

ROUND TABLE

## Minoritized Communities in Iran: The Struggle for Unconditional Equality

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Following the tragic murder of Jina Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman, in 2022, subsequent protests in 2022–23 presented a significant intersectional challenge to the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) political order, revealing deep-seated issues of ethnic, economic, gender, and political discrimination. Originating in the Kurdish region, these protests quickly spread across Iran and its diaspora, offering a glimpse of potential intersectional solidarity cutting across ethnic, gender, and religious lines. Notably, Kurds and Baluchis played a leading role in the protests, bearing the highest toll in terms of lives lost and injuries sustained. The Iranian regime responded ruthlessly, employing military violence to suppress dissent and systematically dehumanizing these communities in an attempt to undermine their vocal opposition to the exclusionary and hierarchical rule rooted in Persian and Shiite dominance. Throughout history, the Kurds have consistently stood at the vanguard of resistance against the political authority in Tehran, as well as challenging the dominance of Persian and Shiite supremacy. This enduring opposition is instrumental to understanding the widespread, well-articulated, and mobilized resistance to the IRI's abuses of power. This resistance finds its epitome in the Women, Life, Freedom social movement.<sup>1</sup>

The persistent denial of the historical suffering endured by Kurds and Baluchis, coupled with the systematic dismissal of their political grievances as legitimate democratic claims, has been an ongoing challenge. However, the recent wave of protests have become a catalyst for a liberatory shift in the political landscape, as protestors representing diverse ethnic groups came together and communicated a transethnic solidarity countering the discursive tools employed by Iranian nationalists. These narratives unfairly tag Kurds and Baluchis as advocates of separatism, security threats, and disloyalty. In response to these narratives, Kurds and Baluchis have articulated a compelling vision for a new political order, rooted in the principles of cultural, political, and economic justice. This vision emphasizes the necessity of equal participation at both local and national levels within a decentralized Iranian framework. By advocating for such a paradigm, Kurds and Baluchis aim to address their historical marginalization and lay the foundation for a more just, inclusive, and participatory society in Iran.

Building on this background, this *Iranian Studies* roundtable delves into the intricate web of structural discrimination faced by minoritized communities in Iran. These

<sup>1</sup> For critical interrogations of the relationship between Kurds and the Iranian state, see: Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour, "Can non-Persians speak? The sovereign's narration of 'Iranian identity'," *Ethnicities* 19, no. 5 (2019): 925–947; Allan Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran: Crossborder Interactions and Mobilisation Since 1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Kamran Matin, "Decolonising Iran: A tentative note on inter-subaltern colonialism," *Current Anthropology* 63, no. 2 (2022): 199–200.

communities –characterized by ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities divergent from the prevailing narrative of the Iranian state – find themselves navigating a complex terrain of marginalization. In this enlightening discussion, Afshin Matin-Asgari unfurls a comprehensive historical panorama, meticulously tracing the contours of national oppression experienced by non-Persian constituencies since the 1920s. Imbued with a nationalist rhetoric, Matin-Asgari underscores the historical pursuit of crafting a unitary Iranian national identity, a quest that manifested historically in the marginalization, minoritization, and inferiorization of non-Persian ethnicities. Expounding on the nationalist discourse, Matin-Asgari contends that the notion of achieving a cohesive Iranian national identity was intricately tied to the deliberate relegation of non-Persian communities to an inferior status. In his concluding remarks, Matin-Asgari reflects on a pivotal outcome of the 2022–23 uprisings – the acknowledgment of national oppression. However, he astutely observes that this recognition is met with resistance, if not outright rejection, by certain nationalist political factions and segments within the scholarly community. In synthesizing these historical perspectives and contemporary insights, this roundtable serves as a crucible for understanding the nuanced dynamics of identity and oppression within the Iranian sociopolitical landscape. It beckons us to contemplate the ongoing struggle for recognition, multinational justice and equality, grappling with the complexities underscoring the broader discourse on national identity in Iran.

