



MANDAEANS IV. COMMUNITY IN IRAN

History, geography and people. According to the 15 September 2004 United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report for Iran, Section 1, the current Mandaean population in Persia comprises between 5,000 and 10,000 persons. The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees report on Iran (26 August 1997) puts the number at 6,200. Estimates by Mandaeans themselves hover about 10,000. The Mandaeans, whose official designation by their Persian and Iraqi neighbors is “Sabeans” (“dippers,” “dyers,” “baptizers”; see Fahd, p. 675), call themselves “Mandaeans” (“the knowledgeable ones,” from the Aramaic *manda* “knowledge”). These ancient Gnostic Baptists were wrongly considered by early European missionaries and travelers as “Christians of St. John” who consider John the Baptist as their prophet and as the renewer of their Adam-derived religion. The Mandaeans must have arrived into Persia from the west (i.e., Jordan, Palestine) as early as the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, although scholars disagree on the exact dates and places of a possibly gradual and segmented emigration of the Mandaeans from West to East. Jordan/Palestine; for a different view see, however, [MANDAEANS i. History](#)). An old, mostly discarded, hypothesis of the Mandaeans as indigenous to Babylonia has recently been revived (Lupieri, pp. 157, 163-64).

The Mandaeans settled in the mountains of Media and in Mesene ([Characene](#)), roughly present-day Khuzestan and lower Mesopotamia. Coins from [Tang-e](#)



Sarvak, near the Mārūn River, north of **Behbahān**, from the 2nd century, in late Arsacid times, attest to an Aramaic-speaking people whose language seems to have been influenced by the Mandaic language. Internal Mandaean literary traditions of their habitations in the mountains of Media have been considered somewhat suspect among some scholars, but attestations from sources such as the Mandaean legend *Haran Gawaita* should be taken seriously. *Haran Gawaita* offers historical evidence for early settlements near **Bisotun**. How early, is still a matter of dispute. As noted, it is not impossible that the Mandaeans had come to the rivers of Khuzestan as early as the 1st century. Today, the Mandaeans are found chiefly in Ahwaz (**Ahvāz**), Khuzestan's provincial capital, which is the center of the Iranian Mandaeans, the site of their community center, and the home of their religious leaders. Khorramshahr (Korramšahr, old Moḥammara) and Shushtar (Šuštar), towns that previously held considerable Mandaean populations, no longer do. After one of the better known massacres of the Mandaeans, that of Shushtar in the late 19th century, the few survivors left the city. About a century earlier, in 1782, the Mandaean priesthood in Persia had been horribly persecuted; and in 1818, the Persian Mandaean priests were thrown into exile. Many Mandaean colophons (i.e., postscripts written by copyists of the Mandaean literary sources) describe hardships on both Ottoman and Persian soil.

During the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, Mandaeans moved away from the war-torn towns Khorramshahr and Abadan (**Ābādān**). **Bandar-e Māhšahr**, Sarbandar, Susangerd, Howayza, Ḥamidiya, and Šādegān still have Mandaeans. In recent years, some Mandaean families have moved outside of “Mandaean territory,” to Tehran, Karaj, and Shiraz. Several of the Mandaean dwelling areas listed in 1880 by the French Vice-Consul M. N. Siouffi, such as Shahwali (Šāhwali), Dezful, and Kowaybdeh (Siouffi, p. 159), do not shelter Mandaeans anymore. In his days, Siouffi states, the Mandaeans of Shushtar were famous for the high level of their religious knowledge. Indeed, Mandaean colophons testify to Shushtar as a vigorous Mandaean religious and scribal center— in the 17th and 18th centuries, for example. The English adventurer Austen Henry Layard met Mandaeans in Howayza in 1841. Some of the earliest known Mandaean manuscripts in European collections come from Shushtar and Howayza in the 16th century. A source dating to the year 1480 (Drower Collection manuscript, no. 12, entitled *Pashar Harshia*, in the Bodleian Library, Oxford) testifies to large Mandaean populations in these towns. On the basis of documentation from Mandaean colophons, one may safely conclude that the Mandaeans have moved around a great deal, both as a



