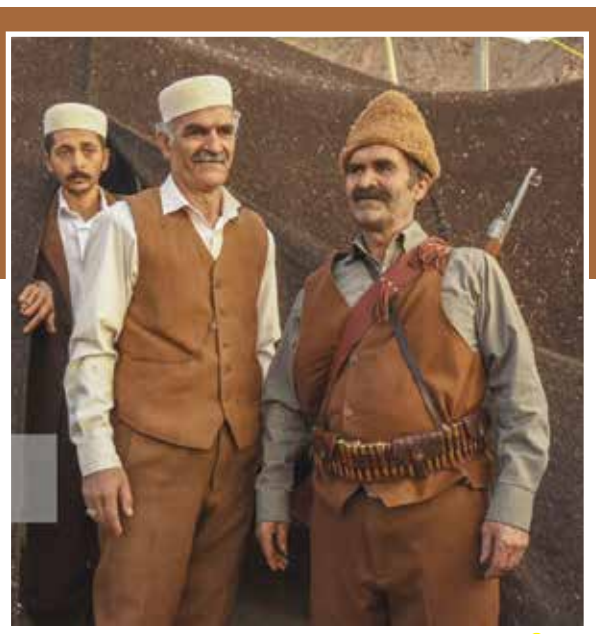


ISNA

Semnan preserves rich ethnic, linguistic diversity

Iranica Desk

Semnan Province, located along the southern slopes of the Alborz Mountains and on the edge of Iran's central desert, is one of the country's historically significant regions. Its geographical location has played an important role in shaping its ethnic and cultural diversity throughout history. Formerly known as Qumis, or Komesh, the region lay along a major route connecting the Iranian Plateau with Khorasan, Ray, and Gorgan. This strategic position made it a place of passage, migration, and settlement for different populations over the centuries.

Parts of what is now Semnan Province were within the territory of the Median kingdom. The region later retained its strategic and commercial importance under the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian empires. During the Parthian period, Qumis was considered one of the empire's important provinces. In subsequent centuries, the arrival and settlement of different ethnic groups and tribal communities gradually contributed to the region's diverse demographic and cultural makeup.

The province's population includes communities with longstanding roots in the area, as well as tribal groups that migrated there at different points in history. Nomadic pastoralism also remains an important part of the cultural identity of areas such as Garmsar, Shahrud, Damghan, and Mehdishahr.

One of Semnan Province's most distinctive features is its linguistic diversity. The province is sometimes described as an "island of dialects" because of the variety of languages and local speech forms found there. Semnani belongs to the Western Iranian branch of the Iranian languages and has preserved distinctive historical and grammatical features. Other local varieties include Sangesari, Sorkhei, Lasgerdi, Shahmirzadi, and Aftari. Languages and dialects such as Turkish, Kurdish, Baluchi, Mazandarani, and local varieties of Persian are also spoken in different parts of the province. This linguistic diversity reflects centuries of coexistence, migration, and cultural interaction among different communities.

Alireza Shah-Hosseini, head of the Semnan Provincial Branch of the Iranology Foundation, says that more than 78 dialects have been identified in the province. He believes that the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups and the region's linguistic diversity have made Semnan a small-scale reflection of Iran as a whole. In his view, this diversity is not a threat but an opportunity to strengthen cultural ties and showcase Iran's intangible heritage.

In an interview with IRNA, Shah-Hosseini described Semnan as a "colorful mosaic of ethnic groups and dialects," saying that the presence of different cultures has given the province a distinctive identity. He cited Kurdish, Lor, Turkic, Baluchi, Mazandarani, Tabari, and Turkmen communities, alongside speakers of local languages and dialects such as Semnani, Sorkhei, Lasgerdi, Aftari, and Parvari.

He noted that traces of Turkmen presence can even be found in Abr village in Shahrud, further illustrating the province's ethnic and cultural diversity. Shah-Hosseini said that local subcultures are among the valuable assets of any region and that Semnan, despite having a population of less than one million, has considerable cultural diversity. This diversity, he added, can help strengthen national identity, deepen understanding of local cultures, and introduce Iran's cultural heritage to a wider audience.



TASNIM

He also described Semnan as a "paradise of dialects and accents," noting that some elements of its linguistic heritage have been registered on Iran's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. According to Shah-Hosseini, the Semnani language and local varieties such as Sangesari and Sorkhei are important components of this heritage. Preserving them, he said, is essential to passing the province's historical and cultural identity on to future generations.

Shah-Hosseini attributes part of Semnan's ethnic and linguistic diversity to the migration and movement of communities from different parts of Iran over various historical periods. Groups with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds gradually settled in the region and continued their lives alongside its established population. One example is the presence of people of Georgian descent in Abbasabad village, in Meyami in the eastern part of the province. Shah-Hosseini says the village's residents have Georgian roots and that some old Georgian words can still be identified in their speech. According to him, the community was relocated to the area during the reign of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty. The village was previously known as Asadabad.

He considers the peaceful coexistence of migrant communities and the region's established population one of Semnan's defining cultural characteristics. Over generations, these communities have lived alongside one another, preserving elements of their own languages and traditions while also contributing to the development of a shared regional culture.

