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# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security



# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

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## INDEXING & ABSTRACTING



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The Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security (JCTS) provides a platform to analyse conflict transformation and security as processes for managing change in non-violent ways to produce equitable outcomes for all parties that are sustainable. A wide range of human security concerns can be tackled by both hard and soft measures, therefore the Journal's scope not only covers such security sector reform issues as restructuring security apparatus, reintegration of ex-combatants, clearance of explosive remnants of war and cross-border management, but also the protection of human rights, justice, rule of law and governance. JCTS explores the view that by addressing conflict transformation and security holistically it is possible to achieve a high level of stability and human security, requiring interventions at both policy and practitioner level. These would include conflict management, negotiated peace agreements, peacekeeping, physical reconstruction, economic recovery, psycho-social support, rebuilding of primary services such as education and health, and enabling social cohesion. Other macro-level governance issues from constitution writing to state accountability and human resource management also need to be considered as part of this process of change.

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## Federalism and Iran: Reimagining Dignity and Belonging

Mostafa Hetteh\*  
York University

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### ABSTRACT

*Abstract: This article examines the enduring tension between centralization and pluralism within Iran's political geography, arguing that the modern state has historically pursued unity at the expense of dignity and inclusion. It conceptualizes this condition as a form of "internal statelessness," wherein ethno-national communities remain formally incorporated yet substantively marginalized. In response, the article advances federalism not merely as an institutional arrangement, but as a normative and political framework grounded in ethical decentralization. Drawing on political theory and historical analysis, it reinterprets federalism as a mechanism for reconstituting belonging through autonomy, recognition, and shared governance. Rather than threatening territorial integrity, territorial federalism is positioned as a viable pathway toward sustainable peace, democratic legitimacy, and plural coexistence in Iran, while offering broader implications for rethinking sovereignty and diversity in the Middle East.*

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**Keywords:** *Federalism, Iran, Dignity, Pluralis, Internal statelessness*

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**Biographical Note:** *Mstafai Hetteh is a Course Director at York University and a postdoctoral researcher in Politics and Law. His work spans political theory, international relations, and comparative politics, with a focus on state power, sovereignty, federalism, and the politics of identity in multiethnic societies. He specializes in state formation, liberty, immigration, state borders, ethnicity, nationalism, and legal pluralism, examining how authority is constructed, contested, and reorganized across institutional and territorial contexts. His research engages issues of colonial governance, securitization, and sub-national struggles over recognition and autonomy. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches, he combines theoretical analysis with applied experience in journalism and policy, offering insight into contemporary geopolitical dynamics and the lived realities of political conflict.*

Iran today stands at a crossroads between the persistence of centralization and the promise of pluralism. The country's long-standing tensions between the state and its diverse national communities reveal an unfinished political project—one that has privileged unity over justice and uniformity over dignity. This opinion piece unfolds in three steps: it begins by tracing the unfinished promise of the Iranian state, shaped by centralization and exclusion; it then turns to federalism as ethical decentralization, proposing autonomy as a moral and political remedy; and finally, it explores the path from statelessness to shared belonging, envisioning federalism as a foundation for dignity, coexistence, and sustainable peace in Iran and beyond.

The modern Iranian state was built upon the rhetoric of unity, yet its consolidation relied heavily on military intervention and colonial domination of non-Persian regions between 1921 and 1925—a unity that has too often come at the cost of diversity.<sup>1</sup> Since the early twentieth century, Iran's statecraft has relied on centralization—political, linguistic, and cultural—as a means to consolidate authority and preserve territorial integrity.<sup>2</sup> Yet this model has simultaneously marginalized many of the ethno-national communities: Ahwazi-Arabs territory, Turks, Kurds, Baluch, Turkmen, and others.<sup>3</sup> Their languages, histories, and collective memories have been subordinated to a singular national imaginary that equates "Iranian" with a narrowly defined Persian-Shi'a identity.

This tension between centralization and diversity is not simply a constitutional issue—it is a moral and existential one. It has produced what might be called internal statelessness: communities that belong to the state yet are systematically excluded from its moral and political promises.<sup>4</sup> The challenge of governance

in Iran, then, is not only about distributing resources or political power but about reconstituting the very meaning of belonging. Federalism—long dismissed as a foreign or divisive idea—offers a framework for rethinking this belonging in ethical, not just administrative, terms.<sup>5</sup>

The Iranian political tradition, deeply shaped by fears of disintegration, has often treated pluralism as a threat. But history shows that the suppression of difference has only deepened the fractures it sought to avoid. From the uprisings in the peripheries to the ongoing discontent among marginalized peoples, the message is clear: peace cannot be achieved through homogenization. It must be built through recognition, participation, and shared dignity.

Federalism, in the Iranian context, is often misunderstood as secession in disguise. Yet at its core, federalism is not about division but about ethical decentralization—the acknowledgment that equality requires autonomy.<sup>6</sup> It rests on the principle that unity can be sustained not through coercion but through cooperation among distinct political communities.

