

Survey Zoroastrians: Online Religious Identification in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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This article contributes to the internationalization of survey methodology by discussing a case from a totalitarian state, the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 2020, GAMAAN (The Group for Measuring and Analyzing Attitudes in Iran) conducted an online survey on religion. The survey had 50,000 participants, around 90 percent of whom lived in Iran. This article discusses the result that, after weighting, 8 percent identified as Zoroastrian—many times the number of Zoroastrians as recorded by scholarship on Iranian Zoroastrianism. We dub this phenomenon “Survey Zoroastrianism” and offer an explanation for this finding. After describing the position of Zoroastrianism in modern Iran and adding two further online surveys conducted by GAMAAN in 2022, we discuss the Survey Zoroastrians’ demographics and their religious and political views. The analysis shows that participating in surveys beyond the government’s control provided affordances for performing alternative identity aspirations tied to notions of nationalism and civilizational heritage.

Keywords: Iran, survey, religious diversity, Zoroastrians, heritage, nationalism, secularism.

INTRODUCTION

From June 6 to 21, 2020, GAMAAN (The Group for Measuring and Analyzing Attitudes in Iran) conducted a methodologically innovative online survey on “Iranians’ attitudes toward religion.”¹ The survey had 50,000 participants, around 90 percent of whom lived in Iran. Refining the raw sample and using cell weighting for five (interlocked) demographic variables and one political variable—which candidate people voted for in the 2017 presidential elections—yielded an

Note: The raw data used for this research can be shared with researchers under a confidentiality and collaborative agreement with GAMAAN.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Dr. Ladan Boroumand for supporting and helping to carry out GAMAAN’s 2020 religion survey, and all who since then joined to assist in sampling. The first version of this article was presented in a conference at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2022, made possible by a KNAW Early Career Partnership. We also extend our gratitude to the journal editor and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and for thinking along, and to Kirsten Janene-Nelson for copyediting.

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¹“GAMAAN,” or the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (*gurūh-i mutālī’āt-i afkārsanjī-i īrānīān*), is an acronym for the Persian word *gamān*, meaning “opinion” as well as “estimation.” The group is registered as a nonprofit research foundation in the Netherlands.

Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (2023) 0(0):1–22

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effective sample size of 1911 (Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2020a, 2020b). Some of the noteworthy findings of this survey are as follows: 47 percent of the population reported having lost their religion, around 60 percent reported they do not pray, 68 percent claimed that religious prescriptions should be excluded from state legislation (even if believers hold a parliamentary majority), and 71 percent claimed that religious institutions should be responsible for their own funding.

These findings flaunt stereotypical notions about Iranian society. They help explain the revolutionary sentiments that erupted in September 2022, with protestors openly calling for overthrowing the Islamic Republic. GAMAAN's findings and the events unfolding in Iran are in stark contrast with the religious and conservative image of Iran shown by the Pew Research Center (2013), World Values Survey (2020), and Gallup (Reinhart and Loschky 2021), whose data collection modes of face-to-face and telephone surveying fail to guarantee (a feeling of) anonymity—which is increasingly recognized as a prerequisite when researching politically sensitive questions in an authoritarian context (Kalinin 2016; Robinson and Tannenberg 2019). In other words, survey modes affect what political scientist Timur Kuran (1997) calls “preference falsification,” the fact that participants misrepresent their real opinions in countries like Iran where the authorities exert severe social pressures and frighten the population with threats of imprisonment, torture, and execution.

This article discusses one noteworthy finding of this survey, namely, one aspect of the overall demographic distribution of self-proclaimed religious adherence: while 32 percent of the population self-identified as Shia Muslim, around 9 percent self-identified as Atheist (*ātiʾst*, *khudānābāvar*), 8 percent as Zoroastrian (*zartushī*), 7 percent as Spiritual (*maʿnaviyyat-girā*), 6 percent as Agnostic (*nadānam-girā*), and 5 percent as Sunni Muslim.² Others stated that they identify with Sufi mysticism (*irfān-girā*, *taṣavuf*; 3 percent), Humanism (*insāniyat-girā*; 3 percent), Christianity (1.5 percent), the Baha'i faith (0.5 percent), Judaism (0.1 percent), and Buddhism (less than 0.1 percent; participants had to manually enter the choice for Buddhism). Around 22 percent identified with None (*hīchkudām*). As for the majority responses, only one-third of the population reported a Shia identity—even though Twelver Shiism has been declared the state's official religion in Article 12 of the Constitution; the second-largest group are the Nones; and the third-largest are Atheists. The feature we are focusing on is the self-identification as Zoroastrian, which was the second most popular religious option.

The target population of this survey was literate Iranian residents no younger than 20 years old. As the 2016 National Population and Housing Census data show, this population accounts for 47 million Iranians. If 8 percent of this population defines their religious identity as Zoroastrian, that amounts to almost 4 million people. That is more than hundredfold the number of Zoroastrians recorded by scholarship on contemporary Iranian Zoroastrianism (Foltz 2011; Fozi, 2014, 2022; Green 2000; Kestenberg Amighi 2016; Stausberg, 2012, 2015; Stewart, 2016, 2018, 2020; also compare with Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2021). We dub this numerical inflation as recorded by GAMAAN “Survey Zoroastrianism.” The hypothesis is that these millions of people are not “closeted Zoroastrians” who have come out of their hiding places, nor people intending to convert to Zoroastrianism, but participating in the anonymous survey, free from scrutiny by the government, gave participants an unprecedented opportunity of making a choice among different religious identities included in the questionnaire. In contrast, contemporary surveys conducted by the World Values Survey, using face-to-face interviews, as well as the Islamic Republic's census, used by the Pew Research Center to estimate the country's changing religious demographics, did not capture the same phenomenon; online research can reveal a different, otherwise overlooked reality of Iranian performances of religious self-identifications. This raises the question: what do we know about these people, and why do they identify as Zoroastrians?

We begin by describing the historical background of Zoroastrianism from the 18th century till the Pahlavi dynasty in the 20th century, a period in which the religion became recast in

²“Atheist” and other selected options are capitalized to indicate that these are (self-)identifications that encompass world-views, similar to “Christian” and “Muslim.”

modern fashion as a world religion and in service of Iran's nationalism. We then move on to Zoroastrianism under the Islamic Republic and analyze the (previously unpublished) results of the 2020 survey as well as two surveys conducted in 2022, also by GAMAAN, on Iranians' attitudes toward political systems (Maleki 2022) and the 2022 nationwide revolutionary protests (Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2023).

The emergence of Survey Zoroastrians is part of the larger secularization and religious transformation process that has been observed by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists who study contemporary Iran (e.g., Hashemi 2018; Kazemipur 2022; Loeffler 2022; Pargoo 2021). Unfortunately, the lack of credible quantitative data perpetuates a static image of the country. Casanova's first example on the first page of his acclaimed *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994) cited the Islamic Revolution as upsetting the understanding of secularization as a linear process. However, in his most recent account of global secular and religious dynamics (2019), Iran is absent. Other sociologists such as Kurzman have cited the unchanging figures of a nearly totally Muslim society (2004:53), confirmed again by the World Values Survey in 2020, while textbooks such as Davie's *Sociology of Religion* (2007) highlight the Islamic Revolution without commenting on the effects of theocratic governance on the population's religiosity. It would appear, then, as if no religious changes had occurred at all in these many tumultuous years. That is why, despite progress in understanding how some societies' secularization and religious transformation may suddenly accelerate (Inglehart 2021; Kasselstrand, Zuckerman, and Cragun 2023), the sociologist Jörg Stolz remarked in his 2019 presidential address to the International Society for the Sociology of Religion: "An obvious shortcoming is that much of our quantitative data are relatively recent and predominantly concerned with Western societies and the Christian religion. We clearly still lack a model that can be applied across the world, as becomes evident when we look, for example, at developments in countries with Muslim majorities" (Stolz 2020:300).

The GAMAAN studies provide a new source of data, and our analysis of Survey Zoroastrians in this article presents an alternative image of Iran. The results show that they are divided on which political system, a constitutional monarchy or a secular republic, is to be preferred for Iran's future. The results also shed light on the Survey Zoroastrians' demographics and how anonymous, online sampling was conducive to participants' performance of their religious identity. At first sight, the phenomenon of Survey Zoroastrians may appear unexpected. If we take into consideration the authoritarian plus theocratic context—which can be described as totalitarian (because it, as the difference is often understood, not only requires blind submission but also aims at total control over the lives of its citizens, in most of its aspects³)—and therefore the challenges of surveying in Iran, the numbers reveal a societal process in which large swaths of the population are alienated from their enforced, formal identity as Muslims. In this context, some imagine Zoroastrianism as civilizational heritage⁴ that offers an alternative. To self-identify as Zoroastrian is to say one is not whom the state wants one to be.

