SCHOOLED TO OBEY, LEARNING TO PROTEST: THE AMBIGUOUS OUTCOMES OF POSTREVOLUTIONARY SCHOOLING IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Government

By

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ABSTRACT

This project examines efforts by the Islamic Republic of Iran to produce loyal "Islamic Citizens" through its postrevolutionary school system as way of securing the hegemonic rule of the state. Drawing upon eighteen months of fieldwork in Iran, including archival research of textbooks published from 1979 to 2008, as well as interviews and participant observation in two private Islamic high schools in Tehran, I show that Iranian schools have both emancipatory and disciplinary effects on students. Ordinary Iranians do not blindly accept or internalize the ideology of the state, instead resisting, reinterpreting or even ignoring aspects of the postrevolutionary project taught to them in school. Yet they often do so using the language, practices, and formal procedures of dominant groups. The dissertation demonstrates the incoherent and contested nature of the New Islamic Citizen, a concept that has changed often and dramatically over the past 30 years. Competition between rival groups for the moral authority to insert their vision of the ideal Islamic society into the education system accounts for the variation in the political and religious content of formal education. These ongoing and unresolved conflicts have resulted in a postrevolutionary curriculum layered with contradictions and tensions that in turn provide students with the resources and opportunities to challenge the totalizing project of the state. The dissertation reveals the relationship between the politics of schooling and the
politics of nationalism in Iran. Looking beyond the usual antinomies of domination/resistance, modern/traditional, or secular/religious attached to the study of political socialization in postrevolutionary Iran, this dissertation contends that interactions of state and society around the topic of schooling contributes to the production of a mutually produced and shared Islamic-Iranian framework for consent and opposition to state rule. This discursive framework is but the latest manifestation of a 200-year effort in Iran to produce an indigenous modernity rooted in an "authentic" and shared national culture.
Acknowledgements

My good friend and classmate Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar once observed that when we write our dissertation, we are in fact writing the story of our own selves. It was not, perhaps, unexpected that I would write about the politics of identity and schooling. What I did not expect was how the writing and researching of the dissertation, an intensely isolating experience, would reveal itself to be a communal act. This story was not, could not have been, written alone.

For those who helped carry me across, it was not easy work. Friends and family were faced with the daunting challenge of supporting me through years of questionable choices in hairstyle (ponytail), weight and mood swings, and general surliness, often taking place simultaneously. They did so unconditionally and without complaint.

I begin in Iran. Above all, I thank Mohammad Rezaei, my ostad and dear friend. I don’t think that I’ve laughed harder or learned more in a friendship. Mammad’s generosity to a displaced irooni-amrikai with an outrageous accent cannot be exaggerated. Two gentlemen who also became dear friends were Hadi Karimzadgan and Hamid Asgarian. The character and devotion of these two educators embody, in my mind, the ideal of the truly righteous Islamic Citizen. Many thanks to the devoted and professional staff at the Ministry of Education archives, led by Khanoom Zoljanahi. So much of what I learned about Iran came from my friends in Iran, including Sara Siyavoshti and her husband Mehran, Masoud Babaei, Ali Hajli and Zakaria.

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Before graduate school, I was mentored by a quartet of remarkable women. To Rhonda White and Esther DaViczaya at Edison Brentwood Elementary in East Palo Alto, California, and Jacqueline Franklin and Fay Thompson at Bancroft Elementary in Mt. Pleasant, Washington, DC, I can only say that I am in awe of what you all have accomplished in the classroom over many years.

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Finally, to my family, to Shahrooz and Sheila, Mom and Dad, I give thanks. Shasha, I am forever in your debt for providing a lifeline to the collection of books and articles in the UC Library system. Mom and Dad, you were my first and most important teachers. I would not be at this point without you. Your love and dedication were borne in not only the manner in which you raised me, by far the most difficult task faced by anyone on this list, but also in the small acts, the plate of fruit, the cup of tea, brought to my room when I was writing. With all of my love, I thank you.
Dedication

To my parents, Gohar and Aref Malekzadeh, who taught me what it means to be Iranian, and together with whom, beginning some 36 years ago, I learned how to become an American. I write in remembrance of my Uncle, Kazem Eyvazi, a true intellectual, whose laughter and quiet brilliance I already miss dearly. *Ba sepasgozari az zendeyad Agha-ye Eyvazi.*
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When a revolution comes under economic pressure, when it comes under political pressure, no one will reproach or blame this revolution...However, if this revolution is unable to nurture and train (natavanad tarbiat bekonad) its children then it will come under question.

The Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei
The First Day of First Grade

The young students of Faith Elementary School were greeted on their first day of first grade by an upperclassman dressed as an oversized rabbit. Standing outside of the school’s gate, the costumed student led a contingent of fifth-graders in a spirited celebration of the Day of Blossoms, the Šûz-e shokoofeh. These older girls were on hand to welcome their new classmates as they arrived with their parents to their new school.

The start of the 1387-1388 school year began, like all school years begin, a day early for the incoming first grade class. Šûz-e shokoofeh comes with its own traditions, designed to help students ease into the academic year. Later, throughout the afternoon and again in the evening, state-run media would broadcast many of the day’s highlights. The same scene was repeated in Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz, Ahvaz: Young boys or girls standing in neat rows, each holding in his or her hand a flowery stalk. The principal raises a microphone and calls the kids into rows, regimented by teacher. An official gives a speech and then, at exactly the same time across the country, he strikes a metal plate with a small hammer, the aural signal for the year to begin. The kids, some with hesitation and others with eager haste, pass under a Koran and into their new classrooms, the air made redolent with the smoky swirl of burning esfand, a traditional and fragrant herb used for the warding off of bad spirits.

Faith Elementary School began the year somewhat different from the schools showcased on television. There were no lecturing VIPs, no striking of a plate, no fragrant flowers for the
children, save for the bouquet spread across the courtyard entrance. At this particular school, tucked between a graying stack of concrete housing and office buildings, only the Koran and esfand were the same.

Neither students nor their parents seemed to notice or care. Mothers and fathers were already too busy chasing after the daughters, cameras and video recorders in hand. Here and there a small group of girls stood in a semicircle for a group picture, corralled together by their parents. In any case it was Ramadan, and the normally festive ceremonies were subdued in deference to the holiday. Readings from the Koran were accompanied by a prayer and multiple salavats, sent above in acknowledgement of the country’s martyrs and many wounded, killed as a result of the War of Holy Defense, or Jang-e moqades, launched almost thirty years ago to the day on the first day of school in 1980.

The day concluded with the parents being led into the school’s narrow hallways to their daughters’ classrooms. There, on top of each desk, a small gift packet of pencils, paper, and eraser awaited each child. These would keep the children occupied while their teacher explained to anxious parents how the remainder of the school year would progress.

The Green Movement

Less than nine months later, thousands upon thousands of young Iranians poured out onto the streets in what was the largest and most sustained demonstrations seen in Iran since the 1979 Revolution.1 What began as a series of spontaneous protests against the disputed reelection of President Mahmood Ahmadinejad to a second term in office soon expanded into a broad

---

1 Throughout this dissertation I refer to the Iranian Revolution, sometimes called the Islamic Revolution, as the 1979 Revolution. Although Islamic Revolution (Enqelab-e islami) is the most common name given to the social movement that led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy, and is the label used by the Islamic Republic of Iran, I consider it to be a too-narrow term given the broad-based coalition that participated in the Revolution, including communists, socialists, and liberals. “Islamic” at once erases their participation from history, and suggests that those who members of the coalition who opposed the Shah but did not support the founding of an Islamic regime in Iran were somehow not “Islamic” themselves.
democracy movement known as the Green Movement. The summer protests persisted into the fall, eventually reaching into the new school year as high schools became sites of student activism, a phenomenon not seen since the earliest days of the Revolution.

The state used the ongoing protests, both on and off campus to justify the acceleration of the re-Islamicization of schools already under way. There came an announcement in November 2009 that some 6,000 Basij militia centers would be established in elementary schools across Iran “to promote and establish the ideas of the revolution and the Basij.” The following summer, Iran’s Ministry of Education outlined plans to assign an additional 1,000 religious clerics to schools in Tehran. These actions were based on the premise that the school system, long considered to be the most important of the postrevolutionary state’s institutions, and a frontline bastion against the cultural onslaught of Iran’s enemies in the west, had failed “to reform and renovate the thoughts of students.”

As they had throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, American and European observers fixated on the revolutionary potential of Iran’s youth population. Once again commentators pulled from the shelves the narratives of the student movement demonstrations of the late 1990s. Foreign media coverage of the Green Movement invariably focused on the futility of the Iranian state and its educational planners to mold the ideal society through schooling. Formal education, the “brain-washing” of young Iranians, had had the opposite

---

5 A critical distinction is made between “schooling” and “education.” Following standard practice in the educational literature, I use the former term to refer to instances and processes of formal education, typically in a state-run educational setting, though private centers of learning are also included if their curriculum is provided for and
effect. The Islamic Republic, much like the Pahlavi monarchy before it, despite committing considerable attention and resources to foster loyalty to the Revolution and the regime amongst its youth, had seen its efforts fail. Iranian youth, a full two-thirds of the population, and well-educated, were an inexorable force:

“By trying to gain more control of the media, to re-Islamize schools, they think they can make a comeback,” said Mehrzad Boroujerdi, an Iran expert and professor at Syracuse University. “But the enemy here is Iran’s demographics. The Iranian population is overwhelmingly literate and young, and previous efforts to reinstall orthodoxy have only exacerbated cleavages between citizens and the state.”

Conveniently ignored or perhaps forgotten was months leading up to the election, well before the rise of the Green Movement, many of these same media outlets had touted a series of “scientific” reports claiming to document the apparent success of the Islamic regime in inculcating Iranian youth in the “Khomeini’s ideology.” These reports, released in close succession, confirmed what many feared to be the worst about education in Iran, its apocalyptic nature and overt hostility to peace with Europe and the United States.

With the rise of the Green Movement Now, this view of Iranian education was suspended, put into remission if only temporarily. The efficacy of Islamic schooling, it would appear, hinged on the success or failure of… idea only reemerged again not a year after the peak monitored by the state. Schooling is a subset or an instance of education, education being processes of teaching and learning writ-large, i.e., in the school, at home, in the mosque, at play with peers, through media, and so forth. This project deals almost exclusively with the phenomenon of schooling, with the understanding that formal education never occurs as a wholly isolated, “scientific,” neutral institution, but is very much enmeshed in the nexus of historical, cultural, and social processes particular to the country or countries under study.

7 Worth, “Iran Expanding Effort to Stifle the Opposition.”
of the protests that, for a brief time at least, had much of the world convinced that Iran was on the brink of another revolution.

The rush to alternately cast education either as a source for revolution or resistance neglected to note the Islamic character of the protests themselves. Both regime and the foreign commentators overlooked this critical quality of the Green Movement. Spontaneous demonstrations and rallies mounted by pro- and anti-Ahmadinejad forces in the capital’s major squares and thoroughfares in the days before the election featured dueling signs and chants proclaiming their candidate to be the embodiment of the “true and good Muslim.” In the aftermath of the disputed election, what was initially a straightforward protest movement seeking redress for millions of lost votes (“Where is my vote?”) quickly transformed into a program of moral witness against a state that claimed the mantle of righteous Islam (“Islam = Honesty” and “Lying is Un-Islamic”).

What connection, then, if any, can be drawn between schooling and the recent political turmoil in Iran? Will the education of Iranian children, including the young girls of Faith Elementary School, who today stand at the beginning of what for schooled by the IRI over the next twelve years, ensure the survival and expansion of the Revolution as Iran’s leaders wish? Or will their academic training turn out to be preparation for a future of protest and rebellion, the inexorable consequence of a youthful and well-educated population taught by the state to oppose injustice wherever it may occur? Is the state, in other words, planting the seeds of its own reform, if not destruction?

Statement of Thesis and Research Goals

This project examines efforts by the Islamic Republic of Iran to produce loyal "Islamic Citizens" through its postrevolutionary school system. Framed as a continuation of Iran's nearly 200-year effort to produce an indigenous modernity rooted in the "authentic" culture of that country, I ask what it means to Islamicize young members of a society whose natural and authentic national identity is, according to the state’s own rhetoric, already Islamic. Drawing upon eighteen months of fieldwork in Iran, including archival research of textbooks published from 1979 to 2008, as well as interviews and participant observation in two private Islamic high schools in Tehran, I assert that Iranian schools have both emancipatory and disciplinary effects on students. While ordinary Iranians do not blindly accept or internalize the ideology of the state, instead resisting, reinterpreting or even ignoring aspects of the postrevolutionary project taught to them in school, they often do so using the language, practices, and formal procedures of dominant groups.

This project, therefore, seeks to explain how efforts to shape culture and identity in a particular institutional realm impacts patterns of rule and change. More than three decades of postrevolutionary education in Iran has produced generations of young dissidents who share the political stage with youth equally committed to the defense of the Revolution and its Supreme Leader. Despite their political differences, these young Iranians speak and draw upon a similar stock of cultural and religious practices and beliefs to advance their political goals. Their shared instruments, drawn from a resonant cultural identity, are the outcome of a school system
designed by its operators to manufacture a uniform national culture (yekbaft) from the many ways of being (hezarbaft) found in Iran.

The mixed outcomes of schooling are matched by the mixed content of Iran’s educational project. The dissertation demonstrates the incoherent and contested nature of the New Islamic Citizen, a concept that has changed often and dramatically over the past 30 years. Competition between rival groups for the moral authority to insert their vision of the ideal Islamic society into the education system accounts for the variation in the political and religious content of formal education. These ongoing and unresolved conflicts have resulted in a postrevolutionary curriculum layered with contradictions and tensions that in turn provide students with the resources and opportunities to challenge the totalizing project of the state. Looking beyond the usual antinomies of domination/resistance, modern/traditional, or secular/religious attached to the study of political socialization in Iran, this dissertation contends that interactions of state and society around the topic of schooling contributes to the production of a mutually produced and shared Islamic framework for consent and opposition to state rule.

A pair of questions guides the research, one narrow and the other broad. The narrow question asks: Why has postrevolutionary schooling in Iran seemingly failed to produce a uniform morality by which the state is able to secure its authority. Inside of this “why” there is embedded both a “what” and a “how” question: What is taught to the children in Iran’s school system, and how is this content taught and received in the school? 

The broad question asks: What is the political work that schools do, and what are the consequences when the school fails, as it so often does, to carry out the state’s moral project? Like the narrow question, this broad question spawns an assortment of related secondary questions including: How does an openly ideological school system affect patterns of rule and
resistance? What is the impact of schooling on relationships of power between state and society? Does it help, hinder, or have no effect on governance? Put plainly, does schooling contribute to state power? Or does it undermine state rule?

**Postrevolutionary Education in the Context of the Literature on Education**

This is ultimately a story of moral failure.\(^\text{10}\) For the past 30 years Iran’s school system has failed to produce consensus regarding the cultural content of the nation. That the Iranian state fails in its cultural project is not surprising. State-driven social transformations through schooling, absent large-scale acts of violence, are notoriously unsuccessful and provide little basis for puzzle-driven research.\(^\text{11}\) The following research and analysis is an attempt to move away from binary standards of success and failure, with an eye to expanding the meaning of failure by studying its variable effects. Put another way, I explore the possibility that state failure in the political, social, and moral education of children *does not* result in the erosion of authority or capacity to rule.

The unvanquished assumption that schooling *matters* ensures that moral failure will, in one form or another, continue to be a feature of education in Iran. Whether Iranian schools have in fact failed in their mandate to preserve the Revolution or are successfully churning out row after row of committed *basijis* bent on self-annihilation is, for our purposes here, less important than the implicit claim that a school system is in fact capable of shaping entire societies.

Belief in the power and indispensability of the school, although a recent development in human history, is also one of the most trenchant and widespread beliefs found in the world today. The subject of countless movies and books, through schools societies and individuals find passage to a better life:

\(^{10}\) I play here with the idea that moral regulation is fundamental to state power.

\(^{11}\) Thanks to Dr. Charles King for this observation.
the articulation of and actualization of utopian visions is exactly what we have come to expect from the school...First, we have faith that schooling will be an effective means of cultural transmission, through which we reproduce our values and institutions, nurture our history and literature, and impress the future with the stamp of a valued past...And second, we have faith that schooling will turn each individual student into a dynamic engine of technological and economic change, enabling the sort of progress, development, and innovation that will make the nation "competitive"...

A shared faith in modern education as a meliorating force is a symptom of the broad influence that functionalist understandings of schooling have had on the popular imagination worldwide. Functionalist theorists view formal education as a key component in the production of a modern society. States require a productive, ordered society for their modernization projects. Schools serve this purpose by fostering a society based on merit rather than family lineage or inheritance. Functionalists portray schools as benign institutions capable of providing opportunities in the service of the majority of a country’s citizens. A well-run educational system dispassionately selects and tracks talent, provides expert knowledge, and transmits values from one generation to the next. Developing countries eager to catch up to the industrialized world have readily adopted functionalist approaches to schooling.

If the theory of functionalism gives us hope that education is the answer, the proverbial silver bullet for solving a range of social ills, including poverty, violent conflict, and discrimination, then we are ensured of the efficacy of state-led education by the traditional literature on education. Academic and journalistic accounts of schooling in postrevolutionary Iran as well as the broader Middle East tend to focus exclusively on textual analysis of the

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12 Gregory Starrett, “Textbook Meaning and the Power of Interpretation,” in Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East, eds. Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2007), 227. Starrett is himself quite skeptical that the twin purpose of schooling can be reconciled. He goes on to write in the same passage: “…what we tend not to recognize as often as we should is that these two promises are at odds. Cultural conservation and cultural innovation are contradictory ideals.”
official curriculum. The effect of education on national identity is understood by reading the “state’s version” of schooling through content analysis of textbooks and official goals. The day-to-day process of schooling, with all of its banalities and challenges familiar to anyone with a background as an educator, is left out. By emphasizing top-down mappings of national identity the literature tends to overlook the unique and varied ways in which educational policy is disputed, reworked, and appropriated by students, teachers and parents at the local level. Such an approach assumes a clear and unmediated transmission from textbook, through teacher, to student. One is left with an image of schools as assembly lines, quietly churning out fully formed citizens.

Functionalists are not without their critics and by the 1960s researchers began to cast a more critical eye on classical sociological accounts of schooling. Conflict or social reproduction theorists argue that rather than serving the needs and values of the majority of society, schools are an instrument of rule for a select minority. Power and domination, not development and advancement, are at the base of any national education system. Far from identifying and elevating the “best and the brightest” that society had to offer, schools are “state apparatuses” that consolidate elite status and perpetuate inequality. The perceived neutrality and independence of schools peddled by functionalists in reality disguises schools’ true function as instruments of domination. By transmitting to children the requisite credentials and “social

capital” necessary for a successful adult life, rather than cognitive skills, schools provide a sublime means of assuring that patterns of inequality will continue in the future.

It is easy to see why the pessimistic vision offered by critical theories of education has gained little traction amongst state planners in the developing world. While reproductionist scholarship provides an important corrective to the cheery optimism of the functionalists, it offers little way out of existing patterns of inequality and domination.\textsuperscript{17} Critical scholarship is guilty of the same ahistoricism and state-centric analysis that their counterparts in the functionalist camp offer. Both produce explanatory models with causal arrows that run in straight lines from design to outcome. Unfettered by considerations of process, history, or power, and privileging content over instruction, these theories render the schoolhouse a politics-free zone, one in which the dominant vision of citizenship triumphs, be it a benign vision or one in the service of scheming elites.

Whether education is seen through the functionalist or reproductionist lens, it is always the adults that are in charge. Reading the literature I found myself in agreement with Elsie Rockwell’s observation that the prevailing theoretical focus on the “disciplining of bodies” fails to capture the collective power of children to disrupt the best-laid plans of adults.\textsuperscript{18} Having myself spent several years trying to put “order” into a classroom of 5- and 6-year olds, the notion that disciplinary regimes only run in one direction is manifestly inaccurate.

\textsuperscript{17} “According to Collins (Collins and Makowsky, 1993, pg. 264), ‘Bourdieu’s theory is completely closed. It is totally cynical, totally pessimistic. We are eternally doomed to stratification...We cannot get outside our skins; we can only change places inside an iron circle.’” Cited in Alan R. Sadovnik, “Introduction: Theory and Research in the Sociology of Education,” in \textit{Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader}, ed. Alan R. Sadovnik (London: Taylor and Francis, Inc., 2007), 11-12.

States worldwide, of course, do an impressive job of compelling children to attend school, to sit and stand in rows and lines, and to participate in the various banalities that comprise the school day in classrooms around the world, ranging from staged rallies to square dancing.\footnote{Square dancing was a regular feature of my elementary school years.} A more interesting question, one that gets at the heart of this particular project, is to ask how states secure the participation of children in schooling, why families choose to send their “babies”\footnote{The term belongs to my old Washington DC principal, Ms. Faye Thompson, who used to affectionately refer to our students at Bancroft Elementary as our “babies.”} to school, and not least of all, how adults go about teaching students and what those kids do once they are put into the classroom or stand outside on the schoolyard during the morning roll call.

Put another way, I am interested in how relationships of power daily get sorted out in the classroom and at the local school site. This project, therefore, seeks to explain how efforts to shape culture and identity in a particular institutional realm, and how these efforts impact patterns of rule and change.

**Scope, Methods, Strengths and Weaknesses**

This dissertation was carried out using a case study approach. Single case study is, as was suggested many years, more than a genre or “just the telling of stories,” but a method with its own strengths and weaknesses.\footnote{Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in *Handbook of Political Science: Strategies of Inquiry*, Vol. 7, eds. Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 79-138.} Alexander George and Andrew Bennett define case study as “an instance of a class of events,” a “well-defined aspect of a historical episode that the investigator selects for analysis, rather than a historical event itself.”\footnote{Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 17-18.} For this study, the class

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\textsuperscript{19} Square dancing was a regular feature of my elementary school years.
\textsuperscript{20} The term belongs to my old Washington DC principal, Ms. Faye Thompson, who used to affectionately refer to our students at Bancroft Elementary as our “babies.”
\textsuperscript{22} Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 17-18. George and Bennett insist that past understandings of case study methods are flawed, based on the mistaken assumption that a case is a phenomenon for which we report and interpret only a single measure on any pertinent variable.” By focusing on the single measure of a specific variable, case studies are pushed into a situation where their validity is assessed based on the distinction between small-n and
of event is schooling, which represents the “well-defined aspect” of postrevolutionary Iran, and in which the central historical episode is the 1979 Revolution. Variation is sought using within-case analysis of schooling, specifically the development of the Islamic educational system in the period 1979-2008. This expanded scope means that, in effect, the project does not deal with a single school system but what can reasonably be described as the many versions of Islamic schooling that have emerged in Iran since the 1979 Revolution.

Even as I deal with variation in the postrevolutionary period, I draw historical and institutional linkages between the current educational system in Iran and what has been a distinctly Iranian project of modernization. Here variation diminishes considerably as I demonstrate how from its beginnings in the early 1800s, modern forms of education have been used by Iranian reformers as a means of transforming social and political life in Iran, starting with the narrow purpose of defense military reforms and gradually expanding to include the whole of Iranian society. Whether the objective of schooling has been narrow or comprehensive, educational reformers have generally sought to balance schooling the use of foreign sources of knowledge with the preservation of Iranian culture.23

Qualitative research offers a number of strengths that are particularly relevant to the study of education in Iran. Case study method allows me to maximize the validity of my research. Validity refers to the idea that research is actually observing, identifying, and measuring what it claims to be.24 Valid measure and assessment is of particular relevance to this research given the near absence of ethnographic work in the country of Iran. As I explain below,

large-N studies, in other words, using the logic and standards of statistical and quantitative methods. Under these circumstances, case studies are more or less set up for failure.

research on schooling in the Middle East has suffered because of an overreliance on impersonal sources of data, particularly school textbooks. Schooling is a highly intersubjective affair, and textual analysis is simply incapable of measuring the effects that schooling has on adults and children, or to explain how materials are implemented in the classroom.

The concept of validity may seem a somewhat obvious and uncontroversial point, but if we compare case studies to, say, a statistical analysis approach we can begin to understand why validity is often considered to be one of the “value-added” features of qualitative research.

Qualitative research typically deals with social phenomena that are notoriously difficult to measure, including culture, power, and state strength. These phenomena are typically highly contextualized and subject to change over time through the interaction of social actors. Moreover, the sensitivity of the case study researcher to contextual factors improves the ability of the researcher to look at the range of intervening variables and triggering conditions associated with a particular causal mechanism. Given this complexity, quantitative approaches may prove to be limited in their capacity to operationalize observed concepts or disaggregate variables in such a way that they accurately reflect reality.

Similarly, because a case study approach involves the researcher getting into the “guts” of a particular case, or to use another familiar metaphor, allows the researcher to lift the lid on the “black box” of a subject, case studies allow for the development of new, more valid hypothesis as a result of data collection. Deriving new hypotheses is identified as a particular strength of case studies because it allows the researcher access to unexpected revelations or

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25 George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 19.
26 George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 21-22.
discoveries in research. As George and Bennett observe, just because “observations are theory-laden does not mean that they are theory-determined.”

Validity comes with tradeoffs, notably in the areas of reliability and generalizability. Reliability involves the accuracy of research methods and techniques, with the expectation that these accurate measuring tools and devices, as well as the generated data, can be replicated by other researchers or in other research contexts. Quantitative methods are particularly strong in this regard, as they rely on an existing and fixed set of research instruments, including replicable data sets and fixed questionnaires.

Due to the emphasis placed on the contingency, complexity, and indeterminacy of social phenomena, qualitative research tends to be highly skeptical of the value or feasibility of such methods, and may ask whether that an undue emphasis on reliability may inadvertently diminish the validity of research. Unless attention is paid to both validity and reliability, the result will be “a nonsensical situation where a researcher may be not at all clear about what they are measuring (validity), but can nevertheless claim to be measuring it with a great deal of precision (reliability).”

Put another way, the precision promised by modern statistical measures and

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27 George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 20-21. The idea that qualitative, inductive work can open up new and unexpected pathways for research was confirmed to me many times during my fieldwork in Iran. For example, given the existing literature on postrevolutionary textbooks I had no way of anticipating what turned out to be a highly dynamic and variable set of themes and lesson plans, whose variation did not necessarily correlate with changes in the domestic political situation in Iran. This research outcome was only possible because of hours of work put in at the Ministry of Education archives. Similarly, I assumed that my research at two private Islamic high schools would be an exhibition of ideal-type schools in the context of the Islamic Republic, as these schools actively pursue the goal of producing students who are adept at science and are successful in their post-secondary academic careers, but who also demonstrate deep devotion to Islam and the political values of the state. What I found instead was a more complex and nuanced situation in which administrators and teaching staff were successful in reaching their academic and cultural goals but often did so by ignoring, changing, or even subverting the state’s curriculum. Replicability has come under considerable, and frankly, unexpected questioning in recent, provoking what might be described as a crisis…See NEW YORKER.

29 Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 187.

30 Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 187.
techniques, “rulers” as it were, have little value if they do not measure what its bearer claims to be measuring.

The imperative to produce accurate and valid data is particularly true in regards to current research on postrevolutionary Iran, a country that has been described as a “black hole” of knowledge for outside observers. The lack of inductive work on Iran has implications beyond just academia. Iranian studies constitute an area of research that, much like Sovietology of years ago, is never far removed from current affairs. Unencumbered by the weight of empirical data, analysts of Iran have felt free to go on flights of rhetorical fancy, drawing dubious and sometimes even embarrassing conclusions about the “true” state of affairs in the Islamic Republic.

My aim here is to provide rich detail, but to not abandon disciplinary commitments to the production of valid generalizations of political phenomena. Daniel Ziblatt notes that comparativists might do well to aim for middle-range theories that allow for generalization but not universalization. This can be accomplished, according to Ziblatt, by clear specification of the scope of the research.

Joel Migdal’s schematic definition of the state provides another means of generating middle-range generalizations. Migdal distinguishes between the state as an image and the state

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as a set of practices. The concept of the state’s image describes the phenomenon of the state as a universally imagined, accepted, and expected by “scholars and laypeople alike”:

The striking structural similarity of states, with their foreign ministries and treasures, their legislatures and courts, helps constitute the singular image. It has become embedded in people’s imaginations, not only among populations living under the rule of highly effective, centralized states, but even among those suffering the unruly, deadly conditions where no organization, state or otherwise, has managed to establish control. Whatever its derivation, then, this image of the state has become widely shared in different cultures and continents; what a state is, or should be, at least in the mind’s eye, has become remarkably similar across the globe, at least since the middle of the last century and perhaps even earlier.

This image, then, provides social scientists a fairly agreed upon standard for comparative analysis. Case study allows researchers to study the actual practices of states, not as deviations from a norm, but in order to better understand how contingencies of history, culture, and sequencing affect state formation.

Schooling is of course one the many structural features that comprise the universal image of the state, and can be studied as in rich and “thick” qualitative detail, which can then be compared to the development of schooling in a particular country or region, using the notion of “schooling,” writ-large, as a unifying standard. Put another way, schooling exists as a generalizable phenomenon and, per George and Bennett, as the particular “instance of a class of events,” i.e., the uniquely Iranian experience with modern education.

34 Migdal’s definition of the state is as follows: “The state is a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence in attempting to control people’s behavior and shaped by 1) the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is an outgrowth and representation of the people bounded by that territory, and 2) the actual practices of that organization’s multiple parts (author’s emphasis). See Joel Migdal, State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16.

35 Joel Migdal, “Researching the State,” unpublished author’s manuscript, provided by email correspondence, 2007.

36 A recent interview on the NPR program Fresh Air demonstrates in humorous fashion the relationship between the general and the specific in a given phenomenon, in this case marriage: “And a lot, you know, a lot of people ask you about your marriage when you are married. People go how's, you know, how's marriage? You know, but - and I'm, like, it's good for me. It's such a funny like general thing that people ask, like: How's marriage? But when it's such a specific thing, it's like, I like being married to my wife. I would hate to be married to your wife, but, yeah, it's great here.” “Spending the Night With Sleepwalker Mike Birbiglia,” Fresh Air, National Public Radio, October 18, 2010, http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=130644070 (last accessed December 26, 2010).
As I indicated earlier, I am concerned with the limitations of my ethnographical work. Certainly I do not claim to have the final word on education in Iran. This is an explicitly qualitative project more concerned with validity claims than generalizations about the effects of schooling on patterns of rule and change, and I do recognize that two schools do not make a school system. Great ambitions lay in but to recycle the famous phrase from Steinbeck, the best laid plans of mice and men, and especially social scientists, do not go as planned. There was no access. There did not take place, as planned, observation of public schools.

While I do not think that my inability to access a larger set of schools for observation and interviews undermines the project significantly, these deficiencies, I am confident, will be outweighed by the onsite data I have collected, particularly as my ethnographies are embedded in a historical and institutional analysis of Iran’s school system and its effect on patterns of rule. The anthropological data that I have collected will be of use to other scholars if only because the current literature on schooling and socialization in Iran and the broader Middle East contains limited ethnographic detail.

**Implementation of the Research Design in Iran**

In order to document the official educational goals, textbooks, and administrative structures produced at the state level as well as bottom-up responses to these goals I used an ethnographic approach consisting of archival research of state documents and pronouncements; one-on-one and focus group interviews with teachers, parents, students, principals, and state planners; and finally, participant observation in inside of the classrooms.

The goal was to gradually build up an empirical foundation from which I could describe variation around the content of the state’s project, the means by which the curriculum is implemented in private and public school settings, and finally, the reception and effect that
schooling has on political and social outcomes, goals that the particular strengths of case study have been of great use.

This is a departure from the usual approach to research on education in the Islamic Republic. There is presently little research into the experiences of actors in schooling as it actually happens. Contemporary scholarly and journalistic accounts of education in Iran as well as the broader Middle East focus primarily on textual analysis of the official curriculum.

Though significant work exists on the importance of schooling to cultural formation and nation-building, much of this literature eschews notions of contestation of the educational process. With an emphasis on the successes of top-down, elite-driven approaches, “reproductionist” visions of schools as “state apparatuses” or instruments that forge national consensus, inculcate ideologies, train labor forces, and transform identities pervades much of the literature. The literature places too much emphasis on the autonomy of elites and not enough on how the official educational agenda is provided, appropriated, selected, or reworked by local societies.

The scholarship on Iranian educational policy mirrors the shortfalls found in the broader literature. Research is characterized by a “discovery” ethos in which differences in lesson content necessarily “reveals” how the country has changed. Research design is built around careful comparisons of themes, pictures, and stories, typically framed by dyads such as “secularism versus religiousness,” “monarchism versus popular revolution,” “nation versus religion,” “Persian versus Islam,” among others.

37 Rockwell, “Schools of the Revolution,” 173. Althusser and Bourdieu are the two most commonly cited examples of this approach in the educational literature.
39 Jalal Matini, “The Impact of the Islamic Revolution on Education in Iran,” in At the Crossroads, ed. Adnan
Divorced from up-close analyses of the actual players involved in education, the conclusions of this research are misleading and often self-contradictory. Depending on the study and the statistical technique used, educational themes in Iran today are either radically different from the monarchist period, or represent continuity over regime types. The result is an academic muddle. Scholars regularly find dissonance between state rhetoric, public opinion, and the contents of textbooks, yet their methodology inhibits them from finding explanations as to why such contradictions are able to persist.

Current scholarship on Iranian schools focuses primarily on textual analysis of the official curriculum. The effect of education on national identity is understood by reading the “state’s version” of schooling through content analysis of textbooks. This state-centered approach assumes a clear and unmediated transmission from textbook, through teacher, to student. Rarely is the politics of implementation discussed or considered. The emphasis on top-down mappings of national identity leads researchers to overlook the unique and varied ways in which educational policy is disputed, reworked, and appropriated not only by students, teachers and parents at the local level, but also by state planners during the design process of the curriculum.


42 Many of the deficiencies in current research methodology can be traced to the influence of functionalist theories of schooling on scholars and state planners alike. Functionalist theorists view formal education as a key component in the production of a modern society. States require a productive, ordered society for their modernization projects. Schools serve this purpose by fostering a society based on merit rather than family lineage or inheritance. The educational system selects and tracks talent, provides expert knowledge, and transmits values from one generation to the next. Parsons, The Social System; Durkheim, Moral Education.
By contrast, my methodological goal has been to understand the particular in context. The presumption is that schooling is an intersubjective experience, whether between teacher and pupil, or elites competing to with one another at the institutional level. Case study method allowed me to capture the process of engagement between different actors within the classroom, and across time in ever-changing contexts. In this way I was better able to capture the varying inputs that shape political and social outcomes.

The primary goal of my research agenda, as laid out in my original dissertation proposal, was to gain insight into the experience and consumption of public schooling at the local level in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). In other words, I wanted to fill the current gap in knowledge regarding local responses to state-driven initiatives to produce the “New Islamic Citizen.” How did parents, students, teachers, and principals view the state’s project? I went into the field with the assumption that no institution is capable of fully reproducing itself and that the formal ideological program of the state being implemented in the schools would meet with considerable negotiation, if not contestation, by actors at the school sites. Part of my research aim was to engage in a structured ethnography of boys and girls public high schools in three distinct socioeconomic sectors of the capital. This would have allowed me to test variation based on the economic background of the teachers and students: Would less well-off students be more apt to accept the state’s agenda, as is commonly assumed? Or was it the case that Tehran’s more affluent neighborhoods were somehow more “Western” and therefore the least likely to embrace the state’s supposed message of traditionalism?43

Archival work on textbooks, media reports, and formal documents related to schooling went according to plan. Alas, my research plans for the actual school sites went awry at the

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43 Supposed because, despite widely-held perceptions to the contrary, modernity is not rejected by the IRI but is instead articulated in local, indigenous terms, terms that currently happen to be “Islamic.”
point of implementation. Access to the public schools did not materialize despite considerable efforts and contacts made during two pre-research trips to Tehran.

In order to enter any school in Iran I had to submit a formal request to the Ministry of Education. One of the conditions of the application was official sponsorship of the researcher by an Iranian university. This sponsorship would not be forthcoming. While I was given full run of my “home” university in Tehran, complete with access to the students and professors, none of my colleagues and friends at the school were able to obtain approval from their superiors in the university to formally sponsor me. My relationship with this particular and any other university in Iran would have to remain informal. The immediate and primary reason was the increasingly tense environment between the United States and Iran, which during the period of my fieldwork had reached its nadir. With open and daily discussion as to whether or not a U.S. attack on the Islamic Republic was imminent, we agreed that it would be unwise to pursue formal access to the schools.