From a political-theoretical perspective, this approach resonates with contemporary debates on self-determination and dignity. Thinkers from Hannah Arendt to Iris Marion Young have argued that political belonging must be grounded in the capacity to act and speak as equals within the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> When this capacity is denied, individuals and groups are rendered invisible; they become what Arendt called "stateless" even within their own country.

Federalism thus becomes a way to reimagine citizenship as a shared yet plural experience. It proposes that diverse peoples—Ahwazi Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Baluch, Persians—can coexist within one political framework without erasing

<sup>1</sup> Hetteh, A. Political History of Ahwaz: Iranian Occupation, Colonialism and Ahwazi People's Territorial Claims. *Iran Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 7(2), 291-322. Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45-50.

<sup>2</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 45-50.

<sup>3</sup> See: Saleh, A. (2013). *Ethnic identity and the state in Iran*. Springer.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 267-270.

<sup>5</sup> Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 88-95.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Keating, *Plurinational Democracy: Stateless Nations in a Post-Sovereignty Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42-45.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The origins of totalitarianism*. Vol. 244. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973.

their specificities.<sup>8</sup> Such an arrangement would allow local governance structures to reflect the social, linguistic, and economic realities of their communities, while still maintaining the coherence of a national system.

Critically, this vision challenges the moral hierarchy embedded in the Iranian state: that some lives and identities are more central to the nation than others. To move toward peace, the state must dismantle this hierarchy and recognize that dignity cannot be distributed selectively.<sup>9</sup> Dignity, in the political sense, is indivisible—it cannot coexist with the systematic silencing of difference.

In practical terms, a federal framework could mean constitutionally guaranteed regional parliaments, linguistic and cultural rights, and mechanisms for resource-sharing that respect local autonomy. These structures do not fragment the state; they deepen its legitimacy by ensuring that all citizens experience governance as representation, not domination.

The heart of the Iranian question today lies in the politics of recognition. For decades, the denial of cultural and political rights has produced a sense of alienation among sub-national communities—a feeling of belonging nowhere fully. Many Ahwazi Arabs, for example, describe themselves as “citizens without citizenship”: tied to the Iranian state through coercive structures but excluded from its national narrative. The same can be said for the Kurds, Turks, and Baluch, whose demands for local governance and linguistic freedom are often conflated with separatism.

To respond to these experiences, federalism must be understood not merely as a system of governance but as a moral response to statelessness. It reclaims the notion of the political home—a space where communities can see themselves reflected in the laws, symbols, and priorities of the state. In doing so, it transforms the state from an apparatus of control into a shared framework of belonging.

This transformation is not only crucial for Iran but also for regional stability. The Middle East has long been haunted by unresolved national questions, border conflicts, and the legacy of

colonial cartographies<sup>10</sup>. A federal and inclusive Iran could become a model for reimagining sovereignty beyond domination—a shift from managing difference to nurturing coexistence.

Thus, by anchoring political structures in the language of dignity, Iran could also begin to rebuild its fractured social trust. Dignity, unlike mere tolerance, implies mutual recognition; it requires seeing the other not as a threat but as a co-creator of the collective future. Federalism, understood this way, becomes a practice of peacebuilding: a framework that recognizes the right to difference as the foundation of unity.

Yet this transformation demands courage—from both the state and its citizens. It requires the political imagination to move beyond inherited fears of disintegration and to see plurality as strength. It also requires the humility to acknowledge the suffering that centralization has caused, and the resolve to build new institutions rooted in justice and equality.

If Iran is to move toward a future of peace, it must move beyond the binary of domination or disintegration. Federalism offers a third path: one grounded in shared dignity, mutual recognition, and the restoration of belonging. It is not an imported solution but a necessary evolution of Iran’s own political and moral landscape.

Ultimately, the debate on federalism in Iran is a debate about what it means to be human in a plural society. It asks whether belonging can exist without erasure and whether unity can be built on justice rather than fear. Federalism, reimagined through the ethics of dignity, offers not a blueprint for division but a vision for peace—a peace that begins with recognizing every community as a rightful participant in shaping the nation’s destiny.

Reimagining Iran through federalism is therefore not about redrawing borders but about redrawing relationships—between the center and the margins, between the state and its citizens, and between memory and hope. In doing so, it gestures toward a region where

<sup>8</sup> Asgharzadeh, Ailreza. *Iran and the challenge of diversity: Islamic fundamentalism, Aryanist racism, and democratic struggles*. Springer, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 75–80.

<sup>10</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 101–105.

dignity replaces domination and where belonging becomes the foundation of peace.

Otherwise, the reality is clear: the majority of non-Persian political parties and movements have already turned toward demands for self-determination and independence, driven by decades of exclusion and broken promises. Federalism thus stands as Iran's final opportunity to transform confrontation into coexistence. It is now the choice of the Iranian state—to embrace a dignified, pluralistic future through federalism, or to face the far worse consequences that come from ignoring the call for justice and equality.

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