Delving into the intricate web of economic injustice perpetuated by state policies, Eric Lob scrutinizes the pervasive impoverishment and underdevelopment plaguing regions such as Sistan and Baluchistan, Khuzestan, Kurdistan, and sections of West Azerbaijan – home to a sizable Kurdish population. Lob illuminates how the Iranian state narrative, framed through the prism of security, separatism, and perceived threats to the state, further entrenches and exacerbates the plight of marginalized groups in these areas. Yosra AleAhmad, in a poignant exploration, vividly portrays the state-sponsored economic underdevelopment and securitization of Kurdistan, with a specific focus on the precarious circumstances faced by female *kolbars*. AleAhmad deftly unveils the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, and gender, laying bare the profound and often overlooked vulnerabilities experienced by Kurdish women engaged in the demanding work of *kolbars*. These resilient women navigate treacherous mountainous terrain, burdened by heavy loads, all while confronting the looming specter of violence from Iranian state border guards. The essay serves as an illuminating exposé on the struggle of Kurdish women *kolbars* caught between patriarchal state violence and oppression within their own Kurdish community. The intersectional lens, wielded by AleAhmad, finds resonance in Azadeh Kian's exploration. Kian sheds light on the systematic oppression endured by various religious, ethnic, and gendered groups in Baluchistan and Golestan. Arguing that Iranian state oppression of non-Persian ethnic and religious communities manifests in Shi'itization, discrimination, securitization, and marginalization, Kian unveils a pattern of injustice. In alignment with AleAhmad's findings, Kian underscores how patriarchal violence, both state-driven and community-inflicted, specifically targets minoritized women, denying their rightful place as sovereign and equal citizens in society. This multi-layered analysis offers a nuanced perspective of the complex dynamics of oppression that persistently shape the lives of marginalized groups in Iran.

The economic deprivation experienced by minoritized communities often goes hand-in-hand with political and cultural exclusion from Iranian society. The cultural othering of non-Persians, primarily manifested in the state's reluctance to acknowledge, accommodate, and institutionalize the multilingual reality of Iran, is a significant source of oppression. In this context, Leila Rahimi Bahmany provides a historical account of how Iranian modernist intellectuals inferiorized and foreignized Azeri Turkish in their nation-building pursuit by glorifying the Persian language as the symbolic marker and cornerstone of Iranian identity. According to Bahmany, the pathologization of minoritized linguistic communities is so prevalent that "Within Iran, writing in any language than Persian, which by definition would be an unsanctioned language, has been regarded as a personal malady or contagion, posing a threat to social cohesion and Iran's integrity." In contrast to this

discourse, Bahmany views the production of literature by excluded linguistic communities as a challenge to the dominant norms, potentially paving the way for a cultural landscape permeated by linguistic and literary diversity.

While this roundtable primarily addresses minoritized communities with Muslim backgrounds, James Barry's essay focuses on how the Armenian Christian community is reshaping the perception of the concept of *aqaliat* (minority) in Iran. In the early years of the IRI, Ayatollah Khomeini rejected the idea of minority status among Muslims, dismissing it as a Western fabrication intended to divide the Muslim world. Despite their long historical presence in Iran, Armenians are often perceived as foreigners or migrants. Due to fears of collective punishment and displacement, Armenians tend to refrain from participating in protests against the Iranian regime. Barry also underscores how the IRI's leading representatives strategically use the Armenians' presence in Iran in international relations, presenting such as a symbol of Iranian diversity, tolerance, and progressiveness. In practice, however, Armenians in Iran do not enjoy this purported tolerance.<sup>2</sup> This disparity becomes particularly pronounced when considering the widespread support for Azerbaijan against Armenia among Iranians. The dynamic puts the small Iranian Armenian community in a vulnerable position, especially as Azeri Turks hold influential positions in the state elite and their religious identity aligns closely with that of the IRI.

In the subsequent discussion, I delve into the topic of oppression faced by minoritized communities and explore the questions surrounding difference and inequality within the context of the Iranian state, examining how minoritized communities are categorized, valued, and penalized as perceived threats to the political and territorial unity of Iran. My central objective is to denaturalize and destabilize Iran's ethnonational hierarchy, based on the dominance of the Persian identity, and advocate for a more inclusive Iran – one that embraces the multireligious, multinational, and multilingual constellation of Iranian society. I aim to reframe the struggles of minoritized ethnonational groups through the lenses of fairness, justice, solidarity, freedom, and equality. In this context of justice, security, and accommodation of minority nationalism, the political philosopher Will Kymlicka contends that states and state borders are not inherently sacred, and secession, while not the foremost political priority for minoritized national communities in Iran, should not be treated as a criminal act. Within a democratic political system, the idea of secession should not be deemed unthinkable. The paramount goal of a democratic state should revolve around promoting democracy, justice, human rights, and the well-being of its citizens. It should not involve coercing different ethnonational communities to remain bound to the existing state indefinitely – a vision only achieved through violence and oppression. States committed to democratic ideals of citizenship and equality must be prepared to accept the risk of secession. Living with this risk becomes imperative, as it aligns with the core principle of democracy and ensures a genuine commitment to the well-being and equality of all citizens.<sup>3</sup>

### **The elusiveness of Iranian identity: the illusion of Persian superiority**

Unlike Turkey and Syria, where the political order is more easily traced to Turk and Arab ethnic primacy, Iran is often perceived as more inclusive and less ethnically hierarchical. This is, however, a far cry from reality.<sup>4</sup> On various occasions, for instance, Iranian state

<sup>2</sup> As Wendy Brown has argued, "Tolerance as a political practice is always conferred by the dominant, it is always a certain expression of domination even as it offers protection or incorporation to the less powerful." Wendy Brown, *Regulating aversion: Tolerance in the age of identity and empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 178.

