the distinct nature of borders and their differentiation from boundaries, even though they can be synonymous. He notes that while boundaries can be seen as part of the broader category of borders, borders themselves may encompass abstract elements, including emotional aspects. Moreover, border zones and their inhabitants are distinguished from their hinterlands, underlining that, borders, unlike boundaries, are socially constructed entities shaped by political and historical events.⁶

The recognition of borders as constructs of human agency, rather than natural occurrences, has captured the attention of social scientists.⁷ A case in point is Georg Simmel, who juxtaposed the human inclination to demarcate

⁴ Henk van Houtum, “The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries.” *Geopolitics*, 10(4), 2005, 672-679.

⁵ Richard Jenkins, “Boundaries and Borders.” In *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity through Boundary Approaches*, edited by Jennifer A. Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, 11-27, London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

⁶ *Ibid.* 16-17.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000; Jean Terrier, “Aspects of Boundary Research: Longue Durée.” In *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity through Boundary Approaches*, edited by Jennifer A. Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, 28-56, London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

borders (*Grenze*) against the boundless continuity of space (*Grenzenlosigkeit*). Simmel's arguments challenge the concept of natural boundaries by spotlighting the significance of social boundary-making. He asserts that a border does not merely represent a geographical fact with sociological consequences; rather, it embodies a sociological reality that manifests spatially. Consequently, Simmel defines a border as the "spatialization of mental [*seelische*] processes of limitation", emphasizing the primacy of the psychological delineations over their geographical expressions.⁸

The construction of self and other is pivotal in analysing the everyday narratives of bordering and border-crossing. Nash & Bryonie (2010) emphasize that these narratives encompass social, economic, and cultural dimensions beyond mere political symbolism.⁹ Borders thus acquire a dual significance: as physical demarcations of state territory and as symbolic markers of social and cultural inclusion or exclusion. This dual nature is rooted in both collective historical narratives and the personal identity constructions of individuals, where the concept of difference is intertwined with, yet not solely dependent on, spatial considerations.¹⁰ Paasi and Prokkola articulate that borders permeate all facets of society, manifesting through subtle "banal flagging" of national identity in everyday life, not confined merely to geographical peripheries. Emotional aspects of bordering are encapsulated in national celebrations and iconographies, pinpointing the 'locations' of borders beyond their physical presence. Active "borderwork" challenges and potentially dismantles entrenched national socialization patterns, whereas borders play a pivotal role in shaping the discursive landscape of social power, evident across material landscapes, ideologies, and national narratives.¹¹

⁸ Georg Simmel, *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Gesamtausgabe Band 11, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992, 34-35.

⁹ Catherine Nash and Bryonie Reid, "Border Crossings: New Approaches to the Irish Border." *Irish Studies Review*, 18(3), 2010, 265-284.

¹⁰ Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, "Bordering, Ordering, and Othering." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie (Journal of Economic and Social Geography)*, 93(2), 2002, 125-136.

¹¹ Anssi Paasi and Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola, "Territorial Dynamics, Cross-Border Work and Everyday Life in the Finnish-Swedish Border Area." *Space and Polity*, 12(1), 2008, 13-29.

Finding fertile ground in political geography, the application of boundary perspectives has broadened to encompass a variety of disciplines.¹² Within the realm of international relations theory, the Minnesota School has pioneered efforts to redefine the discipline's understanding of ethno-territorial issues through a constructivist lens, focusing on 'identities, borders, orders'.¹³ This emphasis on boundaries has notably impacted discussions on nationalism and identity, marking a significant 'cultural' and 'sociological turn' within the field of international relations.¹⁴ While sociological theory has been more reticent in adopting these boundary-focused approaches, they have found application in cultural studies, literary critique, and the analysis of globalization, illustrating their interdisciplinary relevance.¹⁵

Viewing borders as constructs of societal processes rather than outcomes of natural laws, these theories frame borders as categories that delineate socio-spatial differences among places, individuals, and groups. This constructivist shift has introduced the concept of bordering as a fundamental paradigm for understanding borders not as static entities but as "dynamic processes" sub-

¹² Daniele Conversi, "Modernity, Nationalism and Boundary-Building." In *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity through Boundary Approaches*, edited by Jennifer A. Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, 57-82, London and New York: Routledge, 2015; John Agnew, ed., *Political Geography: A Reader*, London: Arnold, 1997; Brian Graham, *Modern Europe: Place, Culture and Identity*, London: Hodder Arnold, 1998; Anssi Paasi, "Europe as a Social Process and Discourse: Considerations of Place, Boundaries and Identity." *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 8(1), 2001, 7-28; Anssi Paasi, "Place and Region: Regional Worlds and Words." In *Regions and Regionalism in Europe*, edited by Michael Keating, 208-217, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004; Anssi Paasi, "A Border Theory: An Unattainable Dream or a Realistic Aim for Border Scholars?" In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 11-32, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

¹³ Mathias Albert and Lothar Brock, "Debordering the World of States: New Spaces in International Relations." *New Political Science*, 35, 1996, 69-106.