result of persecutions and of natural disasters. For instance, a sudden change in the river course in Howayza in 1833 forced the resident Mandaean to leave the area. Two years earlier, the epidemic of 1831 (“the plague of Shushtar”) had claimed the lives of the entire Mandaean priesthood, but two or three *yalufas* (learned laymen) managed to reestablish the Mandaean religion. Madaeans also used to live on the Jarrāhi River (now called Abu Hanyour), but apparently not in recent centuries. (These events are recorded in Mandaean colophons, mainly in unpublished manuscripts; see Buckley, 2005.)

The largest population of Madaeans is still in Iraq, where they live predominantly in Baghdad and Baṣra, much less so in their former centers of ‘Amāra on the Tigris, in An Nāṣeriya, and Suq-al-Šoyukḫ on the Euphrates, and in Qurna at the confluence of the two rivers. As in Persia, the Madaeans must have access to rivers in order to perform their ancient baptism ceremonies. Running water, (*yardna*) is the form by which the heavenly world reflects itself on earth, according to the Mandaean view. Consequently, repeated immersions in running fresh water secure the contact with the heavenly regions. Baptism for babies, at marriage, at annual feasts, at priest initiations, and for the dying is part of the tradition. Other rituals include meals and ceremonies for the dead. The rituals are complex; they are liturgy-dependent, and they require priests. Traditional Mandaean society remains segmented into priests and laypeople, with the *yalufas* as an intermediary group.

The ritual and cultural building, the *mandi*, is a neutral-looking, large house (without any inscription revealing its nature) in the Mandaean quarter of Ahwaz. The house functions as a community center. Prayers and services, religious instruction, settling of internal Mandaean communal matters, and other community affairs take place in the *mandi*. At present, a new *mandi* is under construction in Ahwaz. A more traditional *mandi*, serving solely ritual purposes at certain religious feasts, is situated far off in the countryside north of Ahwaz. Priest initiations, which are, to a large extent, non-public rituals, are held here. Special annual baptisms such as the feast of Panja (the five intercalary days) take place in the courtyard and canal-dependent pool of this *mandi*. Otherwise, Sunday baptisms occur in open spaces along the Kārun River, though not during the coldest season of the year. Non-Mandaean neighbors and passers-by have long been used to seeing the Mandaean baptism rituals in full public view.

Currently, one *ganzibra* (the highest ranking priest), three *tarmidas* (the lower ranking priest), and several *yalufas* serve as leaders, keeping the Madaeans



focused around their rituals and securing the community's life. The Mandaean leaders of Ahwaz are trying to rescue their spoken Mandaic language, the *ratna*, which seems to be extinct in Iraq. To instruct the Mandaean children and youth is especially vital, and the effort to secure the language is a fairly recent one. Only in Persia—and among a few Iranian Mandaeans in emigration— does the spoken language (as distinct from the ancient, East Aramaic, written ritual language) still survive, mainly among the community's elders. Iranian Mandaeans living in emigration in Australia also try to keep the Mandaic tongue alive. In addition to their varied ritual roles, the religious leaders of Ahwaz also serve as links to local Muslim authorities when necessary. The Mandaeans are by tradition endogamous, pacifist in nature, and non-proselytizing, for converts are not accepted. Government regulations requiring schoolboys to cut their hair short have created difficulties for the recruitment to the Mandaean priesthood, as priests' hair and beards must remain uncut throughout life. Islamic instruction in Muslim schools is required of Mandaean children, and Mandaeans must adhere to Muslim codes for dress and public behavior. Mandaean priests, with their long beards, white turbans, and aristocratic demeanor, continue to instill awed respect in public places. With cloaks over their white garments, they look somewhat like Shi'ite clerics or other religious dignitaries familiar in Islamic cultures.