<sup>3</sup> Will Kymlicka, "Justice and security in the accommodation of minority nationalism," in *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights*, eds. Stephen May, Tariq Modood, and Judith Squires (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 145, 166.

<sup>4</sup> For critical interrogations of ethnic politics, Iranian/Persian identity, and nationalism, see: Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 1993); Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: culture, power, and the state, 1870-1940* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2011); Afshin

representatives have refused to endorse the autonomy of the Kurdish language, designating it as a dialect. In 2014, the Iranian Consulate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq released an announcement stating: “[the] Kurdish dialect is not an autonomous language but belongs to the Iranian languages and is a mixture of Arabic, Turkish and Persian languages.”<sup>5</sup> This refusal to accept Kurdish as a separate language, which is ironically silent on Persian’s own borrowings from Arabic, tacitly disqualifies Kurdish claims to nationhood.

Rezwan Hakimzadeh, Vice President of Iran’s Department of Education, argued in 2019 that Kurdish children’s limited knowledge of the Persian language can be considered a biological defect.<sup>6</sup> In the same year, Iranian authorities imprisoned Zara Mohammadi, a Kurdish language teacher and human rights defender, accusing her of “forming a group against national security.”<sup>7</sup> This highlights a concerning pattern, one in which the pursuit of the right to education in non-Persian languages is mistakenly associated with perceived threats to national security, social cohesion, and territorial integrity. We see an illustration of this in the story of a young Kurdish man I interviewed after his arrival in Sweden. Originally from Kurdistan in Iran, he was born in a refugee camp in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Upon returning to their village, his Kurdish name and those of his two younger brothers were changed to Persian and Arabic names. While at school he was always called by his Persian name, at home and among friends he was known by his Kurdish name. In Sweden, he assumed his Kurdish name on Swedish identity cards. After the birth of his son, he visited the Iranian embassy to apply for his son’s Iranian passport. His son’s Kurdish name, Kardo, was not accepted by the officials, who suggested a Persian name, Ardashir, instead. When the man refused this name, one embassy staff member responded indignantly: “Today you ask for a Kurdish name, tomorrow you will be asking for a Kurdish state like those (Kurds) in Iraq.” The Kurdish name was reluctantly accepted, but only after assurances that it was not an anti-revolutionary name.<sup>8</sup> This illustrates how minoritized groups’ claims are often contested, distorted, and embattled when attempting to define themselves or defend their identities from a non-dominant position.<sup>9</sup> In accordance with this perspective, discourse within minoritized communities around linguistic, cultural, and political justice can be predominantly regarded as “the product of damage, of damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant culture.”<sup>10</sup>

While Iran is comprised of different ethnonational and religious groups, and popular nationalism is not always convergent with state nationalism, Iranian citizenship and national identity privilege Persian-speaking people. Drawing on the work of sociologist Krishan Kumar, I argue that Iranian nationalism works at a rhetorical and practical level. In Iran, as in similar multinational contexts, “there is the attachment of a dominant or core ethnic groups to a state entity that conceives itself as dedicated to some larger cause or purpose,

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Matin-Asgari, “The Academic Debate on Iranian Identity: Nation and Empire Entangled,” in *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*, eds. Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 173–192; Rasmus Christian Elling and Alam Saleh, “Ethnic minorities and the politics of identity in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 159–171; Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The emergence of Iranian nationalism: Race and the politics of dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Shahram Akbarzadeh, Ahmed Zahid Shahab, Laoutides Costas, and William Gourlay, “The Kurds in Iran: balancing national and ethnic identity in a securitised environment,” *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 6 (2019): 1145–1162.