Alongside the efforts of researchers and cultural activists, local officials have also announced initiatives to support Semnan's language and cultural heritage. Mehdi Samimian, governor of the city of Semnan, has announced plans to establish an academy for the Semnani language in the provincial capital. The proposed institution is intended to support the ancient Iranian language and create opportunities for its wider use and long-term preservation.

In an interview with ISNA, Samimian said that Semnani has considerable linguistic and cultural potential and that the city's administration supports efforts to promote the language and expand its use. He added that establishing an academy could contribute to the language's development and help preserve the region's local culture.

Samimian also announced plans to give greater recognition to notable figures from Semnan, including Hakim Elahi, and to improve the condition of his mausoleum. Another initiative involves creating a garden cemetery for the province's distinguished historical and cultural figures near the scholar's resting place.

Despite changes in lifestyles and the declining use of some languages, dialects, and traditional forms of clothing, Semnan's cultural heritage remains an important part of the region's historical identity. Establishing an academy for the Semnani language, documenting local dialects, honoring prominent figures, and reviving traditional practices could all help preserve this cultural wealth and pass it on to future generations. Shaped by centuries of migration and coexistence, Semnan's ethnic and linguistic diversity is part of the broader picture of Iran's cultural richness.

Reading Room

Two books uncover forgotten chapter in northern Iran's history

Iranica Desk

Two newly unveiled books by Iranian contemporary history researcher Mostafa Nouri explore a turbulent and often overlooked chapter in the history of northern Iran, documenting the Soviet occupation of Mazandaran and Gorgan during World War II and the political and social developments that followed in the years leading up to the August 1953 coup.

The books, titled Years of Turmoil: Mazandaran and Gorgan under Soviet Red Army Occupation (1941–1946) and Years Without Refuge: Mazandaran and Gorgan from the End of World War II to the August 1953 Coup (1946–1953), were introduced at a ceremony held at the National University of Skill in Sari. The event was organized as part of the programs marking National Mazandaran Day and Mazandaran Week, according to IRNA.

Drawing on historical documents and archival sources, the two volumes examine a period when international political rivalries and the presence of foreign military forces had a profound impact on Iran, particularly its northern provinces. Rather than focusing exclusively on high-level political developments, Nouri's research also investigates how these events affected local communities, public institutions, economic activities and the everyday lives of ordinary people.

The first volume, Years of Turmoil, focuses on the years 1941 to 1946, when Soviet forces were stationed in northern Iran following the Allied invasion of the country during World War II. The occupation, which formed part of the wider Allied effort to secure supply routes to the Soviet Union, had consequences that extended well beyond military and diplomatic affairs.

The book documents various aspects of the Soviet military presence in Mazandaran and Gorgan, including the occupation and use of buildings, the requisitioning of local resources and supplies, financial losses and the use of railway facilities. It also examines the detention of Turkmen and Iranian military personnel, offering insight into the experiences of people and communities caught up in the political and military circumstances of the time. By examining these issues at a local level, the volume seeks to show how the presence of foreign troops shaped everyday life in the region. The experiences of residents, the pressures placed on local resources and the disruption of normal economic and administrative activities form an important part of the historical picture presented in the book.

The first book was initially published in 2015 by the National Library and Archives of Iran. Its latest edition is the third, and has been revised and reorganized. The new edition comprises 444 pages and reflects Nouri's continued work on the subject and his efforts to present the material in a more comprehensive form.

The second volume, Years Without Refuge, continues the story from 1946 to 1953, covering the years between the end of the Second World War and the coup of August 1953. This period was marked by significant political tensions and changes in Iran, as domestic power struggles increasingly intersected with international developments. The book explores the political rivalries and social conditions that shaped Mazandaran and Gorgan during these years. Among the subjects it addresses are the activities and competition of political parties, the consequences of the withdrawal of foreign forces, the nationalization of Iran's oil industry and the developments that culminated in the 1953 coup.

The second volume also considers how national political events were reflected in the provinces. By tracing developments in Mazandaran and Gorgan, it places the region within the broader political history of Iran and highlights the importance of provincial experiences in understanding the country's modern past. The book comprises 520 pages.



Mostafa Nouri

The unveiling ceremony brought together academics, researchers and cultural figures to discuss the historical significance of the books and the importance of documenting the history of northern Iran.

Nouri, whose research focuses on contemporary Iranian history, said that the two books were the outcome of years of study and writing. His work seeks to bring together documentary evidence and historical analysis to provide a clearer account of developments that have not always received sufficient attention in broader narratives of Iran's modern history.

He also noted that the publication of the revised third edition of the first volume offered an opportunity to reorganize and expand the presentation of the research. The second volume, meanwhile, completes a wider account of the region's history by following developments through the politically decisive years leading up to the 1953 coup.

Looking ahead, Nouri is considering the possibility of preparing a third volume. Potential subjects include the period of Reza Shah's rule and the years between the 1953 coup and the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Such a project could extend the historical account and provide further insight into the political and social transformations that shaped northern Iran during the twentieth century.

Taken together, Years of Turmoil and Years Without Refuge offer a documentary-based account of more than a decade of upheaval in Mazandaran and Gorgan. By connecting international developments and national political events with their local consequences, the books seek to give greater visibility to the experiences of communities in northern Iran and contribute to a fuller understanding of the country's contemporary history.