¹⁴ Lothar Brock, "Observing Change, Rewriting History: A Critical Overview." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 28(3), 1999, 483-497.

¹⁵ Rob Shields, "Boundary-Thinking in Theories of the Present: The Virtuality of Reflexive Modernization." *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9(2), 2006, 223-237; Kathryn A. Manzo, *Creating Boundaries: The Politics of Race and Nation*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996; Wilfrido H. Corral, "Globalization, Traveling Theory, and Fuentes's Nonfiction Prose." *World Literature Today*, 70(2), 1996, 267-276.

ject to continual construction and reconstruction.¹⁶ This significant conceptual shift, moving from perceiving borders as primarily physical and static outcomes to understanding them as dynamic entities shaped by socio-spatial dynamics. At its core, the act of bordering involves the day-to-day construction of borders through various means, including political discourse, institutional policies, media narratives, educational materials, societal stereotypes, and “everyday forms of transnationalism”.¹⁷ This perspective posits borders as entities that, while possessing a degree of permanence, remain open to ongoing negotiation and redefinition, embodying the notion that borders are both semi-permanent structures and processes in perpetual flux.¹⁸ At its essence, bordering involves the routine crafting of borders through mechanisms like political rhetoric, institutional frameworks, media portrayal, educational content, societal stereotypes, and daily transnational interactions.

Bordering, following Scott (2015), serves two fundamental human needs: protection from external and internal threats and the delineation of territories associated with specific political, cultural, and social groups.¹⁹ These objectives are met through socialization processes within families, educational systems, and media, which contribute to an individual’s identification with a particular territory, culture, and political system. Borders are essential for defining both the internal and external identities of territories, especially for states recognized by the international community, affirming their rights to

¹⁶ Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, “Bordering, Ordering, and Othering.” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 93(2), 2002, 125-136; David Newman, “Contemporary Research Agendas in Border Studies: An Overview.” In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 33-47, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011; James W. Scott, “Borders, Border Studies and EU Enlargement.” In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 123-142, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

¹⁷ Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, “Bordering, Ordering, and Othering.” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 93(2), 2002, 125-136; James W. Scott, “Borders, Border Studies and EU Enlargement.” In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 123-142, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011; James W. Scott, “Bordering, Border Politics and Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe.” In *Neighbourhood Policy and the Construction of the European External Borders*, edited by Filippo Celata and Raffaella Coletti, 27-44, Dordrecht: Springer, 2015.

¹⁸ James W. Scott, “European Politics of Borders, Border Symbolism and Cross-Border Cooperation.” In *A Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, 83-99, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

¹⁹ Scott, “Bordering”, 32.

engage in various relations, form alliances, and participate in international unions as legitimate political entities. In addition, security is typically ensured by a governing body or authorities striving for recognition and acceptance from the public. This governing entity's sovereignty is projected over a defined geographic area with distinct borders under its control.²⁰

Historical and social science research has elucidated the correlation between domestic political manoeuvres and states' border control strategies. Sahlins' study on the Spanish-French borders reveals how prolonged state-building efforts led to the fortification and militarization of boundaries.²¹ Contrary to the notion that a state's capacity directly influences its border security stance, Gavrilis²² argues that border management is an intrinsic part of state-building strategies, shaped by historical paths of state formation.²³ Andreas posits that the escalation of border policing and the fortification of boundaries are not merely responses to illegal activities but are strategically timed to align with political and media narratives, highlighting a complex interplay between governance, public perception, and border enforcement practices.²⁴ Echoing the insights of Gavrilis, borders are reconceptualized as "institutional zones" rather than mere lines demarcating state separations.²⁵ These zones function to regulate and structure the interactions between states, acting as local embodiments of a state's sovereign authority. They facilitate the exercise of power, resource extraction, and the demarcation of ownership.²⁶ Gavrilis further articulates a critical observation: the more intensively states engage in the micromanagement of their borders, the greater the likelihood of forego-

²⁰ Ibid. 33; David Newman, "Contemporary Research Agendas in Border Studies: An Overview." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 33-47, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011; David Newman and Anssi Paasi, "Fences and Neighbours in the Postmodern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography." *Progress in Human Geography*, 22(2), 1998, 186-207.

²¹ Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

²² George Gavrilis, *The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

²³ Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics." *International Organization*, 51(4), 1997, 513-553.

²⁴ Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide*, 15-17, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

²⁵ Gavrilis, *The Dynamics*, 5-6.

²⁶ Ibid. 7.

ing beneficial cooperation with neighbours, misidentifying border threats, and escalating tensions, which he then discusses in different case studies.²⁷

Ethnicity and Border in Contemporary Iran

Iran's linguistic and cultural diversity has long been a subject of intense debate, both within and outside Iran. While some describe Iran as a fragmented society formed by distinct "ethnic groups" (*gorubha-ye qoumi*) or defined solely by "ethnicity" (*qoumiyat*), others consider these ethnic divisions to be socially and politically constructed, labelling them as "artificial" or "fake identity" (*boviyatha-ye ja'li*). Without deeply examining the theoretical dispute over the origin of ethnic identities in Iran, the presence of diverse groups who define themselves and their identities based on language, culture, religion/confession, and geography must be acknowledged. These dimensions add a complex layer to the configuration of the Iranian identity. Consider, for instance, a young Iranian Baluch living in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan in the borderlands between Iran and Pakistan. He may identify himself tribally as an ethnic Baluch, while also defining himself religiously as a Sunni Muslim belonging to a wider Islamic community. Simultaneously, he may feel himself to be part of a generation of Iranian youth sharing similar aspirations and concerns. Beyond his religious and ethnic identities, he may also perceive himself as a borderlander (*marz-nishin*), someone located far from the centre, facing marginalization and neglect.