<sup>5</sup> Barzoo Eliassi, *Narratives of Statelessness and Political Otherness: Kurdish and Palestinian Experiences* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 193.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 194

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty, “Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction,” in *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, eds. Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M. L. Moya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, “Introduction: Minority Discourse: What is to Be Done?” *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 7.

religious, cultural, or political.”<sup>11</sup> Persian-centric leaders and elites avoid talking about Persian as the ruling identity, emphasizing Iran as a country that nurtures peace, brotherhood (rarely sisterhood), and diversity, a discursive strategy deployed to conceal the Persian constituency’s ethnic and cultural dominance. As Kumar argues, if a dominant group is in charge, it does not

need to beat the drum or blow the bugle too loudly. To do so in fact would be to threaten the very basis of that commanding position, by reminding other groups of their inferiority and perhaps provoking them to do something about it.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, this dominant ethnonationalism becomes conspicuous when its ethno-symbolic power is challenged, as in the case of the Persian Gulf, with Arabs referring to it as the Arabian Gulf.

In line with Kumar, Lois Beck provides an intriguing anthropological account of ethnic politics in Iran, arguing that it is time to deconstruct the myth of Iranianness and consider the self-identification and lived experience of minoritized communities. Beck illustrates that Persians do not see the need to underline their identity as Persians because they benefit from a superior political and economic status. Beck points out that members of minoritized communities are far more self-conscious about their identities, maintaining that Persian political, cultural, and religious heritages have been imposed as the foundations of Iran’s identity.<sup>13</sup> The conflation of Iran with Persian identity is also widely entrenched in academic circles. Consider the journal of *Iranian Studies*, which defines its aim as a multidisciplinary journal “covering everywhere with a Persian or Iranian legacy,” an affirmation of the ethnonational hierarchy in Iran.

### **National sameness, difference, and equality**

When Hassan Rouhani assumed the presidency of Iran in 2013, marginalized national communities anticipated a shift towards a new political discourse marked by an augmentation of political and cultural rights. Shortly after his election, however, Rouhani made it clear that Iran adheres to a singular ruling identity, impassively asserting that the dominant Iranian identity encompasses various subcultures. Describing minoritized cultures and languages as subcultures can be construed as a political strategy aimed at thwarting efforts to assert nationhood and self-governance. It also serves to subsume minoritized communities under the overarching universality of Iranian identity. Stephen May, renowned scholar of language rights, contends that national languages are social constructs, products of nation and state-building processes. Coercively imposing a language as the official language in a multilingual society, while marginalizing minoritized languages, tends to establish “linguistic hierarchies of prestige.” These hierarchies can manifest as linguistic racism on institutional and intersubjective levels. Officials or national languages, in this context, become tools backed by the might of an army and navy to defend and naturalize their privileged position.<sup>14</sup> In a world characterized by a multitude of differences, the promotion of national sameness and assimilation poses a threat to those who do not align with the monocultural/monolingual order of society. This imposition can lead to the marginalization of diverse identities and languages, hindering recognition of and appreciation for the rich tapestry of cultural and linguistic diversity that exists globally.

Minoritized communities’ ongoing struggle and political aspirations, seeking to refashion Iranian citizenship for greater inclusivity, face persistent challenges in the form of national

<sup>11</sup> Krishan Kumar, “Nation and Empire: English and British Identity in Comparative Perspective,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 5 (2000): 580.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 590.

<sup>13</sup> Lois Beck, “Iran’s ethnic, religious, and tribal minorities,” in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 262.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen May, “Linguistic racism: Origins and implications,” *Ethnicities* 23, no. 5 (2023): 652.

security concerns and apprehensions of manipulation by external forces, particularly the United States and Israel, with the aim of destabilizing Iran. For minoritized communities, the presentation of democratic claims for a pluralistic and non-hierarchical Iran as a political strategy is coupled with dire warnings of severe consequences. Crossing the state's designated red line, both inside and outside Iran, could result in imprisonment and even execution. It is noteworthy that this discursive weapon is not solely wielded by the IRI. Reza Pahlavi, the former crown prince, who has endeavored to position himself as the leader of the feminist and Kurdish-led Women, Life, Freedom movement, also underscores the potential divisiveness of claims to a decentralized and federal Iran. This reflects a broader theme, described by philosopher Lawrence Blum as the "divisiveness paradigm," which posits such claims as allegedly threatening civic ties, national solidarity, and disunity.<sup>15</sup> When minoritized communities articulate their concerns around ethnic and religious inequalities in Iran, the Iranian regime and segments of its intelligentsia tend to characterize these grievances as manifestations of "extremism," "separatism," "tribalism," "fascism," "ethnonationalism," and even "terrorism." These labels are wielded to portray the ultimate goal of such articulations to be the division of the supposedly transhistorical and harmonious Iranian state. This framing serves to delegitimize minoritized communities' quest for equality and justice, perpetuating a narrative that stifles meaningful dialogue and constructive engagement on these crucial issues.