RECASTING MODERN ZOROASTRIANISM

In academic scholarship and popular discourses alike, Zoroastrianism is often invoked as one of the oldest continuous living traditions of humankind. The name "Zoroastrianism" is derived

³Chehabi (2001) argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran was a "stillborn totalitarianism," but in its outcome corresponds to the ideal type of authoritarianism more than that of totalitarianism. This is not the place for a political science discussion, but we may note that Chehabi's article was published during the reign of a "reformist" president; the events following the recent revolutionary protests have shown a different face of the regime. Another way of conceptualizing the Islamic Republic, if it is not to be considered totalitarian in the strictest sense of the term, is that it responds to crises with "totalitarian solutions" (Arendt [1951] 2004:592).

⁴Our preference for "civilizational heritage" instead of the more common "cultural heritage" reflects emic language use: the Persian word *farhang* (culture) is often used in everyday speech, but *tamaddun* (civilization) is used more specifically when speaking about the pre-Islamic and Zoroastrian past. Our terminological choice also indicates a difference to other cultural contexts (like Western Europe and China) where religion has been categorized and dealt with as cultural heritage.

from that of a male individual—Zoroaster, a Greek variant of the ancient Iranian Zaratuštra—who plays a central role in the revelatory events recounted in ancient and middle Iranian religious sources. Starting with the oldest mantric poetry, the *Gāthā* (“songs”), Zaratuštra appears as the interlocutor of the wise, powerful, and benevolent supreme deity Āhūrā Mazda. In one reading of this scheme, Zoroastrianism is akin to Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism as a religion with a founder figure and a potentially universal message. Accordingly, it became a candidate for inclusion in the category of so-called world religions (see also Masuzawa 2005:2, 3, 44–46, 145, 215, 266), and Zoroastrian representatives attended the 1893 World Parliament of Religions (Lüddeckens 2002).

This was an ambitious claim for what at that time was a small religious group of probably no more than 110,000 adherents. At the time of the World Parliament of Religions, the overwhelming number of Zoroastrians were living in India. Known as the Parsis, the Indian Zoroastrians narrated their history as one of the successful forced emigration from Iran to the western shores of India. During the 19th century, in colonial India, the Parsis prided themselves of considerable economic, educational, and social progress and political influence, especially in the rapidly growing city of Mumbai.

Meanwhile in Iran, in the centuries from the fall of the Sasanian dynasty in 651 CE to the Mongol conquest in the early 13th century, Zoroastrianism had lost its former preeminence and became a subordinate minority religion. Zoroastrians were not exempt from the harshness of life faced by the majority of the population in 19th-century Iran. In addition, as a religious minority they were also subject to a rude regime of discrimination, harassment, humiliation, and stigmatization. Over the centuries, the number of Zoroastrians had reduced to less than 10,000; moreover, from a religion with a variety of regional and local traditions, in geographical terms Zoroastrianism was reduced to the desert cities of Yazd and Kerman and surrounding villages (Stausberg 2002a:365).

Starting in the late 18th century, Iranian Zoroastrians began fleeing their homeland to seek refuge among the Parsis in India. As a result, the Parsis learned of the plight of their coreligionists back in Iran. To combat the cause of their emigration, some Parsis set up a society to ameliorate the conditions of the Iranian Zoroastrians; spearheaded by its emissary to Iran, Manekji Limji Hataria, this resulted in coordinated activities, which included the spread of education and the reorganization of the structures within the Zoroastrian communities. His efforts contributed to setting in motion a process that abolished the much-hated poll-tax and provided basic civil liberties, protection, and stability to the Zoroastrians—in addition to less poverty and, for some, even wealth, some of which was redistributed in the form of charity.

In the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution (1906), Zoroastrians were the first non-Muslim religious community to elect their own representative to the parliament (*majlis*), whereby they obtained a minimal kind of political recognition. The rule of the Pahlavi kings (1925–79), though far from being a golden era, brought unprecedented opportunities for Zoroastrians. This is also reflected in the two parameters mentioned above: in the 1970s, the number of Zoroastrians almost tripled, to some 25,000 adherents, and their geographical spread widened to different parts of the country; and from the 1960s onward, the greatest share of the Zoroastrian population was to be found in the capital Tehran (Stausberg 2002b:240), where they suffered less oppression than they had in Yazd. Likewise, the traditional settlement areas were transformed by processes of urbanization; villages were abandoned or lost vitality, and people shifted from agriculture to middle-class professions.

Religion did not remain aloof to these changes. Most visibly, the traditional funerary system—whereby corpses were exposed to the sun and scavengers (most effectively vultures) in walled structures (*dakhmah*) with subsidiary buildings (*khiylah*)—was replaced by burial and cemeteries, first in Tehran but eventually everywhere. This was just one element of a system of purity rules that had previously governed religious life but was gradually destabilized. In addition, menstruation rules that had forced women to isolate themselves from social life

during their periods were relaxed (Stausberg 2002b:418–20). Rituals were reconfigured (Rose 2011:186), shortened and simplified, or discontinued, and the hereditary priesthood became a part-time occupation—with people from nonpriestly families taking over most ritual tasks (Stausberg 2004). From a system of locally embedded ritual practices of mainly illiterate people, a major number of whom lived in villages, Zoroastrianism was gradually transformed into a great tradition that emphasizes individual choice, ethics, freedom, rationality, scripture, and discursive practice such as speeches and symbolism (Stausberg 2002b)—even though this transformation never uprooted elements of practice such as devotion to shrines and pilgrimages, participation in festivals, and communication with ancestral spirits. Indeed, a part of a main fire-temple in the city of Yazd was made accessible to the public and became a tourist attraction of national renown.

ZOROASTRIANISM IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The Islamic Republic reversed the process of legal and sociopolitical recognition and introduced discriminatory rules so that “Zoroastrians have been subordinated, segregated, and controlled” (Kesterberg Amighi 2022:348). Yet, Zoroastrianism remains an officially recognized minority religion, and the community still elects its own representative to the parliament (with nominations to be approved by the Guardian Council). Contrary to the atmosphere in the Pahlavi period, in this new dispensation religion was no longer a topic one could afford to ignore. The introduction of compulsory religious education (also for religious minorities to be instructed in their respective religions), and the importance of community infrastructures as social arenas and spaces for leisure activities, have tied many Zoroastrians closer to their religious institutions and identities (see also Kesterberg Amighi 2022:394f, 400). The modernist Zoroastrian religious philosophy of freedom and individual choice challenges not only folk or priestly traditions but also the political theocracy, in which the religious authorities impose norms and rules on society with the force of the law.

In addition to inner-community dissent, widespread emigration—especially of young people seeking to build a future in greener pastures—is a potentially destabilizing factor for the future of the Zoroastrian communities (Kesterberg Amighi 2022:428–33). While many young, educated Iranians wish to emigrate, this prospect is more accessible for religious minorities, including Zoroastrians. Given the political, economic, social, and economic constraints felt by many Iranians, life in the Islamic Republic is a challenge for most Zoroastrians, who never desired to live in such a political system. Yet, given their pre-Islamic ancestries, their use of Iranian languages in their ritual traditions, and the centrality of the notions of Iran and Iranian kingship and kinship in some of their religious narratives, many Zoroastrians consider themselves intimately tied to the country of Iran (see also Niechciał, 2018, 2019). While this attachment does not ultimately prevent people from migrating, the connection to Iran has a strong discursive and emotional significance among Zoroastrians—among both those who remain in Iran and those who have left the country.

There are no reliable figures available on the number of Zoroastrians—in the sense of members of the historical Zoroastrian communities—living in contemporary Iran. The Zoroastrian institutions in Iran are hesitant to go public with such figures, perhaps in part out of fear that reporting too-low numbers could undermine their right of electing a representative to parliament. In the early decades of the Islamic Republic, official censuses revealed unexpected high figures; in 1986 and 1996, the national censuses reported 90,500 and 157,000 Zoroastrians, respectively. These were three or four times the number from the 1970s, even though many Zoroastrians had left the country. The figures were soon corrected, and the officially revised figure was 27,920 for 1996, which seemed more trustworthy (Choksy 2006:171). One hypothesis to explain the exceptionally high numbers is that adherents of the Baha’i faith had “declared themselves as Zoroastrians to the Iranian government’s census takers” (Choksy 2006:171) to avoid persecution. This is indeed

a possibility. Another one is to read these responses as precursors of the response behavior to the GAMAAN surveys from 2020 and 2022 discussed in this article—namely, as an expression of political discontent and worldview dissent. Estimates of the current Zoroastrian population of Iran provided by recent scholarship point to figures at around 11,000 to 25,000 (see, e.g., Foltz 2011:73 [“less than 20,000”]; Fozi 2014:14, and Fozi 2022:85 [“about 14,000 to 25,271”]; Stausberg 2015:187 [“less than 20,000”]; Niechciał 2020:10 [“15,000”]; Kestenberg Amighi 2022:346 [“approximately 11,000”]).