These differences might set that young Baluch apart from other Iranians, yet the crucial point is that all these identity dimensions – ethnic, confessional, and geographical – exist in relation to an "other," namely the wider Iranian identity. In this context, what makes someone an *Iranian Baluch* is not separation from but coexistence with and connection to the broader category of *being Iranian*. Hence, the recurring reference to "Iran's Sunnis," (*abl-e sonnat-e Iran*) "Iranian Kurds," or "Iranian Baluch" reflects an identity formation that is *relational*. Indeed, ethno-confessional awareness in Iran operates within and interacts with a shared Iranian framework as a platform for these identities to articulate themselves. Thus, when a Baluch borderlander defends his ethnic or confessional identity and protests discrimination, he does so as someone who situates himself *within* Iran, as part of Iranian society and nationality.

²⁷ Ibid. 16-17.

This relational coexistence, in which difference and belonging are simultaneously experienced, is central to the argument of this paper and remains an underexplored dimension in discussions of ethnicity and identity in Iran.

Despite the emphasis in the constitution of the Islamic Republic on cultural pluralism and inclusion,²⁸ the state has continued to use the assimilation model inherited from Pahlavi. While a limited form of cultural freedom was provided in certain areas, the authorities controlled the policies governing ethnic minorities (“ethnic policies”) to ensure that demands from ethnic groups in Iran did not conflict with the ideological objectives of the state. Nonetheless, the state’s ethnic policies have changed throughout the different political eras in Iran. Soon after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the newly established government faced ethnic uprisings in various parts of the country, from Baluchistan to Kurdistan, as well as among Turkmen communities in the north and Arab communities in the south. In this era, which included the early days of the war with Iraq, the authorities were compelled to use coercion and repression by revolutionary forces. At the same time, the Shiite-oriented interpretation of Islam, which became the dominant confession of the country and the one fixed in the constitution, led to the emergence of confessional cleavages alongside existing ethnic ones.

The Iran-Iraq War intensified the repressive policies on ethnic groups in Iran, while the nationalist agenda of the newly established government during the war further shaped the basis of the state’s relations with ethnic minorities. Based on conversations with ethnic activists who witnessed the crisis of the 1980s, this security concern was tantamount to a phobia and shaped the Islamic Republic’s approach to ethnic policies.²⁹ Moreover, the authorization of demographic changes in ethnically concentrated regions in Iran under the *territorial planning policy* (*siyasat-e amayesh-e sarzamin*) was seen as

²⁸ Hessam Habibi Doroh, *Sunni Communities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2013-2021: Securitization, Secularization and Privatization*, Leiden: Brill, 2023; Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

²⁹ Seyyed Reza Salehi-Amiri, *Modiriyat-e Monaze‘at-e Qoumi dar Iran: Naqd va Barrasiye Olgubaye Mojoud va Erae-ye Olgu-ye Matlub* [Management of Ethnic Conflicts in Iran: Critique and Review of Existing Models and Proposing a Desired Model], Tehran: Majma-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam, Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Estratezhik [Expediency Discernment Council, Center for Strategic Research], 1385/2006.

discriminatory aspect of state's policy towards ethnic groups, which had also existed during the Pahlavi period.³⁰

The post-war reconstruction phase under the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani coincided with the launch of and emphasis on economic development. The era of economic development and the centralization of the political structure intensified regional inequalities, advancing the centre-periphery gap. In contrast, the Second Development Plan of 1995 was initiated without explicit reference to ethnic minorities. The concentration of economic advancement created a context in which the demands of ethnic groups were limited to economic issues, leading to further alienation of these groups from the state.³¹ Later on, under the so called "reformist" president, Mohammad Khatami, domestic policy centred on the principle of citizens' rights (*huquq-i shahrivandi*) and the government gave more priority to cultural and political issues. Transformation in the structure of broadcasting through the establishment of provincial television as well as introducing incentives to encourage investment in peripheral regions was welcomed by the Kurdish and Baluch elites. In the words of reformist Kurdish politicians, Jalal Jalalizade (b. 1960), deputy member of Sanandaj, Diwandara, and Kamiyaran (in the Kurdistan Region) to the sixth Majles (2000-2004):