This brings us to the question of the criteria for being recognized as a human being endowed with rights, deserving of recognition, and entitled to respectful treatment. When minoritized national communities, such as Baluchis and Kurds, assert their humanness and right to acknowledgment as nations alongside other established nations, they are staking a claim to equality and justice. In doing so, they challenge the divisions and hierarchies perpetuating their subordination. Political scientist Anne Phillips contends there is a powerful ideal behind the rejection of contingent differences – such as culture, skin color, and sexual orientation – as potential sources of division. However, Phillips also warns that the notion of a common human identity poses a threat to the concept and realities of being different.<sup>16</sup> For instance, if minoritized and racialized groups are called upon to see beyond their particular and legitimate grievances, as indeed happened during the Women, Life, Freedom movement and diasporic protests in the West, there is a risk of further privileging the already privileged dominant group. Moreover, regarding political solidarity in the context of differences and existing power imbalance between different constituencies, it is important to avoid imposing national sameness ("we are all Iranians") as a prerequisite for a successful and inclusive movement, as this violent universalism has been a target of minoritized communities. As Ilan Kapoor and Zahi Zalloua point out, political movements and transnational networks become vulnerable when they begin stifling difference by "imposing a single vision/tactic or ignoring and excluding voices (along class, gender, disability, sexual, racial, and North-South lines), particularly the voices of the most marginalized."<sup>17</sup> Telling marginalized groups, predominantly concerned with their stigmatized and unrecognized differences, that they are also human and Iranian without altering and democratizing power relations is not a viable solution. As Phillips eloquently puts it, with respect to why minoritized groups insist on their differences:

If you are already more securely established in the hierarchies of power, it is that much easier to set your particularities aside. They do not thereby vanish, but they require no special attention because they are already more incorporated into what is understood as the human norm.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Blum, "Ethnicity, Disunity and Equality," in *Contemporary Debates in Social Philosophy*, ed. Laurence Thomas (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2008), 193.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 10–11.

<sup>17</sup> Ilan Kapoor and Zahi Zalloua, *Universal Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, *The Politics of the Human*, 13.

This passage eloquently illustrates how a flawed universalism perpetuates itself by expressing hostility towards marked groups seeking political visibility for their differences, aspiring to gain institutional and public recognition, respect, and representation. Excluded groups often find themselves compelled to relinquish their particularities in pursuit of the human or universal subject status seemingly bestowed by the nation-state. As minoritized groups challenge the ethnonational hierarchies imposed by states, they engage in a political act of judgment concerning justice and injustice, effectively disrupting naturalized forms of domination.<sup>19</sup> The potential for equality beyond national sameness arises when there is a political and legal transformation of institutions and discourses that deny, inferiorize, or exclude differences. In this political context, being a human being, equal as an Iranian citizen, and different, such as being Baluchi, need not be viewed as inherently incompatible or oppositional. The persistence of inequality within the Iranian nation-state impedes the realization of lasting peace, conviviality, and stability in Iranian society. This perpetuation of inequality and denial of rights create fertile ground for the cultivation of polarized identities, wherein certain groups assert themselves as subjects of rights and privilege at the expense of racialized and minoritized communities. Envisioning and implementing a new, inclusive political future necessitates a fundamental shift in the political normativity of nation-states and hierarchical citizenship, transcending the political dominance of the titular nation.

Political movements struggling for a democratic and pluralistic Iran need to provincialize the construct of Persian identity and challenge its presumed cultural hegemony. So long as Persian identity is the assumed master identity, setting the rules of the game on an uneven playing field, minoritized communities cannot expect equality; they will remain in an ascribed minority position awaiting the Iranian state's charity, paternalism, and benevolence, or violence if they challenge its political order. Thus, creating an egalitarian state in Iran entails relinquishing unearned privileges, thereby enabling children of minoritized communities to enter a world in which their identities, names, histories, religions, cultures, songs, and languages are present and structurally endorsed by the state. This constitutes the gist of the unconditional equality that minoritized national communities must pursue if they want to escape arbitrary oppression and violence within the framework of an Iranian state. As Phillips emphasizes, "Equality is something that people make happen when they refuse to accept the status of inferiors. Equality is a commitment and a claim."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, minoritized communities need not relinquish their differences to achieve equality and secure the position of unconditional equals. This involves being constitutionally endorsed and recognized as members of diverse ethnoreligious communities and Iranian citizens.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11; Engin F. Isin, "Ways of being political," *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 3, no. 1 (2002): 21–22.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Phillips, *Unconditional Equals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 112.