The famous Mandaean jewelry work can still be seen in Persia, for the people continue their gold and silver trade, with Mandaean goldsmiths even now making up the majority of jewelers in Ahwaz. Even in the bazaars of Tehran, one may chance upon Mandaean silver objects, and a Mandaean can often identify the artisan by examining a particular piece of merchandise. A special technique is using a black substance (*mina*) in order to make exquisite patterns and miniature illustrations on silver. The recipe remains secret, but this much may be revealed: melted silver, copper, and lead are combined with phosphorus and an unspecified substance in order to produce a liquid whose top layer becomes black. This layer is poured off, allowed to solidify, made into a powder, and applied to the silver piece chosen for engraving. Heating and again melting this substance on the silver piece, the silversmith does his final work on the piece and polishes it. Mandaean silverwork even became famous in Victorian England. Later, Western soldiers serving in the Middle East and Americans in the oil trade learned to appreciate the jewelry (see Fourouzandeh and Tavildar, chapter 1).

In modern times, many Mandaeans have become highly educated, and there



are engineers and other professionals among them. However, since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the opportunities for Mandaeans to take part in higher education have been severely curtailed. Mandaean businesses in Ahwaz include several small factories and workshops, and a few Mandaeans still till the soil. The traditional occupations in boatbuilding, fishing equipment, masonry, carpentry, and bridgebuilding seem to have declined in recent decades.

Present-day situation. Three Koranic verses (2:62, 5:69, 22:17) mention the Sabeans (Ṣābeʿin; perhaps a general term for baptist sects in the first century of Islam [7th century CE], clearly including the Mandaeans; see Fahd) together with the Jews and Christians, thus classifying them as a protected religion. These are “People of the Book,” (Ahl al-*ketāb*), that is, a people which possesses a sacred scripture and has a recognized prophet. Subsequently, Zoroastrians also were included in this category. By Ayatollah Khomeini’s decree after the 1979 Revolution, the Mandaeans lost their status as a protected religion in Persia, while the status of Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians remained as before. The Mandaeans have worked, so far without success, to regain their position as a legally protected religion. Situated far from the power centers of Tehran and Qom, the Mandaeans are at the mercy of the local authorities of Khuzestan, legal powers that encourage and enforce increased harassment and persecution of the Mandaean population. (Records of many international cases for asylum-seeking Mandaeans may be found at: Amnesty International; International Rescue Committee; The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; UNHCR; The United States Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom.)

In April 1996, in Tehran, Ayatollah Sajjadi of Al Zahra University in Qom posed three questions to the present writer about Mandaean religious beliefs and behavior, and he seemed satisfied with the answers. Still, the official status of the Mandaeans has not been changed. Significantly, during those very days of the present writer’s visit (indeed on 11 April 1996) the cause of the Mandaeans was raised in the Persian parliament. Questions number 228 and 335 (in the parliamentary publication: Ayatollah Khamenei, *Ajwabat al-esteftāʾāt*, part 1. *al-ʿEbādāt*, Beirut, 1996, pp. 98, 100) concern the Mandaeans. With regard to question 228, the Sabeans are listed as Ahl al-*Ketāb*, along with “Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians.” The question seeks a clarification of the Sabean position. The answer specifies that, from a legal viewpoint, there is no prohibition for Muslims against associating with Mandaeans. Question 335



focuses on the Sabaeans as followers of John the Baptist, and the explicit issue is whether these people are indeed identical with the possessors of sacred book mentioned in the Qur'ān. The reply is affirmative. Nevertheless, these answers have not led to the inclusion of Mandaeans among the protected religions in Article 13 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic (q.v.).