Undoubtedly, my personal history played a role. It is true that knowing Farsi and being Iranian allowed me to access Iran in a manner unthinkable for the American or European researcher. Despite my background as an Iranian citizen and my fluency, I nonetheless remained an *Amrikai* or at minimum an Iranian from “the other side of the water” (*az oon var-e ab*), the accent, dress, and even manner of walking were dead giveaways that I was not a “local.”

On occasion, I tormented myself with the question of how much more I should have pushed for access. Clarity came with the spring 2008 arrest of Roxana Saberi, a reminder that...
while research in Iran is not as impossible or as dangerous as we might think back home, it is also useful to be overly careful.44 Paranoia had its benefits.

I had to pursue my research using informal connections. This meant that instead of a systematic comparison of three schools side by side, I focused on drawing as much as I could out of the particular school sites that had been made available to me. The “power” of sampling in qualitative research is found in the quality (richness/robustness) of the information obtained, not the numbers of persons interviewed. This is achieved through a theoretical saturation approach that focuses on uncovering a full range of knowledge, experiences, and attitudes theorized to be relevant to the research question.

If it is the case that research designs change once out in the field, it is also true that obstacles and failures frequently lead to opportunities that would have been otherwise ignored. As a direct result of not getting into public schools, my personal connections eventually led me to carry out ethnographies at two private Islamic schools in Tehran. Non-state schools in Iran are legally required to use the state’s centralized curriculum, but are otherwise free to develop their own hiring and firing practices, as well as extending the school day to include extracurricular activities unavailable in public schools. While at these non-state schools, I quickly realized that my dissertation had a new puzzle to tackle, namely: Why is there a need for private Islamic schools in a country in which every school is presumed to be Islamic? What social and political need do private Islamic schools serve in the IRI?

My primary objective had been to understand how local understandings of educational projects leads to negotiation and transformation of both local and state groups. The two private schools that I ended up researching proved to be an exceptionally rich source of data for

answering this research question. Well-known and highly regarded by families and the educational community, I was fortunate to have been given near-complete access to the classes, staff, and activities at Omid and Entezar. Indeed, because they are private schools, the schools’ principals were free to allow an outside researcher such as myself come and go as he pleased, a liberty I would likely never have obtained in a public school setting.

The Presentation of Chapters

The following axioms inform the organization of the dissertation’s chapters, and are presented here as a “rough and ready” guide and preview of the theoretical architecture of the research, which I explain in greater detail in Chapter One “Musings on Theory: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Emergence of a National Educational System in Iran 1811-1940”:

1. State formation and society formation, while analytically distinct, are mutually coforming.

2. The authority of the modern state in formation is based on material/coercive and immaterial/symbolic components. These components are also analytically distinct and mutually coforming, as symbolic politics “saturate and shape institutions as well as being promoted by them.”

3. Intentional state action often initiates the interaction of state and society, but outcomes generated by the purposeful behavior of the state, including struggle over particular points of contention between elements of the state and society, are almost never intended or anticipated by its officials but are determined by the process of interaction, itself

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subject to the contingencies of historical timing and the cultural, social, and institutional legacies found in the country under study.\textsuperscript{46}

In accordance with the claim that politics consists of a number of analytically distinct but mutually constitutive elements, the following dissertation chapters alternate between analysis of the state and society, and between the analysis of institutions and ideas. Although these chapters together constitute a generalized study of schooling in the context of modern state formation, each chapter of the dissertation stands on its own and can be read as an empirical window onto the particulars of postrevolutionary schooling in Iran, as well as the deep historical and intellectual ties of today’s school system with Iranian efforts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to reconcile modernity to the local context of Iranian culture and national identity.

Chapter Two “Structure no System: The Foundations of the Politicization of the Postrevolutionary School System (1979-1989)” presents the hegemonic project of the state, focusing on its material and institutional components. Here the state takes center stage as it struggles to produce from scratch an Islamic and revolutionary curriculum, at the same time it recruits elements of a pre-existing school system built up during years of Pahlavi rule. I demonstrate that war, near civil war, assassinations, international sanctions, and an exploding student population produce material obstacles to the consolidation of the postrevolutionary system of schooling. When combined with the hesitation of postrevolutionary planners in producing a clear set of goals and benchmarks, these exogenous and internal factors left Iran’s school system, as late as ten years after the Revolution, in a state of weak consolidation. As a result, the Ministry of Education was exposed to the political machinations and interventions of rival elites, particularly in the period since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. I will argue

that the failure to fully consolidate postrevolutionary schooling during the period in which factionalism was tempered by the presence of the Islamic Republic’s founding father lead directly to the current status of the Iranian school system as a structure of rules and regulations that lacks a systematic and consistent program for the education of Iran’s children.

Chapter Three “The Expansion, Overcrowding, and Appropriation of the School System by Ordinary Iranians, 1979-2008” turns the focus away from elite struggle and looks instead at the families for whom postrevolutionary schooling was being constructed. The postrevolutionary period was a time of tremendous growth and expansion of the school system, and for the first time in Iran’s modern history schooling became not only accessible to practically the entire population, but also an expectation. Here I ask: What happened when Iranian families made their first sustained contact with the state through the schools? If Chapter Two demonstrates the incoherence of the state’s educational project, then Chapter Three will show that families, insulated from elite machinations and for the most part uninterested in the politics of schooling, brought a tremendous sense of purpose to schooling. And in doing so, by participating in state-led education on terms mostly (but not entirely) of their own making, these parents managed over time to transform schooling from a public good and an instrument of state hegemony into a private resource in service to the advancement of their children’s future social and economic prospects. This chapter also addresses the issue of acute overcrowding of Iran’s school system. The expansion of the coverage of schooling in Iran coincided in the postrevolutionary period with an explosion in the population. This overloading of the educational system, only recently diminished, locked into the structure of schooling a system of teaching and assessment based on rote memorization and standardized testing, all leading up to the onerous and formidable university entrance exam, the konkoor. The demands and pressures
of meeting the academic requirements of school have eroded the capacity of the state to meet its ideological goals, goals which following the end of the war with Iraq and the death of Khomeini, less and less families viewed as a priority in their children’s education.

Chapter Four “Reading Baba Ab Dad in Tehran: The Development of Religion, Politics, and Citizenship in Postrevolutionary Iranian Primers, 1979-2008” shows that the religious and political messages found in postrevolutionary elementary Farsi textbooks (Grades 1-3) have been highly unstable and inconsistent over the past 30 years, with Islamicization of the texts peaking reaching its peak nearly a decade after the Revolution. More than just primers, these textbooks serve as the foundation of the state's project to produce the New Islamic Citizen by providing young students with their first exposure to the ideology of the Revolution and the official values of the Islamic Republic. My archival research, the first of its kind, demonstrates that internal struggles to consolidate the revolution as well as to institutionalize the postrevolutionary Ministry of Education continued well after the 1979 Revolution, and provides conclusive evidence that from the beginning, the Islamic Republic sought to produce both an Iranian and Islamic national identity, with these concepts frequently merging.

Chapter Five “Parvaresh: Case Study of a Concept, Part One” extends the discussion in Chapters Two and Three of the material challenges facing the Iran’s schools system by adding an ideational layer. I argue that the overtly ideological character of the Iranian school system, characterized by an “unhidden curriculum” and produced by a regime manifestly committed to the creation of an Islamic society loyal to the formal values of the state, results in the politicization and paralysis of that same school system. This politicization of education, produced because of qualities endogenous to postrevolutionary schooling, is the primary reason that the IRI fails to reach its goal of transforming students into idealized Islamic citizens. In
other words, Iranians schools have become over the past thirty years increasingly politicized because postrevolutionary education is itself political.

Chapter Five represents the first of a two-part case study of parvaresh. Parvaresh is the centerpiece of the Iranian school system and the state’s primary mechanism for the transmission and reproduction of its ideology. Universally celebrated as the most important component of education, parvaresh has nonetheless been fraught with contention throughout the history of modern education in Iran, particularly in its application. Against the view that there is consensus as to what constitutes Islamic values, I show how under Islamic rule, elite conflict over the use and content of parvaresh has become quite acute, reaching crisis levels in recent years.

Chapter Six “Parvaresh: Case Study of a Concept, Part Two” is the second part of the mini-study of parvaresh, and represents the final empirical chapter of the dissertation. I examine parvaresh at the point of implementation and using data from research at the private Islamic schools of Omid and Entezar, I will demonstrate why the state faces long if not impossible odds in replicating the successes of private Islamic schooling in the area of parvaresh. Unlike private schools, public schools school are unable to control for student population, to select a teaching staff whose priorities and educational approaches accord with that of the school, or to organize a set of extra-curricular activities designed to provide parvaresh instruction through “play.”

Finally, an explanation in regards to the third axiom listed above, in which I recapitulate Norbert Elias’ claim that political action by the state tends to produce unintended outcomes. This theoretical principle demands that the project take a long view of the phenomenon of education and schooling in Iran.47 In full agreement with the notion that any serious examination of the politics of education “requires attending to the historical mutability and

flexibility of political ideals and pedagogical practices and to the power relations (i.e., accommodation, contestation, negotiation) operative in educational systems),”

I insert history into every chapter in order to draw out and track the contingent and processual interactions of state and society.

History suffuses the dissertation generally: By historicizing the study of Iranian schooling, “by studying its formative moments and evolving processes,” not just since the 1979 Revolution but as a component of the early nineteenth century reforms of the Qajar dynasty, I am better able to integrate the material and immaterial components of the politics of schooling in Iran. Put another way, by peering through the “lens” of process at the phenomena of state formation and society formation, I am better able to “understand how different elements in each pull in different directions, leading to unanticipated patterns of domination and transformation.”

Origins

Many years ago, during one of her infrequent visits to the United States, my Iranian grandmother observed: “We lived as Muslims for over 50 years. Now they come and teach us what it means to be a ‘real Muslim,’ that all of this time we’ve been doing it wrong?” She was, in this exclamation, referring to the Islamic Republic, the pronoun “they” the term most commonly used in Iran whenever referring to politicians, the government, or its leaders. The

50 Joel Migdal, Atul Kohil, and Vivienne Shue, eds., State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8. Traditional political science methodology can be likened to mathematical equations used in linear algebra. Like linear algebra, researchers set up rows of independent and intervening variables that are then balanced on the other side of the equation by a series of dependent variables. While this system is very good at determining causal effects taken as a snapshot outside of time, my approach is closer to the mathematics of calculus. Just as calculus is the study of change over time, I seek to understand changes to, and caused by, schooling over time. The metaphor is courtesy of Dr. Matthew Schmidt.
context for my grandmother’s plaint is now lost, but over the years her exasperation remained with me because of its obvious irony---my madarjoon is a devout follower of her faith, fastidious in her prayers and a haji khanoom twice over, having made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Certainly, the image of a pious Muslim woman protesting the religious policies of the Iranian government did not accord with the image of Iran in the United States as a country populated by the fanatical supporters of a regime of “ayatollahs and mad mullahs,” and the secularist, modern, often well-off opponents of the Islamic state.

The way in which she drew upon her faith to criticize the government, and the manner in which the language of her religious practice both fueled and shaped her expression of righteousness, stayed with me for years afterwards. This memory shapes in no small measure the content and goals of this dissertation, as I seek to understand how opposition and support for the Revolution is often made using the same store of Islamic and Iranian cultural practices and beliefs.

The more proximate inspiration for the dissertation came in an East Palo Alto, California elementary school classroom. Still several years several years removed from graduate school and the PhD, I served as the homeroom, first-grade teacher to a class of twenty students, all of whom had either been born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States at a young age with their parents, or first-generation Americans, their parents native-born Mexicans.

Part of my task in both places was to help my students, almost all of them immigrants or the children of recent immigrants, to become Americans. But what kind of Americans? Which stories would I tell them, myself the son of immigrants from Iran?

The Columbus and Thanksgiving stories were particularly troublesome. I was serving in a predominantly Latino and indigenous community (the two, of course, often overlap): would I tell
my students that Columbus “discovered” the New World, the story I had learned growing up? Or would I share with them the more recent, revisionist version that has Columbus ravaging the tribes encountered in Hispaniola? Likewise, what of the traditional Thanksgiving narrative? The image of settlers and natives sitting around the same table, celebrating the year’s harvest, is a powerful and iconic representation of America’s promise. The comity of the Thanksgiving feast serves as an implicit rebuke of the Old World’s sectarian and ethnic strife. Yet within a generation, the colonists and Amerindians of New England were engaged in one of the most brutal wars in American history, one that ended in tragedy for the native population.\footnote{Jill Lepore, \textit{The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998).}

Against these “new histories” what was I, the teacher, to do? Was the importance of instilling a shared identity in a country as diverse as America more important than the need to tell children the “true” (i.e., the \textit{whole}) story?\footnote{WALZER and more controversially, JR.} I wondered if national mythologies, no matter how false or misleading, were sometimes necessary to bind an otherwise fractious society together. My own internal negotiations, at times fraught with anguish and ambivalence, led me to wonder about the sort of daily negotiations teachers might make in more charged contexts, places where the choice of lesson plan or style of delivery might lead not only to the loss of a job or the ostracism of one’s community, but could very result in violent sanction, or worse.

It is said that we write in our research our own stories. That I chose the topic of identity formation and its relationship to politics in Iran was not a surprise. Born in Iran myself, my family and I immigrated to the United States when I was still an infant. Although my father’s work with Caterpillar had brought us to the proverbial American heartland in Peoria, Illinois, until the age of five my social life, such as it was, was ensconced in Persian culture. Peoria in
the late 1970s, it turned out, had a rather large contingent of Iranians. My earliest memories include gatherings of large numbers of Iranians, either at our home or the homes of my parents’ friends. These parties, I would later find out from my parents, were attended by the range of Iranian ethnicities and religions found “back home,” including Baha’i, Jewish, Armenian, Azeri, secular Muslims. Although politics and heated debate were regular features of these prandial events, there was a sense of community, heightened by a shared nostalgia and longing for Iran, so far away. As my father recently told me, the one thing that no one ever discussed or argued about in those days was religion. It was, at the time, seen as improper.

Then in late 1978, everything began to change. By the middle of 1979, parties became infrequent, the divisions too much to overcome. The Revolution had caused everyone to pick sides, and to retreat into their putative religious identities.

Thus began a pattern in which events in Iran impacted directly our own sense of identity. I entered kindergarten in 1979, just before the Students in Line with the Imam’s Path climbed over the top of the US Embassy walls in Tehran, leading to the 444-day Iran hostage crisis. Those 444 days spread across kindergarten and the first months of my first grade. The only Iranian student in my rural Peoria elementary school, I distinctly remember taking it upon myself to teach my classmates and teachers about the difference between the Shah and Khomeini, how one was “good” and the other was “bad.”

Since then, like many Iranian-Americans in my situation, the act of explaining, or explaining away, what Iran is “really” like became a part of my purpose and identity. Tied by birth and upbringing to two countries that famously do not get along, I took it upon myself to explain what was “good” and “bad” about each. The impulse to reconcile fellow Americans to the reality of Iran, as I saw it, no doubt informs this project.
I have found that the best way to achieve this end is to make Iran ordinary, familiar. One way of doing this has been to situate the research within an analytical framework of modernization. The politics of education in Iran is tied to the story of that country’s encounter with modernity, a story whose opening chapters took place not in 1979, as the current regime would have us believe, or the founding of the Pahlavi dynasty by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925, but in the early years of the nineteenth century, some two hundred years ago.

The notion that the Islamicization of Iran is in fact the latest instance of a nearly 200-year modernization process is likely to be met with raised eyebrows in many quarters, particularly by outside observers accustomed to the usual markers of “tradition” emanating from Iran over the past 30 years, the “images of women draped in the forbidding black chador, or of clerics in turbans.” Modernity is seen as something that occurs in Iran in spite of the Islamic Revolution, not as an outcome driven by revolutionary policies. Yet, today’s regime does in fact consider itself to be modern, and like its Qajar and Pahlavi predecessors, pursues an educational program that will lift Iran into the membership of developed countries.

One of the goals of the research is to demonstrate that Iranians, elite and ordinary alike, have consistently insisted that the individual and collective empowerment promised by modernity place in the idiom of Iranian cultural traditions. Iranian society has tended to favor those groups and movements who actively resist submission to “westernization” as the way to achieve modernization. The dissertation fits squarely within the multiple modernities literature. I reject the notion that there exists a single path for change and development in the modern era,

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as well the more recent notion of the clash and/or dialogue of civilizations, the latter bringing together the intellectual odd-fellows of “old-school orientalists” with the “new occidentalists” in a shared belief of coherent civilizational blocs that are in turn available for reconciliation or endless newer varieties of the old modernization theory used nowadays by “reformed” orientalists and occidentalists.\textsuperscript{54}

The realization that are active agents in shaping, judging, and using modern ideas not their own, or their society’s own, is a vast improvement on the idea that somehow leaders of the so-called third world are helplessly subject to the phenomenon of “multiple biographies,” in which the “eastern” mind (or in the case of Latin America and Africa, the “southern” mind) must be somehow reconciled with the “western” mentality.\textsuperscript{55} The dilemma in Iran today is not in the choice between east and west, past and future, tradition or secularism, Islam or pre-Islamic Persia. What I will be describing throughout the dissertation is a national more than an ideological project. Above all it means that the solutions to the current impasse between what is seemingly a group of Iranians committed to the preservation of religious rule at all costs, and those who seek to produce a fully secular and democratic government, bound by the rule of temporal, constitutional law and not the cosmic law of Islam, will, by necessity, draw on what is already there. Perhaps controversially, I assert that religious practice will be part of any solution

\textsuperscript{54} I very much like Mehrzad Boroujerdi’s notion of “occidentalism” as being the proverbial other side of the same coin as Orientalism. This is what Sadiq al-Azm famously referred to as “orientalism in reverse,” an exceptionally evocative phrase. See Mehrzad Boroujerdi, \textit{Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism} (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

\textsuperscript{55} Kate Crehan observes:

It is worth thinking about why [such "western" artifacts] seem so much more out of place than would a copy of, say, the Mahabharata found in the home of a European or American political figure. Sometimes it seems as if we who can claim a home in ‘western culture’ have culture in the singular, while the rest of the world are boxed up into their own unique cultures. It is interesting how those who fill their apartments in New York. . .with third world artifacts are never referred to as hybrid beings adrift between cultures.

to the modernization dilemma in Iran, a claim that I intend to support with empirical data in the latter chapters of the dissertation.\textsuperscript{56}

The audience that I most hope to reach with this research is not necessarily the academic community or those assigned to report on Iran for foreign media like the New York Times, but those average persons who may have an interest in Iran and feel that they have a vague idea of what is “really” going on there, but wish to know more.

These are the individuals who populate the realm of common sense\textsuperscript{57} and conventional wisdom, and even amongst the most well-read and highly educated of their numbers, there persists skepticism that Iran is not a serious country, its people trapped in the grips of an anachronistic, deeply traditional ideology produced by a repressive regime that brooks absolutely no dissent, and against which protest of any form is impossible. I was reminded of the potential when, on a flight home to visit my parents, the matter of the PhD came up in conversation. Following the usual pleasantries, my companion on the flight, a stranger that I had just met, said:

“Forgive me for my question, but isn’t it true that Iran during the 1970s was a modern place…”

The end of this work represented by this dissertation is the beginning of my answer to him, an adult version of the explanations that I once dispensed years ago as the “Iran expert” of my kindergarten class.

\textsuperscript{56} Thus the argument that Islam is “neither the solution nor the problem” is only half-correct. It is true that Islam itself cannot propel Muslim countries away from, or towards, modernity and democracy. Persistent calls for the reform of the religion of Islam led by a modern-day “Muslim Martin Luther” exaggerate the extent to which Islam shapes political identity. Nonetheless, given the importance and prevalence of religious practices in the Islamic world, fixing politics itself will have to involve some sort of Islamic “fix.” See Daniel Brumberg, “Islam Is Not the Solution (or the Problem),” \textit{The Washington Quarterly} 29, no. 1 (Winter 2005-2006): 97-116.

\textsuperscript{57} Here I am suggesting Antonio Gramsci’s use of the concept of “common sense” and its linkages to political power and patterns of rule.
Despite the adoption of a constitution in 1906, the modern history of Iran did not begin until 19 years later, the beginning of the Pahlavi Dynasty. Reza Shah the Great successfully moved Iran away from being a totally oriental nation towards the acceptance and adoption of Western social and economic philosophies and institutions. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah, is continuing the Westernization process which has been responsible for Iran’s burgeoning growth in recent years.”

Excerpt from *Investor’s Guide to Iran*, published by the Central Bank of Iran, Center for the Attraction and Protection of Foreign Investments, 1969.

“We do not wish to be either weststruck (*gharbzadeh*) or eaststruck (*sharqzadeh*).”

Instructor at Omid Boys High School, a private Islamic school in Tehran

Chapter One “Musings on Theory: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Emergence of a National Educational System in Iran 1811-1940”

The central narrative of this chapter deals with the transformation of education in Iran from the premodern forms of the *maktab* and *madreseh* to what is today a modern system of formal schooling, covering nearly the entire country.\(^58\) I will demonstrate that education under clerical rule has been a continuation of a nearly 200-year effort to train, teach, and develop members of Iranian state and society, often using foreign sources knowledge, while at the same fixing then preserving the authentic national and cultural identity of Iran.

My goal is to show that the current postrevolutionary educational system, formally geared towards the creation of an ideal Islamic society, is rooted in the modernization and educational debates of the nineteenth century, and not, as is commonly assumed, the Islamic communities of the seventh century. The modern nation state provides the principal analytical framework necessary for understanding the relationship that the politics of education has to patterns of rule and change. Specifically, political outcomes in education are directly tied to, and driven by, the ongoing pursuit of a shared cultural nationalism, capable of binding Iranian state

\(^{58}\) The *maktab* was the first and most common type of schooling available to boys and girls. The *ulama*-led *maktab* was less a system of schooling than a series of ad hoc centers of religious learning, irregular sites of education (in the sense that there was no centralized or uniform curriculum) set up in local villages to teach both boys and girls, separately, religious subjects, the Quran, and basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. Some, though not many, continued on to the *madreseh*.
and society together. Ideology bends to the dictates of modern state politics rather than the opposite.

What this means for analysis is that the overt ideological indoctrination at the heart of Iranian schooling, i.e., the “Islamicization” of school and society by the postrevolutionary government, generally follows patterns determined by the “rules of the game” associated with the modern nation state rather than Koranic interpretations or the injunctions of Iran’s ruling ideology, the *Velayat-e faqih*.

This chapter begins with two overlapping but separate discussions detailing how postrevolutionary education has roots in nineteenth and early twentieth century debates on modernization and the politics of the modern nation-state, respectively. A brief historical narrative is provided in order to establish the fundamentally modern nature of the postrevolutionary school system in Iran.

“Modern” is a term that is not often associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran, its schools, or its ideology.59 I will show why this perception is empirically false, a mistake produced by the conflation of westernization with modernization. Dichotomizing all historical, political, and social experience in Iran into the binary categories such as “traditional” and “modern” fosters confusion and unneeded bias rather than clarity, and shuts off the possibility that political and social agents in Iran resolve the modernization crisis through innovative synthesis.60

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Adopting a multiple modernities approach, I show that from the beginning of Iran’s modern era reformers sought to adapt western forms of knowledge to the local, Iranian context without sacrificing or upsetting the cultural authenticity of the country. By the end of the nineteenth century, reformers in Iran sought to expand what had been a limited project of modernization. The import of European technology and knowledge for military use developed into a project geared towards the social and cultural transformation of the entire society. This expansion, as we shall shortly see, was not always or entirely driven by the state.

Technological developments occurred in parallel with political modernization. During this same period there emerged the first attempts by the state to restructure the relationship of the monarchical state with society. Naser al-Din Shah, greatly influenced by his historical tour of Europe in the early 1870s, began to experiment with modern forms of political rule. Towards the end of his reign, for the first time in Iranian history the authority of the palace was put on display through elaborate public ceremonies and parades. This reimagining of state-society relations during the late Qajar era provided the basis for the modern politics of nationalism, solidified under the first Pahlavi ruler and which continues to define and shape politics in Iran to the present day.

The dual currents of modernization and nationalization eventually converged with the formal establishment of a truly mass system of schooling by Reza Pahlavi at the beginning of the twentieth century. State-led schooling dissolved the final boundary separating state, society, and culture as the school became the central site for the imagining and dissemination of the “authentic” Iranian nation. Schools were to be where
children and their parents, the primary recipients of the state-sponsored schooling, “rediscovered” their lost Iranian identities.\(^{61}\)

The modernization process represents the negotiation of late-nineteenth century and twentieth century Iranian elites with their European, and later American counterparts. A different political process emerges with the domestic implementation of modernity through the schools, as contact between an expanding, totalizing Iranian state and its population generated contentious politics as to what the purpose of contentious negotiations and conflict between the modernizing Iranian state and a population that did not necessarily go along with the state’s project.\(^{62}\)

Therefore in the second half of the chapter I turn my attention away from historiography to engage with more traditional political science concepts, including modern state formation and state/society relations. The modern state formation literature presents an especially useful means for exploring the relationship of formal education to political outcomes in contemporary Iran due to its particular focus on material and symbolic forms of rule.

**Defining Multiple Modernities**

In the introduction to her edited volume on feminism and modernity in the Middle East, Abu-Lughod quotes Paul Rabinow’s observation that “it is impossible to define modernity; rather, what one must do is to track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being modern are


\(^{62}\) The concept of negotiation looms large in the remaining chapters of the dissertation. Although there are asymmetries of power between state and society, generally in favor of the former, neither group is fully autonomous. Negotiation is a recognition of this limitation on autonomy.
Rabinow’s comments reflect the fact that modernity has lost what was once a straightforward meaning, the notion “progress” follows clearly delineated and predictable stages that can be measured by production and consumption of various material goods and lifestyles.

Today, in the wake of the cultural and linguistic turns in the social sciences, many studies of modernization are characterized by a deep skepticism of the claim that there can be only one, clearly delineated path to modernity. Researchers are increasingly likely to follow Rabinow’s dictum to chase down the different ways in which modernity is made manifest in different countries, regions, and periods of history.

There is a strong normative element to this theoretical stance. Many who adopt a multiple-modernities approach do so in opposition to what is seen as the imposition of a colonial and oppressive project of westernization, carried out under the guise of universal and timeless values. The long and often sordid history of European colonialism and interference in the Middle East and other late developing regions of the world leads these scholars to be suspicious of the claims of modernity, and to ask how modernity “might not be what it purports to be or tells itself, in the language of enlightenment and progress, it is.”

In general, I consider modernity to mean the occurrence of change and a movement towards the liberation of the individual, a process described by the historian Mary Kay Vaughan as “an enabler of human life.” Vaughan notes that whatever modernization may offer, its content

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64 I do not, as the saying goes, have a dog in that particular hunt. My own motivations in using a multiple modernities approach to the study of education in Iran derive a desire to not allow myself to be limited by pre-existing categories of thought.
is deeply shaped by the particular historical and geographical setting in which modernization takes places, and is generally produced in a manner that includes the active involvement of ordinary members of society. These ordinary folk act not as passive recipients of progress but operate as individuals who negotiate the diffusion of modernity as “a goal to work for, not a steamroller flattening tradition and dignity…a process to be judged, assessed, and selected.”

A multiple modernities approach, while rooted in an empathetic impulse towards so-called “local scripts,” does not compel the analyst to accept all claims to the modern at face value. The intent to be modern does not automatically result in modern outcomes. The casting of a critical eye onto dubious claims to modernity is acceptable so long as the analyst explains with clarity his or her basis for judging a particular concept, phenomenon, or outcome to be not modern. The challenge is to balance a healthy skepticism with the prudence to not reject “insistent claims” out of hand, or worse, to impose one’s own unexamined frameworks of modernity onto research subjects and sites of analysis.

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65 Vaughan, Cultural Politics in Revolution, 14 (or is it 197?). Vaughan describes peasant responses to the modernization programs of the postrevolutionary state in Mexico. Asef Bayat makes similar observations regarding a different group of subalterns, the urban poor of postrevolutionary Tehran. He argues that the poor tend to reject the constraining facets of modernity while welcoming its liberating dimension (i.e., they embrace electricity and indoor plumbing, but feel that they are unable to afford to pay bills or submit to strict bureaucratic regulations, as the latter are seen as putting their very survival at risk). Bayat stresses that rejection of portions of the modern project is not a defense or embrace of tradition for its own sake:

The disenfranchised express a deep desire to live an informal life, to run their own affairs without involving the authorities or other modern formal institutions. This is not to suggest that tradition guides their lives, but rather to insist that modern institutions, in one sense, reproduce people’s traditional relations as solutions to the problems that these institutions engender. In many informal communities in Third World cities, people rely on their own local and traditional norms during their daily activities, whether it be establishing contracts (e.g. marriage), organizing their locality, or resolving local disputes.


66 To do the latter is to run the risk of ignoring or overlooking critical data. For an example of how an expanded definition of modernity provides insight into the use of Islamist thought for feminist ends, see Sussan Siavoshi,
Providing Historical Context: The Dilemma of Modernization in Iran

Just one year into the first of two devastating wars with imperial Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, ‘Abbas Mirza Qajar, crown prince to Qajar king Fath Ali Shah and governor of the province of Azerbaijan, lamented to Napoleon’s representative to the court in Tabriz that the Persian kingdom had seemingly fallen inextricably behind the European powers:

What is the power that gives [Europe] so great a superiority over us? What is the cause of your progress and of our constant weakness? You know the art of governing, the art of conquering, the art of putting into action all human faculties, whereas we seem condemned to vegetate in a shameful ignorance... 67

A series of devastating military defeats at the hands of the Russians had marked the permanent end of Iran’s long-standing presence in the Caucus region. 68 Just as consequentially, the Russo-Persian Wars also marks the beginning of the first, sustained Iranian engagement with Europe and the primary impetus for Iran’s modernization movement. European expansion into southwestern and central Asia at the end of the eighteenth century, and in particular Russian encroachments on Iran’s northern flanks at the start of the nineteenth century, propelled Qajar leaders to seek relief from the very countries who posed the greatest threat to the survival of Iran’s ever-diminishing kingdom.

Europe, only recently considered to be unworthy of Iran’s attention, suddenly became in the mid-nineteenth century extraordinarily relevant to Iranian interests, not only for the immediate threat that European armies posed to the Qajar kingdom, but also as the source of scientific knowledge, the arts of “governing and conquering,” that would ensure Iran’s salvation.

68 The wars with Russia (1804-1813 and 1826-1828) continue to resonate as a part of the collective psyche of Iranians---many ordinary Iranians are able to relate how Iran lost so many states and important cities to the Russians---and are the immediate reason for the unpopularity of Fath Ali Shah Qajar, the second Qajar king and ruler at the time of Iran’s defeats.
Europe occupied a dual role in the imagination of Iran’s rulers. Despite the immediate crisis and threat that European modernity posed, reformers within Iran remained confident that recent setbacks on the battlefield were only temporary, the result of a pressing but correctable deficiency. European-style education would be the means of resolving this deficiency, a bridge by which Iran would be able to resolve the obvious military and technological gap that separated Iran from her European rivals.

Iran’s reliance on Europe for the acquisition of the scientific, technological, and military knowledge necessary for the defense of the country against the encroachment of European armies was of course a contradiction, one that was not lost on Iran’s rulers. Constituting what Monica Ringer refers to as the “modernization dilemma,” the challenge of bringing change to Iran without sacrificing Iran’s cultural identity shaped not only the Qajar encounter with European modernity, but ultimately become the defining paradigm of the Iranian encounter with the emerging modern world:

Throughout the nineteenth century, reformers (and their opponents) were acutely aware of the very real danger of European imperialist policy in the region. Europe thus served as an important initial catalyst in considering the need to reform, a model of modernization, and at the same time, the specter of loss of territory and political autonomy that failure to reform would enable…Simply put, the modernization dilemma is the attempt to use European institutions as models for Iranian modernization, and to adopt European technology and know-how, while at the same time guarding against a loss of cultural agency and authenticity.  

Led by Abbas Mirza, and in active emulation of similar reforms then underway in the neighboring countries of Egypt and Turkey, the Qajars launched a series of military reforms known as the Nezam-e jadid (1803-1833). This first phase of modernization was quite narrow in purpose, focusing solely on the import of European military technology, specifically modern

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arms, the sending of students abroad to learn the subjects relevant to the craft of warfare, and the use of European military trainers.

Even before the first Iranian students were dispatched to Europe there were already indications that modernization would not be a simple or straightforward process, but instead a source of considerable political conflict. Rivals of Abbas Mirza soon seized upon the most rudimentary of military reforms, including the adoption of new uniforms and an order for soldiers to shave off their long beards, the latter seen as traditional markers of religious piety, as an opportunity to accuse the Crown Prince of being a *farangi*, i.e., a Europeanized Iranian with suspect loyalties.  

For his part, Abbas Mirza countered by presenting his military reforms not as innovations but as a restoration of traditional techniques employed by the Prophet himself during the military campaigns mounted by the early Muslims. The suspect reform of new uniforms and shaved beards were a return to the legitimate practices of the Prophet, covering over the potentially illegitimate imposition of European customs.

The use of “ancient” and “authentic” cultural symbols by reformers and conservatives alike would soon become a typical feature of the debates surrounding Iran’s modernization process. Although deeply resentful of Iran’s perceived backwardness, progressive forces in Iran rarely sought to bring an undiluted westernization to Iran. Tormented by their own religious and cultural backgrounds, reformers often expressed a deep desire that the country remain “Iranian,” however defined, even as they felt helpless to ignore the west. This dual impulse led to

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72 The obsessive concern of modernizing intellectuals with the west was not limited to the nineteenth century, but was a feature of secular intellectual thought throughout the twentieth century. See Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996). For an excellent review of Boroujerdi and the broader modernity/tradition debate in Iran, see Said Amir Arjomand, “The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 4 (Nov. 2002): 719-731.
contortions such Plainly visible for example in Abbas Mirza’s use of the Prophet’s example to justify needed but ultimately banal reforms.

Despite early signs of trouble, Qajar reformers in the early nineteenth century pressed forward, confident that diligence and careful attention to a rigorous course of study would provide the keys to unlocking Europe’s secrets. Students sent abroad were expected to identify the “useful” elements of European civilization and therefore worthy of adoption, and discard or ignore those aspects deemed inappropriate (namonaseb) to Iran’s cultural context.

For these earliest reformers the feasibility of the project to transfer foreign knowledge back home was never in doubt. Not unlike the advocates of modernization theory more than a century later, or for that matter, the present-day leaders of the Islamic Republic, early Iranian travelers to Europe viewed technology as a universal phenomenon, completely modular and unattended by a historical, social, or cultural context.73 Travel literature (safarnameh) from this period reveals a complete lack of introspection or worry regarding on the part of the students, as in this letter sent by Mostafa Khan Afshar from Russia:

The establishment of [European-style schools] in the kingdom of Iran would be extremely simple and easy. A few masters of Western sciences could be brought to Iran, and one of the schools for the children of the nobility of the land could be selected and they could be gathered together there, and several people of high moral conduct could be selected to supervise them [the students], who would learn both Iranian sciences from Iranian teachers as well as Western sciences from Western teachers.74

73 The classic text in the area of Middle East Studies is Daniel Lerner’s The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East. Turkey at the beginning of the twentieth century was in many ways the inspiration for modernization theory, the study of that country’s efforts to reconcile secular reform with its Islamic heritage and identity a launching pad for the careers of a number of now famous orientalists, most notably Bernard Lewis. For a trenchant and withering critique of Lewis and the legacy of modernization theory in the Muslim Middle East, see Edward Said, “Impossible Histories: Why the Many Isams Cannot be Simplified,” Harper’s, July 2002, 69-74.
Though Europe remained as an exotic source of fascination and learning throughout the nineteenth century, there was little desire amongst rulers and foreign-based students to become culturally European. The dispatch of student emissaries to Europe, coincident with the import of European military instructors to Iran were done with the anticipation that these would be temporary measures, the first steps in producing a domestic program of modernization and education. Self-sufficiency was the ultimate goal, and from the beginning reformers sought to develop Iran to a level of knowledge and ability where it would no longer be necessary to send students abroad to European countries.