Even though the Iranian population has increased dramatically since the revolution—it has more than doubled—this process has left Zoroastrian communities largely unaffected. This is in part because—similar to the Parsis in India, and similar to the current population in Iran—Iranian Zoroastrians have low birth rates; in addition, the large-scale emigration of young people has decreased both population and reproductive capacity. Last but not least, in case of marriages with a Muslim, legislation in the Iranian Republic forces the Zoroastrian partner to renounce her or his religion and to adopt Islam (Foltz 2011:81–82). It is therefore highly unlikely that the membership in historical Zoroastrian communities has increased from the prerevolutionary levels; it is even questionable whether it has remained at that level.

ZOROASTRIANISM AS CIVILIZATIONAL HERITAGE AND HYPOTHETICAL ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOUS OPTION

Beyond the ethnic and historical Zoroastrian communities, the people traditionally living and professing this religion that we have discussed so far—the emergence of modern nationalism assigned a new discursive-ideological-imagined place to Zoroastrianism.

In the Qajar (1789–1925) and Pahlavi (1925–79) periods, as a result of Iranian-European and Iranian-Indian interactions (Marashi 2020; Zia-Ebrahimi 2016), a new notion of Iran took ground. The pre-Islamic history of Iran was narrated—rediscovered or constructed—as a temporal regime that, on the one hand, became disconnected from the parameters of Islamic religious historiography and, on the other, served as both an imagined point of comparison with the present and a vision for the future. And though Manekji, the Parsi emissary mentioned earlier, was remotely involved in the creation of this discourse—which originated in the period from 1860 to 1890 (while Manekji was in Iran)—Zoroastrians were not its creators. Its inventors were the Caucasian writer Mirza Fath‘ali Akhundzadeh, who was born in what is today called Azerbaijan and who worked for the Tsarit viceroyalty in Tblisi, and his disciple Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, a religious dissident and political opponent of the Qajars who had some Zoroastrian ancestry (Stausberg 2002b:200; Zia-Ebrahimi 2016:54).

Zia-Ebrahimi has coined the term “dislocative nationalism” for the dominant form of historiographical ideology that sees Iran as a “primordial nation” that has had a continued existence of several thousand years. This ideology deems that Iranians are part of a presumed Aryan race, and the grandeur and glory of these people is to be found in the pre-Islamic kingdoms—whereas its present state of decadence is blamed both on the Arab invasion and on Islam, the religion Arabs supposedly imposed on the Iranians (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016:2). Zia-Ebrahimi calls this narrative ideology “dislocative” because it dislodges “the Iranian nation from its empirical reality as a majority-Muslim society situated—broadly—in the ‘East’” (p. 5). Instead, the Aryan myth ties Iran to the “West.” Zia-Ebrahimi’s spatial metaphor, which seems to operate with an essentialist division between West and East, overshadows the temporal dimension of Iranian nationalism: the disembedding is also a temporal strategy, because the point of reference shifts to the remote past; it is a politics of nostalgia, a romantic longing of an imagined past, the remnants of which can be filled anachronistically with desired outcomes. A well-known example is the Cyrus Cylinder, found by a British expedition in 1879 in the ruins of Babylon. This object bears an incomplete inscription in the Akkadian language in which Cyrus is praised as a benevolent king protected by

Marduk after the conquest of the neo-Babylonian empire. The Cyrus Cylinder has been hailed by Iranians of diverse backgrounds as the first declaration of human rights; that both representatives of the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic have made this anachronistic claim testifies to the enduring strength of Iranian nationalism (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016:73).

The anti-Arabic rhetoric of this dominant strand of Iranian nationalist discourse can be read as either anti-Sunnite or anti-Islamic. In the former reading, the Shia is considered to be the correct and real party of Islam—and, note, this happens to be Iranian Islam, as opposed to the Arabic Sunnah. This construction is potentially compatible with the state ideology of the Islamic Republic. The primacy of Shia Islam in the political system results in discrimination of the country's substantial Sunni minority—Sunnis are not even allowed to have a purpose-built mosque in the capital! And since some ethnic minorities are predominantly Sunni, they constitute a double minority (Elling 2013:19). On the latter reading of anti-Arabic rhetoric, Islam is rejected as a foreign imposition that was spread by means of violence. This rhetoric, of course, is incompatible with the state ideology; by contrast, it enjoys popularity among critics of the regime. The position of Zoroastrianism in this discourse is similarly unhistorical as the reference to pre-Islamic Iran. It is valued but in disembodied form; its position is a symbolic one. The discourse is pro-Zoroastrian, but this affects Zoroastrians as a historical community only to a little degree. The quest for authenticity and identity surpasses source-critical historical awareness.

The late 19th-century founders of the discourse had little knowledge about Zoroastrian history and living Zoroastrianism. Though Iranian studies have blossomed in Europe since the second half of the 19th century, it was not until much later that Iranian studies (in the sense of the study of pre-Islamic Iranian cultures, history, languages, and religions) took ground as an academic discipline. A leading figure in this development was Ebrahim Purdavud (1885–1968), who held the first chair of Iranian studies at the University of Tehran (inaugurated in 1934). Purdavud obtained his scholarly training in Paris and Berlin. From 1933 to 1934 he traveled to India, where he was invited by Parsi beneficiaries to study and work with Parsi scholar priests. It was among the Parsis of India—and not among Iranian Zoroastrians—that he became acquainted with Zoroastrianism as a living religion with priestly rituals. The encouragement and financial and logistical support of his wealthy Parsi sponsors in part enabled Purdavud to launch the series of translations of the main Avestan texts in New Persian that made these ancient sources first accessible to Persian audiences—Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians alike (Stausberg 2002b:222–26; Marashi 2020). During his tenure at the University of Tehran until he retired in 1964, Purdavud trained a circle of devoted students who continued this work of intellectual popularization of Zoroastrian scriptures and thinking.

Purdavud added an academic-orientalist strand to the ideology of nationalism. The fact that he advocated for terminating the traditional compulsory Arabic instruction earned him death threats in the last years of his life (Marashi 2020:287). When he passed away in 1968, the political nationalism of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi was approaching its hybrid climax. In addition to his academic tenure, Purdavud was also a nationalist activist and poet. Some of his works of poetry can be read as nostalgic glorification of pre-Islamic Iran; some utilize Zoroastrian motives and even praise Zoroastrianism as a religion (Stausberg 2002b:206–8). Yet, he did not entertain connections with the Zoroastrian communities of Iran. He never formally converted, nor did he show any desire to be accepted as a Zoroastrian (Stausberg 2002b:222). His Zoroastrianism was the product of learned literary-pseudohistorical imagination. In Marashi's words: "For Purdavud, as for the Iranian nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s, the Zoroastrian revival was always more about distinguishing the real and authentic Iranian culture from the layers of inauthentic cultural accretions that Iran's national heritage had acquired over the long duration of its history. It was this nationalist logic of distinguishing the authentic from the inauthentic that came to define the new understanding of Iran's Zoroastrian heritage for the Iranian nationalist intellectuals of Purdavud's generation" (Marashi 2020:232).

Similarly, even though some of the maneuvers of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi—such as the pompous celebrations of the 2500th anniversary of monarchy in Iran (in 1971) and the change from the Islamic to an Imperial calendrical era (in 1976)—provoked outrage and were rumored to testify to his alleged affinities with Zoroastrianism, there is no evidence of the Shah's desire to embrace this religion. Yet, there were occasional conversions to Zoroastrianism in the Pahlavi period (Kestenberg Amighi 1990:230), and these were mostly “tacitly permitted” (Choksy 2006:157). Conversions to Zoroastrianism, however, never reached the scale of becoming a mass movement, and not all Zoroastrians were in favor of accepting converts (Kestenberg Amighi 1990:241).