Consequently, Mandaeans experience various forms of pressure and persecution from their Muslim neighbors, especially in Khuzestan. Non-Muslim purveyors of food must set up a sign declaring their religion in their shops, and Mandaeans, not being legally recognized, therefore cannot enter the grocery business. Public sector employment is closed to them, as is, very often, higher education (see U.S. Department of State, 2004, Iran, Section II, Restrictions on Religious Freedom). Mandaean health and education professionals lost their positions after the revolution. Mandi events in Ahwaz are monitored by the authorities. Only recognized religious minorities are permitted to have community centers but, despite the decree, the Mandaeans still retain theirs. As in Iraq, some Mandaeans have changed their names to “generic,” non-Mandaean ones, in order to become more anonymous. For instance, one finds last names referring to well-known tribes, villages, or towns, and Mandaeans may avoid specifically Muslim accouterments or greetings. Traditionally, and even today, some Mandaean families live in specific parts of a town, where they have been known for generations, and are often recognizable by name, dress, occupation, or behavior (see Buckley, 2005 for Mandaean names). Mandaeans tend to avoid Muslim first names, often preferring more neutral ones, such as pre-Islamic or even Western names.

Mandaean identities, however, are often recognized, and forced conversion to Islam has become common, especially with respect to women (see above references to immigration court testimonies in asylum cases; refugee organizations; U.S. Dept. of State; UNHCR; etc.) Harassment in schools has forced some Mandaean parents to break off their children's education. The Mandaean graveyard in Ahwaz has been partially destroyed by local authorities. Old ties between Mandaeans and their Muslim business associates and friends have become severely strained, even severed.

Still, the community in Ahwaz continues to form the center for Iranian Mandaeans. The social structure and the rituals endure. One of the best sources documenting the present-day life of the Mandaeans in Ahwaz is a book featuring large color photographs (see Tahvildar, Fourouzandeh and Brunet, 2001). In three languages—English, French, and Persian—this book



deals briefly with Mandaean social life, baptism, ceremonies for the dead, ritual slaughter of birds for food, prayer, and the five-day Panja ritual. The book's stunning photographs are unrivalled and serve to illustrate, beyond doubt, that the Mandaeans of Persia are still extant. In contrast, at least one recent academic book (Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, Cambridge, 2000) makes no mention of the Mandaeans. For decades, other scholars have, as a matter of habit, declared the Mandaeans (whether in Iraq or in Persia) as a near-extinct group. On the whole, however, there is a re-emergence of international interest in Mandaeans and their religion. In 2002, Gorgias Press in the United States reissued Ethel Drower's classic, but long unavailable, study of Mandaeans and their religion, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*. European documentary filmmakers have come to Khuzestan in order to record the Mandaeans and their rituals; linguists realize that fieldwork among speakers of Mandaic can be conducted mainly in Persia, and also among a few Mandaeans in emigration. International conferences on Mandaism have begun, and there are increased contacts between Mandaeans and Western scholars. Also, the Mandaeans themselves have taken initiatives to launch their own conferences outside of their traditional homelands, in order to secure connections between their often far-flung members and to foster a continued communal identity. An international association of Mandaeans has been formed—the Mandaean Associations Union.

The number of Mandaeans in emigration is increasing, with Mandaeans from Iraq and Persia now living in many countries around the world, often in very difficult situations as asylum-seekers without international recognition. During the early fall of 2004, the infamous detention camps in Australia finally released the last of its incarcerated Iranian Mandaeans, who have been granted refugee status. One must hope that the Mandaean refugee problem may come to an end and, likewise, that the traditional communities in the homelands may continue to exist and flourish, so that the unique Mandaean culture and religion are not lost. However, the current war in Iraq has further endangered the situation for Mandaeans, with many of them kidnapped, maimed, and killed. As a contrast, in Tehran in the spring of 1996 it became obvious that the present author's public appearances—as a spokesperson for the Mandaeans to Iranian students, academics, clerics, and intellectuals—presented the audience with an opportunity to realize that their own country still shelters a small and little known group of ancient Gnostics recognized by the Qur'ān.



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