Consequently, on December 28, 1851, Iran inaugurated its first state-sponsored, European-style secondary school, the Dar al-Fonun, established by the reformist Qajar minister, Mohammad Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, more commonly known as Amir Kabir, or “Great Minister.” The Dar al-Fonun remained the only institute for higher learning in Iran until the founding of Tehran University in early 1935, and is widely regarded as the first sustained, state-led engagement with modernity by the Iranian state. The school’s mission was rather narrow, and focused on producing well-trained administrators and government bureaucrats. Once versed in European military and industrial arts and sciences, graduates were expected to either return to the classroom as teachers in order to train the next generation of government and military officials, or move on to service in the Qajar state.

Despite its historical importance, state leaders did little to ensure the success of the Dar al-Fonun as a center of modern learning in part due to concerns that modernization was not only leading to an unwanted Europeanization of Iranian culture, but also bringing with it the conditions by which the authority of the state rule might be challenged. The half-hearted

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75 The name means “House of Arts,” as fonun is the plural of fan, or “art,” in Arabic. “Arts” as it is used here refers specifically to the technological arts.
commitment by state leaders to the Dar al-Fonun left the institute greatly limited and ensured its ultimate demise.\textsuperscript{76}

By the middle of the century, there emerged a growing unease with the course of modernization was taking in Iran. A new crisis had emerged, in many ways more profound than the military catastrophes of the beginning of the century that had initially propelled Iran onto the path of modernization. Sustained, direct contact of Iranians with European lifestyles and especially the developments in urban design and renewal of the nineteenth century had led an increasing number of reformers to believe that Iran’s “deficiencies” were not limited to the scientific and technological arts only.\textsuperscript{77}

Gone was the earlier confidence that the country could manage to distinguish between European culture and scientific knowledge, replaced by the feeling that somehow Iran was socially inferior to the Europeans. There began to emerge the belief amongst reformers that for Iran to become fully modern, scientific knowledge would not be enough. There also needed to occur widespread social, cultural, and political reform, one that included the participation of the entire population, the “people,” and not just a modernization borne on the shoulders of a few enlightened elites.

Education continued to be seen as the key to success, but as the definition of modernity shifted, so too did the expectations of schooling. Now it was no longer enough to import knowledge from abroad. Simply grafting European modernity onto the Iranian context was a

\textsuperscript{76} Its founder, Amir Kabir, would not live to see the decline or the closure of the Dar al-Fonun, having been assassinated by agents acting under the direct orders of his former sponsor, Naser al-Din Shah, in 1852.

\textsuperscript{77} So deep was the anxiety and shame felt by the Qajar king, Naser al-Din Shah, having personally seen and experienced Europe, felt the need to keep his fellow countrymen from doing the same. He would write: “My servant and the people of this country should not be informed of any other places except Iran and their own world...if they hear the word ‘Paris’ or ‘Brussels’ they should not know whether these two [things] are edible or wearable.” Cited in Ringer, “The Quest for the Secret of Strength,” 153.
superficial fix. Education would have to instead be focused on the teaching of skills and above all the *redemption* of the national culture.

With state-led efforts at schooling reform stalled, change came from outside the formal realm. A number of private individuals, themselves the beneficiaries of state-sponsored overseas education or graduates of Dar al-Fonun, took matters in their own hands. Known as the *Madreseh-ye jadid*, or “New School” movement, more than twenty European-style schools were established in different cities across Iran in the period 1870-1906.

The New Schools were set up with the express purpose of making, practically from scratch, “new humans” (*insanha-ye jadid*). The manufacturing motif was not by accident. Iranian travelers in Europe, having visited the continent’s manufacturing centers as well as schools, soon came to refer to schools as “human manufactories” (*karkhaneha-ye adam sazi*), a concept and term that by the century’s end “had become so hegemonic that even a princely memoir would refer to schools as *karkhaneha-ye adam sazi* and as ‘our first resolution for ending our miseries.’”

Like factories that “take in raw materials and turn out products,” so schools “take in ignorant children and turn out engineers and accomplished thinkers.” The hope that modern schooling would be, as That so many writers found the metaphor of the factory to be apt was undoubtedly due to the fact that the modern school stood in such stark contrast to the “old education,” the *maktab* and *madreseh* associated with the premodern period of Iranian history.

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80 The concept of the factory continues to be used to this very day. Here is Khamanei speaking about the purpose of schooling: “Therefore, education’s primary focus is the construction and training (*parvaresh*) and manufacture of those basic resources; which are what? It is the human; the productive human, [the country’s] human resources.”
Reformers did not limit themselves to the content and form of schooling, but began to reimagine the purpose and ultimate objective of the new education. Treatises produced by educational activists of the period addressed men and women as citizens, the members of a public whose participation in education was considered to be a public duty rather than in service to the private ends of religious obligation (literacy in order to read the Koran) or individual perfection.\(^8^1\) This was a major departure from the previous tendency to treat education as a private privilege undertaken by individuals fortunate enough to be able to afford formal training, or well-connected enough to secure state sponsorship of their education.

Science, history, and the literary arts would produce learned men and women capable of building the Iranian nation so that Iran might join “the caravan of civilization.” The optimistic spirit of Iran’s first wave of educational reformers is seen in the following remarks, expressed by Malek al-Motakallemin at the inaugural ceremonies of the private Sadat school in 1898:

> Only through knowledge can mankind achieve the highest peaks of progress; only under its aegis is it possible to establish justice and bring redemption to the world…Having come to study at these karkhane-ye adam sazi, you [young students] ought to know that the destiny of the world, the fate of your nation, your own future and that of the children---depend on knowledge alone.\(^8^2\)

Although the phenomenon of the New School emerged in response to state failure in producing comprehensive educational reform, its leaders felt strongly that in order for their project to be successful the government would have to become involved in producing a national school system. Limited in reach, private schooling at the beginning of the twentieth century, much like the now defunct Dar al-Fonun, could only reach a small number of students. The presence of foreign missionary schools also added to the numbers, but they and the New Schools ultimately

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\(^8^2\) Mehdi Malekzade, Tariq-e enqelab-e mashrootiyat-e iran (Tehran, 1327/1948). Cited in Menashri, Education and the Making, 37.
represented a transitional period in the history of education, an institutional bridge between the premodern *maktab*, already fast fading at the start of the century, and a fully national educational system, founded under Reza Shah Pahlavi in the early years of his rule.\(^{83}\)

It should be noted that the *Nezam-e jadid* did not occur *sui generis* but emerged as part of a general reimagining of Iran’s national history by intellectuals who were determined to legitimize modernity as the expression of an “authentic” Iranian culture. The articulation of a national identity, that stock and repertoire of symbols and “immemorial” memories to which all Iranians could make equal claim, constituted a great portion of the work of educational activists associated with the New School movement, and represents the earliest foundations of what became the modern nation-state under the next regime. The convergence of state, nation, and society would occur in the founding of the first truly national school system under Reza Shah Pahlavi, a topic that I take up in the next section.

### A Modern Politics of Nationalism

Sami Zubaida, just a few years after the 1979 Revolution and at a time when the image of Iran as a center of religious and political fanaticism was still ascendant, published piece in the journal *Economy and Society* entitled “The Ideological Preconditions for Khomeini’s Doctrine of Government.”\(^{84}\) In the article Zubaida argued that Islamism in Iran as well as the broader Muslim world, despite its “medieval” trappings, constituted a modern ideology. Islamic movements such as the one that had ended nearly three millennia of monarchy in Persia could

\(^{83}\) For a discussion of the influence of foreign missionary schools in Iran, see Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi, “From Evangelizing to Modern Iranians: The American Presbyterian Mission and its Iranian Students,” *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 2: 213-240. Rostam-Kolayi concludes that despite the evangelism of the American schools, and the great appreciation of its former students for the education they received from these schools, its graduates remained committed to their Iranian identities.

only be understood---indeed, could only be made thinkable---in terms of contemporary socio-political conditions. Key among these conditions was the context of the modern nation-state and the legitimizing authority of “the people,” whether obtained through the mechanism of elections and parliamentary politics or less democratic means.

The consideration (or manipulation) of society by the state is the hallmark of modern politics, and to demonstrate that this was a component of the movement led by Khomeini, Zubaida compared the behavior of the Islamic regime to premodern forms of rule found in historical Islamic states, the same states that the current government in Tehran claimed to be in lineage with:

The initiative for political change cannot be said to come from “the people” in such a political unit [i.e., the historical Islamic state]; urban populations may riot if pushed too hard, or may side with one military faction or another, but these are hardly initiatives in political transformation, let alone social ones. The only initiative which would dislodge the ruling clique came from another potential clique: a militarily organized group, usually tribal, with a dynasty of princes or of holy men or both at their head. In this context, the concept of “the people” as a politically active and effective entity, if it occurs at all, has rather different sociological and ideological references from that in the context of the modern nation state.85

Zubaida goes on to describe those references as being to a “nation,” in the modern sense of the term, i.e., constituted “not merely by a central state, but by deeper social and economic processes which underpin the state,”86 or put differently, a concept which presumes a congruence of state institutions, social structures, and cultural identification.87 While Khomeini never explicitly adopts the Weberian ideal-type of the nation state, his use of the concept of “the people” in his writings and speeches as the crucial political force for revolution and, following the

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85 Zubaida, *Islam, the People*, 19.
86 Zubaida, *Islam, the People*, 19.
revolutionary triumph, Iranian resistance to continued western imperialism, according to Zubaida typifies a modern approach to politics.\(^8^8\)

Zubaida’s analysis, “counter-hegemonic” for its time, proved to be the leading edge of conventional wisdom within the academic community, namely that the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath count as modern phenomena.\(^8^9\) Even if much of the popular and journalistic understanding of Iran remains committed to the image of an Iran populated by “mad mullahs” and chador-clad women, Iranian historiography has increasingly taken to understanding 1979 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic as the latest chapter in a roughly 200-year modernizing process. The dominant intellectual trend is to evaluate change and transformation in modern Iran through an assessment of the emergence of institutions and ideas in Iran rather than on the basis of Iran’s tumultuous history alone.\(^9^0\) What this means in terms of analysis is a reassessment of the importance of the historical junctures that comprise recent Iranian history, including the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1907, the coup d'état against the government of Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953, as well as the 1979 Revolution. Under this broader reading of Iranian history, such events are not ruptures in Iranian history or \textit{sui generis}, but the symptoms of earlier developments in the political and intellectual structure of the country.

\(^{8^8}\) Zubaida, \textit{Islam, the People}, x.


One of the more recent works to appear out of this milieu, and of considerable influence on my own thinking, is Afshin Marashi’s *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940*. Marashi demonstrates that transformations in the social, cultural, and political assumptions underlying state-society relations between 1870 and 1940 produced a new conceptualization of the nation of Iran, that “abstract social category or framework tying together state, society, and culture.” While nationalist claims predate this period, the salience of nationalism as an instrument for politics only occurs *after* the emergence of a political arena animated by the assumption that there exists, or ought to exist, a congruence of state, society, and culture. In the wake of these structural changes, state and society increasingly came to seen as “tied together by a common culture and that the role of the state was to be representative and agent” of the “cultural nation.”

The consolidation around a nationalist framework for politics in Iran took place in fits and starts, spread over decades. The key figure behind its development was also its most unlikely source of inspiration: The self-proclaimed “Shadow of God on Earth” and “Pivot of the Universe” himself, Naser al-Din Shah. Indeed, Naser al-Din Shah, the corpulent third ruler in the Qajar dynasty, who had allowed the founding of Dar al-Fonun by Amir Kabir only to later order Amir Kabir’s assassination, embodied like no other historical figure the tormented and often contradictory process that Iran’s modernization process entailed.

Upon ascending the throne in 1831, state and society as we understand these concepts today did not yet exist in Iran. State authority lay in claims made to a cosmic and sacred source of power, with Naser al-Din Shah acting as intermediary between heaven and earth. God on Earth, and not through appeal to the masses.

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Under these conditions, there was absolutely no need for the involvement of the people in politics, no need for the state to appeal to the masses. State power was *a priori*, assumed to be permanent and outside of the temporal realm.\(^93\) Marashi describes the premodern state as being “to a great extent characterized by a political solipsism, remaining largely self-referential, or more concerned with linking its authority to external, cosmic, and sacred points of reference than with any awareness of its relationship to ‘society.’”\(^94\) Marashi goes on to explain that society was itself “atomized and segmented through vertical lines of authority linked to regional, tribal, sectarian, and linguistic loyalties, poorly integrated beyond a conception of certain basic yet highly fluid, overlapping, and evolving geographic parameters.”\(^95\) Although Marashi places the origins modern nation state in the Qajar period, the Qajars themselves never fully abandoned the old, conservative, and premodern form of political authority. The figure of the shah remained rooted in a traditional legitimacy comprised of the fusion of ancient, pre-Islamic sacral kingship with the cosmic, Islamic authority granted to the crown.

Nonetheless, in the wake of Naser al-Din Shah’s first tour of Europe in 1873—-a tour that came about because of the intense lobbying efforts of Qajar bureaucrats who had been trained by the Dar al-Fonun and had lived for years in Europe—-there began a state-led effort to redefine the monarchy in Iran as a public spectacle.\(^96\) This new model of legitimacy was premised on what

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\(^93\) This notion of the permanence of state power, blessed by the divine, is expressed in the traditional proclamation “The king is dead. Long live the king!” (“Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!”).

\(^94\) Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 5.

\(^95\) Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 5.

\(^96\) The dispatches sent back to Tehran by these diplomats throughout the 1860s described in great detail the urban transformations then taking place in the capitals of Europe, most notably in Paris under the direction of Baron Haussmann. The redesign of European cities were among the most visible signs of the modernization process still unfolding on the continent, and that had, by the 1850s and 1860s, been copied by Iran’s neighbors, including in Istanbul and Cairo. For these overseas diplomats, confronted with the daily experience of order, regulation, and civic life that characterized the emerging modern urban environments of the belle époque, the knowledge that Iranian cities, especially Tehran, continued to wallow in backwardness was too much to bear. See Monica Ringer, “The Quest for the Secret of Strength in Iranian Nineteenth-Century Travel Literature: Rethinking Tradition in the
was for Iran at the time a novel set of assumptions, rooted in the idea that state and society were to have a closer and more visible, if not yet intimate, relationship than had existed under premodern legitimation practices.

It was hardly a coherent model. As with most cases of non-western countries seeking to emulate western models of political rule, the diffusion and adoption of western political models was for the most part a piecemeal and ad hoc affair. “The projection of legitimacy in the late Qajar period,” Marashi writes, “ultimately came to reflect an uneasy coexistence between a traditional system of legitimation based on the old model of Persianate kingdom and a new system conscious of the need to ground political authority in a popular-urban social base.”

The contrasting conceptions of political authority in nineteenth-century Iran—a theory of kingship that saw legitimacy grounded outside or above society versus new, national-popular doctrines that conceived of legitimacy as emanating from society—reflected precisely the dilemma of legitimation that confronted all the conservative monarchies of the nineteenth century, whether they were dynastic states led by the Habsburgs, Hanovers, Hohenzollerns, Romanovs, and Ottomans or the nationalizing dynasties of Japan and Siam.

The slow turn of the state’s gaze towards society, and for that matter, for the first time the construction of a coherent “Iranian society,” began under Naser al-Din Shah but would not reach completion until the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi.

While nineteenth century experimentations with modern forms of authority lead directly to the founding of a national school system in Iran, it was only after the establishment of mass schooling that the nationalizing of Iran came to a close. The Pahlavi school system provided an institutional setting in which the cultural and philosophical efforts of the emergent nationalist discourse was meshed with the administrative and technical apparatus of a nationalizing bureaucratic state:

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Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 35.

Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 35.
The state thus became the vanguard of national authenticity, and society in turn was seen to need the moralizing leadership of a pedagogic state...the [educational] policy of the Pahlavi state intended to make manifest that which was felt to be latent, to help bring about a new polity in which state and society were unified and mediated by a single national culture. What remained was to define the nature and parameters of this national culture.99

The mounting of a state-sponsored, national school system meant that, for the first time in the country’s history, any Iranian child could (in theory if not yet in practice) attend as a citizen and member of the Iranian nation.

I take up this important connection between education and the consolidation of a modern politics of nationalism in the next section. For now, it is important to note that, under Marashi’s innovative reading, the political history of Iran in the modern era becomes the struggle between rivals over which cultural symbols will animate a shared political field, and not a Manichean battle between Islamicists and secularists over that same field.100

Put more figuratively, modern Iran has been shaped not by the crashing waves of political upheavals of the past century but instead by the deeper waters of institutions and ideas quietly flowing beneath the turmoil at the surface:

If the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are understood as the period of crystallization in which the basic institutional, social, and cultural structures of the Iranian nation took shape, then the subsequent narrative of modern Iran becomes a history over the ideological content that animated the newly crystallized political field—-not over the basic dimensions, or form, of the political field itself.101

We hear in this passage the echoes of the earlier discussion of the modernization dilemma in Iran. Modernity and modernization constitute a negotiated process, between Iran and Europe, and between the Iranian state and a newly emerging mass society. Camron Michael Amin notes

99 Marashi, Nationalizing Iran, 137.
101 Marashi, Nationalizing Iran, 137. Marashi himself resists conflating nationalism with secularism, a still common tendency found in the literature on nationalism. I address this issue later in the chapter.
in his review of Marashi that the Pahlavi state that emerges in the early twentieth century “was far from a passive recipient of modernist cultural influences,” instead actively “promulgating a national ideology through its expansion and control of public education and support for lavish events like the millennial celebration of the poet Ferdowsi,” demonstrating that Iranian nationalism “is not an inevitable byproduct of the cultural hegemony of the West, nor a mere construct or political tool.”

Marashi himself is less concerned with the political nature or ideological content of the nation than with tracing its emergence as a historical artifact adopted from Europe and articulated to the Iranian context. Marashi leaves to other researchers to trace the different imaginaries of the authentic Iranian nation in the post-Reza Shah period. Still, drawing connections between the history and contemporary debates, he describes a “dilemma of culture,” or dual-cultures problem, as being that begins with the appropriation of the nation form over 100 years ago remains unresolved to this day in Iran:

While the history of Iran in the twentieth century is one of success in consolidating state institutions and national social structures, the enigma of Iranian modernity continues to be its failure to find a cultural consensus…it is safe to assume that until a resolution to the problem of cultural consensus is achieved or the nation form is itself transcended in Iran, politics within the national framework will continue to be characterized by myriad alternative imaginings—ideological, cultural, and symbolic—all claiming to speak on behalf of the nation.

A politics of nationalism is not commonly associated with the Islamic Republic or the ruling ideology of the velayat-e faqih. The belief that nationalism only emerges in conjunction with the phenomenon of secularization has led both Islamists and observers of the Middle East to treat nationalism as an alternative to Islamicization, rather than as a possible framework for the

103 Marashi, Nationalizing Iran, 138. Again, Marashi rejects the conflation of nationalism with secularism. Islamic “imaginings” can constitute the cultural nation, but face competition from a secular, pre-Islamic based nationalism. The failure to achieve cultural consensus produces Iran’s “dual society” or “two cultures” (Islamic and pre-Islamic) phenomenon. Farideh Farhi, however, argues that for ordinary Iranians there is no conflict or contradiction, and many incorporate both heritages into their own sense of national identity. See Farideh Farhi, “Crafting a National Identity Amidst Contentious Politics in Contemporary Iran,” Iranian Studies 38, no. 1 (March 2005): pp. 7-22.
expression of religious belief. Nationalism in the Iranian context thus belongs to the Pahlavis, and was abandoned in the wake of the Revolution by an Islamist movement committed to purging the country of all traces of western forms of rule.

Certainly amongst IRI ideologues nationalism has been understood to be a foreign plot designed to divide the ummat, or community of believers, by the falsehood of nation and ethnic background.\footnote{For a discussion of how ethnic and linguistic differences are treated in the early textbooks of the Islamic Republic, see Chapter Four of this dissertation, especially the Third Grade Farsi lesson “Better Than Whom?” Although formally a call for unity among Muslims, the lesson can also be read as a rebuttal to Arab and Sunni criticisms of the Shiite Islamic regime in Iran.}

For example, Morteza Motahhari, who served as the principal ideologue of the early Islamist movement and Islamic Republic in Iran until his assassination in early 1979, was deeply suspicious of nationalism, and viewed it as a western device for securing their imperial project in the Islamic world.\footnote{Motahhari, perhaps Khomeini’s most brilliant and accomplished disciple, and for whom “Teacher’s Day” would be dedicated, sought through his writings and speeches to formulate for young Iranians an Islamic alternative to the royal regime.} In his 1970 treatise \textit{Khadamat-e motaqabil-e Iran va Islam (The Mutual Service of Iran and Islam)}, on the assumption that nationalism is necessarily correlated with secular life, Motahhari observes that though nationalism may have some benefit to the people of a country, on its own it will leave individuals with a sense of want or emptiness.\footnote{Mohammad Motahhari, \textit{Khadamat-e motaqabil-e Iran va Islam [The Mutual Service of Iran and Islam]}, (Tehran, 1349/1970), 6-7. Cited in Vanessa Martin, \textit{Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran} (London: I.B. Tauris and Co Ltd., 2003), 90. See also Martin, \textit{Creating}, 92-99. The monarchy was not the only rival to Motahhari and his like-minded colleagues in the clergy. The religious laity, in particular Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, presented Iran’s nascent Islamist movement with fierce competition for the hearts and minds of Iranian youth.}

A high school principal interviewed by the Iranian sociologist Mohammad Rezaei provides a less forgiving interpretation of nationalism. Nationalism, according to the principal, stands against the values of the Revolution and is wholly inappropriate to the Iranian context:

\begin{quote}
We especially condemn nationalism. Imam Khomeini held nationalism to be a source of division. We must not propagandize nationalism in the school. This would be like teaching racism. We
\end{quote}
need to be sensitive to two issues...Are we teaching the Koran? Do we start the morning assembly with the name of God? Do we have prayer in the morning?...We must not do anything that would lead to the flag taking the place of the Koran. It’s not important whether or not there is a flag but the Koran must be, velayat (guardianship) must be, the Imams and the holy sites must be.\textsuperscript{107}

These two examples, one elite and one ordinary, might seem to suggest that modern nationalism is an inappropriate means of explaining the politics of education in postrevolutionary. Yet in fact we see contained within the objections of these two men the very basis for a politics of modern nationalism. There is no need to “build” nationalism by the analyst; it comes baked into the framework of the politics of both Motahhari and principal. For these men, Iranian interests, the preservation of an authentic cultural identity, and Islamic practice represent an indissoluble phenomenon for the supporters of the Islamic state. To be Iranian, in other words, is to be Islamic.

Iran has, in other words, a national identity, even if our principal and Motahhari are unwilling to categorize that identity as nationalism per se.\textsuperscript{108} Returning to a point made earlier in this dissertation, the self-definition of social actors does not obviate the need for analysis. Simply because Motahhari and the principal define themselves as Muslims, committed exclusively to the ummat, does not mean that they do not use the language and logic of nationalism, even if they do not refer to it as such.

Islamists oppose the absence of Islam in the articulation and definition of Iranian identity, not the idea that an Iran and Iranian nation have always existed since time immemorial. The belief in a primordial national identity for Iran, inextricably tied to religion and the divine, is not


\textsuperscript{108} Charles King makes a similar point in regards to the concept of "ethnic conflict." King distinguishes between ethnic conflict as a self-reported phenomenon, i.e., belligerents define themselves, in part, along cultural lines, and ethnic conflict as a distinct phenomenon, different in kind from other instances of large-scale violence within a single state. King argues that this latter version of ethnic conflict is flawed and empirically untenable. Charles King, “The Myth of Ethnic Warfare: Understanding Conflict in the Post-Cold War World,” \textit{Foreign Policy} 80, no. 6 (November/December 2001), 165-170.
a contradiction and presents a clear opening, as it were, to sneak an acceptable Islamic-Iranian nationalism into the ideological and political discursive realms of the IRI.

This claim is in very much in line with the growing appreciation within the literature of nationalism’s modularity. What distinguishes nationalism from other forms of collective belonging is “the way in which national solidarities imply a specific relation to space and time, one that is inextricably tied to modern notions of sovereignty---invested in a people and realized (ideally) through common state institutions.”

Nationalism, however, features this generic dimension alongside a historical element. Wedeen argues that the first wave of writing on modern nationalism, led by Benedict Anderson’s seminal work, fails to distinguish between the generic and historical aspects of nationalism, “which is to say that they overgeneralize the historical connection in the West between the idea of the nation and the project of secularism in particular.” Put another way, the claim that nationalism and secularism necessitate each other confuses a historical connection between nationalism and secularism for a constitutive one.

Religious activists are well aware that, if a nation starts with the premise of secular nationalism, religion is often made marginal to the political order. This marginality is especially onerous from many revolutionary religious perspectives, including the Iranian, the Sikh, and the Sinhalese, because they regard the two ideologies as unequal: the religious one is far superior. Rather than to start with secular nationalism, they prefer to begin with religion.

The implication of this way of speaking is not that religion is antithetical to nationalism, but that religious rather than secular nationalism is the appropriate premise on which to build a nation, even a modern nation-state. In fact, virtually every reference to nationhood used by religious nationalists assumes that the modern nation-state is the only way in which a nation can be construed.

What Wedeen is arguing is that just as with the state, state formation, and modernity the understanding today is that there does not exist a single kind of nationalism. Nationalism

provides a framework for explaining a particular set of political and social outcomes, and not necessarily the content of those outcomes, which are inevitably shaped by the contingencies of local history and culture.

The Benefits of Using a Framework of Nationalism

Certain benefits derive from the use of a frame of modern nationalism in research on formal education in Iran. Above all, it enables me to lower the stakes of my research, especially in regards to the work that textbooks are supposed to do. I have found the literature’s strict focus on ideology and the Islamicization of the curriculum in the postrevolutionary period to be too narrow and confining, and a framework of analysis that frequently pushes research into forced and artificial dichotomies. Throughout the scholarship, authors assess schools and textbooks on their failure or success to implement a (static) ideological program, with the materials and actors compelled to pick sides between either Islamic or pre-Islamic, revolutionary or prerevolutionary periods.

There is more to Iran’s postrevolutionary schooling than the production of ideological lieges, bound to a fixed definition of what it means to be a Muslim. Nationalism is a heuristic supple enough to capture the messiness of politics as actors interact and sort out what it means to be an “Iranian,” but also sufficiently rigid to keep the research from spinning off into tautologies and non-falsifiable claims. As we’ll see in later chapters, what counts as “Islamic” changes over time, and what comprises the Islamic Citizen is not always Islamic. The curriculum, nonetheless, rarely strays from the bindings provided by the concept of the shared Iranian nation.

A further benefit of looking at recent history in Iran through the frame of nationalism is that it allows us to move away from an over-reliance on the figure of Khomeini as a central figure and “unmoved mover” of postrevolutionary politics in Iran. By placing the theoretical and
institutional foundations of the revolution a century earlier, a more historically balanced story emerges in which Khomeini is less the maker of worlds than a modernizer whose success derives, in no small measure, from the modernization debates that began in Iran long before his appearance on the political scene.

Ultimately Iran under the clerics bears many of the same marks, and the same burdens, of the dilemma of modernization that bedeviled reformers in the Qajar and Pahlavi eras. In the following section, I provide specific evidence of what is the modern character of postrevolutionary schooling as well as make explicit its connection to historical legacies of previous regimes. Above all, I aim to demonstrate that Islamicization is at most a companion to a national project, and not the central feature of either education or the political arena in Iran.

**The Modernization Dilemma in the Islamic Republic**

Modernity, indivisible from education, had by the end of the nineteenth century expanded well beyond its original purpose of providing for Iran’s defense against foreign encroachment. As ideas of what constituted the modern expanded, so too did the role and expectations of education. The school system, such as it was in the early 1900s, now had an impressive portfolio, and included the fostering of a national identity, the training of a skilled workforce, and of course, securing the authority of the Pahlavi state.

The Shah’s educational portfolio became the IRI’s portfolio in 1979, with the difference that now an overtly religious discourse was added to its nationalizing and modernizing agenda.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{113} Religion was added, but only superficially. Zubaida argues that the Islamic language of Iran’s revolutionaries is at best an emulsion “sprayed upon” a decidedly modernist program of rule. Zubaida, Islam, the People, xxx.
Nation (*mellat*), Islam (*din-e islam*), and science (*elm*)

114 are the basic elements of education in the Islamic Republic, and seen as working in necessary tandem. Science and knowledge produced by the educational system contributes to the preservation and independence of the Islamic nation. By the same token, knowledge must first be validated by religion in order for it to be deemed useful. In both instances, educational outcomes are tied to the goal of securing the independence of the nation, as seen in the following statement made by Khomeini at a gathering of Islamic student associations in late April 1980:

> What we want to say is the point that our universities educate and train individuals who are westernized, many teachers are westernized and they bring up our youth westernized. We say that [as a consequence] there is [today] no university useful for our nation…There have been universities in Iran but we depend on the west in all the affairs necessary for a living country. When we say that universities must change fundamentally and become Islamic, we do not mean that only Islamic science should be taught there nor that sciences are of two types namely the Islamic and non-Islamic ones…we mean that our universities must provide for the needs of our nation and not the aliens.  

We saw earlier how Islam renders nationalism acceptable by making the latter local, rather than a “western imposition.” In the same way, the pursuit of knowledge, whether it takes place in the schools or at the universities, 116 requires an Islamic (i.e., Iranian) foundation of learning to receive the imprimatur of legitimacy. Education must be, in other words, a strictly local affair, designed by and for Iranians:

> The meaning of the Islamicization of universities is that they become independent. The meaning of the Islamicization of universities is that they become independent and separate themselves from

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114 The Farsi term *elm* and its adjectival form, *elmi*, are regularly featured in discussions about education. Although the terms mean “science” and “scientific,” respectively, in English, *elm* has a broad application in usage. In the Iranian context of education, *elm* refers to any subject matter that is taught in a school or university, and not just, say, biology, physics, or chemistry. The expression “bad kar-e elmi hast” means that whatever the material being taught or learned, it must be formulated in a neutral, unbiased, and value-free manner that is rigorous and systematic, in other words, scientific.


116 English readers may find my usage redundant, given that “school” is often conflated with “university” or “college.” However in the Farsi sharp distinctions are drawn between the two through the use of the different words *madreseh* and *daneshgah*, meaning school and university, respectively.
the west or dependent on the east. We want to have an independent country, an independent university, and an independent culture.117

A little over a year later this speech Khomeini would return to the topic of national independence and its correlation to an Islamic academic training, where once again “Islamic” acts as a proxy for “Iranian.” Here, Khomeini speaks of the apocalyptic and redemptive qualities of schooling. Although his remarks are focused on university education, they are consistent with the postrevolutionary state’s approach to formal education at all levels of instruction. The term “east” in the following passage, refers in the following passage to the Soviet Union and its allies in the communist bloc, a common usage in the first decade of the IRI:

The reform of a nation originates from its universities. Similarly, the annihilation of a nation stems from its universities. Universities and academic education can incline our youths toward the east or the west, make them fell hollow and make them infatuated with the west or the east until the east dominates our country, destroys and removes all of our culture and gives us a westernized or easternized mind…However, thanks to God, our nation has become aware and will not permit the materialization of these plans that are for the interest of the west or the east. Our nation has understood that universities can make our country dependent or independent…118

Islam, embraced by the state and society together, is the only means of achieving independence. Islam is the essential cultural identity of the Iranian people, and while Iran can survive without a large role for its non-Islamic features and practices, without religion as the centerpiece of the country’s educational program Iran will not fall victim to a fate in which the country’s youth forget their vatan (homeland) and instead become “infatuated with Moscow, London, or Washington.”119 120

117 Khomeini, “Imam Khomeini’s Speech at the Gathering of Students.”
119 Khomeini, “Imam Khomeini’s Statements at the Meeting with Members.”
120 Passages such as the ones cited just above lend credence to what Farideh Farhi has called the “almost pathological” Iranian yearning for independence. I do not disagree with this characterization, but want to suggest that the phenomenon of political leaders wanting to secure, above all, Iranian sovereignty is not unique to the postrevolutionary period but is in fact a part of the legacy of the modernization dilemma. Farideh Farhi, “The Revolutionary Legacy: A Contested and Insecure Polity,” in Viewpoints Special Edition: The Iranian Revolution at 30 (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2009), 29-31.
Just as with the modernizing elites of the Qajar era, IRI planners make a distinction between desirable western technology and undesirable western culture. Rather than develop from scratch an “Islamic” body of knowledge in the arts and sciences, Iran’s leadership has since the Revolution embarked on what is a rather old and familiar effort to draw from foreign sources that knowledge deemed to be necessary for the further development and progress of Iran. Leaders extol the virtues of taking what is necessary from the foreigners, but do so with the expectation that Iran will one day produce all of this material on its own:

We are not embarrassed to learn from the westerners…we are not at all ashamed and we shall not be hesitant, we will go pursue [their knowledge] as their students. However, this apprenticeship comes with two conditions, conditions that unfortunately the Pahlavi regime did not abide. The previous regime closed its eyes and opened its arms wide and whoever came, with whatever they gave, the Pahlavis took. One of the two conditions is that whatever we take in, we shall first assess to see if it is of benefit to us or not. If the knowledge is one-hundred percent beneficial, then we shall accept it one-hundred percent…The second condition is that this relationship of “master and student” must not last forever…one must not be a student forever. We must make ourselves professors.

Islam is often recruited to validate these actions. There is, it is claimed, no religious hindrance to using foreign know-how. However, foreign knowledge must never be accepted whole cloth but must be tailored to the body, as it were, of Iran:

We are not against the process of getting raw materials from them. It should not be assumed that we reject the products of western culture and its scientific advance that are sometimes miraculous. Such dogmatism is not in line with Islamic views at all and we never follow this trend. We should design the building and it is not important where the raw, needed materials are procured.

However, these materials should fit the design (emphasis added).

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121 For an opposing perspective, see Menashri, Education and the Making, especially 306. Menashri links “Khomeini and his men” to the Qajars. The two Pahlavi rulers pursued a different course of modernization, one in which westernization was modernization.


Noteworthy in this passage is Khamanei’s insistence that the description of Islam as being an insular is anti-Islamic. Islam is a dynamic, living religion, and does not prohibit the absorption of cultures deemed to be useful. Instead, tradition mandates that the true Muslim “seek to gain knowledge even in China.”

Religious leaders both before and after the Revolution rarely if ever express doubt about the essentially modern character of their political and social project, and often bristle at the suggestion that Islam is by its nature retrograde. Khomeini expresses in the following statement contempt for those critics who accuse the regime of “spinning Iran back thirteen centuries in time.”

When we stated this topic [of reforming the universities], some guessed and had the illusion that people who want reforms at universities and demand Islamicization of universities believe that sciences are of two types and each science is of two main types for example, there are two types of geometry, namely the Islamic geometry and non-Islamic geometry or the Islamic physics and the non-Islamic physics…

However, they do not know that some members of the Council hold PhDs and some of them are religious scholars (mojtahid). Don’t they perceive that Islamic sciences should be taught at the old schools (madreseha) and universities (hoze-ye elmi) that are centers for other (i.e., Islamic) sciences?

Just the suggestion that Islam or Islamist politics was anti-modern could drive leaders to fits.

In a 1978 interview between a reporter from the New Yorker and Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari, the reporter, cleaving to a particular definition of “the modern,” is set to raise doubts about the validity of the plans that Iran’s religious leaders have for society when he is interrupted by the elderly cleric:

I remarked that many people in Iran, and in other parts of the world, had different views from His Holiness on such matters as religious liberty, land reform, and the role of women. He cut in before I could develop this theme. “The journalistic community in the world,” he said, pointing a

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124 Khamanei, “The Speech Made by His Excellency.”
125 Wright, The Last Great Revolution, 8.
126 Khomeini, “Imam Khomeini’s Speech at the Gathering of Students.”
127 The two, of course, are very different concepts. My point here is that not only is Islam often equated to a conservative, anti-innovatory “traditionalism,” but so too is Islam, the religion, assumed to be the same as Islamist politics, the former, therefore, containing what are allegedly the same anti-progressive proclivities as the latter.
bony finger at me, “has constantly made the libelous charge that we religious leaders are anti-progressive and reactionary and anachronistic. That is not the case. We want science, technology, educated men and women---physicists, surgeons, engineers. But we also want clean and honest political leaders. Those who make the charges against us are themselves reactionary, because their goal is to stop us from instituting a government of hope. The government of God is the government of the people, by the people.”