In books published in connection with Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's adoption of the pseudo-ancient Iranian title *Ārīāmīhr* (“Light/Sun of the Aryans”), the Aryan roots of Iran were emphasized. These books, which set out the ideological foundations of his reign, expressed the aim of overthrowing the Muslim clerics and their hegemonic interpretation of the religion, all the while Zoroaster was “presented as one of the main pillars of Iranian identity” (Shakibi 2013:122). Whereas the Pahlavi regime in an unprecedented manner drew on symbolism from pre-Islamic Iran—indexically tied to Zoroastrianism (even though there were other religious traditions in pre-Islamic culture!)—this discourse of dislocative nostalgia was neither invented nor owned by the regime. Today, references to pre-Islamic Iran that serve as an ideological alternative to the Islamic Republic can imply a royalist attitude. Yet, we will see below that many of those who view Zoroastrianism as a national Iranian religion say they prefer a secular republic to a constitutional monarchy.

Following the Islamic Revolution, though Iranian nationalism was toned down, it never became obsolete, and already since the mid-1990s Iranian presidents have expressed an interest in and sympathy for pre-Islamic Iranian civilization or even a kind of sanitized Zoroastrianism (see Kestenberg Amighi 2022:350 [Rafsanjani], 352f [Khatami], 361–64 [Ahmadinejad], 367 [Rouhani]). This rhetoric, however, did not translate into lasting improvements for Zoroastrians. For the period since Ahmadinejad, Kestenberg Amighi speaks of “competitive nationalisms and cultural repression” (2022:371). Beyond governmental rhetoric, there is a significant part of the population for which references to pre-Islamic civilization constitute important political or cultural resources of their identities (2022:384f).

For example, in 2016 a group of mostly young Iranians made a sort of pilgrimage to Pasargadae, the final resting place of Cyrus the Great (6th century BC). When they reached Cyrus's tomb, protestors chanted “Iran is our country, Cyrus is our father” and the Supreme Leader of the state was likened to Ahriman, the leader of evil forces in Zoroastrianism (Kestenberg Amighi 2022:372; see also Reuters Staff 2016, Figure 1). The Islamic Republic responded to this event, which caught international media attention, by denouncing their celebration of this unofficial “Cyrus Day” (October 28). This, however, did nothing to deter the protestors from spreading their Persian-nationalist messages online. The Cyrus Day celebrations were subsequently banned. This is an example of staging a sort of veneration for ancient Iranian kingship as a political alternative to Islamicist theocracy. But there is also a predominantly cultural-symbolic variety of performing adherence to ancient Iran that finds its expression in private practices such as prayers around a ceremonial fire (a symbol of the Zoroastrian faith) and “Aryan wedding ceremonies” (*‘aqd-i āriāyī*), where references to God are made using the pre-Islamic word “*Yazdān*” instead of “Allah.” Others, inside Iran and in diaspora, wear a golden necklace with a symbolic Faravahar pendant, or decorate their house with an image of the Zoroastrian moral maxim “good thoughts, good words, good deeds.”⁵ Further examples of expressing sympathies for Zoroastrianism include selecting Persian baby names instead of Islamic ones, honoring feasts going back to pre-Islamic times,

⁵At the time of writing the first draft of this article (January 23, 2022), a glance at webshops such as digikala.com and cafehkhareed.com showed that the Faravahar pendant is among the most sold products, together with crucifix and yin-and-yang pendants.

Figure 1

Image circulating online of Iranians chanting at the Pasargadae, the tomb of Cyrus the Great, October 28, 2016. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



using Persian words that indicate a step away from Arabic-Islamic influences, and getting tattoos with Zoroastrian symbols. (Note that tattoos are forbidden according to orthodox interpretations of Islam—and nor are they common in Zoroastrianism, either.) There is a great interest in sharing certain Zoroastrian celebrations, but the government has repeatedly put restrictions on participation by non-Zoroastrians. For instance, access to the mountain shrine of Pīr-i Sabz is restricted during the annual pilgrimage festivities, and not all Zoroastrians are in favor of pulling down all social boundaries.

THE SURVEY ZOROASTRIANS

GAMAAN's 2020 survey findings corroborate the view of contemporary Zoroastrian identity as being more of a nationalist counteridentity—standing in opposition to the Islamic Republic and as one of several alternatives to Islam—than an adherence to Zoroastrianism as a living religion (see also Abdolmohammadi 2015). It should be noted that even those who convert to Christianity retain “Iranian” interpretations of their faith—for example, by naming a church in diaspora after Cyrus the Great. Moreover, Iranians, many of whom do not identify as religious, flock to ancient sites deemed part of their national heritage, such as Persepolis or the tomb of poet Ferdowsi.

GAMAAN's survey did not target Zoroastrian or nationalist groups. It employed multiple-chain referral sampling—meaning, the survey is spread through numerous snowballs and monitored live to determine which demographic groups are missing so as to target them as well, ensuring as diverse a sample as possible. The survey relied on and benefited from the high on-line participation of diverse groups in society and the recent exponential growth of the Internet. Analyzing GAMAAN's previous large-scale surveys, we identified the groups with the least

participation—and then actively targeted them via dozens of digital channels. These included ethnic and religious minorities such as Arab and Kurdish groups and Sufi and Baha'i groups. In this survey, pro-regime Shia channels were targeted to spread the survey link among their followers. This latter strategy proved decisive and was based on the Pew Research Center's methodological research—showing that, in weighting the data for online opt-in surveys, having participants of diverse political orientations can affect the outcome's validity (Mercer, Lau, and Kennedy 2018). Furthermore, we reached mass audiences via the survey being shared on Instagram pages and Telegram channels, some of which had several million followers.

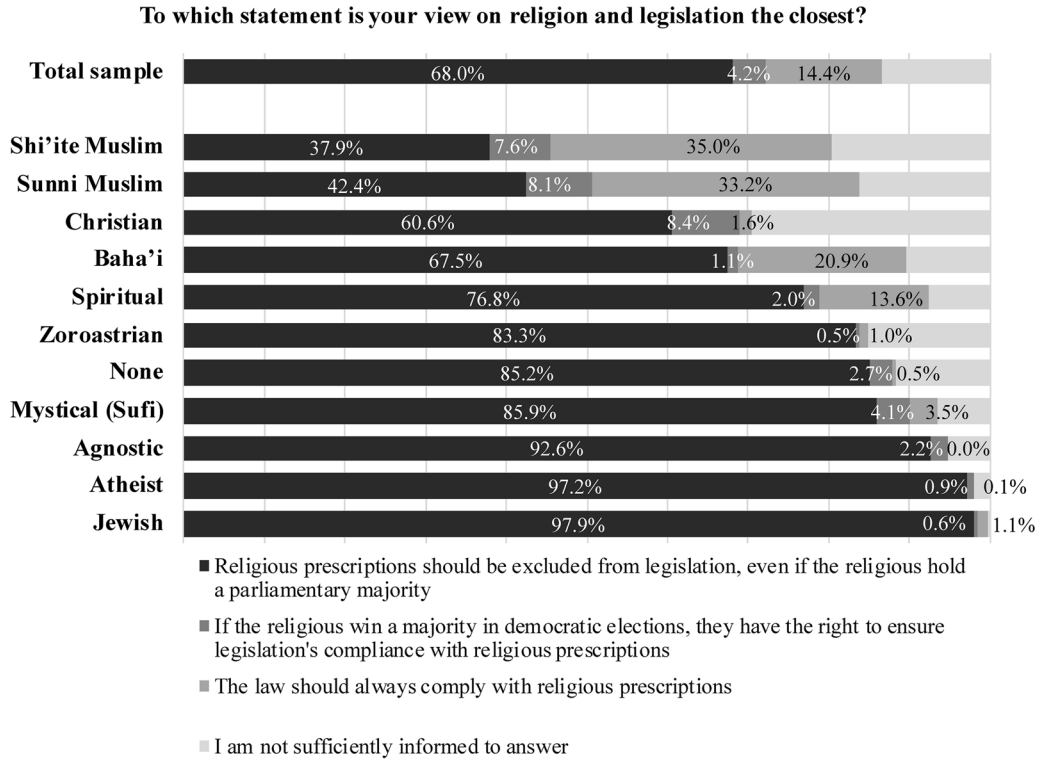
After the data were cleaned, a sample of almost 40,000 Iranians living in Iran was extracted, 2537 of whom identified as Zoroastrian. The sample was weighted and balanced to the target population of literate Iranians aged 20 and older using five demographic variables and voting behavior in the 2017 presidential elections (for the sample characteristics, see Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2020a; for an account of GAMAAN's rationale and reception in Iran and internationally, see Nayeri 2022).