³⁰ Habibi Doroh, Sunni communities, 365; Walter Posch, "Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers: Iranian Narratives on the Kurds." *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, 2017 edited by Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef, London: Hurst, 331-352.; Litvak, M. 2017. "The Construction of Iranian National Identity." In *Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, edited by Meir Litvak, 10-32, New York: Routledge; Rahimiye, Nasrin. 2017. "Four Iterations of Persian Literary Nationalism." In *Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, edited by Meir Litvak, 40-56. New York: Routledge; Bayat, B. 2024 (1403). *Nazariye barkhal-i qoummiyat* [A Theory of Fractal Ethnicity]. Tehran: Markaz-e Entesharat-e Rabbordi-ye Daneshgah-e 'Ali-ye Defa'-e Melli, 66; Meir Litvak, "The Construction of Iranian National Identity." In *Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, edited by Meir Litvak, 10-32, New York: Routledge, 2017; Bahram Bayat, *Nazariye bar Khal-e Qowmīyat* [A Theory of Fractal Ethnicity], Tehran: Markaz-e Entesharat-e Rabbordi-ye Daneshgah-e Ali-ye Defa'-e Melli [Strategic Publications Center of the National Defense University], 1403/2024.

³¹ Hadi Rahmani Saed, Hamidreza Ebrahimi, Leila Madibar, and Ahmad Qasemi, *Siyasathaye Qoumi va Aqnam-e Irani* [Ethnic Policies and the Peoples of Iran], Tehran: Daneshgah va Pazhuheshgah-e Ali-ye Defa'-e Melli va Tahqiqat-e Rabbordi, Markaz-e Entesharat-e Rabbordi [National Defense University and Strategic Research Institute, Strategic Publications Center], 1398/2020; Bayat. *Nazariye barkhal*, 72.

“Khatami’s era reflected a rational approach in the socio-cultural spheres and created a space for dialogue. However, when it comes to some political reform and more rights for ethnic groups, specially Iranian Sunnis we witnessed the bitter barrier of so called ‘They don’t let us’ (*nemigozarand*), meaning that higher decision makers do not let the government to give more chances to ethnic groups and this structural issue has continued and even today whenever there are some demands the typical answer is: *nimigozarand* (they don’t let us).”³²

Under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the political agenda emphasized Islamic and revolutionary principles. His government’s performance has had significant domestic and international consequences, dramatically affecting ethnic groups and the state’s ethnic policies. However, other elements under Ahmadinejad were received as positive steps in the state’s ethnic policies. These elements included the implementation of the Targeted Subsidy Reform Plan, economic restructuring, distribution of Justice Shares, Mehr Housing Project, and regular provincial visits. However, the absence of systematic political steps led to public dissatisfaction and ethnic clashes, which peaked during 2005-2007.³³

After the frustrating era of securitized relations between the state and ethnic groups under Ahmadinejad, a new approach was needed. Hasan Rouhani took office in 2013 with the support of borderland provinces, including ethnic elites and Sunni leaders, such as Shaykh Al-Islam of Zahedan and Molana Abdolhamid Esmailzayi. They were motivated by the guarantees from Rouhani regarding public freedom of political association and thought, more liberty in the religious activity of non-Shiite confessional groups, and better cultural representation of the country’s various ethnic groups.³⁴ Rouhani offered several policies that seemed promising: he introduced the Citizen’s Charter of Rights (*manshur-e hoquq-e shahrvandi*), which talked about “diversity,” “inclusion,” and “participation” for ethnic and minority groups. Further, he established the “Special Advisor to the president in affairs of ethnic and religious/confessional minorities” (*dastar-e vizheh-ye rais-jombur dar omur-e*

³² Interview with author, December 2025.

³³ Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 101-103; Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities*, 70-72; Rahmani et al. *Siyasatba-ye qoumi*, 80-84; Salehi-Amiri. *Modiriyat-e Monaze’at-e qoumi*, 422-433.

³⁴ Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities*, 41-42; Stéphane A. Dudoignon, *The Baluch, Sunnism and the State in Iran: From Tribal to Global*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

aqvam va aqalliyatha-ye dini va mazhabī).³⁵ This advisory office was created to observe, guarantee, and implement the rights of Iranian citizens belonging to religious, confessional, or ethnic minorities. The first advisor was Ali Yunesi (Minister of Intelligence under President Khatami from 2000 to 2005).

Despite temporary achievements under Rouhani's policy, criticism has been directed toward his administration. For instance, the establishment of the *Centre for the Study of Ethnicities and Religions of Azerbaijan* at the University of Urmia was regarded as fulfilling one of Rouhani's campaign promises regarding ethnic groups. However, creating "Azerbaijan Studies" in a province where at least half the population is Kurdish was seen as evidence of distortion.