A common strategy for dealing with the claim that religion is anti-modern, Iranian leaders often seek to reverse the equation of modernization by making religion the most important causal variable in the modernization process, and not a dependent variable that must be factored out before modernity can occur. In the following example, Khomeini inverts what is presumed to be the great strength of the foreign powers. He renders the moral failure of the United States and the Soviet Union as the defining characteristic of Iran’s enemies. Khomeini’s aim is what gives the self-doubting citizen of Iran an opportunity to know hope. To do this, he will, in a manner of speaking, move heaven and earth.

When some states advance industrially and scientifically, some of us grow smaller and begin to think that our failure to do the same is due to our religion, and that the only means to achieve such progress is to abandon religion and that the only means to achieve such progress is to abandon religion...When the enemies went to the moon, these people imagined that religion was the obstacle preventing them from doing the same!

The imperialists may have managed to reach the heavens, but the angels are on the side of the Islamic people of Iran. Khomeini goes on to note that it could not have been the “laws,” i.e., the social and political organization of the Soviets or the Americans that led them to this “magnificent advance in invading outer space,” since the organizing society of the “Eastern” and “Western” camps was totally different. What is not different, and what ultimately renders these great accomplishments meaningless, is the two camps’ shared disregard for the one true faith:

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128 Joseph Kraft, “Letter From Iran,” *The New Yorker*, December 18, 1979. Shariatmadari’s comment reflect what is generally a heightened level of knowledge and awareness amongst Iranian leaders of the orientalist trope that Iran’s indigenous culture, above all Islam, stands in the way of progress.

Let them go to Mars or anywhere they wish; they are still backward in the sphere of securing happiness to man, backward in spreading moral virtues, and backward in creating a psychological and spiritual progress similar to the material progress.\(^{130}\)

A fundamental feature of the modernization narrative presented by the postrevolutionary regime has been the disruption of Iranian progress by the western powers. Rather than the Qajars and Pahlavis seeking western knowledge to put to use in Iran for Iranians, the current mythology of the Islamic Republic has it that modernity only truly begins in Iran after 1979, with the expulsion of the west. Rather than presenting a narrative in which a weakened Iran pursues western knowledge, Iran is depicted as a virtuous country denied its rightful place in the modern world. IRI historians put forward a version of history in which instead of Iranians seeking out the west, western leaders come to Iran, having reached the conclusion that the best way to contain and weaken Iran was to ensure that it would never have access to the gift of knowledge.

To the metaphor of schools as “factories” for the production of the “good human” (\textit{ensan sazi}), one now sees the added notion of schools as battleline bastions, waystations for the defense of the country in an endless cultural war against the west:

It is not by coincidence that the principal goal of the imperialists, in truth their entire goal, is to attack the culture of the societies that are their control. It is not by accident the centers of learning of…Iran, from elementary school to the university were under the influence and control of the western imperialists…

In the course of wars and political and geographical disputes in the world, it happened that Europe attained modern science earlier than other nations in recent historical phase. But this does not mean that Europeans are sharper or more intelligent than Eastern nations. Nor does it mean that nations in the East are deprived of certain capabilities that European nations are endowed with.

One day Eastern nations were advanced scientifically, and at the same time nations in the West were in the darkness of ignorance. There have been several such stages in the history of mankind. However, what is taking place in the present stage of history – something almost unprecedented in the history of mankind – is that Western countries are trying to monopolize scientific knowledge and use it as a tool for exercising political and economic dominance over other countries in the world.

Such attempts have never been recorded in the history of mankind, during which knowledge and civilization have been handed down and transferred from one nation to another. What Western

\(^{130}\) Khomeini, “Islamic Government,” 262.
countries are currently doing is unprecedented in history.  

The school quarantines the country’s children until they become sufficiently schooled, and therefore immune to the dangerous pathogens and afflictions born by western culture:

Ayatollah Khamanei linked the special quality [of teachers] to the exceptional role of education in forming both the individuals and society, adding that every person of society in his or her golden time of learning, that is to say from primary school until university, boards a large workshop or a public quarantine whose main role-players are teachers…

Whether conventional or biological, teachers and students stand together at the front lines of the cultural war. Mixing his metaphors somewhat, Khamanei applauds teachers for “standing like mountains in the face of waves of pressure and conspiracies” and beseeches them to continue their vigilance against the enemy:

“As stated in the New Year Day statement, enemies of the Iranian nation pursue treble goals of hindering scientific progress, demoting economic status, and sowing discord in the united ranks of people,” Ayatollah Khamanei cautioned, adding that the teachers due to [the] sensitivity of their job constitute a target in the plot much the same way as in the past 27 years.

This was not the first occasion in which Khamanei had used the idea that the national body resembles an actually human body. Speaking in 1985, then President Khamanei observed that

If an element of an alien culture is suddenly injected in a part of society that has its own certain established cultural bases, has formed its own system, and the society has grown up along these bases, it will automatically lose the balance. In such a case, the society would become like a train that has two engines and two driving forces [resulting in] miscoordination…

Although he has again mixed his metaphors somewhat, the passage is in line with the general policy of taking only that which is useful or healthy for Iran from “alien cultures.”

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133 Khamanei, “Teaching, Work of the All-Majesty.”
134 Khamanei, “The Speech Made by His Excellency.”
Backlash is inevitable, however, as the imperialists, unable to bear the existence of a self-sufficient Iran, will double its efforts to penetrate the cultural and educational realms of Iran.\(^{135}\)

Today, the Islamic Republic has raised the flag of justice and is determined to confront oppression and defend noble human values. Now if this system with such lofty ideals leads its nation to the peak of scientific progress, certainly the interests of the world’s expansionist and domineering powers will be threatened. This is an unavoidable reality…we should [therefore] make every effort to achieve scientific progress. But it should be noted that scientific progress will not be attained through imitation. It will be accomplished through initiative, innovation, originality and the opening of new frontiers in science.\(^{136}\)

Culture after the Revolution becomes, in effect, the Achilles heel of the Islamic Republic. The most effective way for the enemies of Iran to destroy the country, from the perspective of the state, is to penetrate and pollute the national culture. Whereas education was once associated solely with the development of military strength, now it is in the realm of ideas, the “soft war,” that the school plays its most important role in providing for the defense of the country:

My dears! We are not afraid of the economic sanctions, we are not afraid of the military interference. The thing that we are afraid of is cultural dependence.

In fact, the culture is the essence of a society. No social and economic foundation can be established independent from the culture. These foundations are coherent and in line in societies that enjoy a [rooted] culture and especially those who rely on a divine and Islamic base in this culture…\(^{137}\)

There is another side to this elevation of culture by the IRI, one that is more fortuitous for Iran in her struggle against the west. Against force of arms, or economic sanctions, Iran is greatly outmatched. The emphasis on culture, therefore, is a way to level the field of battle between Iran and her enemies in the west, the terms of battle stacked in favor of Iran, her culture from the perspective of the regime clearly superior to that of the west.

\(^{135}\) Culture (farhang) and education (amoozesh) are often conflated in Iran. A full explanation is provided in Chapter Five.

\(^{136}\) Khamanei, “Leader’s Address to University Professors.”

\(^{137}\) Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, “Az zolmat be noor” [“From Darkness to Light”], Moallem, Shahrivar 1387/2008, 3.
Analysis and Implications for Research

Early on in my fieldwork, my advisor in Tehran, the sociologist Mohammad Rezaei, posed an unexpected question about the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamanei, and the current state of politics in Iran. “Have you ever thought,” he asked, “that Khamanei considers this particular system (nezam) to represent ‘real’ democracy?” At issue was not Khamanei’s commitment to electoral politics. Rezaei, having correctly anticipated that I had already precluded democratization, an aspect of modernity, as either a possible causal variable or outcome of postrevolutionary schooling, was gently pushing me to consider the limitations that this perspective would place on my research.

Shortly after this conversation, I came across the following riposte to Rezaei’s question, supplied by Khamanei himself:

> Today the system of the Islamic Republic – which is a religious system whose regulations, principles and values are rooted in religion – is a full-fledged democratic system unparalleled by any other Muslim state. Of course, this truth is very bitter to the enemy. They do not like the idea of having religion and democracy on the same flag. They are attempting to separate the two. Thus the truth about the Islamic Republic is very painful to them...

> Today our best criteria especially for our officials are those based on religious democracy for improving our morality and manners. Do not make mistake, this sort of democracy has nothing to do with the Western version. It is quite different. It consists of two things: It is not like importing democracy from the west and then attaching it to religion. Democracy itself belongs to religion. (emphasis added)

Here we see Khamanei making the claim that democracy, when made concurrent with religion—indeed, to be democracy it must be so---becomes a redemptive experience. Not only is this “true” version of democracy much improved than its alternative in the west, so much so that it drives the enemy to fits of jealousy, but Khamanei goes so far as to suggest that the origins of democracy lie in Islam itself.

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138 In any case, the 2009 presidential election would, only a few years later, cast considerable doubt on the Leader’s sincerity where democracy was concerned.

In the black and white of “tradition” and “modernity,” I had been unable to anticipate Rezaei’s question. The same condition would have kept me from understanding the passage above as anything other than a deception, made by a ruler eager to instrumentally use a popular and righteous concept---democracy---as a way of securing his own power and rule.

Modernist orientations that, a priori, equate modernization with westernization, remain prevalent in social and historical scholarship on the Middle East despite the poststructuralist assaults of the late 1960s and 1970s. The imposition of a “modernization is westernization” framework and the continued use of outmoded categories of “tradition” and “modern” do violence to analysis by flattening what was for elites often a rather complex and anguished program of reform. Modernist frameworks also effectively shut out the clerical leadership from participation in modernity. If the bridge that must be crossed to becoming modern is that the nation must also become fully European or American, then this represented for the rohaniyat a bridge too far.

The reality is that westernization, like modernization and the concept of the “authentic culture,” is far from coherent or uniform. Recent historiography moreover demonstrates that the individuals and groups who have been a party to the modernization debates in Iran since the early 1800s generally exhibit a deep ambivalence towards importing western sources of knowledge.

We see, for instance, in the following comments by that paragon of secular modernity, Reza Pahlavi, a man whose drive to westernize Iran is often compared to that of his Turkish contemporary Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, deep concerns regarding the wisdom of the modernization project that he has embarked upon:

It would be much better to educate [our students] here in the country where they are going to live, and with whose progress they must inevitably be concerned. But we do not yet have the necessary machinery…I don’t want to turn the Persian into a bad copy of a European. That is not necessary,
for he has [a] might tradition behind him. I want to make out of my countrymen the best possible Persians. They need not be particularly Western or particularly Eastern. Each country has a mold of its own, which should be developed and improved till it turns out a citizen who is not a replica of anything else, but an individual sure of himself and proud of his nationality.¹⁴⁰

Similarly, at the inauguration of Tehran University, perhaps the high water mark of modernization under Reza Shah, Prime Minister Ali Forooghi noted that only through interaction between civilizations was advancement possible. Iranian civilization, in order to progress and grow, by necessity needed to interact with western culture, but only in a way that would not prejudice Iran’s unique culture or national identity.¹⁴¹

This idea of an interaction between (presumably) equal civilizations, from which each benefits, would be recapitulated several decades later by the current Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. Asked how Iran might keep “the rich and genuine culture of Islam immune” from the pollution of the “non-genuine western or eastern cultures,” Khamanei drew upon the history of the earliest stages of Islamic history as an example of how thrive by acquisition of knowledge, explaining in the process that the greatest sin lies in the lack of discretion. Blind embrace and acceptance is not permissible if Iran is to remain healthy and whole:

The prerequisite condition for survival and perpetuation of country is constant absorbing and repelling. In addition to absorbing and repelling that is along with these two, a culture should exchange with other cultures. In other words, it should absorb useful and positive elements of other cultures. This process cannot be unilateral. If this process is bilateral, it will result in a dynamism and perfection of a culture. This process is good. However, there is a bad process where a culture let elements of other culture flow inside it out of its control and without being decided upon by it. It is like a sick body to whom something is injected."¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Menashri, Education and the Making, 106.
¹⁴¹ Menashri, Education and the Making, 106.
This history is not, as some have argued, evidence that Islam is “sprayed on” secular modernity. Rather, Islam is the expression of modernity itself. Here my analysis is closer to that of Ali Mirsepassi who insists, “Islam has been viewed as the authentic cultural identity of Iran, the imagined traditional community of the disappearing past.”

Of course, the claim that Iran’s recent political history is the expression of an authentic modernity and nation, conceived by Iranians and articulated in local term, should not be taken to mean that there in fact exists an “authentic” Iranian culture or that there can ever be a conclusive end to the process of determining what that culture might be. Even Islam, so often cast as an immutable source of Iran’s true identity, to borrow from Whitman, contains multitudes. Authenticity is itself a site and source of considerable dispute, and much of the politics discussed in the remainder of this dissertation centers on rival efforts to fix what goes into the cultural training of children since 1979, as well as how to best preserve and transmit that culture across generations.

But what of those parts of the modernization project that are not modern? How, for example, shall we account for what is the manifestly patriarchal attitude expressed in

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143 Zubaida, *Islam, the People*, xxx. Zubaida argues that secularist politics continues in spite of political Islam. My argument is that Islam is how modernity gets expressed in the current political context of Iran.
144 Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse*, 11. Mehrad Boroujerdi offers nearly the opposite assessment regarding the centrality of Islam to Iran’s “authentic” national identity. Like Zubaida, Boroujerdi is skeptical of the view that 1979 is best understood using a framework of political Islam, arguing instead that religion (Shi’ism) was a key, but not the sole, ideological component of the Revolution. Religion, he writes, was “more a surrogate for Iranian nationalism.” Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals*, xv.
145 The premise of authenticity, it seems to me, is ultimately a limiting and unnecessary construct. Farideh Farhi has pointed out that ordinary Iranians have little need or interest in seeking out coherent, consistent, and fully formed accounts of themselves. Farhi, “Crafting a National Identity,” 7-22.
147 Marashi argues that Iranian modernity continues to fail, or at minimum, remains a project left incomplete, because of the irresolution of what he refers to as the “dual-cultures” problem. He seems to imply that once the dual-cultures problem is resolved modernization dilemma will end. See his conclusion in *Education and the Making*, especially pg. 138.
Shariatmadari’s notion that young women, and young men for that matter, being unable to control themselves require forced separation in the classroom?

I want to separate the schools of learning from the schools of flirting. We in Islam don’t look on women as playthings, accepted as long as they are young and beautiful, and then cast away. In Islam, the older the woman, the higher her status. We know that in coeducational schools there is a corruption of moral values, which is reflected in the police records. The girls develop certain relations, and some have illegitimate children, and others have abortions. The girl loses her self-respect and her status in society. Either she suffers a great personal loss or she takes up another way of life—prostitution.148

Passages such as this remind us that the articulation of modernity into local terms does not ensure liberation, empowerment, or the promise of “liberation.” Mina Safizadeh is absolutely correct to note that critiques of orientalist interpretations of the Middle East and the “totalizing” effects of the western narrative of modernity must not be replaced by a blindness towards the totalizing, i.e., anti-modern, effect that the current, putatively authentic “Iranian-Islamic” ideology of the IRI, has had.

I only note that any solution to the problem of totalization will, by necessity, include many of the same anti-modern forces that produce disempowerment. One of the primary tasks of this research will be to investigate whether or not disputes over “authenticity” in Iran since the Revolution have actually prevented modernity from taking hold. Much work remains to be done, although discussion of what that work entails lies outside of the scope of this research.

Having established the modern character of Iranian politics since the late nineteenth century, and framed the form of politics as that of a modern politics of nationalism, I now move on to the examination of the political effects of schooling in the postrevolutionary period. Up to this point in the dissertation modernity has been presented as a concept negotiated by and between reforming elites, across international borders. What of modernity as a negotiated

148 Kraft, “Letter From Iran.”
concept within national borders? What happens after leaders bring modernity down from on high to the masses, the latter assumed to be waiting eagerly for its blessings in the valleys below?

In the following section I focus on state efforts to shape children’s subjectivities as a part of broader processes of modern state formation. I lay out in the following paragraphs a theory of the state that integrates material and immaterial components of state rule, focusing specifically on how symbolic politics both exposes the public authority to subversive action by ordinary citizens and offers non-violent means for securing citizens’ consent to state rule.

**The Shaping of Children’s Subjectivities in the Context of Modern State Formation**

The preface of *A General Overview of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, published under the auspices of the Tehran-based Institute for Educational Research (Pazhushkadeh-ye talim va tarbiat), an affiliated organization of the Ministry of Education, begins with the following passage:

> In the contemporary world, education plays a binary role, [on the] one hand it has a primordial role in terms of an individual’s nurture, preparation, and guidance, and on the other hand, the significance of education has been well recognized as the only [means] to develop human resources and to make social, economic, and political [progress].

Education, the text goes on to say, constitutes a benediction and “in our world should be…spreading peace and prosperity” between every country.

This dual role of education is a relatively new phenomenon. Only with the emergence of the modern state form and its diffusion across the globe over the past century has there emerged a concomitant need for populations consisting of what we might describe as “happy workers and loyal citizens.” Prior to the rise of mass politics and modern forms of rule, there was no **public** need for education as there was hardly any such thing as “society” as we understand it today,

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much less a state interest in inducing the quiescence of said society. As I noted earlier, a modern politics of nationalism first took hold in the nineteenth century, becoming truly universal just in the post-war period.\textsuperscript{151}

This section focuses on one of the two basic characteristics of modern education, the matter of the individual’s “nurture, preparation, and guidance,” or put more simply, the formation of the national citizen. States everywhere lay claim to the subjectivities of their citizens, and in particular the young. The promotion of a particular and usually “timeless” identity through schooling constitutes a central feature of modern state formation, and in this regard, for all of its overt efforts in this realm, Iran is not exceptional.\textsuperscript{152}

Without question, state leaders since the Revolution have viewed the national school system as the important institution for the reproduction of an authentic national and moral identity. Schools are the principal site where children are trained until they internalize “the horizon of the taken-for-granted,”\textsuperscript{153} those ruling ideas and beliefs that consist “of things that go without saying because, being axiomatic, they come without saying; things that, being

\textsuperscript{151} Although nationalism plays a central conceptual role in this dissertation, I recognize that nationalism has not been the sole means of binding state and society in the modern era. Other techniques exist, including the use of cult politics or the elimination of society altogether, the latter method associated with Soviet and Eastern European forms of communism. There is considerable evidence that the Soviets could never overcome what Lenin famously referred to as its “prison house of nationalities” problem, a problem that was in many ways exacerbated by the policy of internal passports and lingering Russian chauvinism. Of course, the late 1980s ethnic conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was the proximate, though not fundamental, cause of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For a discussion of authoritarian politics sustained by a politics of spectacle and cult worship of a single leader, see Lisa Wedeen, \textit{Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). For a discussion of the lingering effects of the preference given to Russian speakers in the former Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan, see David Laitin, \textit{Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad} (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1998).

\textsuperscript{152} I address the matter of the “unhidden curriculum” and the politicized nature of Iranian schooling in Chapters Five and Six of the dissertation.

presumptively shared, are not normally the subject of explication or argument."  

Through schooling the IRI attempts to remold people’s own definitions of themselves, so that ideally there is no daylight or distance between the state’s ideology and the worldview of its citizens.  

How then to discuss the politics of schooling in the context of modern state formation, with the goal of linking the two to political outcomes? First, a definition: Modern state formation describes “the dynamic, historically informed, often contingent process by which states emerge in relation to societies.”  

State formation is not historically determined, but represents a process initiated by the ongoing, purposive action of agencies and institutions of the modern, transformative state seeking to expand and consolidate state authority over a population. Purposive action by state planners invariably generates unintended outcomes, defying persistent myths that certain a priori conditions are needed for successful state formation, or that there exists a deliberate strategy of action for state formation, a formula or recipe for achieving. Indeed, state formation has no end, no final measure of achievement. The primary qualities of state formation can be said to include impermanence, contingency, and persistent uncertainty of future relationships of power. “No state-society relationship is ever permanently fixed, though the relationship can be extremely stable and resistant to change, depending on the degree to which state-society relations are institutionalized and reinforced by culture and history.”  

Modern state formation resembles in many ways state-in-society approaches to the

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155 This is, of course, an ideal-type. Apart from the incoherence and diversity of thought and action found within the categories of state and society wherever these are studied, the program of education behind Iran’s school system produces its own contradictions. If, for example, the formal values that children learn in schools are assumed to be harmonious with the values of the students’ household, then what need is there for inculcation in the state schools? I address this and other puzzles later in the dissertation.


157 Concepts and Dilemmas, 14.
examination of political power. As in the modern state formation approach, state-in-society authors focus on the ways in which the realities of power are experienced and challenged by individuals at the local level as well as how these localized accounts are embedded in larger structural forces. Scholars working with this approach treat as axiomatic that the engagement of the state with individuals and groups in society results in their mutual transformation. Rather than a presuming a linear relationship between state designs and outcomes, scholars focus “on the process of becoming---the continuing reconstruction of state and society” (emphasis added).158

The modern state formation and state-in-society approaches pay close attention to how states seek hegemonic control over society using both material/coercive methods as well as immaterial/consensual techniques. The state is theorized as being dual: On the one hand, the state stands as a coherent, monolithic Leviathan, standing over and apart from society as a country’s authoritative power, ruling with actual and implied use of force. On the other hand, the state is imagined as an extension of society, a ubiquitous and diffuse concept simultaneously representing the embodiment “the people” its willing agent, a duality of state power that Joel Migdal has referred to as the “Janus-faced” image of the state.159

Together the modern state formation and state-in-society approaches are part of a growing movement within the social sciences away from the Weberian notion of the state as a purely rational bureaucratic institution, operating with impunity, to an emphasis on questions of culture and power as they relate to the formation of the subjectivities of the state’s population.

159 Joel Migdal, “Researching the State,” unpublished author’s manuscript, provided by email correspondence, 2007. I reject the claim that the “fierce” component of the state’s image, i.e., its coercive arm, is nothing more than a projection or “mask” put on by the state to disguise its actual, and more pernicious forms of power, above all at the level of the ideational and cultural. See especially Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” Journal of Historical Sociology 1, no. 1 (March 1988): 58-89.
Scholars working within these literatures typically hold the view that the unprecedented power of the modern state is clearly “not only external and objective; it is in equal part internal and subjective,” invisibly working to shape understandings of who we are even as it performs the visible rituals of regulation typically associated with governments, including the monitoring of borders, imposition of taxes, and the enforcement of laws covering a range of personal behavior.\textsuperscript{160}

The examination of schooling as a site designated for the manufacture of subjectivities makes culture a particularly apt concept to use in research. It bears repeating that the cultural realm represents the most important obligation and critical field for state intervention. Without a good culture, not just Iran but any country will be lost:

\begin{quote}
The primary concern of every society is its culture. Fundamentally, the culture of every society establishes the identity and existence of that society. When a culture is corrupt, no matter how strong its economy, politics, industry, and military, a society will find itself rotten and hollow to its core.\textsuperscript{161}
\end{quote}

Once we acknowledge that politics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, “over the management and appropriation of meanings,”\textsuperscript{162} the challenge for the analyst working within modern state formation and state-in-society approaches to research is to determine whether the balance of state rule lies on the coercive or symbolic side of the ledger, or somewhere in between.

Culturalist approaches to the state are often associated with an interpretivist approach that posits the state in its material and visible form to be nothing more than a collective delusion,

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\textsuperscript{160} Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, \textit{The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 180.
\textsuperscript{161} Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, “Az zolmat be noor” [“From Darkness to Light”]. \textit{Moallem}, Shahrivar 1387/2008.
\textsuperscript{162} Wedeen, \textit{Ambiguities of Domination}, 30.
\end{flushright}
what Philip Abrams describes as an “a-historical mask of legitimating illusion.”163 The state by this reading is not a thing or an object, nor is it an essential, material base of reality, hidden behind a cleverly concocted veil of false consciousness, but rather power that is “ubiquitous and diffuse, permeating society and subjectivity.” Abrams writes: “…the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is.”165

I find this poststructuralist reading of the state, in which state power “is all culture, all the time,” to be less then compelling. While I do not disagree that the immaterial cultural and symbolic politics can have material effects in the real world, state power takes ideational (or ideological) and institutional (or coercive) form.166 In any case, the accumulation of ethnographic research in the field of comparative education, particularly amongst scholars working on the Middle East, have called into the question the effectiveness of state power, whether take ideational or institutional form.167

While I view skepticism of the inexorability of state power, cultural or material, as an important corrective to earlier tendencies within the literature to grant the state carte blanche authority in achieving its (assumed to be coherent) goals, i.e., the implicit claim that educational inputs lead in a more or less direct fashion to outputs, it is also important to not reject out of hand

165 Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty,” 82
166 Thanks to Dr. Daniel Brumberg for this insight.
167 Culturalist approaches in the context of Middle East studies, as they come with the historical baggage of orientalism and even “orientalism in reverse,” in scholarship for years sacrificed complexity for essentialist readings, unexamined politicized done under the guise of objective research.
the faith and importance that leaders place on the importance of cultural work as a means for securing power, whether it be through schooling or in the educative process writ-large.

**Immaterial Study or the Study of the Immaterial? The Reticence of Political Science**

The recognition that state power is never derived solely from physical and material forces has had relatively little impact on research being produced by political science. Despite the discipline’s long-standing authority on the study of the state, a topic central to many if not most political science research agendas, practitioners of political science for the most part continue to focus on material components of state rule. Cultural factors are treated as being causally unimportant, mere epiphenomenon, diffuse, and ultimately of little consequence against more essential and “real” material reason. While sophisticated cultural approaches towards state power have flourished outside of the field of political science, ironically, and despite political science’s traditional claim and authority on the concept of the state as a subject of research, a fuller, more realistic picture of how state leaders form and reproduce their authority can today be found in the sister disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and history.

Political science does not entirely reject cultural analysis, but tends to veer between a benign neglect of culture as a causal mechanism and the naïve embrace of outmoded and empirically untenable understandings of cultural phenomena.  

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168 An excellent example of how the use of culture in political science is often a case of “one step forward, two steps back” is the following passage from Samuel Huntington’s response in *Foreign Affairs* to his critics: “The presumption of Westerners that other peoples who modernize must become ‘like us’ is a bit of Western arrogance that in itself illustrates the clash of civilizations.” Huntington, like the postmodernists, rejects the idea that the world needs to become like Europe and North America in order to develop politically and economically. However, the problematic of Huntington’s formulation, represented in this single sentence, is his belief that there is such a thing as a western culture and civilization, one that coheres around a set of values that presumably, are timeless, and is populated by actual “Westerners.” Samuel Huntington, “If Not Civilizations, What? Samuel Huntington Responds to His Critics,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (November/December 1993): 192.
other “scientific” explanations have come up short, a *deus ex machina* to explain what cannot be explained by rational or institutional approaches.\(^{169}\)

By emphasizing the mutual appropriations of state and society, a state-in-society approach provides political scientists with a more precise lens to study the *cultural* struggles taking place in the classroom as constitutive of politics. Political scientists generally avoid study of the cultural beliefs and practices that constitute “good citizenship,” even though these phenomena are manifestly political. There is a sense amongst some political scientists that culture is a concept better left to its sister disciplines in the social sciences.\(^{170}\) Political science’s aversion to systematic cultural analysis is particularly problematic in the case of Iran, as cultural politics remains of special interest to that country’s clerical rulers, both as a meaningful policy objective in its own right and as an instrument for domination. By contrast, this study draws explicitly from recent theoretical and methodological developments found in sociology and anthropology. It is my belief that political scientists need not cede intellectual ground on the matter of culture but should instead engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue, offering up their discipline’s unique insights into matters of power and state formation.

Disciplinary commitments to generalizability and the crafting of parsimonious explanatory models also contribute to culture being an unattractive analytical tool for political

\(^{169}\) Steinmetz argues that part of the problem lies with Max Weber. He demonstrates that Weber’s theory of the state rarely understood culture as a constitutive element of the modern state, but at the most, a *product* of the state. Weber links rationality and modernity in such a way as to make culture a component of either premodern or nonwestern states, or both combined. In other words, culture for Weber is determined by temporal and geographical variables---the further away one gets in space and time from the contemporary west, the more likely it is that culture constitutes the state’s authority, those countries representing an absence of rational governance. Even the concept of charismatic authority is seen by Weber as a temporary condition, occurring at founding moments but which must be sublimated into the routinized and bureaucratic structure of the legal-rational state if the state is to become truly modern. See George Steinmetz, ed. *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

science, and one that many in the field are more than happy to leave to the anthropologists and cultural historians. Nonetheless, forays by historical institutionalists into the mire of cultural analysis have in recent years held out the promise that the field of political science could overcome its by developing models that utilized an attractive, middle-range compromise between the messiness of purely interpretivist approaches and the decontextualized (and depoliticized) of structural/behavioralist theories.

Historical institutionalism represents an eclectic field that highlights the particular ways in which institutional and ideological paths or legacies structure political and social change. \(^\text{171}\) The basic premise is that past institutionalization of particular practices or ideas, often made at historical or critical junctures that can be identified post hoc, set the range of possibility or likely political outcomes. The occurrence of increasing returns means that once a country or an institution is “locked” into a particular institutional path---and the key here is “locked,” meaning some measure of successful consolidation takes place---then over time it becomes ever more difficult to deviate from this path. Change is not impossible, and the equilibrium of the path can be easily disrupted by an exogenous shock, but such deviation is unlikely given the idiosyncrasies of political phenomena. \(^\text{172}\)

A frequently cited scholar who effectively combines a historical institutionalist approach with culture is David Laitin. Developed over several years and covering a wide range of comparative cases, Laitin outlines a model for research able to reconcile the so-called symbolic-

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instrumentalist divide in culturalist approaches to social science. On either side of this divide are the understandings of cultural phenomena as a national “essence,” or as an instrument-laden toolkit waiting to be used by crafty elites. Laitin utilizes both, and offers what he calls the Janus-faced approach to culture. This approach recognizes that states, at least at foundational moments, have the capacity to fashion the cultural framework of the society over which they govern.

Laitin inverts the usual use of culture in political analysis. Instead of defining culture as “what actors share in common” be it knowledge or cultural practices, he demonstrates that it is possible to define culture based on the differences. Cultural disagreements between actors produce a range of outcomes, but Laitin conceptually limits the scope of conflict by tying the strands of political debate around what Laitin calls “points of concern.” Much like the concept of two-dimensional power found in the work of power literature authors, points of concern define whether a topic is or is not “reasonable” and “appropriate,” thereby “ruling out” or “ruling in” categories of debate.

Foundational moments are where the cultural glue is set. Leaders, domestic or foreign, depending on the circumstances, establish points of concern, an action that satisfies the instrumentalist account of culture. Although the points of concern are themselves constructed, Laitin insists that once established cultural frames have an independent impact on political life, outside of the purview of the state. Here, Laitin meets the demands of the symbolic theory of

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175 Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture*.

culture in which culture is a relatively coherent causal force that exists beyond the reach of individual manipulation.

Laitin’s work is at its strongest is in its insistence that there must be some shared ground for culture to have causal effect on politics. Culture resides in the social, even as it deals with values, ideas, and practices that are meaningful for the individual. Meaning can only be achieved publicly, as a social act, generally achieved by reading a Geertzian cultural script.177

Culture as an object or site of political struggle only occurs in "extraordinary times," the aforementioned foundational moments. Symbolic politics have political effects in non-crisis settings, but in a sharply delimited way. Although the initial struggle by elites to establish "points of concern" rarely turn out as anticipated, once the struggle is over political life associated with culture falls into a routine:

Seeking a delimited but not dismissive notion of culture, this essay shows that in extraordinary times, the groupness of culture cannot be taken for granted. People take advantage of their multiple cultural repertoires and refashion their identities to make them relevant to the crises they face. Similarly, state actors seek to frame cultural groups better to assure themselves the possibility of meeting the demands these groups will make on the state.178

Pace historical institutionalists’ emphasis on habit and legacy, once the “loose” limits of symbolic politics are firmly established, the dialectic that emerges between the boundaries of culture (i.e., the points of concern) and the cultural claims of individuals and groups become difficult to undo. Even leaders who manipulated cultural symbols for purposes of rule become, over time, themselves trapped in “webs of significance” that they themselves have spun.179

179 Laitin, Hegemony and Culture.
One of Laitin’s central concerns is that as analysts increasingly make the "cultural turn," they forget the insights of state theory generated by bringing the state back in literature (of which he is a founding member). States are relatively autonomous actors and not a set of institutions "captured" by dominant groups or a neutral playing field facilitating contractual interactions of maximizing individuals, as the Marxist and behavioralist accounts, respectively, would have it:

To say all politics is discourse, or culture, is to relegate these concepts to an explanatory void. States have only limited capacities, and not in all periods, to reframe culture. On the other side of the dialectic, discourse strategies only rarely naturalize new cultural formations. New nationalities do not appear with each new narrative proposing one. Cultural symbols shape action, but these symbolic frames can be crushed by the state.\footnote{Laitin, “The Cultural Elements,” 292.}

There are a number of problems to Laitin's approach to culture and politics. Laitin, like many working within the historical institutionalist framework, seeks to avoid the sin of cultural essentialism but ends up falling into a ditch containing more or less the same. Putting it slightly differently, Laitin tries to tame, or to use the Foucauldian locution, discipline the unruly concept of culture so as to make it stable enough to be an independent or causal variable, pinning it in time much like a collector pins a prized butterfly in a display case.

Culture is not, however, a static frame or a coherent and timeless “script” waiting for the local citizen to decipher. To claim otherwise is to decontextualize culture, to make it once again “essential.” The concept of "frame," used by Laitin in the passage cited above, evokes the image of a self-enclosed, presumably impermeable square or rectangle, a space that is distinct and separate from what surrounds it. State and society “frame” in splendid isolation from each other, acting as unfettered, autonomous and whole agents, limited only by their inevitable collisions with each other ("the state crushes the symbolic frames").
There is also the one-sided nature of power in Laitin’s concept of the “points of concern,” a concept which assumes the inevitable success of the state. Though it may require a period of trial and error, it is only a matter of time before the pieces, or points of concern, piece and fit together to make the symbolic framework. This itself is a hegemonic process untroubled by disagreements and rivalries that are often to be found within elite ranks. Laitin argues, for example, that the British, as Nigeria’s colonial rule, managed to convince the Yoruba that the ancestral village ought to be the basis for any “legitimate” politics amongst the latter’s people. Yet he offers no mechanism as to how this outcome was brought about. Perhaps the British were uniquely unified in mounting this particular hegemonic project in Nigeria, but this must be shown empirically, not merely assumed. Laitin does not.\footnote{Laitin, Hegemony and Culture.}

Just as troubling is Laitin’s assumption that once the cultural glue or points of concern are set, they become difficult if not impossible to break, absent a crisis of some sort. Laitin pays no attention to the overwhelming ethnographic evidence by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians demonstrating that the reception of symbols and cultural discourse often differs considerably from what is produced by dominant groups.

I single out Laitin not because of any particular animus towards his work, but because his research represents a "best effort" by political science to "take culture seriously." The primary limitation on the discipline, I am convinced, is its adherence to explanatory models that are parsimonious, generalizable, and causal. While not rejecting these out of hand, the insistence on demonstrable and neat modes of causality leads to models such as Laitin's, in which history must at some point be "frozen," i.e., made into points of concern.
Here the work of poststructuralists has been instructive. By deconstructing culture to expose its variety of use and production, this scholarship has done much to demonstrate the futility of trying to prevent culture from existing as a phenomenon in motion, even if it is only around “points of concern.” Nonetheless, with poststructuralist readings of culture we run the risk of going too far in the opposite direction. Whereas the work of historical institutionalists tends to overstate the on the structural qualities of culture, poststructuralist understandings of the state, as the name indicates, eliminates structure of any form from the equation. Culture suffuses everything, a condition that invariably leads to a never-ending series of tautologies that are useless for empirical analysis. Whereas historical institutionalism tends to “freeze” the causal variable of culture, poststructuralist approaches often flood all phenomena with symbolic and ideational explanations, making all outcomes about culture all the time.