The weighted results showed that around 8 percent identified as Zoroastrian. As pointed out above, this would put the figure of Zoroastrian more than hundredfold the number recorded in recent scholarship. The Survey Zoroastrians' demographics show that their distribution is similar to the literate Iranian population as a whole: about 20 percent of Survey Zoroastrians received higher education versus 27 percent of Shia Muslims (7973 individuals in the refined sample), and 36 percent of Atheists (5961 individuals in the refined sample). Survey Zoroastrians' average age is unremarkable: 25 percent between 20 and 29 years old, 53 percent between 30 and 49 years old, and 22 percent above 50 years old—which resembles the total population. A noteworthy demographic feature is that 60 percent of the Survey Zoroastrians are male. Although weighting may affect these results, the large sample of Survey Zoroastrians indicates that this identification may be biased toward a masculine perspective. We conjecture that such a masculine bias matches Iranian nationalist attitudes—including heroic role models narrated in Ferdowsi's epos—and nostalgia for lost imperial glory. Another remarkable demographic characteristic of Survey Zoroastrians is their being spread evenly across the nation, with 78 percent reporting to live in urban areas and 22 percent in rural areas (around 21 percent of Iran's literate population live in rural areas).

So far we have established that Survey Zoroastrians are often male, their age and urban-rural distribution resembles the general population, and they are less educated compared with other worldview and religious groups. Now let us look closer at the Survey Zoroastrians' reported religious beliefs and practices. Since we do not have comparable survey data for people who grew up in Zoroastrian families and were socialized in Zoroastrian communities, it is impossible to say to what extent these findings differ between Survey Zoroastrians and registered members of Zoroastrian communities or their families.

An 87 percent majority of Survey Zoroastrians reported believing in God. This puts them relatively close to the Nones (9863 individuals in the refined sample), 73 percent of whom said they believe in God. Therefore, being unaffiliated with a religion in Iran (as elsewhere) does not exclude believing in a higher power or even a theistic god. We should be careful not to automatically conflate not being affiliated with not being religious (compare with Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson 2007); in the theocratic context of Iran, though, saying one is “nonreligious” is particularly meaningful. We find that Survey Zoroastrians have a religious background but identify less with the concept of religion: 47 percent said they were raised in a family in which members believed in God but were “not religious” (*khudā' bāvar ammā ghayr-i 'mazhabī*); 41 percent described the family environment they were raised in as “religious” (*mazhabī*), and 57 percent described having transitioned in their life from being religious to nonreligious (*az dīn 'dārī bih bī' dīnī risīdah 'am*). Like Nones, Survey Zoroastrians expressed little faith in eschatological and demonological doctrines: 93 percent reported not believing in heaven and hell; 82 percent reported not believing in life after death; 94 percent reported not believing in the coming of a Messiah (*zūhūr-i munjī-i basharīyyat*); and 92 percent reported not believing in genies or *jinn*.

Figure 2
 Preferences for political secularism by religious identity, 2020.GAMAAN.
 Note: data generated for this article, not published in GAMAAN's reports.



These beliefs impact practices: over 81 percent said they never pray, in comparison with the 100 percent Atheists, 88 percent Nones, 59 percent Spirituals, and 21 percent of Shia Muslims who reported they never pray. Also telling is the fact that Survey Zoroastrians reported much higher rates of alcohol consumption than do Sunni and Shia Muslims. Alcohol has traditionally not been forbidden in Zoroastrian texts and is consumed in both festive and social gatherings, but there are also non- and anti-alcoholic attitudes to be found among Zoroastrians. Those who identified broadly as Sufi reported about three times higher occasional drinking than Sunni and Shia Muslims—around 30 percent—but this is still significantly less than Zoroastrians and Atheists, of whom about 50 percent said they enjoy an occasional drink. Note that a large number of people said they do not drink because they have no access to alcohol, due to the government's enforced alcohol temperance. These numbers point to a social reality and symbolic meaning of (not) drinking, which mediates religious identities in Iran (Tamimi Arab 2022).

Overall, Zoroastrians (as well as other non-Islamic groups) exhibited much less trust in the political system than Shia Muslims do: 40 percent of the Survey Zoroastrians said they did not vote in the 2017 presidential elections, similar to the 47 percent Atheists and 40 percent Nones who did not vote—whereas only 10 percent of Shia Muslims said they did not vote. The findings also illuminate a substantial discrepancy between Shia and Sunni Muslims and all other groups' views on religion's establishment in the state. An 83 percent majority of Survey Zoroastrians reported believing that religious prescriptions should be excluded from legislation, even if the religious hold a parliamentary majority (see Figure 2). These numbers indicate that only Shia and Sunni groups reported significant support for basic political principles of the Islamic Republic—and even this explicit support is in the minority (35 percent and 33 percent, respectively); of the Sufis,

who constituted a third Muslim category, 85 percent dissented from political theocracy. Thus, both Survey Zoroastrians and Sufis fall between the more radical stance Atheists (97 percent) and the more moderate Christians (61 percent). The reader should be cautioned, however, that small groups around or below 1 percent, like Christians and Jews, are much more likely to be misleadingly affected by our weighting.

The view in favor of disestablishment or political secularism translates into opposition to the compulsory hijab, to religious education, and even to the right to proselytize in public. For example, 76 percent of Survey Zoroastrians reported explicitly disagreeing with the compulsory hijab; 21 percent claimed to neither agree nor disagree. In contrast, only 21 percent of Shia Muslims and 27 percent of Sunni Muslims reported disagreeing with the compulsory hijab, while 54 percent and 59 percent claimed to agree. In comparison, 92 percent of Atheists, 82 percent of Nones, and 63 percent of Sufis reported they explicitly disagree with the compulsory hijab. Furthermore, Survey Zoroastrians seem to have conflicting views of religious freedom: 30 percent said that all religious groups should have the right to proselytize in public, while 59 percent said that no religious group should have that right. In comparison, 71 percent of Atheists and 61 percent of Nones reported the belief that public proselytizing should be banned.

These results suggest that these Iranians support a privatized conception of lived religion, both in the sense of understanding religion as a matter of (unsolicited) choice and as a commitment that should preferably be expressed in private domains. In line with this, Survey Zoroastrians may not be keen to officially convert to Zoroastrianism—not only because this would be considered apostasy and therefore in theory result in a death sentence in the present legal framework, but even more so because such official outward acts might not be considered that important.

IDEAL VERSUS FORMAL RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Survey Zoroastrians selected their religion from 13 options: eight major religions, plus an “other” option, a “Spiritual” option, and three nonreligious options of “None,” “Agnostic,” or “Atheist.” The question’s formulation was: “Which of the following options is closer to your beliefs and faith (*bāvar va i’tiqād-i shumā*)?” It was the second question in the survey. Given that the survey was titled “Iranians’ attitudes toward religion,” the survey could be interpreted as being about what it means to be Iranian. Many people thus “performed” their personal and national Zoroastrian identity by ticking that box. Such a survey—conducted at a time when official statistics are unreliable and, in any case, tend to serve the state ideology—prompts people to participate, and participants can express their disaffection and their desire for an alternative Iran by selecting Zoroastrian. Indeed, research on the use of the census in other countries shows that, rather than measuring the distribution of religious identities across populations objectively—in other words, measuring independent of the researchers’ approach and context—the census can be employed by participants to perform their identity:

For Britain, for example, Abby Day has observed that people who were originally ambivalent or hesitant took a firm stance when the census question was read out to them; it was then that “their identity suddenly crystallized” (Day and Lee 2014:346). When the religion question appeared on the census in Britain in 2001, people who otherwise did not appear religious chose to self-identify as “Christian” (Day and Lee 2014:348). . . . Religious identities are informed by many factors and are maybe less stable than one tends to imagine. (Stausberg 2021:467–69)

The most spectacular rise of a census anti-religion was the so-called Jedi Census Phenomenon. Following an email that went viral before the 2001 census in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, more than 500,000 people in these four countries reported “Jedi” as their religious identity, so that Jediism suddenly became one of the largest religions in these countries, particularly in New Zealand. The email was probably a provocation, a joke, or a protest against the use of mandatory checkbox confession of religious identities (Davidsen 2016:380; see also Cusack

2010). Most Census Jediists (as we might call them in analogy to our “Survey Zoroastrians”) were probably unaware of the existence of Jediist networks that had emerged since the 1990s. The two cases are analogous in many ways: (1) in both cases, the emergence of new information technologies (the spread of email and the internet vs. online surveys) have provided new expressive affordances; (2) both cases can be interpreted as forms of soft protest (against mandatory surveys and Christian dominance or state Islam, respectively); (3) in both cases, people opting for these identities probably had limited familiarity with ideas, beliefs, and practices of the respective religions; and (4) in both cases, it is *prima facie* unclear to what extent this professed identity informs their noncensus self-perceptions. Yet, in the Iranian context, Zoroastrianism is an established and traditional religion that every Iranian has heard of, unlike the fiction-based, playful, invented Jediism.