Another critic of Rouhani's government was its continuation of so the called "security view" of ethnic groups, especially Iranian Sunnis. In this regard, the appointment of Ali Yunesi, who has a background in security services, intensified concerns about the securitization against ethnic groups. Similar appointments in the provinces of Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan, based on political connections to Hasan Rouhani and Ali Yunesi's networks, led to the appointment of individuals who had previously worked with Yunesi during his tenure at the Ministry of Intelligence. This was seen as very critical by the Baluch community, who were marginalized and received only a few symbolic managerial posts in four minor and non-strategic provincial departments.³⁶

By the end of his term, Hasan Rouhani's presidency was seen as a failure by many Iranians, including different ethnic groups. Starting in 2017, confrontations increased between the Baluch and Kurdish groups and the state. Specifically, the security pressure on Sunni communities, the concerning number of arrests of members of Sunni communities in Sistan-Baluchistan and growing socioeconomic dissatisfaction marked the end of Rouhani's presidency. This discontent with Rouhani, and generally all moderate and reformist pol-

³⁵ Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities*, 41; Regarding the profile of Yunesi see: ibid. 86; Hessem Habibi Doroh, "Neglected Research with Neglected Data: Barriers and Opportunities in Research on Sunni Muslims in Contemporary Iran." *The Muslim World*, 2025; Rahmani et al. *Siyasatha-ye qoumi*, 181.

³⁶ Regarding the security view on ethnic groups see: Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 147, 195-6; Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities*, 105-107.

iticians, was so strong that the majority of Sunni institutions, including Makki Madrasa and its director Molana Abdolhamid, endorsed Ebrahim Raisi in the 2021 election. The political decision to support Raisi was noteworthy for involving many actors from different ethnic groups, demonstrating the complexity of Iran's ethnic dynamics.³⁷

The short presidency of Ebrahim Raisi continued the securitization of ethnic groups, particularly Iranian Sunnis. A member of the Iranian Sunni community in the city of Mashhad described this era as follows:

“The behavior of Ebrahim Raisi in the city of Mashhad and this province in general has long been known. The process of Shiitization and the domination of Sunni communities by force created a very problematic situation for Sunnis in Mashhad. Many had to leave the city or go into the shadows. Raisi managed to replace Sunni clerics who were independent or linked with Zahedan, with a trusted groups of newly ‘generated’ Sunni clerics educated by the state’s institution. By implementing and growing Basij forces in the peripheral areas of the city that have clear ethnic diversity (among them many Baluch), Raisi and his security apparatuses created a ground for ethnic and confessional confrontations.”³⁸

The state’s failure to realize the growing ethnic dissatisfaction peaked in mid-September 2022, when new waves of demonstrations erupted in many cities following the death of 22-year-old Jina (Mahsa) Amini after her arrest by the Iranian “morality police”.³⁹ It soon became clear that she was of Kurdish origin and hailed from a Sunni family. Almost a week before this event, a Sunni Baluch girl named Mahu (15 years old) was raped by a police officer in Dashtyari, a neglected city in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan, a border province marred by the country’s highest level of poverty combined with

³⁷ For details on this election and the role of Iranian Sunnis see: Hessam Habibi Doroh, “Iranian Sunni Muslims and the 2021 Presidential Election: Paradigm Shift or Political Compromise?” *Christian World Politics*, 26, 2022, 319-339.

³⁸ Author’s interview November 2025.

³⁹ For a summary of how the Sunni communities of Iran condemned the death of Jina Amini and criticized the authorities see: <https://t.me/sunnionline/15169>. Molana Abdolhamid himself also published a statement on September 20, 2022, sending his condolences and pointing out many grievances shared by Iran’s ethnic minorities: <https://t.me/sunnionline/15177>; Further see: Walter Posch, *A Regime Unveiled: Social and Ethno-Sectarian Tensions and Democratic Evolution in Iran*, Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2022.

socio-ecological challenges. After the eruption of demonstrations in different cities in Iran under the slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom,” people in Zahedan, the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan, demonstrated to express their anger regarding the rape of Mahu, but also showing solidarity with Jina (Mahsa) Amini. Notably, in Zahedan, a significant city in Sistan-Baluchistan, tensions were already simmering prior to the widespread protests. Influential local Baluch leaders endeavoured to pacify the community, particularly aiming to restrain the youth. However, as the movement gained momentum in other parts of Iran, it acted as a catalyst in Zahedan, inspiring the youth to express their dissatisfaction openly in the streets. This response illustrates a pattern in which local dynamics interact with national movements, leading to delayed but eventual participation in broader protests.

On September 30, shortly after the Friday prayer held by Molana Abdolhamid, clashes erupted between the local Baluchis and security forces, resulting in an unprecedented bloodbath in the city of Zahedan. The clashes started around the Makki complex, which is the largest Sunni Mosque in Iran and a school (known as Dar al-Ulum “House of learning”). Within approximately two hours, over 90 people were killed, and 200 were injured. The people of Zahedan called that day “bloody Friday.” Following that incident, regular protests continued in Zahedan for almost six months. Those protests created a new dynamic in mobilizations, which had phenomenal characteristics compared to previous protests and created a strong sense of ethnic awareness in Iran.

Economic Intervention

The Iranian state has long viewed the border not only as a zone of threats and conflict, but also as an economic opportunity. In this regard, everyday economic practices have been continuously regulated and redefined. Historically, the economic dynamics of Iran’s eastern borderlands were deeply connected to cross-border relations shaped by tribal networks. Moreover, seasonal migration contributed to a relatively fluid economic structure in which mobility across the region played an essential role. With the expansion of the central state’s presence in the border regions, many practices that had previously been part of ordinary local economic exchange came to be categorized by the state as “smuggling” (*qachaq*). As a result, many traditional forms of

mobility and trade were criminalized, contributing to the emergence of an increasingly securitized environment that deepened over the decades.

