Traditionally three interdependent communities including peasants, pastoral nomads and the urbanites have existed in Iran as early as fourth millennium B.C. The peasants always comprised the majority of the population followed by the urbanites and nomads. The peasants, however, remained politically weak and despite their numerical prevalence, they have always been under the control of the urbanites and nomads. In contrast, the pastoral nomads have played a very important political role since the first millennium B.C. As a matter of fact, most of the dynasties ruling over Iran either originated from the nomadic tribes or assumed power through their support.

However, for the time being, the traditional interrelationship between these three communities in Iran is already disrupted under the forces of modernisation. Most of the pastoral nomads have settled down during the past several decades. In 1938, the pastoral nomads comprised over 20 percent of the entire population of Iran,¹ whereas their number was reduced to 2 percent in 1985.² In the meantime, the rural-urban migration has resulted in an unprecedented increase of urban population. Currently, over 52 percent of the whole population of Iran resides in urban centres.³ Generally speaking, the process of modernisation has reduced the traditional political power of the pastoral nomads so drastically

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¹ The calculation is based on Colonel Ahmad Ehtesabyan’s *fajrāfā-ye Nezānt-e Iran* (Tehran, 1938): 224.

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that they no longer play their traditional political role. The pastoral nomads have lost not only their political power in relation to the central government, but their social organisation and their way of life have changed radically. The political system of nomads no longer functions as it did in the past. For example, the tribes have disintegrated into small segments without powerful tribal chiefs. The Basseri of south Iran is a case in point.

In order to explain the process of political changes among the Basseri we shall first describe briefly the traditional organisation of the tribe. Second, examine the forces of change and their impact upon the social and political structure of the Basseri, and, finally, look at the present condition of the tribe under the Islamic Republic.

**The Basseri**

The Basseri reside in Fars province, south of Iran. Their traditional summer and winter territories are located in southeast and northeast of Shiraz (the capital of the province) respectively. The exact number of the Basseri is not known. According to a governmental report there were 2500 families in 1953, while F. Barth has stated that their number fluctuated between 2000 to 3000 families or nearly 16000 souls.

It is difficult to present the precise number of the Basseri mainly for two reasons. First, most of the Basseri have settled down in villages and towns during the past several decades. They are so dispersed that it is practically impossible to locate every household. Second, the National Statistics takes into account only those Basseri who still pursue their nomadic way of life. However, the number of the entire Basseri can be estimated roughly around 20000 to 25000 peoples, respectively 4000 to 4500 families. Most of the Basseri are already settled either in rural areas or they have migrated to urban centres such as Marvdasht and Shiraz. Presently, the nomadic Basseri consist of 1139 households with a total population of 7911 persons.

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5 This document is available at the National Archives in Tehran.
6 F. Barth, Nomads of South Persia. The Basseri Tribe of the Khansch Confederacy (Boston, 1961): 1.