Given critical work on survey methodologies, we expected that the percentage of Iranians who identify as Zoroastrians would be prone to fluctuations that are dependent on survey design and social context—more so than with other groups whose numbers may also vary. However, as both the spectrum of non-Islamic options and the huge difference in belief in God between Zoroastrians and Atheists in the data show, Survey Zoroastrians can be viewed as a cohort that shares a particular set of beliefs, use of symbols, and material culture referring to ancient Iran.

What all non-Islamic groups have in common—and this holds also for a significant proportion of self-identified Muslims—is their use of GAMAAN’s survey as a platform to express both religious and nonreligious sentiments. Given the repressive context of Iran, the meaning of the survey itself is different from surveys in democratic countries such as Great Britain, where much less is at stake for most participants and, more so, where it is much more difficult to recruit participants; in Iran, the opportunity to express one’s opinion publicly yet anonymously, and to see that one’s opinion actually counts, is appreciated as an act of democratic culture.

Providing a full and technical demonstration of the national representativeness and the validity of GAMAAN’s data goes beyond the scope of this article.⁶ Here, our concern is to interpret the gathered data on the Survey Zoroastrians. The results of two more surveys in which participants were asked about either their religion or their personal beliefs suffice to demonstrate that the survey design significantly influences Zoroastrian identification. The first of these additional surveys was conducted from February 17 to February 27, 2022, resulting in a refined sample of 16,850 and, after cell weighting with interlocking variables, an effective sample size of 1498. (See section 3 in Maleki 2022 for detailed information about the sample, weighting, and comparisons with external data.) This survey, titled “Iranians’ Attitudes toward Political Systems,” began with a series of questions via which participants could anonymously express their social and political views. A question about “religious orientation” (*girāyish-i dīnī*) was placed at the end of the survey as one of several not-mandatory demographic questions. Below, we explain that the phrasing “religious orientation” turned out to be more ambiguous than the phrasing in the 2020 survey, which had a mandatory question regarding which option—without using the word religion (*dīn*)—is “closer” to respondents’ “belief and faith” (*bāvar va i’tiqād-i shumā*). Some interpreted “religious orientation” as their formal identity, which was not the same as their unofficial and personal “belief and faith.” This is why we reverted to the earlier wording in a second additional survey conducted in December 2022.

The weighted results of the February 2022 political systems survey show that again the largest three groups were Shia, Nones, and Atheists—but in this measurement the number of Shia increased from 32 percent to 56 percent, while Nones decreased from 22 percent to 12 percent; Atheists’ numbers remained much the same (9 percent in 2020 and 10 percent in February 2022).

⁶Representativity is not our main concern in this article; for that, see the tables in the appendices and methodological sections of GAMAAN’s survey reports on religion (2020), elections (2021), international relations (2021), political systems (2022), and the 2022 nationwide protests (2023), available at gamaan.org.

Table 1: Comparison of largest religious groups according to three online surveys

	GAMAAN June 2020 Religion Survey (Refined sample size: 39,981; effective sample size: 1911)	GAMAAN February 2022 Political Systems Survey (Refined sample size: 16,850; effective sample size: 1498)	GAMAAN December 2022 Nationwide Protests Survey (Refined sample size: 158,395; effective sample size: 1696)
Religion	Question 2 (mandatory): “Which option is closest to your belief and faith (<i>bāvar va i‘tiqād-i shumā</i>)?”	Question 29 (not mandatory): “What is your religious orientation (<i>girāyish-i dīm</i>)?”	Question 27 (not mandatory): “Which option is closest to your belief and faith (<i>bāvar va i‘tiqād-i shumā</i>)?”
Shia	32%	56%	38%
None	22%	12%	9%
Believer in God without religion	–	–	26%
Atheist	9%	10%	7%
Agnostic	6%	7%	3%
Sunni	5%	5%	5%
Spiritual	7%	4%	3%
Zoroastrian	8%	1%	5%

It is revealing that the Zoroastrians saw the greatest change, an eightfold decrease, from 8 percent to 1 percent. (Note that, even though this figure is a steep decline, it is still around 20 times the documented population of the Zoroastrian communities in Iran.) In contrast, other groups in the same order of magnitude as Zoroastrians—those who self-indicated as Agnostic, Sunni Muslim, and Spiritual—showed minimal or even zero differences in numbers (see Table 1).

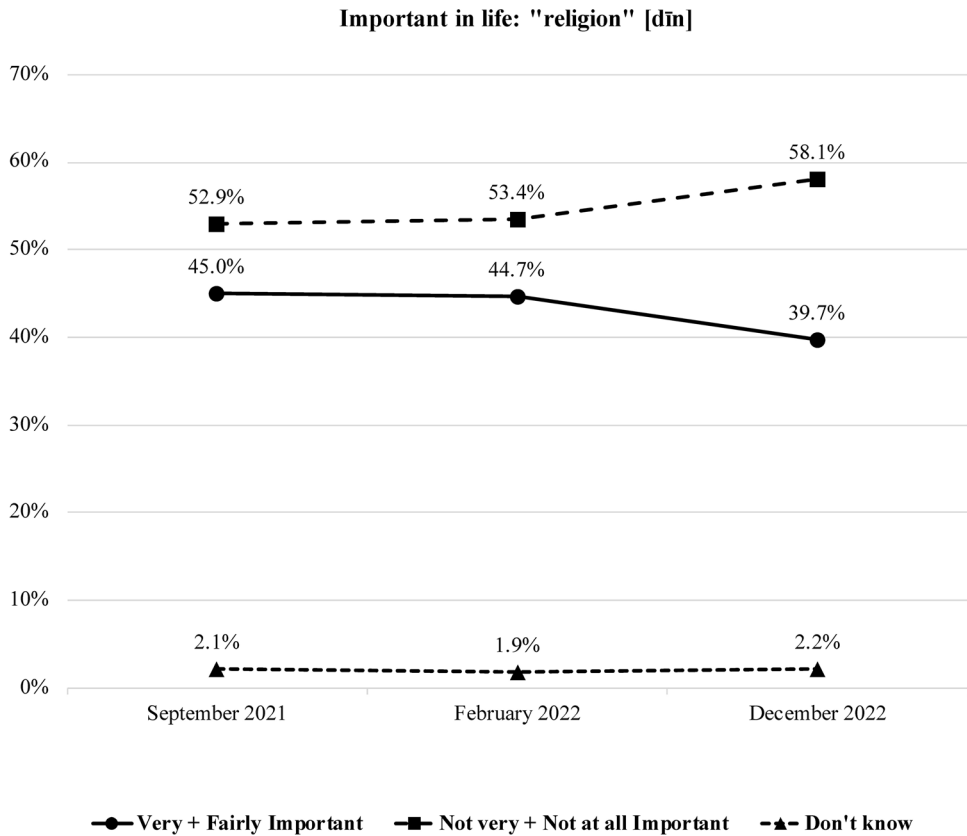
These differences and similarities with the 2020 survey need to be partially explained by factors outside the survey design: (1) bias in the 2020 survey, in which results were tested successfully against employment rates but not against further external data, as in the more elaborate 2022 surveys; (2) the effect of the novel use in the February 2022 survey of the VPN platform Psiphon, which sent the survey link to 620,000 unique desktop and mobile devices across Iran; and (3) the more organic multiple-chain referral sampling through social media without reliance on hugely popular channels (i.e., reducing bias toward anti-regime positions).

There are also reasons to think that the survey design in itself significantly affected the choice for Shia, None, and Zoroastrian. One of these reasons is that in GAMAAN’s various surveys conducted between 2021 and 2022 the figure for responses to the question “for each of the following aspects, indicate how important it is in your life,” the importance of “religion” (*dīn*)—next to “family,” “friends,” and “work”—was relatively consistent, between 40 percent and 45 percent (Figure 3).⁷ The aggregate for religious groups in the 2020 survey is around 50 percent, dependent on what is counted as “religion” (e.g., adding or not adding “spirituality” under “religion”). Another reason is that participants left comments in the February 2022 survey that give the

⁷GAMAAN’s surveys produced the same results for politically nonsensitive questions asked by World Values Survey in 2020 in Iran using face-to-face interviews. These were questions about ethnicity, the language spoken at home, and attitudes toward family, work, and friends. In contrast, comparing the World Values Survey and GAMAAN’s surveys revealed a great discrepancy with politically sensitive topics such as religion.