At the same time, environmental problems and years of drought and water shortages pushed larger segments of the local population toward informal border economies. Since the 1990s, repeated droughts and environmental degradation have significantly affected agricultural livelihoods in the province. The depletion of water resources, lack of industrial investment, and high unemployment forced many residents to seek alternative means of survival. Alongside this, Sistan-Baluchistan's geographical connection to Afghanistan turned the province into one of the main transit routes for opium trafficking. However, because drug trafficking is punishable by death in Iran, other forms of smuggling increasingly emerged within the province. In this context, *sukhtbāri* – fuel carrying across the border – became one of the most important economic activities for many households. Due to the significant difference between subsidized fuel prices in Iran and market prices in neighbouring Pakistan, fuel carrying developed into one of the most widespread economic activities along Iran's eastern border. For the Iranian authorities, this practice came to be categorized as fuel smuggling and was increasingly associated with insecurity and threats to economic security. For local communities, however, fuel carrying was often described as one of the few remaining options for survival in a province characterized by poverty, unemployment, and a lack of meaningful investment.⁴⁰

The securitization of fuel smuggling has led to an increasing number of attacks targeting fuel carriers, resulting in numerous casualties in the border region. This issue became particularly critical following several explosions in border areas caused by car accidents, as well as incidents involving hostile fire by security forces. Nevertheless, cross-border smuggling is not a new phenomenon in Iranian Baluchistan; rather, it expanded significantly during periods of drought from the 1960s onward.⁴¹ Regarding the term *sukhtbaran*, the ulama of Iranian Baluchistan have attempted to avoid associating fuel carriers with the word “smuggler” (*qachaqchi*), which carries a strongly nega-

⁴⁰ Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities*, 162-163. Hessam Habibi Doroh and Javad Heiran-Nia, “Iranian Baluch Migration to the Gulf: Deciphering the Baluch Mindset on Migration to the GCC.” In *The Future of Migration to GCC Countries: Migrants' Aspirations, Labour Reforms and Politics*, edited by Françoise De Bel-Air and Nasra M. Shah, Singapore: Springer, 2025.

⁴¹ Dudoignon, *The Baluch*, 126-127.

tive connotation. Some influential Sunni clerics, such as Molana Abdolghafar Naqshbandi, have referred to those *sukhtbar* who died or were killed as “martyrs of bread” (*shahid-e nan*).⁴²

In addition to controlling border activities, the state has also attempted to regulate border economies through administrative procedures. During the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the so-called *Border Resident Card* system (*kart-e marzneshini*) was introduced. The project aimed to formalize small-scale border trade and create a controlled framework for the economic activities of borderland communities. Within this framework, border residents were granted permits allowing limited import-export activities in officially recognized border markets. Another example of the bureaucratization of the border emerged under President Ebrahim Raisi with the implementation of the *Razzaq Plan* (*Tarh-e Razzaq*) in 2022. The plan aimed to control and formalize fuel transportation in the province. Under this system, households living within twenty kilometres of the border and fulfilling specific residency requirements were allowed to purchase approximately 200 litres of diesel per week at subsidized state prices. The official objective of the project was to reduce illegal fuel smuggling while simultaneously providing economic opportunities for neglected border communities. At the same time, the initiative formed part of Ebrahim Raisi’s broader political attempt to present himself as *seyyed-e mabruman* (“the Seyyed of the Neglected”), portraying himself as a supporter of vulnerable and marginalized communities for political purposes.⁴³

While the main purpose of the *Razzaq Plan* was officially presented as addressing the structural causes of poverty and underdevelopment, many local communities understood it more as another mechanism of surveillance and

⁴² The idea of martyrdom (Ar. & Pers. *Shahadat*) is often presented by Deobandi scholars, especially through expanding on the Persian-language literary tradition within the Baluch community. See Dudoignon, *The Baluch*, 61.

⁴³ *Joz’iyyat-e Tarh-e Razzaq dar Sistan va Baluchistan: Cheh Kasani beh Surat-e Qanuni...* [Details of the Razzaq Plan in Sistan and Baluchistan: Who Can Legally Participate...]. 2022. *Hamsahbri Online*, July 16, 2022, <https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/691386/جزئیات-چهارشنبه-رازق-در-سیستان-و-بلوچستان-چه-کسانی-به-صورت-قانونی>?utm_source=chatgpt.com; “Saranjam-e Tarh-e Razzaq Chi Shod?” [What Happened to the Razzaq Plan?]. 2021. *Etemad Online*, June 5, 2021. <https://www.etemadonline.com/-23/493026-بخش-اجتماعی-23/493026-سراجم-رازق-چه-شد>?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

control. Furthermore, the project was widely perceived as evidence of the state's failure to create sustainable employment opportunities or invest in long-term economic infrastructure. Instead of addressing the structural economic problems of the province, the plan was seen as institutionalizing inequality without offering any meaningful solution.