**Culture as Structure and Practice**

The challenge here is to operationalize culture in such a way that allows us to treat the immaterial as a force with real and material effects in the world, in the parlance of the poststructuralists, but which also permits an epistemology capable of accounting for cultural change, thereby avoiding the essentialism that has long plagued culturalist approaches in the discipline. Applying the jargon of social science, how can we understand culture as an independent and dependent variable, and do so, quoting Charles Tilly, “without locating it inside, beneath, behind, or above every feature of states previous observers have attributed to interest, accident, individual will, or organizational inertia?”

I am persuaded by an approach in which culture is represented as the dialectic between system and practice. This provides us both with the “frame” or stable “points of concern” that

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Laitin describes, as well as a grasp of the historical processes that are constantly eroding and changing those same seemingly fixed notions of what culture is. Rather than make a choice between culture as an essence, and culture as a contrived instrument drawn from a political toolkit, I embrace the notion that culture features the qualities of system and practice, simultaneously:

System and practice are complementary concepts: each presupposes the other. To engage in cultural practice means to utilize existing cultural symbols to accomplish some end. The employment of a symbol can be expected to accomplish a particular goal only because the symbols have more or less determinate meanings—meanings specified by their systematically structured relations to other symbols. Hence practice implies system. But it is equally true that the system has no existence apart from the succession of practices that instantiate, reproduce, or—most interestingly—transform it. Hence system implies practice. System and practice constitute an indissoluble duality or dialectic: the important theoretical question is thus not whether culture should be conceptualized as practice or as a system of symbols and meanings, but how to conceptualize the articulation of system and practice.  

Lisa Wedeen, in slightly different form, develops the same argument. She lays out a convincing case that that the logic and system of culture exists in dialectic with its actuation through cultural practices:

The word ‘systems,’ of course, implies structure, but the language and symbols constitutive of any ‘system of signification’ are created, reproduced, and subverted by agents speaking and acting in the world. I am not sure that there can be human signification without agency—people doing the work of interpreting and making intelligible signs. We nevertheless reproduce ourselves as agents or ‘subjects’ within the confines of institutional and semiotic ‘structures,’ what game theorists call ‘choice under structural constraint.’…

For culture to be meaningful it must also be intelligible to actors who, after all, may or may not know each other. Strangers within a shared moral community are able to get on because, as Sewell puts it using the ubiquitous linguistic analogy, “[actors] will be capable of using the ‘grammar’ of the semiotic system to make understandable ‘utterances.’”

185 Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 49.
The assumption that there exists an “intelligibility” of the cultural realm between even the most unconnected of actors necessarily means that culture possesses a certain logic and coherence, enough to make it distinct from other spheres of social action, say economics or politics. Culture is, in other words, a thing in the world, that analysts can identify and document.

At the same time, Sewell and Wedeen caution us to not ascribe too much coherence or permanence to culture. The best way to understand culture’s durability and presence is to think of it as having a “thin coherence,” a phrase evocative of Michael Walzer’s notion of “thin morality.” Sewell writes:

The fact that members of a community recognize a given set of symbolic oppositions does not determine what sort of statements of actions they will construct on the basis of their semiotic competence. Nor does it mean that they form a community in any fuller sense. They need not agree in their moral or emotional evaluations of given symbols. The semiotic field they share may be recognized and used by groups and individuals locked in fierce enmity rather than bound by solidarity, or by people who feel relative indifference toward each other. The posited existence of cultural coherence says nothing about whether semiotic fields are big or small, shallow or deep, encompassing or specialized. It simply requires that if meaning is to exist at all, there must be systematic relations among signs and a group of people who recognize those relations.

Extending the earlier metaphor, grammar may produce language, but over time the rules of language can and often do change. Sewell’s statement that a shared set of symbolic oppositions does not necessarily determine outcomes of cultural activity can therefore be summarized in the following manner: Culture in its logic is singular, but in its practice is multiple.

This particular nuance is what I find to be compelling about a systems practice understanding of culture, and points to how political science approaches to culture, even in the work of a scholar as sensitive to culture as Laitin, are often at their weakest. In combination with Wedeen’s observation that we reproduce ourselves as agents within the confines of institutional and semiotic structures, culture becomes sufficiently problematized to avoid the trap of granting

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too much causal importance to culture, as is clearly evident in the empirically untenable “civilizational clash” literature. At the same time, the binding of practice to a system or “grammar” prevents culture from becoming overly diffuse and escaping from our hands. Culture may, pace poststructuralist theory, suffuse all aspects of social life. This does not mean that culture is always or necessarily a component of the political in social life. Where and if it is political must be clearly established or at least defended by the researcher.

One way of achieving this is by looking to the state. Cultural identity in the modern era is inescapably influenced by state action. This is not to say that state action determines subjectivity. It is state action in the cultural realm, however, that brings coherence to cultural practices, if only momentarily. While culture holds out the promise of a deep form of power, one that will eliminate the need by the state to rely on the use of force to secure its rule, it is also in many ways the most unpredictable:

Institutions like the school are designed to induce consent to a dominant political order. Yet consensus is never fully realized. Nor is it perduring and stable. Rather, consensus generates a gamut of contradictory and equivocal ideas among political elites and the public alike and is thus vulnerable to alternative perspectives about polity and education.188 (emphasis added)

I have found William Roseberry’s notion of the “hegemonic process” to be a useful concept for describing what is the deeply uncertain nature of state power, particularly as it relates to state action in the cultural realm. Hegemony, according to Roseberry, is not an outcome or a fixed and final state of ideational consent, but a ceaseless project of rule: “Let us explore hegemony

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not as a finished and monolithic ideological formation but as a problematic, contested, political process of domination and struggle."\(^{189}\)

What I like about Roseberry’s formulation is that it draws our attention to the fact that Gramsci was very aware of just how difficult it is for dominant groups to actually achieve hegemony. It is an important corrective to what can only be described as the near uniform, but uniformly incorrect, interpretation of hegemony by social scientists to mean ideational consent or false consciousness.\(^{190}\) Indeed, Gramsci understood that “to hegemonize as a class would simply imply either a limited or an unsuccessful attempt” at consolidating power.\(^{191}\) Hegemony has to be worked at, the subaltern won over through persuasion. Culture plays no small role in this task and like Lukes writing years later, Gramsci concerned himself with how people’s understanding of themselves and the world in which they lived shapes their capacity for political action (or encourages their quiescence).\(^{192}\) This understanding took shape in the realm of culture, which

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\(^{190}\) Perhaps the most notorious example of this is James Scott’s description of hegemony as being “simply the name Gramsci gave to [false consciousness/ideological domination as formulated by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology]*.” James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 315. Scott, one of Gramsci’s most ardent critics, himself concedes that hegemony as it is commonly used by social scientists differs greatly from Gramsci’s more nuanced application of the term. Gramsci himself never offers a specific definition of hegemony. This is due to the fact that he viewed the concept as a way of mapping out ever-changing relationships of power in particular historical and geographical settings. Power and the struggle for power were in Gramsci’s writings highly contingent affairs, tied to a material base but made manifest by the actions of political actors.


\(^{192}\) It should be noted that hegemony does not preclude the use of violence or other coercive measures. Frequently mistaken to mean ideational consent, Gramsci understood the notion of hegemony in much more fluid terms than it has come to be used by many of his interlocutors. Groups secure power through a variety of ways, not least of which is the array of coercive tools available to the modern state. It is a concept that contains no clean formulas or prescriptions for determining who rules and how. The particular combination of consent and coercion that constitutes hegemony is an empirical question that can only be answered by looking at the historical conditions and particular combinations of relationships. As Crehan puts it, hegemony is better understood as a concept that “names the problem,” i.e., the challenges dominant groups face in establishing their rule. Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
Gramsci understood to be the realm in which class difference is lived. The durability of Western capitalists rests primarily on their ability to align the subaltern with ruling class interests, a task accomplished through the medium of culture: 

Gramsci and his followers argued that the educational system, the media, and other cultural institutions in capitalist societies promote values that uphold and perpetuate the economic elite’s moral authority. As a result, the dominant political culture in capitalist countries makes it seem that disparities between rich and poor are natural and inevitable features of modern social life. To the extent that the popular (or “subaltern”) classes accept these ideals, elites can avoid the use of violence as they strive to perpetuate the existing order.

This is false consciousness with a catch: It is a recognition that in order to make his particular interests appear to the rest of society to be the universal interests of all, the successful hegemon must willingly sacrifice and give up parts of his project. Boyer’s description (“as they strive to perpetuate the existing order”) to my mind captures well Gramsci’s understanding that rule was a condition to be earned culturally as well as physically.

Hegemony is a never-ending process, state projects instead of than state achievements. Based on a temporal pact, conditions of rule are always under threat by the fragility of the conditions of agreement between the strong and the weak. Subalterns are not dupes, lumbering under the burden of false consciousness or bouncing to and fro against “points of concern” produced by a long-ago colonial master. Rather, hegemony anticipates the presence of

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193 Crehan, Gramsci, Culture, 71.
194 State violence in form of prisons, courts, military forces, and the police are but the first line of defense for the ruling classes. Gramsci writes "when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks." Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 238.
196 Gramsci himself did not believe in false consciousness. One of the major themes in Roseberry’s article is to dispel the widely-held notion that Gramsci’s project dealt primarily with the realm of ideas and ideology. The ideational and the material are not easily separated. For Gramsci, ideas are important because they have material effect.
197 Roseberry, “Hegemony and the Language.”
considerable strife between social classes. The “dominated” are not entirely so, and display considerable feistiness and potential menace towards state rulers.

Subalterns are able to make trouble for the dominant classes. James Scott’s research, and that of others working in the area of moral economy, demonstrates that resistance is a regular feature of daily life. However, to paraphrase Marx, just as men do not make history as they please, neither do the dominated classes resist as they wish. The confrontation between these two groups takes place within the formations, institutions, and organizations of the state and civil society in which subordinate populations live. Subordinate populations, for Gramsci, are not necessarily deluded and passive captives of the state; at the same time, they are not fully autonomous either, their politics and culture distinct and separate from that of the state.

The consequence is a form of politics and the attempt at rule that is, by its very definition, fluid and uncertain, forever susceptible to challenge and change. Roseberry writes:

This is the way hegemony works. I propose that we use the concept not to understand consent but to understand struggle; the ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. What hegemony constructs, then, is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination.198

The Emancipatory and Disciplinary Effects of Education

I originally went to Iran committed to finding evidence of children’s resistance to the state’s message, as well as empirical proof that adults (teachers and parents) were facilitating this resistance. At the very least, I expected to find teachers put into the position of intermediaries,

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forced to facilitate between postrevolutionary values mandated by a distant state agency, and the contrasting political cultures of local communities.\textsuperscript{199}

Prior to my arrival I had carefully and consciously crafted the theoretical architecture of my project in opposition to a literature that I viewed as being too deferential to the “claims of formal content.” Authors implicitly accepted that formal inputs, what state authorities placed inside of textbooks and formal goals, determined the range of possible educational outcomes. The politics of education was captured by the dynamic of resistance/domination. Students either submitted to the disciplining power of the school system, or they fully rejected, retaining the autonomy of their moral selves while paying lip service to the. Given the lack of empirical, inductive research inside of classrooms and with actors in the educational arena, conclusions tended to side with state success. I wanted to bring balance by going inside of the system by looking inside of the proverbial black box of education, prying its lid off with the concept of “resistance.”

Once again, an unexpected question posed to me while I was in Iran caused me to change course. After listening to me lay out my research objectives, an educational expert in the office of the Organization of Educational Research and Planning of the Ministry of Education, related the story of how his son, then a high school student, resented the current regime. His son, whose dislike of the government and its policies was absolute and unabiding, opposed the inculcation of “revolutionary values” not from any sense of ideology or fully-formed ideas about the role of religion in politics or education, but rather for the rather banal reason that Islam, as practiced in

the school, seemed to serve no other purpose than to deprive him of the ability to bring and listen to CDs and Walkmans on campus.

This same son, he continued, woke up early every morning with his father to perform his ablutions and morning prayer. He also fastidiously observed the various high holy holidays of Islam, including the fasting rites of Ramadan. This high school student, who rejected the authority of the Supreme Leader and had only disdain for the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic, was by all accounts, and according to the standards of the regime, a devout and proper Muslim. “Now,” asked the expert, “what is ‘resistance’? Can my son be counted as someone who is in resistance to the regime?”

This conversation forced me to recognize that in my attempt to problematize the existing literature on education in Iran, I had overcompensated in favor of an idealized vision of agency, thus reproducing the resistance/domination dynamic already found in much of the existing literature.

Already on the ground in Iran, I began to look for an alternative theoretical framework for the analysis of the causal effects that schooling has had on children. I wanted this framework to be sensitive to the range of potentially contradictory responses that state intervention in the educational lives of its citizens produces. I suspected that but above all, able to understand education in. I wanted a model capable of depoliticizing, as it were, the politics of postrevolutionary schooling.

I found the answers to my research needs in a corner of the literature on the Middle East not often seen in political science, that of feminist theory. Feminist theorists have for years now grappled with the challenge of reconciling what an openly normative research agenda centered on the liberation of women in the Middle East, with the phenomenon of women’s active support
for contemporary Islamic movements that very often seem to be inimical to their own interests and agenda. This empirical reality is only made more vexing by the fact that there exists today more opportunities for women’s emancipation than ever before in the region, particularly in the area of education. Moreover, it is not the “usual suspects” who are refusing to “see the (liberal-secular) light,” i.e., the poor who are often considered to have a “natural affinity” for religion, but also the middle and upper classes in a number of countries, including Iran, Egypt, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

In response to this seeming paradox, feminist scholars have been forced to abandon their normative project, at least defined in universalist, Enlightenment-based terms, in favor of a localized approach, one that is receptive to women’s use of familiar and traditional practices in order to better their lives. The old idealism is sacrificed for a more complex understanding of “freedom,” one that, although often compromised by patriarchy nonetheless offers greater explanatory purchase.

What feminist scholarship gives us is an understanding of how the moral agent is necessarily compromised by his circumstances. Saba Mahmood captures this idea well:

I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.  

More directly related to my quandary, but still within the rubric of feminist theory, Lila Abu-Lughod, reflecting on her own work and the work of her fellow feminists, considers the possibility that there has been a willingness to romanticize resistance, “to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity

of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated.” This reading of resistance, Abu-Lughod acknowledges, collapses distinctions between forms of resistance and perhaps more critically, forecloses the possibility of explaining the workings of power in an accurate and satisfying way.

The problem with resistance theorists is that they only care about resistance. Abu-Lughod advocates for a new approach, one with only a small, but consequential shift, towards the examination of resistance as a diagnostic of power. Reversing Michel Foucault’s oft-cited “where there is power, there is resistance,” she argues that resistance scholarship ought to being their research with the concept of “where there is resistance, there is power.” Concrete, observable acts of defiance, in other words, instances where state power breaks down or fails in achieving its goals, teaches us more about the form and content of that power than any abstract theory can. Counterintuitively, ruptures between state and subject expose the empirical evidence of “domination.” Understandings of the ambiguous effects of power and domination can best be seen at those points where state attempts to establish its authority break down.

Afsaneh Najmabadi’s work on changing attitudes towards women’s education in Iran is especially relevant to my project, and is often cited by scholars working within the framework of a multiple modernities approach. She describes how by the early twentieth century, a widely-held truism amongst Iran’s modernizing reformers to argue that women’s education was a national priority if the Iranian nation were to ever catch up with European civilizations. A concerted effort was launched by intellectuals of the period to redefine women’s roles as more than the bearer of children, literally “house” (manzel). Women were to become instead

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“managers” of the home and the mothers of the nation. To qualify for this new social role, young girls would have to be crafted by the state into educated wives and mothers.

This education featured a double move, in which the school became the ground for regulatory practices toward women (becoming housewives and educated mothers) and for awarding women particular rights (the right to go to school, previously inconceivable). As Najmabadi puts it, this double move

…combining disciplinary techniques and emancipatory promises, became a general feature of the modernist rethinking of gender. Far from one move simply contradicting and frustrating the other, the disciplinary and emancipatory moments enabled each other’s work…

Najmabadi acknowledges that later generations of Iranian feminists are often disappointed that women’s education was from the beginning harnessed to their status as wives and mothers. She notes, however, that if the argument that educated women made better mothers and wives seems to our contemporary sensibilities like a reinforcement of women’s old professions, we risk ignoring that “the emancipatory possibilities of modernity and its disciplinary technologies were mutually productive.”

The idea that modernization process in non-western settings brings with it emancipatory and disciplinary outcomes has had been used to good measure by a number of scholars working on educational systems of the Middle East. Sometimes referred to as cultural production theory, this approach is based on an appreciation for how power and resistance are inseparable phenomena. In other words, “despite the obvious and complex ways in which regulatory

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204 Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Crafting an Educated,” 183.
elements of formal schooling are tied to reproductive structures, possibilities may be opened up for change by schooling and education.\textsuperscript{206}

What takes place inside of the classroom is only a part of the story. The cultural work of actors at the school site is embedded in a structural and material context, something that Gramsci himself understood quite well. Power, in other words, does not take exclusively material or symbolic form, but a combination of both, the balance between the two forms determined by the particular historical circumstances under study.\textsuperscript{207}

Hegemony as a manifestation of institutional power implies the existence of a coherent and regularized state program for education. In the following chapter I examine the failure of the postrevolutionary state in Iran to create such a circumstance and the effects that this failure has had on the possibilities for securing state rule through schooling.

\textsuperscript{206} Adely, “The Mixed Effects,” 355. Emancipation and regulation in many ways comes “baked into” the Farsi term for “being educated” or more literally, “being trained,” tarbiat. In Chapter Five I will explain how tarbiat simultaneously suggests that one has learned how to control one’s body and being, i.e., has manners (batarbiat), as well as having been educated in an academic sense.

\textsuperscript{207} Kate Crehan, Gramsci, Culture.

“We have a structure, but no system.”

Administrator in a Boys High School, Tehran, Iran

For the young students of Iran’s public school system, the 1979 Revolution could not have come at a better time. The collapse of 2500 years of monarchial rule in February 1979 had the practical and welcome effect of closing down every school across the country. The so-called “spring in winter,” as the Revolution would come to be known, marked for millions of Iranian children the beginning of summer.

Or so it seemed. Many of these same students would be disappointed to find themselves back at school, lining up for the regular morning assembly just two weeks after the revolutionary triumph. A flurry of changes greeted them upon their return and the days were different for the rest of what little remained in the 1978-1979 school year as a new figure on campus, the morabi-e tarbiati, or values education teacher introduced the children to the rough and ready reforms that had been devised during their brief hiatus from school.

“Change” in those early days dealt less with the inculcation of a formal ideology than it did with the demystification and systematic eradication of the ancien regime. The morabian led the way, directing children and adults in collective acts of excision, beginning with tearing out portraits of the Shah and the royal family from the front of every textbook.\(^{208}\) The following school year change became more substantial as leaders turned their attention to consolidating the

\(^{208}\) A teacher’s guide included in the earliest textbooks published by the postrevolutionary Ministry of Education directs instructors to black out specific words and pictures in the textbooks, including anywhere that the Pahlavi emblem appeared (such as on illustrations of coins). It would take at least a full school year (1979-1980) for all of the old, prerevolutionary textbooks to be removed from circulation.
ideological foundations of the new regime. Reforms at school expanded to include the hiring (and removal) of teachers based on their political and religious credentials, additions to the curriculum in accordance with the emerging Islamic identity of the Revolution, and revisions to textbook content, mainly in the areas of religion and the social sciences.\textsuperscript{209}

While the first decade (1979-1989) of postrevolutionary schooling in Iran continued to produce a number of ad hoc reforms, fundamental change\textsuperscript{210} in the structure of the school system did not occur until 1990. At the theoretical level change took even longer: the system operated without a binding set of goals and objectives until 1998. These many delays in moving public education towards an Islamic schooling represent more than mere formalities or the “late notice”

\textsuperscript{209} Although references to religion were inserted into the first set of textbooks published after the Revolution, these were mostly limited and of a traditional nature, such as asking for God’s blessing as teachers and students begin the school year or thanking God for the gifts that education brings (see Chapter Four). There was little if any of the politicized Islam, and none of the adulation of Ayatollah Khomeini as a “Founder,” attributes that are commonplace in today’s curriculum.

\textsuperscript{210} There is a strong tension throughout this chapter as to what counts as “fundamental change.” It is a concept that I stretch taut between two perspectives: those that argue that changes in curricular content separates the postrevolutionary school system from its prerevolutionary version, and, at the other end, a scholarship that insists structural changes must take place before the label “fundamental change” can be applied. David Menashri falls into the latter camp. He argues that the Islamic regime did bother to remove the old school system but instead strove to use it to their advantage. Iran’s new leaders made revisions to the content of schooling, but for Menashri what matters is that the model of modern education developed by the previous regime remained. See David Menashri, \textit{Education and the Making of Modern Iran} (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992). Mohammad Rezaei strongly disagrees, arguing instead that the changes in materials, hiring practices, even the architecture of certain schools, as well as the introduction of the \textit{Omoor-e tarbiati}, a department in the MOE created specifically for the purpose of consolidating the Islamic identity of the Ministry of Education and the nation, set the postrevolutionary school system well apart from its predecessor. For Rezaei, those that claim “fundamental change” has not taken place likely do so with an ideological or political agenda as their starting point. See Mohammad Rezaei, \textit{Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari-ye danesh amoozeshi: Nasaziha-ye gofteman-e madreseh [An Analysis of the Daily Lives of Schoolchildren: The Failures of School Discourse]} (Tehran: Society and Culture Publishing, 2008).

As for this chapter: I am hesitant to give “fundamental change” a precise definition for fear of losing the partial truths, to borrow from J.S. Mill, contained in the Menashri and Rezaei perspectives. Nonetheless, while I do not disagree with Rezaei’s point that a break occurs in 1979, my concern here is mostly with the effort, repeatedly mounted but often stalled, to \textit{structurally} change the school system. What matters for me is the \textit{absence} of change, in other words, does the postrevolutionary school system continue to use the same organizational chart and administration of schooling as the royal school system? Was an Islamic system grafted onto a pre-existing educational framework? For the period under study in this chapter (1979-1989) the answer to both questions is “yes.” Again, this does not mean that the perspective given by Rezaei is necessarily incorrect. Certainly it is a stretch to claim that the current school system remained the same as the Shah’s---a claim that Iran’s leadership, including its Supreme Leader, currently makes.
of cardinal revisions that were already underway in the schools as some have claimed.\textsuperscript{211} Rather, the lengthy gap between \textit{de jure} restructuring of the school system and the \textit{de facto} changes being implemented in individual schools produced a critical juncture in the history of postrevolutionary schooling in Iran, one that propelled the school system onto a developmental path \textit{at odds with} the goals of Islamicization. The stability that state planners initially gained by preserving and building on the old school system contributed directly to the instability and politicization that plagues the Ministry of Education to this day.

In this chapter I argue that the failure to institutionalize a theoretical and structural framework for an Islamic school system during the 1980s undermined the capacity of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to carry out its ideological project of producing the “New Islamic Citizen.” Throughout the middle of the decade and well into the next, administrations pursued a policy of “fundamental change” in schooling. Paradoxically, the greater the incentive and perceived need to “finally get schooling right,” the less likely it was that reform agendas would survive. Without the insulation provided by a settled and robust institutional framework for schooling, successive educations ministers found their reform agendas exposed to accusations that they were pursuing factional interests over the educational needs of the country.

\textsuperscript{211} For a particularly vivid example of this “harmony” or “congruity” thesis, see M. Mobin Shorish, “The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran,” Comparative Education Review 32, no. 1 (February 1988): 58-75, especially pg. 71. Shorish describes the “the strong congruity that exists among the textbooks, the sermons of the Friday Prayers, and the decrees and laws issued by the government.” Golnar Mehran, though she agrees that the symbols and role models taught in schools have long been an integral part of the Iranian-Islamic identity, informally taught by the majority of Iranian families and reinforced by the community, nonetheless feels that politicized Islam faces strong resistance from competing socialization agents, including families, peer groups, and foreign media. Children are sensitive to the gaps between the messages taught at school and the practices of the world outside of the school. Mehran describes this dissonance in “Religious Education and Identity Formation in Iranian Schools” (paper presented at Constructs of Inclusion and Exclusion: Religion and Identity-Formation in Middle Eastern School Curricula, Watson Institute for International Studies, November 14-15, 2003), http://www.watsoninstitute.org/religionid/ (last accessed March 10, 2010)
The evidence and analysis that follows addresses an important gap in our empirical knowledge of Iran’s postrevolutionary school system. Although considerable attention has been paid to the development of the educational system before and just after the Revolution, the structure of schooling in the postrevolutionary period has received almost no treatment as an object of change or “dependent variable.” In other words, there is little scholarship that deals with the politics of educational reform in the IRI. By tracing the history of the Iranian school system in the first decade of the postrevolutionary period I am able to unpack the concept of “Islamicization,” revealing it to be an uneven process frequently compromised by material limitations and the hesitation of state leaders to act. The chapter aims to demonstrate that the postrevolutionary school system is not a static artifact or a coherent institution focused solely on the transformation of society, but a contradictory product produced by a new regime as it took an uneven path towards achieving its ideological goals, stumbling often along the way.

As I do throughout the dissertation, I use the institution of formal schooling as a prism for exploring larger themes relevant to the political science literature. Looking beyond Iran, the chapter offers insight into the effects that instances of weak institutionalization have on state formation and the consolidation of power. State survival has in recent years been a topic of great interest for scholars working on semi-authoritarian countries, or so-called liberal autocracies, in the Middle East and North Africa region. Often with the “transitions literature” as their starting

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212 Most of the research deals with schooling as both an independent and dependent variable, in other words, as an instrument for change and an object for change. See Monica Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001) and Reza Aratesh, *Education and Social Awakening in Iran* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1962). For the modern period, see Menashri, *Education and the Making*. Menashri makes a compelling case for schooling as a source and an object of change during the Pahlavi period. Inexplicably, however, the author drops this frame of analysis when he surveys the structural revisions, or lack thereof, made in the first decade after the Revolution, instead arguing that the new regime, apart from changes to content, left the Shah’s school system intact. This is balanced somewhat by his detailed discussion of the important divisions within the leadership regarding the course of schooling as Iran emerged out of the war years and the Khomeini era.
point, these authors pursue the melancholy task of explaining why it is that the MENA region has been so resistant to the waves of democratization that have brought down so many otherwise recalcitrant regimes in other parts of the world.

Specifically in the case of Iran, many scholars attribute the durability of the postrevolutionary state, somewhat paradoxically, to its institutional weakness. This strength-in-weakness line of analysis has received perhaps its most extensive treatment by Daniel Brumberg. In spite of numerous predictions of its imminent demise, the IRI has survived because of what Brumberg calls its “dissonant institutionalization,” specifically the enshrinement of different and even opposing political logics (theocracy, democracy, republicanism) within a single constitutional framework. The multiple developmental paths that emerge from the bundling of such diverse theories of state, as it were, do not tear the state apart but instead generate sufficient centripetal force to sustain the overall framework. Dissonant institutionalization arranges state and competing elites in such a way that no one group is capable of achieving total dominance. The absence of definitive victors in the political arena inoculates the regime from easy collapse even as it denies the state an easy path towards democracy or totalitarianism.

Yet this literature, because of its focus on elite competition and the assumed autonomy of the state, has paid insufficient attention to the unintended consequences that technologies of survival can produce at the local levels where ordinary citizens lead their lives, including outcomes that over time erode and undermine state authority. Writing against the concept of “dissonant institutionalization” in my analysis, I draw a distinction between state survival and

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213 Brumberg notes the theoretical kinship that his work has with the state-in-society approach literature, but draws a sharp distinction between Migdal’s argument that competing sociopolitical forces can constrain ruling elites, and his own belief that such forces can aid not only regime survival, but also spur regime innovation and controlled change. See Daniel Brumberg, “Dissonant Politics in Iran and Indonesia,” Political Science Quarterly 116, no. 3 (Autumn, 2001): 381-411, especially pg. 384.
state effectiveness and begin to explore the possibility that institutional flexibility leaves spaces through which the shoots of alternative narratives to formal ideologies can grow from below. Over time, these shoots have the potential to shape the discourse and practices of the state, albeit in a manner shaped by the rules, discourse, and practices of the state. By approaching the interaction between a weakly institutionalized state and society as a mutually transformative relationship, the chapter extends the concept of hegemonic processes introduced in the introductory chapter, and prepares a subsequent conversation in later chapters of the dissertation regarding social responses to the school system.

My theoretical ambitions in this chapter do not stop with the exploration of the transformative state and its troubled relationship with society, but also includes the role that institutions play during periods of transition. In the remainder of this chapter I seek to uncover the extent to which regime-change in Iran has been a rule-governed process, indelibly shaped by the institutional legacies of the previous regime. Here I heed the call of Dan Snyder and James Mahoney that comparativists pay attention to the “missing variable” of institutions when examining instances of regime transition. The two authors argue that by integrating voluntarist and structuralist perspectives together into an institutionalist approach, analysts can obtain added analytic leverage for understanding the failures and successes of incumbent and oppositional groups before, during, and after regime change. Snyder and Mahoney encourage scholars to consider ways in which existing institutions hinder the ability of regime leaders to preserve their power or even hasten their demise at the hands of oppositional forces. From the other side of the political ledger, the writers push analysts to examine “how the strengths and strategies of opposition groups are shaped in crucial ways by the very institutions they seek to transform,” and how inherited legacies of old institutions can shape and possibly retard efforts at regime
consolidation following oppositional triumph.\textsuperscript{214} Change, whether for incumbents or the opposition, has to be understood as a historical dialectic between the agency of political actors and the limitations imposed on them by their environments.

The history of postrevolutionary schooling in Iran presents its own twist on Snyder and Mahoney’s research agenda by raising the question: Why was it that Iran’s revolutionaries-turned-incumbents failed for years to fundamentally alter or “make their own” an institution deemed as vital and sensitive as the school system? If regimes consist of “the formal and informal institutions that structure political interaction, and a change of regime occurs when actors reconfigure these institutions,”\textsuperscript{215} then why would Iran’s leaders not restructure the structure of schooling? The persistent claim by the Iranian authorities that the “imported” and “imitative” pre-revolutionary educational system was the source of Iran’s subjugation to Western powers leaves little doubt that the new regime sought its transformation. Yet as I have already indicated changes were only made to discreet components of schooling (to wit, staffing, content, and curriculum) during the first decade of Islamic rule. System-wide reform took much longer, and only affected the high school level of the school system. State planners not only preserved many of the educational programs and institutions inherited from the Pahlavi era, in some cases these institutions were expanded. Why?

\textbf{If It Ain’t Broke…}

One answer is that change was unnecessary. If the new regime saw no pressing need to reinvent the educational wheel, as it were, it was because the old system worked just fine.

\textsuperscript{214} Dan Snyder and Richard Mahoney, “The Missing Variable: Institutions and the Study of Regime Change,” \textit{Comparative Politics} 32, no. 1 (October 1999): 103-122. Although Snyder and Mahoney focus on democratic transitions, their fundamental argument regarding the importance of institutions during periods of transitions holds for a semi-authoritarian country such as Iran.

\textsuperscript{215} Snyder and Mahoney, “The Missing Variable,” 103.
Modern schooling, after all, had a long and storied history in Iran prior to the Revolution. Iran’s
new leaders inherited an educational infrastructure that had been developed over the previous
five decades, one that “covered virtually every part of the country.”

In the tumult of revolution, a pre-fabricated, intact, and functioning school system was in many ways a blessing,
certainly one too politically and socially useful to reject out of hand. Even as Iran’s
revolutionaries publicly excoriated Pahlavi-era schools as little more than “Western imitations,”
they were busy taking advantage of those same schools as a way to deliver their version of an
“authentic” and native curriculum into the classrooms.

In any case, there was the matter of keeping up appearances. Iran’s Islamists needed to
establish their *bona fides* as the leaders of modern movement and the delivery of schools and
teachers to every part of the country, especially rural areas traditionally forsaken by the capital,
was an easy ticket. H.E. Chehabi reminds us that the Islamists were under considerable
pressure to demonstrate that their ideology was relevant to the contemporary world and not, as its
critics claimed, a reactionary response to modernization and modernity. Forged in intense
competition with liberal and Marxist groups during the movement to overthrow the Shah, the
constant claim made by Iran’s new leaders was that Islam, if properly understood, contained all
of the answers to the problems of the world.

There was no need to scrap modern innovations
such as mass schooling already in place, only to make these institutions “complete” (*kamel*)

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*Menashi, Education and the Making,* 301. Menashi’s description is a bit misleading. While the school system
was in theory “national”—and above all, “modern” in the sense that it followed the conventions of mass schooling
(uniform, state-run)—there were many areas of Iran, especially in the country’s rural regions, that remained
woefully underserved if at all by the public school system. The drive to provide full access to education even in
Iran’s far-flung provinces would become an important rallying point for the postrevolutionary regime.

H.E. Chehabi, “Religion and Politics in Iran: How Theocratic is the Islamic Republic?” *Daedalus* 120, no. 3
through Islam. As a practical matter, the regime could ill-afford to refuse the economic advantages that only a mass school system could provide, including the army of doctors, engineers, and other skilled labor that the new republic would need if it wanted to achieve economic and scientific independence, which of course was a major revolutionary goal.

Within Iran itself a narrative has emerged over the years that the main reason fundamental change failed during the 1980s was because the country was caught up in events (dargir) beyond its control. The structural limitations imposed by an explosion in the student population, the eight-year “Holy Defense” or Iran-Iraq War, and a state budget crippled by international trade embargos, collapsed oil prices, and military expenditures presented formidable if not insuperable barriers to change. Fundamental reform of schooling, or any other institution for that matter, was not a realistic or viable option until these many crises had passed.

I disagree that these were the only or even primary reasons why the schools developed at the rate that they did. Far too much has been made of the role that Iran’s material limitations played in preventing change from occurring. Iran’s exogenous factors only partially explain the inertia of the school system during the 1980s.\(^{219}\) The truth is that while there is merit in each of the explanations described above, an oft-overlooked factor in understanding the structural development of Iran’s school system has been the management of the Ministry of Education. War and collapsing oil prices only made worse what was already a historical weakness within the Ministry of Education, namely a lack of long term planning. Put simply, state leaders failed to act when it had the chance to mold a new school system, choosing instead to delay reforms. Delay and the failure to act have imperiled the viability of the Ministry of Education as an

\(^{219}\) Certainly they did not prevent the IRI from making phenomenal strides in eradicating illiteracy or in drawing populations of young girls who previously had been left out of the educational system into the classroom. I detail these important gains in Chapter Four.
effective and successful institution, a contention that I aim to prove in this chapter.

My argument in this chapter corresponds to the goal, outlined in the introductory chapter, to combine institutional and cultural perspectives in my analysis. On their own, neither structural explanations (the schools were poorly funded, the country was caught in the grip of a devastating war), nor cultural explanations (Iran’s postrevolutionary elites are unable to work together resulting in a paralyzing factionalism) can provide sufficient data for understanding why the Iranian school system has struggled to reform in light of changing political and social needs.

Again, change (or the lack thereof) as a factor in the politics of the IRI’s school system has not drawn much attention in the scholarship. The literature on the development of the Ministry of Education in the postrevolutionary period of is full of elisions and blank spaces. The official version put out by the IRI is little better. The Ministry of Education in the second edition of its English-language primer on Iran’s school system, summarizes the history of fundamental change in schooling in the following manner:

After the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the education system underwent essential changes. It was necessary to re-examine the philosophy, objectives, and policies of the previous educational system. The Council for Fundamental Change in Education, established in 1986…revised the Education System, and studied some ideal alternatives, and finally proposed a system of education of the Pre-university level, based on the Islamic doctrine, as well as the new social, economic, and the political needs.220

This short paragraph conceals as much as it reveals. To get at what changes took place in the education system, before and after 1986, as well as the impact that these changes had on patterns of domination, a closer look at the ministry’s “innards” is required, to borrow a metaphor from Migdal. Like any history, I begin at the beginning.