Figure 3
 Important in life: “religion” (dīn), according to three surveys conducted by GAMAAN in 2021 and 2022

Note: This question was not asked in 2020.



impression that, after having had a chance to express themselves, when they arrived at the question of religious identity, many interpreted this question not as an invitation to express worldview preferences but as part of a typical demographic identifier (as in filling in a form at an office).

In the February 2022 survey, some participants used the possibility of commenting to explain that their Shia identity is a formal one only. (Note that the 2020 survey’s equivalent option to comment did not show this pattern, nor would the follow-up survey in December 2022.) Among these comments are: “Officially I am Shia, but in reality completely irreligious”; “I am Shia-born”; “Unfortunately Shia, but in reality I have no belief in Islam”; “For now Shia, but religion is in general something to limit individuality and to make political use of persons, and to trick the people with the Sharia (*kulāh shar‘ī*)”; “My identity papers say that I’m Shia, but in reality I only believe in God”; “The regime forces me to be Shia, but I don’t believe”; “I wish I was not a Muslim.” These comments help explain why, of the self-identified Shia Muslims, 14 percent said religion is “not very important” in their life and another 14 percent said religion is “not at all important”—bringing the percentage of Shia for whom religion is personally important to 39 percent, which better resembles the 2020 survey’s result of 32 percent who personally identify with Shia Islam.

Besides these comments about Shia Islam, many of the people who left a comment indicated that they do believe in God without having a religion, which connects with the other salient comments’ theme of believing in a form of humanism or being and acting humane. Some responded

to the religious identity question simply with “I am human.” One striking result is that the comments about an imposed, formal Shia identity were juxtaposed with comments that reflect a desire for a Zoroastrian one. Participants wrote: “I’d like to be Zoroastrian. I’m weary of Islam”; “Only Āhūrā Mazdā”; “Zoroastrian friendly”; “Good words, good thoughts, good deeds”; “I believe in Yazdān”; “Unfortunately according to my identity papers I am Shia, but my personal preference is for Zoroastrianism”; “For now Shia, but God-willing in the future Zoroastrian”; “Zoroastrian and Spiritual and Humanist.” We interpret these comments as indicating that Zoroastrian identity is, indeed, a hypothetical alternative—for many, a dream or an aspiration more than an actual alternative lived religion embedded in a religious community.

It is no coincidence, then, that the proportion of adherents to Zoroastrianism—associated loosely with ideas about national heritage—fluctuated the most out of all groups when comparing the 2020 and February 2022 results. This interpretation is confirmed by Survey Zoroastrians’ response in the February 2022 survey to the question about the importance of religion in their lives: 65 percent said that religion is not at all important to them, 12 percent said that it is not important, and 21 percent said that it is somewhat important; only 1 percent said that religion is very important. Rather than showing similarities with Shia Muslims or Atheists, in this respect Survey Zoroastrians more resemble Spiritual people—of whom 59 percent said that religion is not at all important, 24 percent said that religion is not important, 12 percent said that it is somewhat important, and only 1 percent said that it is very important. It would be wrong to deduce from these results that, because religion is not at the center of many Survey Zoroastrians’ identity, the imagined attachment to Zoroastrianism is not important to who they think they are and wish to be (compare with Curtis and Olson 2019). Rather, Zoroastrianism is dissociated from the idea of being a religious person.

The fact that survey design affects the results was corroborated by a second additional survey, conducted from December 21 to December 31, 2022, about the nationwide protests sparked since September 2022. Given the context of heightened political activity, the survey resulted in a refined sample size of 158,395 and, after sample matching followed by cell weighting with interlocking variables, an effective sample size of 1696. The data-gathering approach was again adapted: spreading the survey link on various social media channels; Psiphon VPN sending survey links to 360,000 unique mobile and desktop devices; and, for the first time, through the broadcasting of an advertisement on the satellite television channels Iran International and Voice of America Persian. (See section 2 in Maleki and Tamimi Arab 2023 for detailed information about the sample, weighting, and comparisons with external data, such as household income levels, the languages people speak at home, and health insurance distribution. The comparisons indicate that the survey results are to a high degree representative of the literate adult population.)

Like the February 2022 survey, the December 2022 survey began with a series of questions via which participants could anonymously express their social and political views. A question about religion was placed at the end of the survey as one of several nonmandatory demographic questions. The formulation of the question stressed that it should be understood as being about participants’ personal and informal orientation, namely, “Which option is closest to your belief and faith (*bāvar va i’tiqād-i shumā*)?” Furthermore, the options slightly differed from those of past surveys: participants could now also choose the Yarsani faith and, more importantly, could choose “Believer in God without religion” (*khudābāvar-i bīdīn*) in addition to “None.” Table 1 shows that the results resemble the 2020 survey, with the percentage of Shia being 38 percent and the Zoroastrians 5 percent. As expected, when the question was formulated in a similar and more personal way, the percentage of Shia for whom the religion was a mere formal identity—and thus not so important—declined in comparison with the February 2022 survey. In the December 2022 survey, Shia who said religion is “not very important” reduced to 12 percent (in comparison with 14 percent in the February 2022 survey), and those who said religion was “not at all important” reduced to 8 percent (in comparison with 14 percent in the February 2022 survey).

Table 2: Comparison of Survey Zoroastrians' demographics

Survey Zoroastrians' Demographics	GAMAAN June 2020 Religion Survey	GAMAAN February 2022 Political Systems Survey	GAMAAN December 2022 Nationwide Protests Survey	Total literate Iranian Population Above 19 Years Old (2016 Census)
Refined sample size	2537 (out of 39,981)	185 (out of 16,496)	4414 (out of 158,395)	–
Male (%)	60	61	59	53
Higher education (%)	20	14	20	28
Rural (%)	22	26	29	21
20–29 years old (%)	25	35	30	30
30–49 years old (%)	53	53	52	51
Above 50 years old (%)	22	12	18	19
Important in life: religion (very + rather important) (%)	–	23 (1.4 + 21.3)	21 (3.5 + 17.5)	–
Language Spoken at Home				Ethnologue Statistics of the Total Iranian Population (2021, 24th ed.)
Persian (%)	–	53	66	63
Azerbaijani (%)	–	10	7	14
Kurdish (%)	–	1	3	6
Luri (%)	–	20	13	4
Gilaki (%)	–	4	4	3

These results corroborate the idea that the survey question can generate responses that are more or less in line with formal and informal identities—while other slight differences may be due to the effects of bias, the results' credibility intervals, and the changing context in Iran. Furthermore, it seems that some participants who chose options such as “Zoroastrian,” “Sufi,” or “Spiritual” in the 2020 and February 2022 surveys selected the option of a “Believer in God without religion” in the December 2022 survey. This is explained also by the fact that these groups all showed a high rate of belief in God with relatively low rates of the importance of religion in life—likely because the concept of religion is associated with the organized religious domination of the Islamic Republic.

Although the Survey Zoroastrians' overall proportion fluctuated in three online surveys, Table 2 shows that their demographics are consistently different from other groups; the features commented on above for the 2020 survey (i.e., male, less urban than other minorities, and less educated overall) are corroborated by the 2022 surveys. The percentage who in December 2022

said religion is important in life is similar to February 2022, with only 3.5 percent stating religion is very important and 17.5 percent saying religion is somewhat important. Moreover, Survey Zoroastrians' ethnicities comprise those that can be found in Iran, including but not limited to those who speak Persian, Azerbaijani, Kurdish, Luri, and Gilaki at home. We should beware of reproducing a Persian-nationalist interpretation of who Survey Zoroastrians are, effacing ethnic and linguistic differences in the process (compare with Lehman and Sherkat 2018, who warn against a too-generalized categorization in the American context). The data on the languages Survey Zoroastrians speak at home indeed suggest remarkable developments, such as the relatively high percentage of respondents who speak Luri—which appears to confirm reports of conversions to Zoroastrianism among the Bakhtiari Lurs (Iran International 2023).