In the words of one inhabitant of Sistan-Baluchistan who closely experienced the situation of fuel carriers:

“After years of tensions surrounding fuel smugglers, and after many of them were killed either in accidents or by police shootings, the government came with the idea of semi-legalizing this activity. But in reality, it only became a way for the authorities to profit from the dangerous activities carried out by borderland communities, while also controlling these communities in a more structural way.”⁴⁴

Governance and securitization

Governance in Sistan-Baluchistan has historically been closely linked to security concerns. Issues related to border security, ethnic and religious differences, separatism, smuggling networks, and insurgent movements pushed the central government to intervene in the province through increasingly securitized administrative structures. This dynamic can clearly be observed in the appointment of provincial governors after the 1979 Revolution. Between 1979 and 2025, Sistan-Baluchistan had a total of twenty-one governors. However, only four of them originated from the Baluch communities of the province, and among them only one was a Sunni Baluch: Mansour Bijar, who was appointed under the presidency of Masoud Pezeshkian. At the same time, at least five governors came directly from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or other security-related institutions.

The securitized dynamics of governance in the province stand in contrast to the historical structure of Baluchistan, which was traditionally governed through tribal leaders, local religious elites, and influential families. These actors historically played – and in many cases continue to play – a central role in maintaining social order and mediating local conflicts. The transition toward a centralized administrative structure began during the Pahlavi era

⁴⁴ Interview by the author, November 2025.

and continued under the Islamic Republic, significantly transforming the traditional governance system of the province. However, the expansion of central state influence did not entirely eliminate the historical role of traditional authorities. Influential tribal leaders and Sunni religious elites largely managed to preserve their local influence, creating, in many ways, a parallel structure of authority within the province. Among local communities, state intervention was often perceived as a process of centralization, Shi'itization, and in some cases even colonialization. These perceptions became even more pronounced when security figures and IRGC-affiliated individuals entered the province with their own security-oriented agendas.⁴⁵

As an example, the appointment of Mohammad Karami, a former IRGC commander, as governor under President Ebrahim Raisi demonstrated how the securitization of governance could further intensify tensions in the province. Karami had previously served within the IRGC's Quds regional command structure in southeastern Iran and became governor during the 2022 protests and a period of escalating unrest in Sistan-Baluchistan, particularly following the violent confrontations in Zahedan and the increasing number of attacks carried out by Jaish al-Adl.

Following the events of "Bloody Friday" in Zahedan and the broader escalation of tensions in the province, Karami was eventually removed from his position. Nevertheless, the political marginalization of Sunni Baluch elites remained a central issue, contributing to a persistent gap between state institutions and local society. Administratively and politically, the province continued to be governed through a framework in which security concerns frequently outweighed social dynamics and local sensitivities.

This aspect is closely connected to the concept of *kbodi* ("from us") and *gbeyr-e kbodi* ("the other"), through which Sunni Baluch communities in the borderlands are often perceived and treated as politically and ideologically distant from the centre. In this regard, many Baluch communities see them-

⁴⁵ Dudoignon used the term "colonisation" in order to show the characteristic of the Shi'ite 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" Stéphane A. Dudoignon, "Un tropisme indo-pakistanaï? Le sunnisme en Iran aujourd'hui." *Outre-Terre*, 28(2), 2011, 329-339. Further see: Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities*, 37-38.

selves as sidelined and categorized as *gheyr-e khodi*, excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making processes.⁴⁶ There are even indications that one of the underlying reasons for limiting the role of local ethnic elites in higher administrative positions is the fear that stronger local representation could reinforce communal identity and eventually encourage centrifugal tendencies away from the centre. This once again highlights the fundamentally security-oriented logic that continues to dominate policymaking in Iran, particularly in relation to its borderlands.

Religious Intervention

Another important element of the state's attempt to control the socio-political dynamics of Sistan-Baluchistan is religious intervention. Given that the province is predominantly Sunni Hanafi, in contrast to the official state religion of Twelver Shi'ism, religious affairs in the province have long been treated as matters of national security. In this regard, Sunni religious institutions increasingly became objects of state regulation aimed at strengthening central control over the borderlands.

It is important to note that in the mid-2000s, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (*Shura-ye Ali-ye Enqelab-e Farhangi*), during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, established the *Council for Planning Sunni Religious Schools* (*Shura-ye Barnamerizi-ye Madāres-e 'Olum-e Dini-ye Abl-e Sonnat-e Keshvar*).⁴⁷ This council was viewed critically by many Sunni communities across the country, who perceived it as a “state project” intended to create Sunni clerics loyal to the Islamic Republic and to oversee the activities of Sunni madrasas. Officially, the council aimed to standardize curricula, super-

⁴⁶ Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities*, 109-110. Bayat, *Nazariye barkhal*, 45; Mohammad Chalabi, *Hoviyyatha-ye Qoumi va Rabete-ye An ba Hoviyyat-e Jamee dar Iran* [Ethnic Identities and Their Relationship with Societal Identity in Iran], Tehran: Vezarat-e Keshvar, Daftar-e Omur-e Ejtemai [Ministry of Interior, Office of Social Affairs], 1367/1989.