A Brief History of Reform

Immediately following the Revolution and acting on their own initiative, several groups

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within the nascent regime began to till the theoretical and philosophical soil in which a new school system could be sown. With the Ministry of Education in disarray, these early efforts were confined to the Office of Investigations housed in the Organization for Educational Research and Planning, or OERP.\textsuperscript{221} Their self-assigned task was to produce the goals and philosophy suitable for an Islamic education. Not much would come of these efforts in terms of actual policy, though the bureau did produce an article entitled “The Goals and Philosophy of Islamic Education.”

Work in the Office of Investigations stopped altogether with the absorption of groups into the newly resurrected Supreme Council of Education. The Supreme Council of Education (SCE) (\textit{Shura-ye ali-e amoozesh va parvaresh}) was reformed under the auspices of the governing Revolutionary Council in early 1980 after a nearly three-year hiatus.\textsuperscript{222} Originally comprised of 15 members, the SCE was later expanded to include 22 members, including the Ministers of Education, Culture and Higher Education, Health, Agriculture, as well as various elected and honorary members.\textsuperscript{223} Since 2003 the President of the Islamic Republic sits as the head of the SCE; previously the Minister of Education served in that capacity.\textsuperscript{224} As an agency, the SCE fuses both legislative and executive functions. Its mandate is to devise the goals and curriculum

\textsuperscript{221} The OERP has deputy ministerial status in the Ministry of Education and is responsible for preparing, producing, and distributing textbooks. Although the head of the department is a political appointee, the OERP has a reputation for being one of the more technocratic-minded and professional (which in the context of postrevolutionary Iran reads as non-political) components of the educational structure in Iran.

\textsuperscript{222} The Supreme Council of Education was originally established in 1966 following the 1964 breakup of the Ministry of Culture and subsequent founding of the Ministry of Education. The Supreme Council met from the period 1968-1977, after which it ceased activities. In its original incarnation the responsibilities of the SCE were limited to producing the goals and standards of the Ministry of Education and did not possess the executive and legislative powers granted to it in the postrevolutionary period. See Ahmad Safi, “\textit{Naksh-e shura-ye ali-ye amoozesh va parvaresh dar pishbord-e nezam-e amoozesh va parvaresh}” [“The Role of the Supreme Council of Education in Gains Made by the School System”].

\textsuperscript{223} The expansion was legislated by the Majles on December 16, 1986.

\textsuperscript{224} In practice, given the many impositions on the President’s time, the Minister typically acts as the de facto head of the Supreme Council. The addition of the President to the SCE illustrates the extent to which schooling has become politicized in Iran in recent years, and in general serves as an example of the fractured and overlapping relationships of power that constitute the IRI’s state apparatus.
appropriate for an Islamic society, as well as to effectively implement educational policy.

Importantly, as the ultimate legislative authority over matters of education, the SCE has the final word on what the goals, curriculum, and direction, though as we’ll shortly see, since 1984 any major policy initiatives mounted by the SCE must first be approved by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, or SCCR.

The newly-minted SCE was not granted much time or opportunity to devise a program for reform. Less than three months after it began operations the Council found its mandate superceded by the arrival of a new institution: the Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution.

Responding to months of turmoil and conflict between student groups on the country’s university campuses, and fully cognizant of the important role that the universities had played in ending the Shah’s reign—and therefore, their potential for ending reign of the current regime—on June 12, 1980 Ayatollah Khomeini issued the following statement:

It has been for a period that the necessity of the Cultural Revolution that is an Islamic task and is sought by the Muslim nation has been made public but effective and essential measures have not been taken up to now. The Islamic nation and especially the faithful and committed university students are worried about this issue and they are concerned about the disruption of conspirators, the effects of whom become evident from time to time. The Muslim nation who are committed to Islam are afraid that -God forbid- the opportunity is lost, no positive work is done and the culture of the country turns into the same one that was during the domination of the previous corrupt and uncultivated authorities. [The previous rulers] had turned these important and essential [universities] into the servants of colonists. The achievements of universities clearly manifests this fact in the sense that, except for a few faithful and committed people who were serving the country and Islam against the will of universities, the others did nothing for our country but damages and harms. The continuation of this disaster that is unfortunately sought by some groups affiliated to foreigners will strike a deadly blow to the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic. Therefore, acting negligently on this issue is a great betrayal against Islam and the Islamic country.

Accordingly, their respected Excellencies Mr. Mohammad Javad Bahonar, Mehdi Rabbani Amlashi, Hasan Habibi, Abdol-Karim Soroosh, Shams Ale Ahmad, Jalaleddin Farsi and Ali Shariatmadari are assigned the responsibility of establishing an association and invite committed authorities from among the Muslim academics, committed employees, faithful and committed students and other educated sectors who are faithful and committed to the Islamic Republic to set up a council and embark on planning different majors, determining the future of cultural policy of universities based on the Islamic culture, selecting and preparing competent, committed and informed academics and other issues related to the Islamic educational revolution. It is obvious that according to the above-said statements high schools and other educational centers that were run based on a deviant and colonial educational system should be examined precisely in order that
my dear children become immune from the damage and deviation. I ask the Almighty God to assist you, the gentlemen, in this vital task. I seek the glory of Islam and Islamic countries.\textsuperscript{225}

The formation of the Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution marked the beginning of what came to be known as the Iranian Cultural Revolution, a three-year period (1980-1983) bracketed by the immediate closing of universities and by their subsequent reopening in the fall of 1982.

The impact of the Cultural Revolution on public schooling remains poorly understood and is frequently misrepresented both in the academic literature and in mainstream reporting on the period. Writers regularly imply, assume, or assert that the changes brought on by the Cultural Revolution extended to schooling writ large.\textsuperscript{226} In reality, despite the mandate of the Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution to reform all levels of schooling from pre-elementary up to the universities, the impact of the Cultural Revolution on pre-university schooling was negligible at best. Even before the formation of the Headquarters, the Islamicization of the classroom and curricular materials, although fitful and not always Islamic,\textsuperscript{227} was already well underway. Unlike the universities, Iran’s public schools remained open for the duration of the Cultural Revolution.

The primary anxiety of Iran’s leadership, and the impetus for forming the Headquarters, was the political turmoil that had made the country’s universities into virtual battlegrounds. With leftist, liberal, and Islamic groups daily facing off against each other on campuses across the country, gaining control over the universities was the immediate priority, a fact clearly

\textsuperscript{225} Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, cited in Gozaresh-e setad-e engelah-e farhangi az 22 khordad 1359 ta 22 bahman 1362 [Report of the Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution 22nd of Khordad 1359 to 22nd of Bahman 1362], Islamic Republic of Iran, Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution.

\textsuperscript{226} Farsi, unlike English, makes specific distinctions between different levels of schooling. Thus, the term “school” (madreseh) refers only to the place where pre-university education takes place. Likewise, whereas “student” in English can refer to either a pre-university or a university student, in Farsi daneshamooz means a young person who is in K-12 education and daneshjoo indicates a university student.

\textsuperscript{227} I dedicate Chapter Four to explaining in greater detail the tensions found across the curriculum, including the contradictions that exist between lessons emphasizing a profane, parochial Iranian nationalism and content that instructs children in the holy and global identity of the Islamic citizen.
evident in the text cited just above.\textsuperscript{228} The bulk of the Supreme Leader’s announcement deals with his disappointment with the current university system; Khomeini mentions pre-university schooling, but only in passing in a single sentence.\textsuperscript{229}

Lacking leadership or resources, plans for carrying out the Cultural Revolution at the pre-university level quickly withered. The committee assigned the public education portfolio lapsed into inactivity; several of its members dropped out from the panel altogether. A parallel committee in the Ministry of Education was formed in the late fall of 1980, but in the end it too failed to produce anything substantial in terms of goals or policy. The Supreme Council of Education, acting on its own initiative, did manage to publish an article, titled “Charter for Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in the journal \textit{Cultural Revolution}. The SCE distributed their proposal to the various institutions associated with the Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution as well as the Ministry of Education for their consideration and review, but no further action was ever taken.

Iran’s leadership permitted the universities to reopen in fall of 1983, effectively marking the end of Iran’s brief encounter with cultural revolution.\textsuperscript{230} With the immediate political crisis of the universities resolved, and as the Islamic forces consolidated their grip on the state, Iran’s cultural warriors could turn their attention to other matters. A more pragmatic and moderate approach began to emerge within the body and leaders no longer felt that they had to rush.\textsuperscript{231}

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\textsuperscript{228} Dr. Mohammad Maleki, the first provisional head of the University of Tehran following the Revolution, facilitated student rivalries by allowing for the free expression of political groups on campus.
\textsuperscript{229} “It is obvious that according to the above-said statements high schools and other educational centers that were run based on a deviant and colonial educational system should be examined precisely in order that my dear children become immune from the damage and deviation.” Khomeini, \textit{Gozaresh-e setad}.
\textsuperscript{231} Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, remembering the early days of the SCCR in a 1985 interview, emphasized how much the organization had developed as a body: “Initially when the meetings of the SCCR were held it was sometimes felt that we were short of time which made us hold extraordinary meetings. However, currently the situation has
\end{flushleft}
Khomeini authorized the expansion of the Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution in 1984 by introducing eight new members, including the president and prime minister. The inclusion of top-ranking officials was a preliminary step towards routinizing the Cultural Revolution.\(^{232}\) Having deemed the challenge of cultural reform to be much larger than originally anticipated the temporary Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution became the permanent Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, or SCCR.\(^{233}\)

Ultimately, the greatest impact that the Cultural Revolution had on pre-university schooling was on the chain of command. The SCCR was handed the task of setting broad cultural policy for the country. It was invested with authority over the various institutions and ministries whose portfolios dealt directly or indirectly with matters of culture, which of course included the Ministry of Education. By mid-decade the politics of culture settled into a formal routine. From time to time the SCCR would meet, announce new policy initiatives, and send it

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\(^{232}\) As is typical in the makeup of the IRI’s leadership structure, there is considerable overlap in the memberships of the SCCR and the SCE.

\(^{233}\) Khomeini’s edict establishing the SCCR made it clear that from the perspective of the state, the transformation of Iranian into a properly Islamic country would be a long project. It reads in part:

Having expelled the treasonous experts and after the escape of the westernized and easternized experts who had made the country dependent on foreign countries in all aspects, the dire need for committed specialists, Islamologists, and patriotic thoughtful minds as well as active and skillful academics, teachers and instructors who believe in Islam and the independence of the country at all levels, including in the academic sciences and an advanced culture is felt ever more. Day by day, the necessity of developing and improving educational centers and the Cultural Revolution in the real sense become obvious. Thanks be to God, the Headquarters of the Cultural Revolution has offered valuable, effective, and useful steps in this direction during the short term of its activity. We appreciate these efforts. However, getting rid of the corrupt western culture and replacing it with the benevolent Islamic, national and revolutionary cultures in all areas throughout the country requires such a great endeavor that its attainment requires years of pain sticking efforts and long campaign to reradiate deeply rooted western culture…

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Another Try at Fundamental Change

Only a few years after their defeat of the Shah, the goal of Iran’s leaders to join Islam with modern schooling had become something of a star-crossed dream. From the deprivations of the devastating eight-year Iran-Iraq war, launched by Iraqi bombers on the morning of 22 September 1980 on the first day of the 1980-1981 school year, to the assassinations of the three primary founders of the Islamic school system, Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti, Mohammad Ali Rajai, and Hojatoleslam Mohammad Javad Bahonar, killed in the span of six weeks in the summer of 1981, fundamental change had become a narrative of missed opportunities and unanticipated obstacles to reform.

Despite these setbacks, reform efforts continued forward. A major turning point came during the confirmation hearings of the Islamic Republic’s fifth Education Minister, Kazem Akrami. Akrami promised the Majles that he would mount a renewed effort for fundamental change in schooling. Indeed, once in office, Akrami wasted little time. Keeping in accordance with the famous hadith that believers must “seek knowledge even in China,” he dispatched his deputies around the world to study how schooling was done in other countries, including Japan, Russia, and Germany. The reports that were garnered from these trips were compiled into a single, preliminary plan that was then sent on to the provincial ministries for review.

Fundamental change began within the Ministry of Education, but it would require the approval of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution if it were to go any further. On March 4, 1986, in the closing days of the Iranian year 1364 and on the occasion of its 59th session, the SCCR approved Resolution 6364 mandating “Fundamental Change in the School System.” One week later Resolution 6364 was forwarded to Education Minister Akrami, who in
turn set up the eponymous Council for Fundamental Change in the School System, comprised of the minister’s various deputies as well as representatives from the Majles, the Supreme Council of Education, the Organization for Planning and Budget, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, and teachers deemed exemplary for their knowledge and experience.

Their task was not only to devise a new system for the education and training of Islamic citizens, but also to diagnose the flaws inherited from the previous regime. The Council identified no less than eleven areas of the school system that required immediate attention, including its value system, academic instruction, values instruction, the administration of the school system, the system for the hiring and evaluation of teachers, decline of training, inadequate goals, assessment, responsibilities, and investigation of the school system, pre-school education (including kindergarten), and the participation of the public in the school system.234

The SCCR initially gave the Council a timeframe of six months to report back with its findings. Several extensions later, in all adding up to two years of effort, the Council delivered its recommendations to the SCCR in the spring of 1988. Following another year of delay and review, the SCCR finally approved the “General Plan for Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran” in July of 1989.

With three years already invested in the process of change, the bureaucratic wheels were once again set into motion. The SCCR convened a new council under the auspices of the Ministry of Education (now headed by a new Minister, Dr. Mohammad Ali Najafi) to replace the previous Council for Fundamental Change. Seven commissions covering different areas of schooling were set up within the framework of this new committee, including commissions on

pre-school and elementary education; junior high education; high school and vocational education; selection and training of staff; administration; development planning; values (political, religious, social) programming.

Each of these groups would produce a detailed plan pertaining to their designated area of responsibility. Unfortunately, their efforts were for naught, and the recommendations of the various commissions were never used. The leadership had concluded that simultaneous implementation of fundamental change across all levels of schooling was not feasible at that time. The decision was made to carry out reform at the high school level only, with the promise of revisiting the question of change at the elementary and guidance levels of schooling at a later date.

Goals and Objectives

One of the major oversights of the reform process of the late 1980s was the decision by the SCCR to not include a set of national goals in the final legislation passed in 1990. All told, there would not be a framework of laws or theoretical basis for Islamic education of any sort during the first 20 years of the postrevolutionary school system. This lacuna is remarkable, especially considering the strong emphasis that the founders of Iran’s postrevolutionary Ministry of Education placed on grounding the new school system in the law. Beheshti, Rajai and Bahonar all felt that the Constitution had to be the foundation for any Islamic school system.

Constitutions are by their nature limited as policy devices, and as a document Iran’s was

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235 The reasons for this decision included hardships and budget limitations as a result of the eight-year war with Iraq, the youth population boom, the impact of postwar reconstruction of the economy on cultural pursuits.

236 This is not to suggest that goals were never considered or published. A serious attempt to produce a legal framework was made during by the Council for Fundamental Change, and the commissions assigned to the elementary, guidance, and high school portfolios produced a set of goals for their respective levels of schooling. Like so many of the other components of the Council’s work, however, these were set aside. For a detailed description of the proposed goals see Amanollah Safavi, *Tariq-e amoozesh va parvaresh-e iran az iran-e bastan ta 1380 hejri shamsi [The History of Education in Iran from Ancient Iran to 2001]*, (Tehran: Rosht Publishing, 2004).

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too blunt an instrument for determining the daily operations of schooling in the country. Implementation demanded more precise and political action, specifically a transparent series of laws and objectives by which educators could measure progress. Yet for nearly a decade the 1980 Constitution served as the only formal declaration of Iran’s educational structure, leaving the postrevolutionary school system to operate for years without a clear strategy, philosophy, or set of benchmarks.

The first written declaration of goals appeared in 1988. On February 4 of that year the Majles approved “The Goals and Responsibilities of Education.” Most histories make note of the law as an important development in the history of postrevolutionary schooling, though we must be careful to not attribute too much importance to its passage. Saeed Paivandi, for example, characterizes the 1988 legislation as “the most important document in instituting the major developments in Iran’s education system” and goes on to claim that this piece of legislation “builds an educational model atypical at the international level and a curriculum centered on religious instruction.”

Paivandi’s description is an excellent example of how snapshot appropriations of the historical record can be misleading, and cause unwitting readers to draw erroneous conclusions. Paivandi’s exaltation of the 1988 law implies that the Majles has legislative

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237 Saeed Paivandi, Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran’s Textbooks (Freedom House, 2008). I have already shown that far from being an outlier, the postrevolutionary school system in Iran fits well within the universal model of mass schooling. The IRI is, after all, a member of UNESCO and a participant in that organization’s Education for All movement. A more fruitful line of inquiry than trying to explain how the IRI is not like the rest of the world is to study ways in which modernity (public schooling, for instance) has been articulated in Iran using local, Iranian cultural terms.

238 In case, there is also sloppiness in dating the facts. The author cites the year of the law’s passage as being 1987; it was in fact passed by the Majles in 1988. In general, Paivandi provides an abridged and ultimately deceptive history of schooling reform in the 1980s, one in which a uniform and unchallenged “Islamic” state implements a cohesive educational package without opposition or disagreement, i.e., without the politics. A good contrast to this unnuanced approach is the manner in which Mohammad Rezaei uses the 1988 legislation in his book to illustrate the larger issue of identity formation in postrevolutionary Iran. Rezaei dedicates significant space to demonstrating the ways in which the legislation conforms with an official discourse of Islamic citizenship. What he does not do is
authority over curriculum and planning, an authority that we have already seen is reserved exclusively by the Supreme Council of Education. More important than the goals themselves is the curious fact that their passage came nearly ten years after the Islamic Consultative Assembly first began to meet as a legislative body. Here the devil lies in what is left unsaid by the author. It might be argued that Paivandi considers the 1988 legislation to be a pro forma procedure, the coronation of an already Islamicized school system. We cannot assume that he does based on his claim that this law “builds” the postrevolutionary schooling. If not, they why would revolutionaries wait so long to institute the major developments of the education system with this “most important document?” This question is left unanswered, though we can assume that Paivandi does not question the success of the regime of meeting the many goals that the law delineates.

The reality is that the 1988 legislation were less about “building” an educational model than they were a first-cut articulation of an idealized school system, one that had up to that point only been expressed in slogans and internal memos. It was an important step, even if did not carry with it the weight of legislative authority.

Incredibly, the next step did not come until a decade later. In 1998 the Supreme Council

make the law something that it is not in order to serve an unrelated political or ideological agenda---in Paivandi’s case, the agenda being to demonstrate that the religiosity of the Iranian school system renders education in the IRI an anomalous and retrograde phenomenon.

The Majles serves as a consultative body to the Supreme Council of Education, equipped with the power of the purse and of impeachment, both of which directly affect the ability of the government to carry out its educational agendas. Beyond its influence on executive power, the parliament has little legislative influence on the daily operations or broad goals of the Ministry of Education.

Mehrad Haghayeghi, for example, writes that the first announcement of educational objectives by the Supreme Council of Education in March of 1983 was “no more than a late notice since plans for personnel purification, curriculum development, and textbook revisions were well under way…” See Mehrdad Haghayeghi, “Politics and Ideology in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Middle Eastern Studies 29, no. 1 (January 1993): 36-52.

In fairness to the author, he does allow for the possibility that the indoctrination of Iranian children has not been entirely successful. Still, Paivandi makes this acknowledgement almost at the end of the report, and does so without taking into consideration what role structural flaws in the school system itself may have played in the failure to inculcate official values in future generations of adults.
of Education passed the “General Goals of Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Two years later, these were followed by the “Goals of Elementary School,” the “Goals of the Guidance School,” and the “Goals of the High School.” Taken together, these updated provisions were much more detailed than the 1988 legislation and left little doubt that the purpose of schooling was to produce the Islamic nation. What did remain in doubt, however, was whether these goals represented a case of too little too late, or better late than never?

The New System (Nezam-e jadid)

A reform process that began in 1984 finally reached its culmination in February 1990 with the approval of the Nezam-e jadid or “New System” by the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. The Nezam-e jadid, in light of this chapter’s concern with the influence of institutional and historical legacies on the development of Iran’s postrevolutionary school system, is significant for what it did not change. In addition to leaving the structure of elementary and junior high schools exactly as they had been before the Revolution, the new law did little to improve the “Islamic character” of the schools or its students, focusing instead on more effectively solving the country’s economic challenges, particularly as it pertained to the creation of a well-trained and competent workforce. This was well in line with historical precedent: of the three major reforms proposed by the Ministry of Education in the twenty years between 1971 and 1991, all were designed with the developmental needs of the country in mind.

The reality was that the “New System” was not new at all but an old plan newly recycled.

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242 Goals were broken down into eight categories: Ideological, Moral, Scientific and Pedagogical, Cultural and Artistic, Social, Biological, Political, and Economic goals.
243 Not to be confused with the earlier defensive military reforms under Crown Prince Abbas Mirza.
244 It was an outcome that did not go unnoticed. One conservative newspaper decried, “In defiance of the authorities in the Majles and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, change to the school system [focused only on] high school “amoozesh” without the slightest attention to the values training of students.” “Noqteha-ye ebham dar tahavolat pishnahadi-yeye nezam-e amoozeshi” [“Ambiguous Reversals in the Changes Requested of the Educational System”], Jomhoori Islami, 6 Khordad 1377/1998.
Given the effort and time that had gone into achieving the limited reforms of the Nezam-e jadid, it was no small irony that in 1990 the state adopted a Pahlavi-era reform package that had been lost to the tumult of revolution a decade earlier. The following description is from 1976:

When the new secondary system becomes fully operative, which it should do by 1978, there will be three kinds of secondary school: the academic secondary school (Naziri), the technical/vocational school (Fanni va herfeyi) and the comprehensive school (Jameh). It is intended that apart from producing "better human beings who are prepared to meet the problems and responsibilities of life" they should either prepare students for further academic studies (e.g. at a university) or for a practical job. The comprehensive schools are designed to help those who are undecided which course to pursue but the concept is intended to be flexible so that students can move from one stream/school to another. Originally the courses were to last for 4 years but at the Ramsar Conference of September 1974 the Shah decided to shorten the courses to 3 years except for those intending to enter university.245

Apart from some minor differences in nomenclature (the comprehensive schools are today called Kardanesh instead of Jameh, for example), there was almost no difference in purpose or design between the 1978 and 1990 plans. Both reduced secondary schooling to a term of three years, with a shared curriculum for the first year of high school for all students. After the end of their first year students were sorted into one of three tracks: academic or theoretical branch (Nazeri), vocational (Fanni va herfeyi), or work (Kardanesh). The aim was to get children to where they could best serve their country.

As a practical matter, by separating out college-bound students after the first year designers expected that the system would be freed up to deliver much-needed vocational training to those students uninterested or unqualified in going on to university.246 Vocational and work tracks required an additional two years of schooling, after which students would graduate with a diploma (diplom) before entering the job market.

246 Even with its scope limited, the Nezam-e jadid has not been successful in meeting the training goals of state planners. The Nezam-e jadid, instead of facilitating the entry of young adults into much needed technical fields, as was intended, appears to have instead made worse. Vocational education has actually seen a precipitous decline in enrollment. I provide the numbers on this subject in Chapter Five.
The academic track (Nazari) was designed for those students who saw a university degree as their ultimate goal. Pupils in the Nazari branch could choose from one of four areas of specialization, either math, natural sciences, literature, or Islamic education, before entering a fourth year of study following the receipt of their high school diploma. The fourth and additional year of study was a mandatory requirement for those wishing to sit for the konkoor, Iran’s national university entrance examination administered once a year in the late spring.²⁴⁷

**Keeping the Bad with the Good**

Iran’s postrevolutionary school system continued or revived many of the educational solutions engineered by the Shah’s planners. It also had the misfortune of inheriting a large number of the problems that the school system had under the monarchy, problems sufficiently persistent to appear over and over again in the literature. Writing in 1960 Reza Aratesh blamed the slow progress of modern education in Iran on “an unsteady leadership of the Ministry of Education” and an educational system “built on imitation” of French and American models of schooling that, being foreign in origin, were unable to meet the needs of Iran’s society. He condemned the school system as being directionless: “There have been no long-term educational objectives or guiding philosophies which would strengthen the educational program.”²⁴⁸ Many of the same complaints are repeated in a 1976 report published just before the revolutionary movement began to gather momentum. Keith Watson, in what is otherwise a paean to the White Revolution, notes the persistence of structural problems in the school system, especially in the area of planning:

> However, the most difficult reform promised and one that has in the past been a major source of

²⁴⁷ In response to pressure from families, the Ministry of Education has in recent years allowed graduates of the other tracks to sit for the exams.
weakness because of excessive control from the centre is that of administrative reform. In fact critics of Iran often point sadly to the bureaucratic confusion and indecision that they see around them. Within the administrative framework there is a lack of continuity of senior staff, a lack of co-ordination between different ministries, and even between departments within the same ministry.249

Nearly four decades after Aratesh published his assessment of the Pahlavi school system, the Council of Fundamental Change produced a report on the major flaws in the pre-revolutionary education. As we’ll see shortly, nearly all of the following criticisms are still being made today, except now they are directed towards the postrevolutionary school system:

- the governing philosophy of the educational system was inimical to the philosophy and worldview of Islamic "training" (tarbiat-e islami)
- the Shah's school system was an imitation of the French school system with a design that concentrated primarily on the training of elites
- the inappropriateness of the educational contents of the school system
- the lack of attention to the cultural and ethnic diversity of the country
- credentialism (madrak geraḵ)
- lack of access to resources and equipment based on class or socioeconomic status
- the presence of a trite and corrosive culture as the moral basis for the raising of the country's children
- a centralized administrative structure that has failed to pay adequate attention to the various regions of the country, especially in regards to the equitable distribution of resources
- the bureaucratic nature of the educational system, characterized by unnecessary formalities
- the hiring and firing of administrators without any regard for need
- the lack of parental participation
- inappropriate methods for the selection and training of teachers

the decline of secondary education and an increase in the number of students failing the university entrance exam \((\text{refuseshan-e konkoor})\)^{250}

Spread out over two regimes and three decades these similar evaluations cut against narratives that blame the woes of the current school system solely on the legacy of the war or the population boom of the 1980s. They suggest instead that in addition to structural challenges a more intangible factor has bedeviled reform efforts---the failure of leadership. Current leaders have long known what is wrong with the educational system. Given an historical opportunity in 1990 to correct what their own experts had identified as a “deviant” course of schooling, and therefore acquit themselves of the legacy that the new regime had inherited when it came into power, Iran’s new leaders instead took a pass.

Implemented on a trial basis during the 1991-1992 school year, the Ministry of Education officially inaugurated the new high school system nationwide in 1992. It did so having failed to slay the demons, imagined or otherwise, of the Pahlavi regime. Of course, the problems that the various commissions associated with the Council for Change had so painstakingly identified did not go away on their own; many became worse. By not addressing the challenges of planning and administration directly, the Islamic Republic had in effect made the flaws of the Pahlavi its own, setting the stage for future actors to lay claim to the mantle of change and the concomitant politicization of education.

**Fundamental Change Once Again**

Not long after the election of Mahmood Ahmadinejad, Iran’s Supreme Leader made it clear that he had run out of patience. Ayatollah Khamenei on July 25, 2007 pronounced the school system to be a failure. It had failed to reform, and more importantly, it had failed in its

\[^{250}\text{Javadi, “Baresi-ye ravand-e tahavolat,” 5.}\]
primary mission of securing the revolution in the hearts of Iran’s future generations. It was time to finally produce a comprehensive plan for fundamental change:

**Education Requires Change**

In the years since the Revolution, a great many works in education have been accomplished. However, the school system has not seen change and it remains the old system from before! Of course many things have been accomplished, and we are appreciative of these works. Nonetheless none of these count as change. Change is a fundamental act, one aimed at the roots, and you [the teachers and administration of the school system] can do it; this task must be done. Change is something deeper and more fundamental than what has come before.\(^\text{251}\)

Straining against normal conventions of politeness, a later announcement put out by the Supreme Leader’s office was stinging in its multiple indictments. The school system was deemed to be no different than the one used under the monarchy, little more than a foreign copy, “west-stricken” in its approach to education, and most ominously, anti-religious and counter-revolutionary in its content.\(^\text{252}\)

Primed by the Supreme Leader’s words, Ministry of Education staff followed suit with a flurry of reports validating with the Leader’s premise. Fundamental change was in the air again, and the history of postrevolutionary reform was rewritten to substantiate the need for immediate action:

…Since the earliest days of the Islamic Revolution, changing education in order to deepen and continue the Cultural Revolution has been a great concern for the leaders of the newly born Islamic system, and a necessity that authorities have always emphasized. In response to this need, the directors and authorities of the ministry of education have taken many diverse measures on micro and macro levels with regard to this imported [foreign] system [education], hoping to better align education…with the goals and ideas of the Islamic Revolution. *Structures, textbooks, methods, and administrations have been changed repeatedly in order to obtain the desired outcome, one that meets the needs of the society and Islamic Revolution.* With due respect to the tireless efforts of those who tried to develop this great system and wishing that their efforts remain appreciated, it should be acknowledged that…these designs and plans for change did not bear the desired outcome. Both the people and the authorities are still demanding change and evolution in

Change was also a priority for Iran’s newly elected president. Ahmadi nejad’s government came into office with a commitment to overturning—to their minds, correcting—eight years of reformist policies under his predecessor. The new president had designated the MOE as the most important of all the state’s institutions, leaving little doubt that the school system would draw considerable attention from an administration built on the slogans of “change” and the restoration of “traditional” values.

The truth is that even before Khamanei had issued his pronouncement or Ahmadi nejad had assembled his cabinet, there were already efforts underway to revise the school system. This latest push for fundamental change began not in public or in politics but with a series of discussions that took place in the Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP) during the 1998-1999 school year. At that time the OERP staff had come to the conclusion that what ailed the school system was the lack of a national curriculum (*barnameh*-ye *darsi*-ye *melli*).

Hojjat-al-Islam Zoalem, Chief Curriculum Designer and deputy minister in the OERP, explained what a national curriculum would do for education in Iran at a gathering of deputy ministers and educational experts in July 2008: “A national curriculum is a document that provides the general curricular plan and overall framework for educational planning of the country.” Iran already had a national curriculum in the sense that the same curriculum, books, and teaching materials were used in every classroom across the country. The contents of these materials, however, had not

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253 “Nezam-e tarbiyat-e rasmi va ooomoomi jomhuri-yey islami-yey iran dar afg chesmandaz” [“The Official Public School System for Values Training in the Islamic Republic of Iran With a Horizon-based Vision”], Supreme Council of Education, Working Group Responsible for the Compilation of Research Results and the Codification of the National Curriculum, 10 Azar 1388. It is interesting to compare this passage with the paragraph summarizing the history of change that I posted at the beginning of the chapter (see pg. 10). The latter offers a much more optimistic version of the history of change.
been assembled in a coherent or organized fashion and there was little to no coordination between subjects or across grades:

[In this sense] we are still lacking a national curriculum. Each of our [educational] programs must be sent separately for approval to the Supreme Council of Education, and every subject area of is designed on its own...

…with 24 working groups and approximately 900 textbook subjects of which 250 titles belong to the academic (Nazeri) and pre-university tracks…the first question that comes to mind is what connection exists between these books, curricular contents, and [educational] goals?...

Without hesitation, the answer that we hear for this questions is negative...254

Zoalem’s description of the disunity and incoherence of the curriculum is reminiscent of the familiar Iranian saying that “each person plays her own instrument” (saz-e khodeshra mizaneh), or in this case, each department in the Ministry of Education operates in splendid isolation.

The national curriculum would bring order and rationality to the din of educational materials that currently exists in the school system. A critical component of this endeavor is to be the introduction of an “Islamic philosophy of education” (falsafeh-ye amoozesh va parvaresh islami). If the national curriculum were to be the framework of a new school system, the Islamic philosophy of education would provide the glue to hold it all together. For the first time ever, a coherent and indigenous theoretical foundation for schooling would guide the state planners, a moral and intellectual compass for a school system that had supposedly lost its way.255


255 That an “Islamic philosophy of education” currently does not exist is not seen as an obstacle by the leadership. Zoalem notes that “The ideas of child-rearing, psychology, and even curriculum planning are all areas of knowledge that have been shaped by philosophical and theoretical perspectives that lie outside of religious and Islamic perspectives.” He goes on to acknowledge that no one has yet devised an Islamic or native version of these subject areas. In order to prevent Iran from committing the error of once again copying foreign systems of schooling, in other words, of once again not achieving fundamental change, such a philosophy would have to be devised. Nonetheless, the national curriculum would not be put on hold and state planners would have to make due with the tools and knowledge that they currently have on hand until Iran’s universities and religious centers of learning (hozeha) were able to extract an Islamic philosophy of education from the Holy Koran.
As with prior attempts to remake the school system, the drive to produce a national curriculum has taken a long time to formally take shape. Reform remained for several years an in-house project, pursued quietly by the experts at the OERP. It was not until 2005 that plans to create a national curriculum received official authorization. Nearing the end of his final term as president, and acting on the authority given to him as the head of the Supreme Council of Education, Mohammad Khatami personally gave the go-ahead for the formation of the “Governing Council for the Design and Implementation of a National Curriculum,” and by the spring of the following year when the next president came into office, a working document was already in place.

From the first the expectation was that this would be a project that would take several years to accomplish. Having learned their lesson from the experiences of the MOE in the 1980s, the current reform effort was managed by leaders who had a clear plan for the task before that lay before them. Their goal was to proceed systematically by approaching the production of a national curriculum from three distinct starting points: scientific, revolutionary, and legal.

These three areas of concern were not randomly chosen, but represent a snapshot of the idiosyncratic nature of government in the IRI, a country in which revolution is regularly treated not as an event, but as a raison d’etre. Perhaps inconsistently, a major goal of those in charge of creating a new educational system was to enshrine the fervor and dynamism of a revolutionary curriculum in a static, legal structure. Of course, this was not the first time state planners had pursued such a merger; readers will recall that the founders of the postrevolutionary government

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256 The first major reform of the structure of schooling under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi took fifteen years to complete, from inception to implementation. Dr. Mohammad Mashaekhi, an educational expert who held prominent positions in the Ministry of Education, proposed the current three-tiered structure of schooling (replacing the previous system of two six-year cycles) in an article in 1956, and again in 1965. Adopted in principle in 1966 it was not implemented until the 1971-1972 school year. Menashri, Education and the Making, 195-196. In December 2009, newly appointed Minister of Education, Hamid-Reza Haji Babaie proposed eliminating Mashaekhi’s design, a proposal that almost immediately failed.
considered it imperative that the structure of the school system be in harmony with the constitutional framework of the IRI.

Similarly, the notion that schooling reform must be carried out in a “scientific” manner is a recurring trope in the decades-long effort to produce a uniquely Islamic school system. The conceit here is that the postrevolutionary school system must be a modern institution worthy of a regional (if not world) power, and that its administration, regardless of the curriculum’s traditional, religious, or political content, be a technical and professional endeavor. This meant incorporating the latest advances in pedagogy and educational research into the reform effort, regardless of their origin. Just as it did during Akrami’s tenure, the Ministry investigated the school systems of foreign countries for guidance in how to produce a national curriculum. Fourteen countries were studied in all, including the United Kingdom, South Korea, Japan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, Lebanon, Palestine (the Palestinian Territories), Morocco, New Zealand, Thailand, South Africa, and Sweden.

It may seem curious that a country that considers itself to be a model of independent, Islamic governance would look to such a wide array of states, including perennial “bad guys” (the British) and apostate, non-Islamic nations (China, Japan), for direction on how to educate its own children. Again, this is easily explained if we understand the Ministry of Education’s investigations in the context of the regime’s commitment to modernity. There is an anxiety that pervades this latest reform effort, a concern that Iran has fallen behind, not only vis-à-vis the developed world, but also within the region. Schooling, specifically a modern, national curriculum, is to be the “magic bullet” that will bring the IRI back to its rightful position as a leader in the Islamic and developing world:

Currently, [Iranian] education is facing critical challenges that require scientific and analytical research in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and limitations, for the codification of a strategic plan for the school system. Many countries, especially countries that in
recent years that have experienced extraordinary economic and social development, have produced a national curriculum or a master plan for their school systems. National strategies for schooling are considered to be so beneficial that in 2001 UNESCO recommended that all of its members design national curriculums for their school systems.  

