In discussions of social and political dynamics involving the state and society, themes such as religious and ethnic groups, minority and majority, identity and modernization have been used with frequency. Some of these themes have been interchangeable, and in different time periods the focus of studies has shifted. Prior to the 1990s nationalism and nation-building, debates on modernization, communication, integration, and the role of ethnic groups and conflict were dominant. By the late 1990s ‘identity’ had become a new focus, often mixed with a psychological approach. This was “a ‘neo-way’ of addressing identity, and this new tool preordained the questions that would be asked and the answers that would be given. Not explained were the trajectory, ideology, successes, and failures of modern nationalist movements” (Newman 2000: 23).1 Mark Juergensmeyer, reflecting on world events in the 1990s, used the term ‘religious nationalism’ as a way of describing “longing for an indigenous form of religious politics free from the taint of Western culture”. This “new cold war” was based on the “resurgence of parochial identities based on ethnic and religious allegiances” (Juergensmeyer 1993: 1–2). As old models had failed, the new ones were here to challenge Western secular nationalism.

World events, in many ways, seemed to be supporting parts, if not all, of Juergensmeyer’s worldview. Yet, as we approached the end of the 1990s, with the spread of internet and intensification of globalization, something was changing. These shifts were throwing all discussions, theories, and arguments out of order. Transformations were at both macro and micro levels driven by the information technology.2 Here, for example, the active role of diasporic communities and human rights organizations had intensified
with an impact (not yet clearly measurable) on the behavior of societies and states.

This transformation has not yet been able to shed light on one very important issue, namely power politics. This dilemma was expressed by John Breuilly: “To focus upon culture, ideology, identity, class or modernization is to neglect the fundamental point that nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and politics is about power. The central task is to relate nationalism to the objectives of obtaining and using state power” (Breuilly 1993a). The significance of Breuilly’s comment is that ultimately power is where the interests lie; therefore, the interests can change depending on the situation.

This study places power and powerlessness in the components of nationalism (identity, ethnicity, and religion). It argues that the reason politics is lost is because it is extremely challenging to pinpoint its dynamics. Politics and power are not displayed openly, particularly in countries like Iran, making it almost impossible to assess details. When one engages specifically with empirical evidence to find ‘politics’, still mysteries remain. Lack of institutional framework contributes to the complexity; the polity is secretive, multilayered, and personal. The Islamic State with its clergy have become more complicated than the monarchist regime of the past, and James Bill’s comment rings true even more today than ever before: namely that the “processes of power and decisionmaking are usually hidden within the deepest recesses of society, where they exist in a state of constant flux” (Bill 1988: 10). Ultimately, it is almost impossible to assess correctly and clearly both “the shadowy corridors of the political system” (Bill 1988: 10), and the shadowy activities of members of religious minority communities as they act, react, respond, resist, compromise, defend, inform the authorities, betray their own communities, or other minority groups.

This chapter identifies religious minorities in Iran and their present condition, discusses the legal ramifications of their situation, assesses their responses, and concludes by reverting back to the issue of nationalism.

Religious Composition

Iran is a heterogeneous society. Group characteristics and geographical settings have led to a society where primordial ties are strong. The overwhelming majority of the population are Shi‘i, about nine percent are Sunni, and the rest are Baha‘i, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and a very small and little-known group are Mandeans. Muslim groups’ main identification is