⁴⁷ The full text of the law is available on the official website of the Iranian Parliament (*Majles*): Majles-e Shura-ye Eslami. 2000. *Qanun-e Tashkilat va vazayef-e Shuraha-ye Amuzesh va Parvaresh dar Ostanha, Shabristanha va Mantagheha* [Law on the Organization and Duties of the Councils of Education in Provinces, Counties, and Districts]. Tehran: Majlis-i Shura-yi Islami. <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/135106>.

wise religious education, and promote Islamic unity and rapprochement between Sunni and Shi'i communities.

Operating under the supervision of the Office of the Supreme Leader's Representatives for Sunni Affairs, the council enabled the authorities to exert closer oversight over Sunni clerical education, mosque networks, and religious appointments. The centralization of Sunni religious affairs created growing discontent among Sunni communities from the mid-2000s onward, particularly after the Sheikh al-Islam of Zahedan, Molana Abdolhamid, repeatedly rejected these initiatives. He, along with many other Sunni clerics, viewed state intervention in religious affairs as an attempt to create dependency on the state. In their view, this reflected a broader pattern similar to the experience of Shi'i religious education, which had long become incorporated into state structures with the aim of controlling dominant religious and political discourses through centralized authority. Additionally, in the case of the eastern borderlands, the state's concerns were also linked to the province's transnational religious connections with Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The authorities therefore had a strong interest in monitoring – and potentially influencing – Sunni students and clerics who entered Iran to study in Sunni madrasas.

Beyond the supervision of educational content and religious teaching, there was also a significant financial dimension to the state's intervention in Sunni religious affairs. Through financing Sunni religious institutions, the authorities attempted to create a more state-dependent Sunni religious structure. Efforts to salarize Sunni clerics and incorporate them into state-supported religious institutions were widely perceived within Sunni communities as attempts to alter the existing socio-religious dynamics of Sunni Islam in Iran. Iranian Sunnis often emphasized that their historical independence had been maintained through community-based funding mechanisms and traditional *waqf* systems rather than through state support. Consequently, attempts by the state to control these financial mechanisms were viewed by critical Sunni clerics as efforts to undermine their autonomy and historical independence.⁴⁸

While state influence succeeded in reaching certain Sunni communities and institutions – for example in the city of Mashhad – many Sunni institutions

⁴⁸ Habibi Doroh, *Sunni communities*, 155-156.

in places such as Khaf, Taybad, and large parts of Sistan-Baluchistan rejected state funding and sought to preserve their independence. This resistance has continued to generate tensions and challenges between Sunni religious institutions and state authorities up to the present day.⁴⁹

Final discussion: From Ordering to Disordering

In this chapter, it was demonstrated that in the case of Sistan-Baluchistan, “bordering” is not a fixed territorial condition but an ongoing process through which the state continuously attempts to produce order in the peripheral borderland. As discussed in the theoretical section, bordering involves the constant reworking of social and spatial relations through different mechanisms of control and regulation. In the case of Sistan-Baluchistan, the bordering process has taken shape through economic regulation, securitized governance, and intervention in religious affairs. Through the various practices discussed in this chapter, it becomes evident that the Iranian state has continuously attempted to transform the borderland into a governable and administratively manageable space. In this regard, the state seeks to regulate mobility, control local authority structures, and shape acceptable forms of economic and religious activity.

Despite these extensive and costly efforts to produce a particular form of order, state intervention has simultaneously generated new forms of disorder. The increasing involvement of security institutions in the borderland contributed to the securitization of economic activities, the expansion of informal economies, and growing tensions between local communities and state authorities. Indeed, the growing dominance of a security-oriented model of governance reinforced perceptions of exclusion, marginalization, and distrust toward the state. Consequently, state intervention strengthened resistance among local religious and social networks seeking to preserve their

⁴⁹ For a broader discussion on the politics of religious education in the Middle East, see: Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998; Mirjam Künkler, “The Bureaucratization of Religion in Southeast Asia: Expanding or Restricting Religious Freedom?” *Journal of Law and Religion*, 33(2), 2018, 192-197; Mirjam Künkler, “The Bureaucratization of Religious Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” *Regulating Religion in Asia: Norms, Modes, and Challenges*, edited by Jaclyn L. Neo, Arif A. Jamal, and Daniel P. S. Goh, 187-206, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

identity and autonomy. This produced a contested borderland dynamic in which the relationship between centre and periphery is continuously challenged and renegotiated through the interaction and competition between actors from the centre and local actors in the periphery.

Finally, it is important to note that these dynamics should not be understood merely as temporary outcomes of the policies of a particular government. Rather, they reflect deeper structural characteristics of the formation of the modern Iranian state itself. Whether under the Pahlavi state or the Islamic Republic, the governance of peripheral regions such as Sistan-Baluchistan has consistently been shaped through highly centralized and security-oriented understandings of centre-periphery relations. In this sense, the tensions visible in Sistan-Baluchistan are not simply local or contemporary phenomena, but manifestations of broader structural patterns embedded in the political and territorial foundations of modern Iran.