Here we see an illuminating twist on Paivandi’s claim that Iran possesses “an educational model atypical at the international level.” The Iranian regime earnestly wants to demonstrate the exceptionalism of its Islamic model of government. In order to do this, the state must adopt international forms of modernity that consequently make the Iranian state more like the rest of the world. Mass schooling is, of course, articulated to meet Iranian cultural needs and standards, but the concept of modern schooling is an isomorphic phenomenon.

Regardless, the general consensus was that although there had been previous attempts to change the school system, these had all fallen apart because of the absence of a long-term vision within the Ministry of Education. Dr. Mohammad Mehr Mohammadi, an education scholar and an executive member of the council working on the national curriculum, describes the utility of binding school reform to a 20-year plan:

Of course, in the past efforts had been made to improve the quality of the school system, and these were honorable. But none were done within the framework of strategic planning, one that deals with the nation at large. In other words, we believe that the work we are doing under the auspices of a national curriculum for education is the first instance in which change to education is not the project of a single branch of the state. Rather, the entire state apparatus is to be engaged in dealing with the challenge of making education accountable to a national standard. Every [part of the state] must take responsibility in this endeavor.

Pressed in by countless pressures, the Ministry had been forced to operate on a year-to-year, and even a day-to-day basis. In the grip of daily problems, there was no room for administrators to develop a long-term vision for schooling. The behavior and decision-making by school-site

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258 Again, there is little evidence that Iranians, elite or ordinary, see a contradiction between taking advantage of imported Western knowledge while standing firm against what are perceived to be “Western” values.

administrators reflected this truncated horizon. Again, Dr. Mehr Mohammadi:

Today in our country’s educational system, school administrators must daily contend with widespread problems and innumerable challenges. Right now the schools face dozens of daily crises. In reality, these problems…the administrators…But I want to suggest that a national strategy will alert our school administrators to the interesting fact that beyond the current realities of the school system, there is a tomorrow. Instead of taking head on the problems and difficulties of the governing rules of the Ministry, that principal can with success move to a positive situation, by virtue of the process of long-term planning gain the necessary distance from current realities to plan and strategize.260

It is clear reading the testimony of those tasked with producing the new system that they view the national curriculum as nothing less than an antidote for what they consider to be the many illnesses of the school system. Only a system-wide approach, removed from the corrosive cycle of politics and short-term interests of the political arena, carried out from above, could finally resolve the deficiencies in the school system.

This has not stopped ministers from leaping into change on their own. The temptation to make schools in their own vision remains too great and, short of impeachment, there is little that stands in their way. Not long after taking over for his predecessor at the Ministry of Education (a one Mohammad Farshidi, whose term in office lasted less than two years), Ali Ahmadi announced his intent to have the Ministry separate school textbooks by gender. The separation of books into boys and girls editions was last seen in Iran in 1949, but Ahmadi insisted on a return to this system based on the premise, that according to Islam, girls reached adolescence a full six years earlier than boys.261

The scheme to divide the books by gender was met with considerable derision in the press, from conservative as well as reformist circles, and not just because of the shaky theoretical

261 The issue of young girls’ transition to womanhood is one of the more interesting, and least studied, aspects of. Much of the IRI’s success in expanding enrollment rates is directly due its ability to draw girls into the classroom and above all, keeping them in the system. Prior to the Revolution, it was not uncommon for young girls to drop out when they became young women, i.e., when they turned nine. The postrevolutionary school system has successfully appropriated this stage in life to their own advantage through the ceremony of the ebadat. Rather than becoming a woman at home, young Third Grade girls receive their vestments at school.
grounds on which Ahmadi justified the proposal. Beyond the politics, critics wondered how the MOE, with all of the structural problems that it was facing including non-payment of teachers’ salaries, would find the resources to carry out such a massive reshaping of the curriculum. Once again the Ministry was accused of having priorities that were not aligned with the needs of the country, but instead appeared to serve the idiosyncratic political interests of a particular faction. It is a sign of how little effect such criticisms have had on the behavior of the current government that, even after a divisive and disputed presidential election, Ali Ahmadi’s replacement (the Ahmadinejad government’s third Minister of Education in four years), Hamid-Reza Haji Babaei announced in late December of 2009 that he would press ahead with plans to separate boys and girls textbooks beginning at age nine.

Not content to merely carry out the policies of his predecessors, Babaei came into office with his own agenda for radical reform of the Ministry. His office announced on December 14, 2009 a series of major changes to Iran’s education system, including the elimination of the lower secondary or Guidance Level (grades 6-8), replacing the three-cycle structure of schooling (Elementary, Guidance, High School) with a two-cycle system of six years each. It took only five days of fierce opposition to convince Babaei to not proceed with his original plan. On December 19 Babaei backed off, but change remains an important component of his agenda for the Ministry.

Weak Institutionalization as a Source of Strength and Weakness

In a 1982 interview in Paris with the British scholar C.M. Lake, Iran’s first postrevolutionary president, the recently exiled Bani-Sadr marveled that the Islamic Republic was able to exist at all. The institutional framework upon which the new regime had been set

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262 Readers will once again not be surprised to learn that was the used under the monarchy until the restructuring of schooling that took place in the 1971-1972 school year!
simply had too many gaps to bear the load of governance:

It is a constitution which cannot possibly be applied. Whoever reads it knows very well that it contains no system at all---nobody even knows what foundation the articles are based on. It contains many contradictions…It is not a constitution, but a share-out of power which cannot possibly survive.263 (my emphasis)

Bani Sadr, no doubt still nursing the wounds caused by his ignominious removal from office, predicted the imminent demise of the Islamic regime. Lake agreed with the former president, noting that the theory of state outlined in the 1979 Constitution devolved power to so many different bodies as to put the daily operation of government at risk. The situation in Iran, as both men saw it, was one of “either/or,” meaning either the regime survived or fell. Muddling through was not a viable option: “…the President, Parliament, Prime Minister and the various councils all have limited powers, but no power to act unilaterally…the government either acts smoothly or dissolves in chaos.”264

Does the absence of a system necessarily spell doom?265 In the three decades since Lake published his article, the performance of the Iranian state has rarely been smooth and almost always chaotic, but neither its many governments (nine at this point) nor its regime have ever dissolved. Many make the case that the failure to fully institutionalize has actually been a critical factor in the survival of the IRI. James Bill observes in an article written fifteen years after the Revolution that the “central feature of the process of [Iran’s] institutionalization has been an ingrained and integrating tension that has in fact built a kind of dialectical stability into the system”:

…Iran continues to muddle through and to protect its revolution because of the nature of its ongoing process of political institutionalization. The Islamic Republic has not yet found the answer to its search for a political system compatible with its own culture and with the world in

265 By system I mean the continuity of institutional procedures, rules, and processes over time.
which it must live. The cement of political institutionalization has not yet set. The patterns have not hardened, and this allows the search to continue. In an incoherent, rapidly-changing world, this institutional flexibility and elasticity is not necessarily a disadvantage.\textsuperscript{266}

Bill goes on speculate that “conflict, contradiction, tension, and dualism,” can produce a stable and even effective government:

First, contradictory positions present extreme political options and keep alternative political postures always alive and available…Second, creative and balanced tension provides the system with special flexibility and adaptability…Finally, balanced tensions that provide exhaustive options and promote flexibility also erect protective buffers that disguise the workings of the political system and confound potentially hostile external forces.\textsuperscript{267}

For Bill, what matters is that state leaders in Iran are never limited by a single course of action, but remain always at the helm with the leeway to trim and tact sails that comprise of rule as the shifting political winds circumstances warrant.

Daniel Brumberg extends Bill’s argument using a theoretical model that explains how and “the manipulation of institutional legacies often facilitates the survival strategies that autocrats use to undermine pressures for a substantive transition to competitive democracy.”\textsuperscript{268}

Competition occurs in institutional and symbolic spaces “through which elites redefine contending visions of political community.”\textsuperscript{269} In Iran this competition has been over the interpretation of the “multiple imaginations” of the IRI’s founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. The phenomenon of competing legacies produces what Brumberg labels “dissonant institutionalization,” a situation in which the competition of contradictory visions of authority provide opportunities for regime survival and innovation:

Dissonant politics pivots around the institutional and ideological space that distances contending social organizations both from the state and from one another. The competition by the leaders of these organizations for popular support hinders the efforts of any one group to impose ideological hegemony, while relative autonomy and elite competition facilitate both the state’s manipulation

\textsuperscript{267} Bill, “The Challenge,” 406.
\textsuperscript{268} Brumberg, “Dissonant Politics,” 382.
\textsuperscript{269} Brumberg, “Dissonant Politics,” 382.
of competing elites and the latter’s efforts to manipulate the state.270

The state stays above the political fray, a position of authority that is critical to its survival. By not getting directly involved in the muck of politics, state leaders keep their hands clean and their authority intact: “Divide and rule and elite accommodation are…two sides of the same coin.”271

The durability that dissonant institutionalization affords states can be appreciated when we compare it to the brittle rigidity of what Brumberg refers to as “harmonic states,” or countries in which the absence of institutional and symbolic space between rivals invites “a fight to death between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces.”272

Bahman Bakhtiarí offers a different take on why the IRI has managed to survive for so long despite its many structural flaws. He argues that the factionalism that has historically bedeviled the postrevolutionary government (and by extension the Ministry of Education) has been contained by the politics of exclusion.273 Rather than simultaneously accommodating multiple political groups within the umbrella of the state, as Brumberg contends, the regime stays in power, and maintains a relative state of stability, by excluding particular factions from the political arena. The politics of exclusion works, according to Bakhtiarí, because no single faction is ever fully in charge, and groups closed out from the center, regularly return from the wilderness of the political periphery and rotate back into power.274 Of course, the risk exists that whatever faction happens to be in charge will consolidate so much power that “out” groups can

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274 A different coalition controlled each of the four parliaments voted into office during the period 1980-1992. Only four percent of the Majles deputies have survived all four elections; over twelve years and four uninterrupted elections the turnover ratio for elected officials was an incredible 60 percent. In the 1992 parliamentary elections alone, there was a mere 30 percent reelection rate. Bahman Bakhtiarí, “Parliamentary Elections in Iran,” Iranian Studies 26, No. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1993): 375-388.
never return. Iran’s history since the Revolution\textsuperscript{275} strongly indicates that even a hegemonic bloc with control over executive and legislative branches is not assured an easy ride. This was the case in 1992 when then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani managed to keep out the so-called radicals, a faction that constituted his most prominent opponents, from the parliament by manipulating the political process. The resultant Fourth Majles did not, however, act as a rubber stamp for Rafsanjani’s agenda despite ostensibly sharing his pragmatic views on politics. Something similar happened in 2008 when conservatives continued their grip on the Majles consolidated in the previous election four years earlier. The Seventh and especially the Eight Parliaments have made life quite difficult for Mahmood Ahmadinejad, a president whose conservative views would lead one to expect a better relationship between his administration and the parliament. Quite the opposite, the current Majles has questioned, impeached, and rejected Ahmadinejad cabinet members at a record pace.

I end the discussion on the relationship between weakly institutionalized states and regime survival with the analysis of Gary Sick, who offers what is perhaps the most straightforward explanation as to why the Iranian authorities have not been able to close ranks on a coherent vision for the school system. Like his colleagues, Sick ties state paralysis to the remarkable degree of political pluralism that exists in postrevolutionary Iran. This diversity produces enough viscosity that state rule is preserved: “In revolutionary Iran no is ever fully in command…The diffusion of power gives the regime a resilience unavailable to totalitarian

\textsuperscript{275} Obviously, the events of June 2009 cast serious doubt as to the future utility of this model. Not only has a staunchly conservative bloc consolidated its grip on power, but the rules of the political game appears to have shifted to include the direct participation of what are ostensibly non-political groups, i.e., military organizations, in the electoral system.
regimes such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or Assad’s Syria.”

It also keeps much of anything else from happening. Noting that the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution did not experience the widespread terror that preceded the Thermidorian periods in France and Russia, he writes, "It may be that Iran has been spared the level of terror commonly associated with revolutionary regimes simply by virtue of its own inefficiency---the same inability to establish clear priorities and to muster and administer resources” that has plagued the regime’s performance in a variety of arenas throughout its relatively short history. Put another way, incompetence has proven to be a formidable barrier for the Islamic Republic, an obstacle for it to do either good or evil.

**The Institutional Imperative**

But at what cost? Weak institutionalization has kept the Iranian state in control these many years, but its durability must not be confused with governability. For the Iranian state to achieve its ideological goals through schooling, there has to be some way to turn its ideas and abstract concepts, including the “Islamic Citizen,” into reality. Only a well-administered, coherent institutional structure can do this, something that Iran’s Ministry of Education has long lacked.

It is a basic tenet of social science that institutions have salutary effects on governance. An “organization or pattern of activity that is self-perpetuating and valued for its own sake” the utility of institutions is the measure of routinization and predictability that they bring to the political arena:

> An institution is then a social pattern that reveals a particular reproduction process. When departures from the pattern are counteracted in a regulated fashion, by repetitively activated,

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277 Sick, “Confronting Contradictions,” 408.
socially constructed, controls---that is by some set of rewards and sanctions---we refer to a pattern as institutionalized.²⁷⁸

Actors accept institutions not only because the costs of not doing so is too great,²⁷⁹ but also because of the limits that structures place on the agency of actors not yet seen. While rules limit the agency of players currently in the political arena, they are also a practical means of protecting agents from the sanctions of future actors.²⁸⁰ Institutions not only constrain the politics of the future, they facilitate present action by giving political actors the legitimacy and authority to implement policy.

These basic qualities have been absent in Iran’s postrevolutionary school system. One can easily say that elite actors involved with schooling in Iran have had the worst of all worlds. The absence of a fully institutionalized school system has had the twin effect of motivating successive education ministers to pursue fundamental change, to “get schooling right,” but also of leaving them naked before their political adversaries whenever reform of any stripe is pursued.

The temptation has been to go for broke. Beginning with Kazem Akrami’s pledge to the Majles in 1984, every education minister since has in his own way sought to carry on the legacy

²⁷⁹ I do not want to put too much of a utilitarian point on the matter of institutions. There are many who would argue that individuals do not “accept” institutions, i.e., institutions are naturalized beyond the point of agency and choice. The so-called “power debates” of the 1960s/1970s between the “pluralists” and “radicals” are perhaps the most famous, and exhaustive, treatment of this issue. For the pluralist perspective, see Robert Dahl. Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1961. The rejoinder to the pluralists and “power” perspective can be best seen in John Gaventa, Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980) and Steven Lukes, Power: A Radical View (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
²⁸⁰ In his classic Polyarchy Robert Dahl offers a brilliant exegesis on how one of the primary virtues of democracy is its provision for opposition and incumbents to live peacefully (if not in serenity) under the same political tent. The stakes of the political game are lowered, making the true benefit of the democratic institutions the refuge it provides “for the losers.” Robert Dahl, Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1971).
of Rajai and Bahonar by bringing fundamental change to the MOE. None have ever been successful; many have been pressured out of office, often by a cantankerous parliament.\textsuperscript{281} Whereas the official discourse views the politicization of the school system as a symptom of the absence of fundamental change rather than its cause, it is not surprising that former education ministers tend to place the blame for the ministry’s woes on factional rivalries. As early as the mid-1980s, well before Khomeini’s death unleashed a cascade of factionalism into the body politic, elite divisions were preventing the state from moving ahead with its educational plans. Kazem Akrami in a recent interview recalls that he expressed only two agendas during his confirmation hearings for Minister, the first being fundamental change of education, and the second the elimination of factional politics from the Ministry of Education.\textsuperscript{282} Akrami’s immediate successor, Mohammad Ali Najafi, today remembered not only as the Minister who oversaw the implementation of the \textit{Nezam-e jadid} but also as one of the longest serving Ministers in the modern history of education in Iran (1988-1997), sees the problem of politics as more than a MOE problem, but an infestation of the entire body politic:

This issue [of politicization] is not exclusive to the area of education, though it has been more pronounced [in that sphere]. It has taken place within other agencies as well especially with the new administration.\textsuperscript{283} It is merely enough to have worked in the previous administration to be denounced and judged, without inquiry…Unfortunately, this is the pain that we are today suffering some 28 years after the Revolution, and the reason is because we do not have a clear paradigm for the management of the state. Therefore we fall prey to the influence of certain personal tastes and self-conceits. Every group that comes to power looks to take care of their own by “cleaning house.”\textsuperscript{284}

Najafi’s reference to the absence of a “paradigm for governance” is similar to the official

\textsuperscript{281} The post of Minister of Education has been especially unstable during the Ahmadinejad government. All together, the President has offered five names to the \textit{Majles} for the position, two of whom failed to achieve a vote of confidence. All together there have been 11 Ministers of Education since 1979, three in the past four years alone.

\textsuperscript{282} Leila Janghorban, “6 \textit{Vazir, 6 ideh, 6 taqir-e bonyadi}” [“6 Ministers, 6 Ideas, 6 Fundamental Changes”], \textit{Vizhenameh-ye rooznameh-ye khorasan be monasebat-e norooz} 87, Spring 1387/2008, 14.

\textsuperscript{283} Nafaji is referring here to the Ahmadinejad government.

\textsuperscript{284} Shirzad Abdollahi, “\textit{Vazir-e amoozesh va parvaresh: Omoor-e tarbiati be madreseh baz migardad}” [“The Minister of Education: Omoor-e Tarbiati is Once Again Returning to the School”], \textit{Sharq}, 9 Esfand 1384/2006.
diagnoses given by state planners. Whatever the reason for the infection of politics in the MOE, the only remedy is the adoption of a *theory* of education. The national curriculum is seen as nothing less than an *antidote* for politics:

> If this document [the national curriculum] becomes law, the ceaseless changes taking place within the school system because of the revolving leadership of the Ministry of Education will no longer endanger the continuation and perseverance of the educational system. This system will suffer from unstable leadership no more. Under the planning of this...no one will forget what the goals and objectives are. People will come and go with their own ideas and tastes, but they can only lead if they remember what the goals of the plan are.  

In the meantime, the school system endures, hobbling along from minister to minister, but with little continuity. Perhaps the best description of the current political situation in Iran is the one that I regularly heard during the course of my fieldwork in Iran. I cited it in the epigram at the front of this chapter: Iran is a country that has a structure but no system. What this means is that while there is a constant school structure, replete with rules, memos, and endless strategies for change, there has rarely been a systematic, i.e., consistent, program for turning ideas into long-term policies. Programs are announced with great fanfare but rarely get passed on from administration to administration. Worse, staff is regularly overturned without regard to qualification or need.

As a consequence, ministries and agencies are deprived of the kind of institutional memory that would help these organizations more effectively carry out their assignments. A high school principal in Tehran’s 2nd District provided me with an example illustrating how sometimes even those in charge are not entirely in charge: A student from his school was...

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286 Indeed a strong case can be made that the IRI has shown considerable institutional continuity despite the clatter and confusion of its politics. In the first 18 months of its existence the IRI held three presidential elections. Three were separate prime ministers. The political scene settled down for the rest of the decade, with the same the president (Hashemi Rafsanjani), prime minister (Mir Hossein Musavi) and Supreme Leader (Ayatollah Khomeini) in power until 1989. Perhaps most impressive of all has been the Majles, which despite dramatic turnover has held regular elections every four years. Of the four parliaments in the period 1980-1992, each had a radically different composition in terms of political faction.
scheduled to be honored at a ceremony officiated by the head of Tehran’s 2nd School District. The ceremony was called off, however, when the District chief was informed of his removal from his post just moments before the ceremony, the message delivered in person by the District head’s replacement in a hallway adjacent to where the assembly was to take place.

It is turmoil like this that has led one former education minister to muse that what the school system most needs is a minister who can stay for multiple terms: “My belief is that the Ministry of Education needs a 15-year Minister. Whoever comes to work in this ministry ought to be Minister for three [presidential] terms until he can finish the work that he has started. Yes, the school system needs a constant.”

The system’s record of reform, such as it is, supports Mozaffar’s position. History shows that in those instances where reform and expansion of the school system were successful, there was stability and continuity at the top ranks of the Ministry of Education. This seems unlikely to occur in the current political climate. Whether the structure of a national curriculum can provide the stability needed remains to be seen.

**The View From Below**

The constant turnover and turnover at the administrative levels of the school system has not gone unnoticed at the local level of schooling. For those state agents tasked with implementing the latest “innovation” or plan for fundamental change, the teachers and principals toiling away in what Migdal calls the “front lines” of the state structure, the coming and going of ministerial staff has had deleterious effect on their ability to teach. The Ahmadinejad

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288 The final years of the Shah’s reign as well as the nine years (1988-1997) in which Najafi was in office represent two periods where substantial revisions and improvements to the school system. The historical norm is for rapid and regular turnover of the Ministry with most Ministers lasting in office less than two years. Under the monarchy it was not uncommon for ministers to fall out of favor with the Shah, be rehabilitated, only to fall out of favor again. Since the Revolution, and especially since the rise of the reformists, the Islamic Consultative Assembly or Majles has been active in challenging and even impeaching Ministers of Education.
administration was already into the term of the second of its three education ministers when a group of *nemooneh* teachers from Tehran (literally “exemplary teachers,” or Teachers of the Year) were asked for their opinions regarding what the greatest challenges facing the school system were. Along with the poor quality of pay, the lowered social status of teachers, and overcrowding of schools, several of these teachers agreed that the instability at the top of the school system made their jobs much more difficult. Abdollah Nasser Qobadi, a Tehran Teacher of the Year and national Teacher of the Year from the capital’s 5th District gave the following answer:

> The school system has many problems. God-willing, the recent promises given by the most recent Minister [Ali Ahmadi] will be implemented. Unfortunately however, every administrator that comes does his job according to his own tastes and brings his own personal goals and objectives to the Ministry. Perhaps one of the greatest problems of the education system is this, the regular changes in the decision-making and plans of those in charge of the Ministry.

Fereshteh Yazdkhasti, Principal of the Year from Tehran’s 11th District agrees with Qobadi’s assessment, telling the reporter from *Moallem* that besides the perennial budget woes of the school system

> Another problem is the changes in ministerial staff, because every minister that comes in brings along with him his own unique and new system. At the same time, no matter how good the ideas of the previous minister were the new minister implements only his own ideas [and gets rid of the old system], despite the fact that the main goal is for the system to grow and develop.

Similar sentiments were expressed by a group of teachers, principals, and educational experts interviewed for a recent profile of Iran’s educational system for broadcast on the state-funded network, Press TV. Farahnaz Haddadi, an educator with 24 years of experience and the principal of Shahid Hemmat, a girls’ junior high school located in Tehran did not mince words in describing her frustration with the administration of the MOE:

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289 Between the first and second ministers, the Ministry was operated by a caretaker body whose head, Ali Ahmadi, eventually became the official Minister of Education.

290 Mohsen Farji, “*Hameh moalleman nemooneh hastand, ama…Moalleman-e nemooneh sokhan migooyand*” [“All Teachers are Exemplary But…Teachers of the Year Speak”], *Moallem*, Khordad 1387/2008, 4.

291 Farji, “*Hameh moalleman*,” 6.
The root of the problem is the lack of effectual management at the upper levels. The constant changes in the planning, evaluations, the passage of new rules; new people in the administration who when they arrive bring new projects with them and when they leave, those projects lapse [mostly changed by their successors], these cause the greatest damage to the educational body. Therefore, when I assess these problems myself, then we see that if the changes in administration are slowed down, then decisions are made more carefully and our performance can be evaluated in a better way.292

Sepahdar Golmezraji, an Iranian education expert interviewed for the same program, drew parallels between the turmoil occurring in the schools with other aspects of Iran’s public sphere, noting that the impact that the seemingly endless turnover in leadership seemed to have its greatest, if not most visible, effect on the education system:

I think that changing the managerial positions that we see is not only for the educational system. We have had it in…private companies even, this is true. But in the education system, I think, it shows itself more because…when you are the manager of an education system you have programs. These programs are not going to show their results in short term. Certainly you need some time to see the efficiency of your program. When we change the managers again and again, unfortunately none of these results are gained, and none of these targets are, let’s say, hit at the end of the process because--there is no end of the process! I mean, the manager is changed before he is able to end what he had [in] his mind.293

Here it is useful to return briefly to the concept of dissonant institutionalization introduced earlier in this section of the chapter. Daniel Brumberg contributes mightily to the literature on regime change and historical institutionalism by eschewing what might be called “single-path” path dependencies for an analytical framework that takes seriously the possibility that certain regime frameworks can produce multiple developmental paths. Brumberg’s central hypothesis is that the provision of multiple symbolic-institutional paths within a single political framework creates sufficient political space whereby regime-opposition accommodations can occur, thereby allowing a wily state apparatus to survive by “being above” the contentious and often messy politics taking place beneath its authority. The arms-length distance between an autonomous state and competing elites can spur ideological innovation that may one day lead to

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293 “The Education System of Iran.”
a pacted transition to democracy, or it may allow the state to continue to remain “stuck” in a liberal autocratic mode, as so many countries in the MENA region appear to be. Semi-authoritarianism, Brumberg reminds us, is not a way-station for countries journeying to totalitarian or democratic rule, but represents a destination in its own right.294

While Brumberg adheres to the historical institutionalist piety that small events have outsize resonance on the future events, dissonant institutionalization allows for a considerably wider range of outcomes than is typically seen in the literature. Brumberg’s key insight is that political actors can use a common set of symbolic and institutional markers in diverse and unanticipated ways in pursuit of particularistic agendas. This attention to contingency is a refreshing corrective to strict path dependencies and as a matter of application Brumberg’s theoretical framework provides a particularly useful tool for understanding the ways in which different groups emphasized particular aspects of Khomeini’s thought as they struggled to outmaneuver each other in the wake of the Founder’s death in 1989, a year that fundamentally altered the course of schooling in Iran.

Still, the somewhat jaded responses by teachers and lower-level administrators to the eternal turmoil taking place in the organization and planning of the Ministry of Education reminds us that elite actors are not the only people whose fortunes are affected by dissonant institutionalization. Brumberg leans heavily, too much perhaps, on the dynamic of elite competition as the engine of politics and change. While he does not ignore the response of ordinary people to politics, they tend to be an afterthought or secondary to his framework. At best ordinary members of society comprise an audience that elites seek to charm, convince, or manipulate as they maneuver to “to discredit, redefine, or renegotiate the prevailing political

order.”\textsuperscript{295} The populace may be the decisive factor in determining who wins the political game, but the heart of the action is ultimately at the elite level.

I am unwilling to grant the state the measure of independence from non-state forces, be it elite or ordinary, that Brumberg does. Instead I understand the state to be deeply imbricated in the society that it seeks to transform and ultimately control. Critically, states do not get exactly what they want from the societies they rule, but social forces do not necessarily act. More often than not, their responses to the state are shaped by the practices, discourses, and rules of the public authority.

What I mean to say is that the spaces that multiple institutional paths produce permit ordinary Iranians to use, appropriate, and where necessary, resist the state. Dissonant institutionalization may contribute to regime survival by keeping competing groups at arms length from the center of power but the structural gaps that exist in dissonant states makes it possible for alternative narratives to state rule to blossom from below. These narratives, shaped by the language and symbols of the state—indeed, in other words, by the hegemonic process—have over time produced a vision of citizenship that is today perhaps the biggest challenge, if not threat, to the state. As the events of June 2009 vividly demonstrated, it is an alternative notion of what it means to be Islamic and Iranian, one couched in the language of consent but fully capable of mounting protest.

\textbf{Whither the Islamic Republic?}

At the end of his short 1993 piece dealing with the contradictions embedded in the Islamic Republic’s political framework, Gary Sick asks a simple but fundamental question: how does Islam govern? Now into its “teenage years,” Iran’s revolutionaries had not reached

\textsuperscript{295} Brumberg, “Dissonant Politics,” 386.
consensus on what the Revolution meant for Iran’s national identity and what the country’s role in the international community would be. Because it did not yet know itself, Islamic governance remained “nine parts improvisation to only one part institutionalization,” certainly an apt description for the history that we have seen throughout this chapter.

Sick’s question, how does Islam govern, remains unanswered to this day, now some 17 years later. I am reminded of Afshin Marashi’s thesis that the primary failure of Iranian modernity, politically, has been the inability of state-builders to build a common and uniform culture capable of binding together state to society. The absence of a response to Sick casts new light onto Marashi’s framing. In addition to seeing the cultural debate in Iran as one in which advocates of a secular and pre-Islamic identity struggle against groups committed to the Islamicization of all aspects of national life, we must now also consider the struggle taking place within the parameters of the Islamic Republic itself. Unresolved after so many years, the argument continues between the true believers: What does it mean to be an Islamic citizen in Iran, a good Muslim and a good Iranian? How can these national and personal goals be best achieved through schooling?
Chapter Three “The Expansion, Overcrowding, and Appropriation of the School System by Ordinary Iranians, 1979-2008”

There was a time that schools were a completely ideological structure, an instrument in the service of the state. Today schools are to a certain extent at the service of families…Each of these two institutions, the family and the state, seeks to turn the school to its own advantage. In this, the benefit that schools provide to the state is becoming everyday less and less …

---Mohammad Rezaei, “Chaleshha-ye bAZtOLID-e hezheimoni-ye dolat az tariq-e gosfeman-e madreseh”
[“Challenges in Reproducing State Hegemony via School Discourse”]

In our educational system there is no value placed on teaching children [proper] behavior, but rather on the acquisition of knowledge designated as necessary by the system for entry into university. The konkooR [Iran’s university entrance exam] and testing are the first and last word of education, and acceptance to university is the goal and solution of society and families.

---Bahman Khorizad, “Az amoozeshh va parvaresh-e rasmi che mikhaim? Entekhab-e amoozesh, entekhab-e jamah”
[“What Do We Want From Formal Education? The Choice of Education, The Choice of Society”]

But if education is not contributing to higher output why is more education being produced [in Iran]? It would seem that individuals benefit from education (i.e., private returns to education are high) while the economy does not (social returns are low)…

---Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Human Resources in Iran: Potentials and Challenges”

The history of modern politics in Iran in inextricably bound to the rise of a modern school system in the early 20th century. Educational reforms instituted by Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1920s and 30s mark for many historians the division between the pre-modern and modern in Iran’s social and political history. The advent of a national system of education meant that the boundaries separating state and society, elite and ordinary, at least in the schoolhouse, would forever be dissolved. The emerging Pahlavi state of the 1920s sought to stitch together for the very first time in the country’s history a uniform Iranian identity (Iraniniyat) made of “one cloth” (yekbaft). Schools, as the primary agent of the “pedagogic” and moralizing state would be the key institution in this effort, tasked by the Shah with spreading a common authenticity over

There was just one problem: In much of Iran, schools did not yet exist. Where schools were present, many if not most of the local children did not bother to attend. The expansion of schooling throughout the 20th century occurred primarily in the area of elementary education, did lead to improved coverage of school-age populations and a rise in literacy rates nationwide. Still, at the time of the Revolution almost half of the country’s children, especially those living in rural populations, remained outside of the framework of national education. Marashi’s characterization of an Iranian state and society conciliated by schooling was, even in 1979, more theory than fact. Without an educational infrastructure to bind state with society, and lacking incentives to send their children to school, the notion of a state and society held together to by a common culture had not yet entered the consciousness of most Iranian families. Modernity, it would seem, had to wait.

The successors to the monarchy moved quickly to close the gap between the pedagogic state and society. The establishment and growth of an Islamic school system was a top priority of the new regime, and a massive effort was immediately mounted following the Revolution to bring formal education to those places and populations that had never experienced formal

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298 In 1976, of Iran’s school-age population (6-17) only 52% were covered by the school system. Ates-e melli-ye Iran: Amoozesh-e oomoomi [National Atlas of Iran: Public Education] (Tehran: National Office of Mapping, 1377/1998), 17.
299 Marashi, Nationalizing Iran, 88. Marashi criticizes conventional discussions of education in Iran during the 20th century that focus solely on scale and access. The assumption is that as the quantity of teachers, schools, and students increases, national progress and development will also occur. For the author, quantitative indices rooted in modernization theory miss the point. What Marashi is interested in is not the scope of the educational project, but in the meaning and purpose of having a national school system as it relates to the cultural history of Iran. A state-run and universal educational system is the necessary catalyst for creating a modern politics premised on the unity of state and society around a shared cultural nation. Still, I think it possible to accept Marashi’s premise that educational policy under Reza Shah signaled “the beginning of a radical new relationship between state, society, and culture” while also observing that scale and access matter for transforming the principle of modern nationalism into actual practice.
By any measure, Iran’s revolutionaries were wildly successful in their efforts. Parents and students responded positively to the dramatic expansion of schooling that took place following the Revolution, and new students flooded the schools, brought in by a cresting population boom. The discourse of education as a rite of passage for children and adolescents expanded beyond its usual redoubts within the urban middle and upper classes to include every level of society. For children born after the Revolution, illiteracy became virtually non-existent, and overall literacy rates in Iran have grown at a phenomenal pace. Within a decade’s time Iran ranked as one the most literate countries in the region and the broader developing world. Beyond literacy, pursuit of the high school diploma and increasingly, the university degree, has become a routine and unassailable goal for millions of Iranian families.

Success invites us to return to Marashi’s thesis and to ask: What came next? In the previous chapter I examined how Iran’s state leaders struggled, and often stumbled, to fundamentally change the Pahlavi school system. This chapter turns the focus away from elite struggle and looks instead at the families for whom the new schooling was being constructed. What happened when the boundary separating state and society finally began to dissolve everywhere, and Iranian families made their first sustained contact with the state through the schools? Above all, Why did families consent to sending their sons and daughters---especially the daughters---to state-run schools?

Exploring the question of “what happens” when school finally becomes widely popular constitutes the bulk of this chapter. The answer to the question of why families consented to sending their children to school can be given right here and is rather straightforward: Families allowed their children to attend state-run schools because it was in their interests to do so. These
interests frequently diverged from those of the public authority. Ordinary Iranians responded enthusiastically to the new educational opportunities being provided by the postrevolutionary state not out of sympathy for the formal ideology of the state or because of the increased role that Islam played in the classroom, though for many these were important factors in making schooling more appealing. Nor did parents send their children to school because the state compelled them to; mandatory attendance laws had long been on the books in Iran, but unenforced by the state and unnoticed by members of society, the effect of these laws on drawing children to the schoolhouse was practically nonexistent.

The truth is that far from being natural partners in a shared ideological project, state and society often had quite different understandings of the merits of education. If the last chapter demonstrated the incoherence of the state’s educational project, then this chapter will show that families, insulated from elite machinations and for the most part uninterested in the politics of schooling, brought a tremendous sense of purpose to schooling. Parents sent their children to school because they saw formal education as critical to the future economic and social success of their children. And in doing so, by participating in state-led education on terms mostly, but not entirely, of their own making, these parents managed over time to transform schooling from a public good and an instrument of state hegemony into a private resource in service to the advancement of their children’s future social and economic prospects.

Such a thesis will no doubt strike some readers as being off the mark. They may ask, Isn’t it the case that many Iranians were reassured their cues from the clerical leadership? Haven’t families respond positively to the postrevolutionary educational project because the schools were seen as being sufficiently traditional, in accordance with local religious values, whereas the Shah’s school system as little more than a facsimile of American and European schools?
Certainly. The idea that Iran’s new system of schooling was in harmony with indigenous mores (particularly in regards to Islam) played an important role in convincing families of the righteousness of the school system. Moreover, many poor communities, both urban and rural, received their first access to a proper school under the IRI, attention that was not soon forgotten in those communities.

Righteousness does not necessarily trump utility, however, the embrace and appreciation of a cause does not mean the end of politics. As I have stressed throughout the dissertation, the notion that there is a harmony of purpose between any state and a certain segment of society (traditional, poor, etc.) is a testable proposition, one that the researcher must confirm or falsify with empirical evidence. We cannot assume that Iran’s poor and previously disenfranchised communities support the state but must demonstrate this claim with data.