The 2022 surveys allow us to further unpack Zoroastrians' political diversity. When given a choice, in February 2022, among the options of “Islamic republic,” “secular republic,” “constitutional monarchy,” “absolute monarchy,” and “don't know,” Survey Zoroastrians clearly preferred a monarchical system—more than any other group. However, these differences are not absolute: 34 percent of Zoroastrians indicated they prefer a constitutional monarchy, as do 12 percent of Shia Muslims, 21 percent of the Nones, and 29 percent of Atheists. A similar percentage of Zoroastrians (30 percent) indicated that they prefer a “secular republic,” compared with 22 percent of Shia Muslims and 58 percent of Atheists. The Survey Zoroastrians stood out in their support for an “absolute monarchy,” with 18 percent indicating support for such a system; in contrast, only 3 percent of Shia and 2 percent of Atheists gave that preference.

Another question that shows Survey Zoroastrians' preference for an older notion of what it means to be Iranian concerns which national flag they prefer. Participants could choose among a three-colored flag without symbols, the current flag of the Islamic Republic with the word “Allah” in the middle, a three-colored flag with the lion and sun associated with Iran's monarchies, or “other.” Whereas a flag with a lion and sun was selected by only 31 percent of the Shia, it was selected by 87 percent of the Zoroastrians—the highest of all groups—followed by 72 percent of Atheists. Given that 30 percent of Zoroastrians indicated they prefer a secular republic, this also means that support for the lion and sun does not automatically translate into a preference for monarchy as a future system of governance.

Weighting can misleadingly affect the February 2022 results for Survey Zoroastrians given their relatively small sample size of 185. The December 2022 results, however, are based on a sample size of 4414 and corroborate that Survey Zoroastrians' political views are diverse. Participants could choose among six responses: “constitutional monarchy,” “parliamentary republic,” “presidential republic,” or “Islamic republic,” or they could say that they are “not sufficiently informed” to answer the question, or select “other.” In response, 35 percent of Zoroastrians selected constitutional monarchy versus 12 percent of Shia, 26 percent of the Nones, and 40 percent of the Atheists; and 25 percent of Survey Zoroastrians opted for a presidential republic and 17 percent a parliamentary republic, while only 1 percent chose Islamic republic as their preferred regime type. Hence, while Survey Zoroastrians are divided about which political system they prefer, in both surveys in 2022 they opted for a political system that is maximally different from the current one.

CONCLUSION

Postrevolutionary Iran has repeatedly witnessed mass protests. The first concerned the disputed 2009 elections, with crowds chanting “Where is my vote?” This was followed by protests sparked by economic malaise, environmental disaster, and general dissatisfaction with the theocratic regime, in 2017, 2019, and in 2022 again, with calls for gender equality accompanied with protestors going so far as burning the hijab as a key symbol of the Islamic Republic. The regime has not hesitated in inflicting brutal—even fatal—violence on these mostly young protestors. What is the future of this nation in turmoil?

In this article, we have shown that Persian nationalism, symbolized by the idea of Zoroastrianism, is and likely will remain a key feature of Iranian society, identity, and politics of seeking an end to the establishment of Shia Islam in the state. Among the many creative chants of Iranian protestors, some clearly indicate nostalgia for the Pahlavi dynasty and regret over the Islamic Revolution: “Reza Shah, may you rest in peace!”⁸ “What a mistake our revolution was!” or simply, “Islamic Republic, we don’t want, we don’t want!” This development will be of consequence to our understanding of religiosity in the 21st century. In the same way that the 1978–79 revolution forced social scientists to think the unthinkable—a revolution that paved the way for theocratic governance—it turns out that great changes in religiosity are still taking place over four decades later. The data presented here may once again cause cognitive dissonance and be disparaged if we cling to the decades-old image of Iran as a predominantly Shia nation that supports the Islamic Republic. Instead, our aim was to contribute to challenging stereotypical views by addressing how it is possible that three subsequent online surveys showed such a high number of Zoroastrians, answering questions about their identity, beliefs, practices, and why they call themselves “Zoroastrians.” Scholars and scientists who study religions, including those who work for survey institutes such as the Pew Research Center, are well aware that survey design affects outcome, that we should be careful when comparing surveys, and that subjective identification with a religion is a complex phenomenon. Far less understood, discussed, and recognized, however, is how survey modes affect measured religiosity in societies that live under authoritarian, or even totalitarian, rule. The anonymity enjoyed by our online respondents gave them an unprecedented opportunity to express themselves more freely, revealing religious aspirations and realities that remain undetected in conventional telephone and face-to-face surveys.

When we call the participants in the GAMAAN surveys “Survey Zoroastrians,” our intention has not been to doubt their authenticity as “real” Zoroastrians. We do not think their Zoroastrian identities were insincere; we simply think their identification in the survey was a performative act rather than an ethnic-communal identity—an incidental expression of preferences, not a commitment sustained over a lifetime. Their religious confession was performed by taking the opportunity to express their views and feelings by participating in an online survey—it was not enacted by pilgrimages or rituals together with coreligionists and transmitted as part of family histories or learned by way of religious education. Claiming a Zoroastrian identity for themselves in this setting has no social costs as being part of a religious minority (nor does it bring with it any social benefits). Also, it is unclear how well-informed or spontaneous their choices were—for example, whether they immediately ticked the box “Zoroastrian” or if they contemplated before choosing it from among, say, “None,” “Spiritual,” or “Atheist.” And yet, choices do not seem to have been made completely arbitrarily, given that we have identified a coherent set of demographic and ideological parameters for the Survey Zoroastrians. They are often men, a large majority of which did not receive higher education; of all ages; and divided across rural and urban areas as much as are average Iranians; and they speak different languages, reflecting ethnic diversity. A majority of them stated they had transitioned from being religious to not being religious, and almost all of them expressed a belief in God, but hardly any of them claimed belief in eschatological ideas. Survey Zoroastrians expressed little trust in the current Islamic political system: a majority wished to exclude religious prescriptions from politics; in their view, religion is a matter of free individual choice and should be restricted to the private domain.

A purely statistical reading with a superficial background knowledge of the religious landscape of Iran, where Zoroastrianism is an established minority religion among others, could create the idea of Zoroastrianism being a minority of somewhat less than 10 percent of the population.

⁸In the February 2022 survey, of those who said they prefer a constitutional monarchy, 89 percent supported this chant about Reza Shah; of those who said they prefer secular republic, 60 percent were positive about the first Pahlavi king, known for his secularist policies.

This would amount to a misrepresentation. The participants should not be seen as a religious community or group but as a cohort of persons who have taken a choice in a situation where a choice was offered to them. We have seen that survey design—in particular how the question about religious self-identification is formulated and which options are available—has a significant impact on response behavior: when the relevant question was phrased to focus on their religion rather than on their personal beliefs and faith, the number of participants professing Zoroastrianism went down significantly. A combination of measuring bias plus changing survey design clearly affected the expressed identities that are the most strongly associated with the nation, namely, “Shia Muslim” on the one hand and “None” or “Zoroastrian” on the other. We saw that even some of those who formally identified as Shia Muslims expressed an informal desire to be Zoroastrian, which is in line with this ancient religion’s connection to modern nationalism. Survey Zoroastrians, however, did not greatly value religion as important in life. Their attitude reflects a view that associates the very concept of religion with hegemonic state religion.

Survey Zoroastrianism is best understood as another facet in the history of modern Iranian Zoroastrianism that has been transformed since the 19th century. In the Iranian context, Zoroastrianism refers to more than the minuscule communities that have migrated from an agricultural past in rural central Iran to middle-class realities in the megapolitan capital, communities that have reshaped their religion in important ways to fit the pattern of an ancient rational world religion characterized by the symbolism of light, the idea of a benevolent deity, and the moral triptych of “good thoughts, good words, good deeds.” In the context of modern Iranian nationalism, the idea of Zoroastrianism has emerged as a key feature of the assumed grandeur of pre-Islamic Iranian civilization that protagonists of nationalist discourse aspire to restore; in these discourses, the claimed decline of Iran can be blamed on the Arab invasion, the Arabic language and mentality, and Islam (or, at least, Sunni Islam). As much as this idea of Iran was disembedded from the actual historical, geographical, and historical context, in the context of this discourse the notion of Zoroastrianism was likewise disembedded from the communities that continued to uphold this religion against all odds over the centuries. It is this nostalgic notion of Zoroastrianism as civilizational heritage that appeals to survey participants.

In sum, professing a Zoroastrian identity means a way of being Iranian that is theistic but not theocratic—and where religion is a matter of personal choice relegated to the private realm. It signals an aspiration to restore lost glory to the nation and freedom and happiness to its people.

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