I do so by drawing from historical enrollment rates following the Revolution and placing these against enrollment patterns from the Pahlavi era. I demonstrate that during the 1980s, as the first generations to be taught entirely under the banner of the IRI began to enter the school system, families began to see the utility of schooling as a 12-year course of study, running from Grade 1 to the end of high school, at whose end awaited the university entrance exam and, for the qualified few, passage into university. By accepting the end point of schooling, as it were, enrollment rates in education’s beginning and especially middle stages—elementary and intermediate education, respectively—finally stabilized. Put another way, for the first time elementary and intermediate school transformed from being the whole of education in Iran to becoming stages on the way to the high school diploma, the latter a means to reaching the university. Where once the state struggled to sustain attendance rates across grade levels, today it increasingly has to contend with the relentless pressure of parents who, seeking to secure their
children’s futures, expect the school system to provide the training and knowledge needed to perform well on the national university exam, the high-stakes konkoor.

In the end, politics and state intentions have had little bearing on the domestic consumption of education by ordinary Iranians. The reality in Iran since the Revolution has been that even if families were mostly interested in their sons and daughters becoming ideal Islamic citizens, young adults who are primarily concerned with the formal ideology being taught by state educators, Iran’s school system has hardly been in a position to deliver the ideological “goods.” Overcrowding in the classroom and annual budgets strained to the breaking point by war and economic collapse put the school system into what can only be described as survival mode for all of the 1980s and 1990s, a stance that it is only now emerging from.

State struggle to process Iran’s postrevolutionary “youth bulge” through the school system, had the effect of further entrenching what was an already rigid and traditional pedagogy inherited from the previous regime, one rooted in methods of rote learning based on materials drawn exclusively from textbook content. Today, as it always has, the memorization of easily forgotten facts, not the internalization of Islamic and revolutionary values, is what constitutes “learning” in Iran’s school system. Although arguably the most equitable and efficient means of dealing with the very real structural pressures confronting the school system, the outcome has been a style of teaching and learning that is quite ineffective for achieving the goals of political indoctrination.

Herein lies one of the great ironies of the postrevolutionary school system. For all of the instability and politicization of schooling taking place at the leadership level, detailed in Chapter Two, Iran’s school system has managed to produce a highly efficient, transparent, and arguably objective system of measure for student success and achievement. The gauntlet of standardized tests that children must overcome in order to enter the university of their dreams provides
families with a clear pathway to success. Testing, put plainly, offers refuge from the corruption of access and personal connections that plagues so many of Iran’s social spheres. (*parti bazi*)

In the end what was initially a rational response to the opportunities offered by the educational system has over time become transformed into a normative, even irrational pursuit of a normative good. Today the possession of a university degree is seen as much more than a “meal ticket.” It has become a powerful social signal of one’s place and worth in society, critical to one’s prospects not just in employment but also in the marriage market.

**Theoretical Approach**

The primary research question of this chapter asks how families *responded* to schooling instead of questioning how schooling *affected* students and their parents. By placing the source of political and social action in the hands of ordinary Iranians, I am signaling my assumption that students and their parents are active participants in education, and that they engage with the pedagogic state because there is something in it for them to do so---not because they are forced or duped by the state, or because of an unexamined affinity between the Islamic regime and a deeply religious society. This is not to say that the actions of students or their parents are completely autonomous or that Iranian families make purely rational choices regarding education unfettered by state interests and institutions. Keeping with the theoretical approach of the dissertation, in which I sustain the tension between structure and practice, my assumption is that the “selfish” engagement of ordinary Iranians with the school system individual agency occurs and is shaped by the particular educational framework, created and sustained by a partially autonomous state.

So much for epistemology. As to the ontology, the analysis that follows draws inspiration from Eugen Weber’s seminal work *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of*
In his discussion of the rise of modern schooling during the latter part of the 19th century, Weber notes that although schools existed and were numerous in France before the 1880s (when children began to attend school in large numbers), certain structural changes had to occur before families were willing to commit to public education:

What made the Republic’s laws so effective was not just that they required all children to attend school and granted them the right to do so free. It was the attendant circumstances that made adequate facilities and teachers more accessible; that provided roads on which children could get to school; that, above all, made school meaningful and profitable, once what the school offered made sense in terms of altered values and perceptions.  

Until the context outside of the school resonated with the material being taught inside the classroom, there was little chance that parents and children would display interest in the school system:

School was perceived as useless and what it taught had little relation to local life and needs. The teacher taught the metric system when toises, cordes, and pouces were in current use; counted money in francs when prices were in louis and écus. French was of little use when everyone spoke patois and official announcements were made by a public crier in the local speech. Anyway, the local school did not teach French, but arid rules of grammar. In short, school had no practical application. It was a luxury at best, a form of more or less conspicuous consumption.

Weber’s work is not perfect. His treatment of how a secular French nation was created in the latter part of the 19th century through the schools offers little explanation of the ways in which the peasants, i.e., local communities, contributed source material to the nationalizing project or may have altered the project once it was under way.  

Although he acknowledges that no amount of state coercion could convince rural parents to send their kids to state schools, the agency of the peasant ends at the schoolhouse doorstep. Once the pupils were in their seats, Weber takes it for granted that they received their education whole and intact from teachers who,
acting as the state’s agents, delivered the curriculum without mediation or alteration.

Weber’s study of 19th century France is rooted in a modernization paradigm that has little bearing on the situation in Iran in the latter third of the 20th century. For Weber, changes to the structure of France’s economy were a prerequisite to schools being seen as useful by the peasantry. In other words, the social and economic context outside of the schoolhouse had to be just right. By contrast, in Iran the context was already “right” in that by the time of the Revolution modern institutions, including schooling, existed throughout the country. Iran had long ago made the turn towards modernity. The problem was that not every Iranian had been invited to participate.

Regardless, the basic premise of Weber’s treatment remains compelling and relevant to the discussion at hand. Above all, the notion that families go to school because of the utility schooling affords them is an important alternative to the hypothesis that Islamic schooling has been popular in the postrevolutionary period because of the deeply Islamic nature of Iranian. It is a falsifiable proposition that schools serve the ambitions of families, and I aim to prove this hypothesis using high school enrollment patterns before and after the Revolution. Put directly, rising rates of persistence at the secondary level after 1979 suggest that schools are

As to content, I open the chapter by detailing the population boom and subsequent bust of the early 1980s, a pivotal event in the IRI’s history and one that continues to have profound effect on the political and social policies of the IRI to this day. The first generation of offspring of the postrevolutionary period would also be its largest, and just by the weight of their numbers they affect the state. I show that both boom and bust occurred in spite of state action.

From there, I pick up the story of Iran’s boomers as they begin to enter the school system around the mid-1980s. I tell their story of postrevolutionary education as one of new encounters
with the state, in particular, the encounters that occurred in three categories: Girls, rural society, and the rise of high school. Each of these categories would see phenomenal growth in the postrevolutionary period. Underlying each one’s growth was the reason given above: The desire by families that their sons and daughters some day attend university. Given the same chance at schooling, previously disenfranchised groups pursued the same goals as groups that had been privileged. The ratio of those attending school was greater following the Revolution, but their purpose in doing so was very often the same as it had been before 1979, namely to secure their economic futures and position in society.

Historically the participation of ordinary Iranians in formal schooling beyond primary education has been driven by considerations of employment and social prestige, in other words, decidedly non-ideological factors, a record that I leverage in this chapter to substantiate my thesis. The data strongly indicates that the expansion of schooling in the postrevolutionary period, rather than mitigating the tendency of families to view formal education in utilitarian terms, only exacerbated it several times over.

By bringing schooling to regions and populations that had historically been ignored by the education system the state rather successfully funneled the population boom would be funneled through the education system. Still, growth in coverage could not have occurred at a more inauspicious time. The gale winds of a devastating eight-year war and an economic collapse during the same decade converged to produce a perfect storm that left the state’s educational budget in tatters. State planners were forced to shelter their ideological ambitions under the cover of standardized testing, and though the charged clouds of revolutionary rhetoric and ritual did not dissipate, they were left to float without effect over a school system struggling just to process students in and out of classrooms.
The focus on grades and test scores has facilitated the appropriation of schools by families. The state provides students and their families clear pathways by which to navigate the school system in order to reach their own goals, a quality that has exacerbated the historical predisposition of households to treat public schooling as a private resource. What counts as academic success, and the means by which that success can be obtained, is predictable. By offering an objective, transparent, and above all consistent basis for measuring academic success, families today have a vested interest that current pedagogies not be repealed.

I conclude the chapter with a look to the future development and use of schooling in Iran. Today there are indications that the growth of the school system among certain sectors of society is beginning to stall. As more and more young graduates are unable to translate their educational credentials into steady employment, the pursuit of secondary and postsecondary education may decline, setting up an interesting tension between education, particularly university education, as a normative goal and the perceived utility of having the proper credentials for work.

**The Great Population Boom (and Bust) of the 1980s**

The first generation to be schooled in the postrevolutionary period was actually the third. Commonly referred to as the “Third Generation” (*nasl-e sevom*) the cohort of Iranian children born around the time of the 1979 Revolution represents the original “children of the revolution,” that slice of Iran’s population destined to be the first group to grow up entirely under Islamic rule:

The First Generation made the Revolution. At the time of the Revolution they were in their twenties and older. They had spent their youth under the Shah’s rule and had experience of pre-Revolutionary Iran…The Second Generation…was in its early teens at the time of the Revolution, born between 1965 and 1970. It has vague memories of the time prior to the Revolution. What unites them as a generation is spending their formative years during the eight-year war with Iraq between 1980-1988.  

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It is the absence of a particular memory that sets the Third Generation apart from the First and Second: Born too late to witness the turmoil of the late 1970s, and too young to have experienced the internal conflict, Third Generation members have no living memory of the Revolution or the Shah. The new regime took this lacuna as a positive development. Instead of starting over with their education, the state could start from scratch. Uncorrupted, new, the future of the Revolution would be built on the foundation of the Third Generation children.

There were certainly enough of them. Beginning in the late 1970s and following a decade of steady decline, Iran’s population growth exploded. Between 1976 -1986 Iran’s population grew at an annual rate of 3.9 percent, a sharp increase from the previous ten years (1966-1976), when population averaged 2.7 percent annual growth (Figure 3-1).\footnote{Every 10 years beginning in 1956 the Iranian government has carried out a national census. The Statistical Center of Iran also puts out an annual “statistical yearbook” but the major national benchmarks are typically measured on the “sixes,” i.e., 1956, 1966, 1976, and so forth. Census years and their corresponding date by the Iranian calendar are as follows: 1956/1335, 1966/1345, 1976/1355, 1986/1365, 1996/1375, 1996/1375, and the most recent, 2006/1385.} Total fertility spiked, nearly climbing back up to 7 live births per mother after years of gradual decline, illustrated in Figure 3-2. At the same time that the total fertility rate (TFR) was increasing, child mortality was steadily declining. Usually, as more infants survive childbirth, we see reductions in fertility. The fact that Iran’s TFR spiked upwards makes Iran’s population growth during this period especially unique. The side-by-side comparison of TFR and mortality in Iran and Turkey in Figure 3-3 illustrates this point. All told, Iran’s total population would nearly double in a twenty-year period (1976-1996), ballooning from 33.7 million to over 60 million citizens just three years before the IRI entered its third decade.
Figure 3-1: Population Growth Rates in Iran, Egypt, & Turkey, 1960-2008

Source: Produced from World Bank data.

Figure 3-2: Fertility and Child Mortality Rates in Iran & Turkey, 1960-2000

Source: Reproduced from Djavad Salehi-Isfahani and Hania Kamel, "Demographic Swings and Early Childhood Education in Iran," Working Papers e06-2, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Department of Economics, 2006. Authors’ calculations based on unit record data from Household Expenditure and Income Survey (HEIS), 2002.306

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306 The Household Expenditure and Income Survey (HEIS) is conducted annually by the Statistical Center of Iran.
Readers may be surprised to learn that the new regime did not have a formal, comprehensive policy on population for most of the 1980s. Rather, not unlike its education policy, population policy during most of the 1980s was the sum of a series of ad hoc policies issued by the state, including the lowering of the age of marriage for young girls from fifteen to nine.\textsuperscript{307}

Like so many of the new regime’s actions, opposition to family planning was rooted in a deep hostility towards the previous regime. The Shah’s opponents viewed the UN-brokered family planning program to which Iran became a signatory in 1966 as an artifact of western imperialism. Preventing the population of Iran from growing was a way of preventing the country itself from progressing. Clerics who spoke out against the family planning program typically did not do so from a religious standpoint (though they used their religious authority in asking families to have larger families) but from a political basis. The IRI never banned contraceptive forms of birth control and Khomeini himself famously issued a fatwa in 1980 that allowed for birth control.\textsuperscript{308}

Despite clerical opposition, the Pahlavi-era family program was largely responsible for the decline in population growth that occurred between 1966-1976. As with many of the Shah’s agencies and initiatives, however, the program fell into disarray during the years leading directly up to the Revolution (1977-1979). When the new regime came into power it allowed the Shah’s program to lapse, effectively ending state involvement in engineering smaller families.

\textsuperscript{307} In practice thirteen marked the official age of marriage. Girls ages 9-12 must get permission before they are allowed to become married.

\textsuperscript{308} Akbar Aghajanian, “Family Planning and Contraceptive Use in Iran, 1967-1992,” International Family Planning Perspectives 20, no. 2 (June 1994): 66-69. The IRI allows abortion with certain restrictions. There must be a danger to the pregnant woman’s life and generally the abortion must take place during the first trimester (though in limited cases it can occur later), based on the Koranic principle that the human soul (rooh) does not enter the fetus until the fourth month of gestation. See Morgan Clarke, “Children of the Revolution: Ali Khamenei’s ‘Liberal’ Views on in vitro Fertilization,” British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 34, no. 3 (December 2007): 287-303.
It should be kept in mind that measures such as lowering the marriage age were implemented not solely because of religious mandate, but also out of a desire to create an improved society. Discussions of Iran’s population boom often forget that it took place within a framework of “family,” and did not occur just for the sake of having more people living in the country. The belief of state leaders was that Muslim families were a curative for the various moral and social plagues that afflicted Iran. More citizens meant more families, Islamic families that would naturally be disposed to furthering the cause of Revolution.

In general, the correlation between the specific policies of the IRI and the massive rise in live births during the first half of the 1980s remains uncertain. For example, there is little direct evidence proving that the reduction in the marriage age led to an increase in population growth. Recent research even shows that the average age of first marriage actually increased during the decade, suggesting that growth was driven not so much by the fertility of 12 and 13-year old newlyweds, but by existing households.309

If the formal policies of the state had no effect, then why did Iran’s population grow so rapidly? The pro-natal environment that existed in Iran for much of the 1980s is the most likely explanation. Pushed aggressively by clerics across the country during a time in which the legitimacy and fervor of the Revolution were still strong, Iran’s population responded positively to the call to produce new “Islamic legions” (lashkar-e islami) for the future defense of the nation.

Despite their initial enthusiasm, around the middle of the decade state planners began to

309 Authors working on Iran frequently jump from event to outcome without providing causal linkages. The following excerpt by the journalist Robin Wright is typical: “When Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in 1979, Iran had a population of 34 million. By 1986, a mere seven years later, the population had soared to well over 50 million. The theocracy’s decision to lower the marriage age for females from fifteen to nine, the official age of puberty, had contributed mightily. By 1986, the average Iranian woman was bearing seven children.” Robin Wright, The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).
look upon the increase in population with growing alarm. As it became clear that the country could not sustain the demographic course that it was then pursuing, personnel in the Office of Planning and Budget began to maneuver public and elite opinion in the direction of family planning. After several years of effort and public debate, culminating in a major three-day conference held in the city of Mashad in 1988, the Islamic state finally produced its first formal policy on family planning, signed by Khomeini just before his death in 1989.

Again, society ran well ahead of the state. Data shows that the rate of population growth had begun to drop well before the regime implemented its family planning program, in one province as early as 1982! A uniform decline in growth started around 1985, and what makes this decline especially interesting (other than the fact that it occurred without the direction of the state) is that it took place across the entire country, in every single province and socioeconomic segment of society. Initially the rate of decline was gradual, but as the state program came on line in 1989, the drop in population growth accelerated considerably (Figure 3-3). Iran went from a population boom to a population bust, experiencing a fertility decline of more than 50% in a single decade (1986-1996)! These were figures never before recorded anywhere in the world and the reversal was so dramatic that analysts inside and outside of Iran remained for years skeptical of the results.


313 Only in 1998 did the Population Division of the United Nations endorse the figures, a full two years after the 1996 census.
Why did families stop having so many children when, rhetorically at least, the state was still pushing a pro-natal line? Just as with the causes of the boom, scholars do not entirely know why the decline in growth occurred when it did. The evidence that we have indicates that improvements in other areas, including rural health, public services, literacy and education, were the likely causal factors in reducing growth. In other words, the drop in growth was the unanticipated and even unwanted (at least initially) outcome of state policies not directly related to family planning.
Regardless of the causal factors, one take away from this brief history of the “great boom and bust” of the 1980s is that Iran’s postrevolutionary society demonstrated a capacity to act independently of the state, even at a time when the latter’s authority was unassailable and perhaps the strongest it would ever be. Certainly the pro-natal climate of the early years of the Islamic Republic played a part in inducing the boom, but even here the enthusiasm shown by families for having children was far and beyond what leaders anticipated would happen. In the same way, zeal for not having children was greater than that predicted by even the most optimistic state projections. Above all, anti-natal attitudes took hold years before the state adopted its first comprehensive population policy. The story of population control in the context of state/society relations is a cautionary tale of the limitations of clerical influence and
foreshadows the direction that schooling would take once it was offered en masse to all of Iran and not just part of the country.

**Schooling the Boom: Extending Adolescence, Delaying Adulthood**

The population boom of the early 1980s, once celebrated by state leaders, would in later years be the source of considerable consternation and controversy. Far from being seen as legions of young warriors come to the defense of Islam, the Third Generation cohort is today seen in some quarters as an enduring burden on the body politic, unfairly receiving blame for the various ills and setbacks suffered by the country since the Revolution. Conventional wisdom now dictates that the pro-natal stance of the early revolutionaries was bad politics, with the population boom (the boomers) condemned as “a barrier to social progress and development.”

The perception that Iran’s youth population is a demographic disaster-in-waiting, a ticking time bomb in the heart of postrevolutionary society with the power to disrupt the course of the Revolution if not someday reverse it, is a common conceit in foreign reporting on Iran. It is almost impossible to read a piece on Iran’s domestic politics without some mention of the large portion of school-age Iranians, i.e., children under the age of 14, and the likely political role

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314 “A study of the postrevolutionary educational system may in fact reveal that it had the same major problems as the educational system under the monarchy…[but] it important to note that some of these problems resulted not from the policies adopted by the Islamic regime, but rather from the social, economic, and other problems unique to Iran. Most detrimental was unquestionably the rapid growth of the population…” Menashri 324.

315 “National Report on Development of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran With an Emphasis on Inclusive Education [as] a Way to the Future,” Ministry of Education, Bureau of International Scientific Cooperation. Delivered as part of Iran’s participations in UNESCO’s Education for All, October 2008. How detrimental was the population boom of the early 1980s to schooling? Sharp rises in population followed by low fertility are what demographers refer to as the “demographic gift,” a situation where adults outnumber children by several factors. See Figures 3-5 and 3-6. The economist Salehi-Isfahani has for many years been out in front of this issue, in his writing urging Iran’s leaders to sustain current spending levels on education instead of reallocating budget outlays from primary to secondary to tertiary education as the youth bulge passes through the system. Whether or not the state takes advantage of the demographic gift, the population boom and its effect on schooling is a textbook case of separate state goals---building an army of Muslims, preparing the young generations for citizenship---coming into conflict with and undermining each other. Certainly, the spike itself was problematic, both coming (the rise in population) and going (the dramatic decline in population growth). New teachers had to be hired, as well as new schools built to meet the demand. Now that that demand began to pass passed, however, both the Khatami and Ahmadinejad administrations have struggled to deal with the excess numbers of teachers and schools.
(read: revolutionary) that they will inevitably play in the course...

**Figure 3-5: Progression of Iran’s “Third Generation,” 1986-1996**

Source: Reproduced from Salehi-Isfahani and Kamel, “Demographic Swings.”
Note: 1986 marks the year in which the number of children ages 0-4 relative to the rest of the population was at its greatest.

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316 Although it is not enforced, mandatory enrollment in Iran is to the end of the first year of high school, typically around age 14.
By itself, the spike in population during the 1980s was not enough to create the rampant overcrowding and concomitant shortages that have until very recently beleaguered Iran’s school system. Indeed, the rapid growth in the size of the youth population could have easily led to a decline in educational benchmarks in the 1980s, as an overstretched state struggled to simultaneously manage a war and a school system. The problems faced by this group during their school years, which I describe in some detail below, were to an extent self-made, the unintended consequences borne of the convergence of two separate but related state policies: increase the population and educate all of the country’s youth. In 1976 the ratio of school age children (ages 6-17) actually attending school was around 52 percent. At the time of the 1986

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317 Iran’s leaders in the 1980s did not need to look far to see an example of positive population growth leading to declines in education. Citing a 1975 report given to him by the former head of the Royal Institute for Research on Education, David Menashri writes that despite growth in absolute numbers and coverage rates as a result of the Shah’s White Revolution, overall population growth during the period 1963-1973 lead to an increase in the number of illiterates by some two million persons. Menashri, *Education and the Making*, 184.
census, the same time that the leading edge of the boomers was entering the school system, coverage had mushroomed to 68 percent.

One final note regarding Iran’s population growth: Although much is made of how the early 80s boomers made Iran one of the youngest countries in the world, Table 3-1 shows that Iran had in fact long been a youthful country before 1979. As early as 1950 the children aged 14 and younger were the largest segment of society, accounting for about 39% of the population. From 1955-1995 the share of Iranians 14 and younger never fell below 40%.

Table 3-1: Distribution of Population by Age Group, 1955-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Age Group 0-14</th>
<th>Age Group 15-64</th>
<th>Age Group 65 and over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Not all generational cohorts are alike, however. The rise of public education has gradually shifted the age separating childhood from adulthood in Iran upwards over the past 60 years. Before the Revolution, if parents allowed their sons or daughters to go to school it was mainly to acquire the basic skills taught in the first few years of primary education. Students tended to end their course of study around the Third Grade and large numbers of young Iranians dropped out before the finish of primary school (Grade 5) well into the 1970s (Figure 3-3). Young girls were especially vulnerable, typically leaving school at nine or ten years of age, ages at which women were traditionally considered to have entered adulthood. We can see this dramatically represented in Table 3-2, corroborated by the overall figures in Table 3-3, drawn
from rural data supplied to David Menashri by the headquarters of the Women’s Literacy Corps in December 1975. For these young Iranians, male or female, adult life began at the point that their school lives ended, and most went straight to work, at home, in the fields or in the informal sector if they lived in urban areas. Intermediate or high school education was not an option, much less a university degree.

**Figure 3-7: Elementary School Population by Grade and Gender, 1976 Census**

Source: Statistical Center of Iran, 1976 Census.

**Table 3-2: Total Student Population Enrolled in Women’s Literacy Corps Schools, 1975**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
<th>Fourth</th>
<th>Fifth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78,067</td>
<td>56,478</td>
<td>38,299</td>
<td>28,573</td>
<td>24,671</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Table 3-3: Percentage Girls by Grade Enrolled in Women’s Literacy Corps Schools, 1975**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
<th>Fourth</th>
<th>Fifth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Today the situation is nearly reversed. Young Iranians are remaining young, so to speak, longer than their predecessors. The emergence of a truly mass school system in the postrevolutionary period has had the practical effect of putting off adulthood until much later for millions of young Iranians. Primary school is now the start of childhood instead of its whole. Overall, students are staying in school into their twenties and even thirties. Despite increased levels of education, Iranian youth are also staying at home much longer than ever before. The inability to find work has led to a situation in which young Iranians are putting off marriage, effectively extending adolescence well beyond what it has historically been in Iran.\footnote{Salehi-Isfahani and Daniel Egel, “Youth Exclusion in Iran: The State of Education, Employment and Family Formation,” Brookings Institution, The Middle East Youth Initiative, Working Paper no. 3, (September 2007).}

**The Boom Goes to Elementary School**

For approximately 20 years, Third Generation kids held possession of the school system. Until the last of its members passed through the system late in the 1990s, they were the face of schooling in Iran, flooding the system with the weight of their numbers. The primary level bore the brunt of the wave as student rolls for Grades 1-5 doubled in size, growing from about 5 million students at the time of the Revolution to a peak of nearly 10 million as the last of the boomers exited the elementary schools in the early 1990s (Figure 3-8 & Figure 3-9). Apart from a slight dip at the beginning of the war with Iraq, neither the ratio nor the population of elementary students has gone below pre-1979 levels. Since the 1992-1993 school year, the primary school population has steadily declined, stabilizing at the current level of approximately 6 million students.
Figure 3-8: Total Elementary School Population by Gender, 1943-2000

The fact that boomers went to elementary school in such large numbers was not surprising, as elementary education was already approaching universal acceptance at the end of the monarchy.\textsuperscript{319} There is, however, an important caveat to the prerevolutionary elementary school enrollment rates. A closer look at the 1976 data reveals that the overall rate of attendance masks a steady decline in participation, starting about halfway through primary education. As I noted earlier in citing the numbers from the Women’s Literacy Corps, it was common for students to exit schooling in large numbers between the Second and Third Grades, visually illustrated by the “reverse staircase” pattern seen above in Figure 3-7. This pattern reversed itself after the Revolution and by the time of the 1986 census kids were no longer dropping out

\textsuperscript{319} In 1976 the proportion of children between the ages of 6-10 enrolled in elementary school was 71.6 percent, with over 4 million students attending Grades 1-5. \textit{Atles-e mellî-ye Iran}, 22.
after Second Grade but staying for the duration of primary school (Figure 3-10 & Figure 3-11).

It was on this foundation that authorities were able to grow the school system beyond primary school attendance. When placed in historical context with pre-1979 patterns of enrollment, the data strongly suggests that families began to see elementary schools as providing much more than just the provision of basic skills. Students were attending elementary school in record numbers because they were interested in continuing their education. The figures from 1986, sustained in 1996 (Table 3-4), are early indicators that families had accepted the legitimacy and utility of a high school and university credential. As citizens came to see education as a comprehensive, 12-year experience, elementary schools transformed in the public imagination from being a stand alone institution and the whole of schooling into education’s premiere component.\(^{320}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Atles-e melli-ye iran*

\(^{320}\) For older Iranians, a primary certificate (*madrak-e ehtedai*) functioned in the same way that a university diploma might for a young person today. Primary certificates opened employment possibilities. Young women could teach. Grandmother. It is also a matter of pride. I personally know of a person who, having raised a number of engineers in Tehran, returned to her home province in the north of the country to complete her primary education.
Figure 3-10: Elementary School Population by Grade and Gender, 1986-1987

Figure 3-11: Elementary School Population by Grade and Gender, 1996-1997

A Tale of Two Systems: The Worst of Times

It would take almost three decades for the Third Generation to pass completely through the school system. On the eve of the Revolution Iranian schools counted some 9 million students on its rolls, with the largest proportion of these registered in the country’s elementary school. The total student population grew at a phenomenal rate for the next two decades before finally reversing course during the 1998-1999 school year. At its height, the Iranian school system was teaching 18 and a half million students, more than double the amount in 1979.

Coverage was not without its costs. Little came easy for the members of Iran’s “60s” generation, particularly for these children growing up in Iran’s capital, hit by population boom and influx of internal migrants fleeing the war: “We Third Generation kids,” remembers one student of that time, “rode on the crest of the population wave, and as a result everything that came to us came up short, school included.” For these kids, life was comprised of a never-ending series of hand me downs, and in a decade in which everything possessed what one former student described as the “the color of revolution and war,” just going to school required exceptional will and determination.

Around the same time that the boomers began to enter school in significant numbers, the economy collapsed. The economist Djavad Salehi-Isfahani details how a series of disasters in the late 1970s early 1980s combined to make the decade the most calamitous on record in Iran’s modern history:

First came disruptions in property rights associated with the 1979 Revolution itself, widespread worker unrest in 1978 followed by weakened management in public and private enterprises that lasted for several years, and nationalization of banks and large enterprises. The second year of the Revolution was marked by the Iraqi invasion of Iran which would last for 8 years wreaking the local economy in south-western Iran, causing major damage to productive infrastructure everywhere, and disrupting oil production and exports. These destructive events were capped by the oil price collapse of 1986 which reduced the price of Iran’s main export to one-third, ending

the oil price boom that had started a dozen years earlier in 1973.\textsuperscript{322}

The outcome was an economic decline that was “breathtaking, especially considering the rapid pace of growth that it reversed [GDP growth of 6.6\% during 1960-1977]…Reversals of fortune of this magnitude in such a short period [the 11 year period 1977-1988] are rare in modern history.”\textsuperscript{323} By 1988, GDP per capita was half of what it had been in 1977, and it would take another twelve years for the economy to reach prerevolutionary levels (Figure 3-11).

Population and national income were moving in opposite directions throughout the 1980s. There were twice as many students in school but half as many resources available to the state. To its credit the IRI did its best to sustain spending on education at a high level. Education has always been a major priority of the postrevolutionary regime. The state consistently demonstrated a willingness to back its rhetoric with spending. A quick comparison of Pahlavi and IRI outlays on education and defense in the last and first decades of rule, respectively, gives us a good idea of the priorities of each regime (Table 3-5 & Table 3-6). The monarchy, with secure borders and the de facto protection of the United States, governing in peacetime, on education spent roughly half the amount that it spent on defense. By contrast, the IRI---\textit{during an epic eight-year war}---devoted significantly more of its national budget on schooling than defense, actually \textit{increasing} expenditures on education as the war lumbered into its final years.

\textsuperscript{323} Salehi-Isfahani, “Poverty, Inequality,” 9.
The collapse of the economy took its toll on the school system, however, and by mid-decade real spending per pupil as a percentage of GDP declined. The state tried to sustain spending levels by allocating more and more of its budget on education, but a shrinking economy and a burgeoning student population meant that throughout the 1980s successive school years received a smaller share of the budgetary pie (Table 3-7).
Figure 3-12: GDP Per Capita (Constant Prices), 1980-2006

Source: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, April 2008.

Table 3-7: Public Education Expenditure as a Percentage of GDP (1980-1990)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.51</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


At the school site, the gap that emerged between students’ needs and available resources was quite evident. Throughout the 1980s there were never quite enough teachers or classrooms to accommodate their numbers. Two and even three shift schools became a common feature of the educational landscape. For the grownups assigned the task of instructing these youngsters,
just making the school day happen required planning and coordination worthy of a modern army: “There was a morning shift, an afternoon shift, and sometimes even an evening shift! Sometimes when they couldn’t find enough room, the Literacy Movement would also hold classes in the school.”

Schools followed a rotating schedule with students alternating between “morning week” and “afternoon week.” The clamor for became so bad that many schools out of necessity became gender integrated, with boys and girls rotating between the afternoon and morning shifts.

The provisions found within the classroom in those early years of the Islamic Republic were rudimentary, to say the least. Class sizes ranged from 40 to 60 students, pushed into classrooms that typically came equipped with 10 to 15 benches organized in rows, a desk and a single chair for the teacher, white and colored chalk (that the teacher took with himself), a blackboard and eraser, and finally, a gas-operated broiler: “On each bench there was room for three people, and it was a form of entertainment to watch the kids fights over what bench belonged to which three people.”

In the cold winter months the struggle over classroom territory expanded to include the gas broiler. To the victor went the spoil of being able to sit within the radius of heat emanating from the broiler, at least until the teacher moved the broiler closer to herself at the front of the classroom.

The hardships inside of the classroom paled against the background of conflict going on outside of the school walls. The war with Iraq was never far from the daily lives of schoolchildren during the 1980s. The authorities made sure that students remained engaged with the battles taking place on the country’s southwestern flank. Students regularly participated in food and clothing drives for those families living closest to the front lines. As the war dragged

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on, those front lines came to Iran’s interior in the form of random missile strikes by the enemy. The so-called “war of the cities” between Iran and Iraq for a time put schoolhouses directly into the crossfire, and it was not uncommon to see school buildings fortified by sandbags and “X”s taped to classroom windows in order to keep the glass from shattering in case of a missile strike. These were imperfect measures, of course. No one could feel entirely safe. “All it took was for a teacher to be martyred, or one of our classmates to be bombed, to bring the war home to us.”

A Tale of Two Systems: The Best of Times

Despite all of the hardships of the 1980s, there had never been a more fortuitous time to be a young student in Iran. Children born into the Revolution enjoyed what were easily the greatest educational opportunities of any generational group up to that point. It is not an exaggeration to say that were the first Iranians, ever, for whom going to school was a routine, even expected part of childhood, regardless of social background or geographic location.

A comparison of educational attainment in years by different generational cohorts since 1940 illustrates this point (Table 3-8). Children born just before the Revolution (1975-1979) could expect nearly seven years of schooling (out of a total possible 12 years) in rural areas and just over ten in the urban areas. The cohort that came just after the Revolution (1980-1984) did even better, on balance achieving an average of eight years of schooling in rural areas and almost eleven years of education in urban areas. Taken together, the 1975-1979 and 1980-1984 cohorts compare quite favorably to Iranians born at the beginning of the 1970s (1970-1974). As the last group to begin their education under Pahlavi rule, this cohort finished with only 5.40 years of schooling in rural areas and a respectable 8.90 years in urban areas.

Table 3-8: Educational Attainment in Years by Cohort, 1940-1984

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940-1949</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-1959</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>7.70</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>6.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960-1964</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>7.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965-1969</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>8.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-1979</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>10.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1984</td>
<td>8.60</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>10.70</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>10.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Postrevolutionary schooling reached into places that had never been serviced before, including remote rural areas of the country as well as the neighborhoods of the urban poor. These were the designated constituents of the new regime, the mustazafin or dispossessed. To simply say that the new regime improved access does not capture the importance of what was taking place across the country. In most cases, the state practically built a school system from scratch.

Probably the best way to describe the scope of the changes that took place after the Revolution is to consider the case of rural girls, a demographic that traditionally has had the worst educational opportunities of any group in Iran. In the mid-1960s, only two generations away from the Revolution, the chance that a young girl growing up in the countryside would be literate was four percent, a figure so low that it almost renders the anemic 25 percent literacy rate for rural males astronomical. The situation was not much better for females generally, with a

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327 The mustazafin’s role in the Revolution is complicated, to say the least. This group may have become the symbol of the Revolution after the Shah’s overthrow, but their actual participation during the Revolution was limited—in the case of the rural poor, nonexistent—and came only in the Revolution’s final stages. In some cases, the poor were even hostile to the Revolutionaries. For an excellent discussion, see Charles Kurzman, The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 100-101. Kurzman bases his analysis on ethnographies carried out by researchers before and during the Revolution. See also Farhah Kazemi, Poverty and Revolution in Iran (New York: New York University Press, 1980) and Janet Bauer, “Poor Women and Social Consciousness in Revolutionary Iran,” in Women and Revolution in Iran, ed. Guity Nashat (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983), 141-169.

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national literacy rate of 17 percent compared to about 40 percent for males. Not surprisingly, rates were much higher in urban areas. Around half of those living in cities were able to read and write, with nearly 40 percent of this group female.

Ten years later rates for rural women saw a four-fold improvement. According to the 1976 census 17 percent of the female population living in the countryside was able to read and write, compared to 43 percent of their male peers. Once again urban residents fared much better with a 74 percent literacy rate for men and 55 percent for women.

There is an interesting wrinkle hidden in the folds of the 1976 numbers. A closer look reveals that literacy rates for the young (ages 7-14) was quite high compared to the rest of the country. Male children were the most advantaged group, almost fully literate at the time of the census. Their female peers were close behind at 88 percent literacy.

The urban numbers are not unexpected; it is in the rural figures for the 7-14 age group, especially its female members, where we find indications of inexorable change brewing. Around 77 percent of rural males 7-14 were able to read and write in 1976. Rural females came in at a 42 percent literacy rate, a figure that was nothing short of miraculous compared to the overall rate of four percent from just a decade earlier, and much better than the 19.8 literacy rate recorded for the age group just above them (ages 15-19).

The 1976 numbers suggest that as the IRI reaped its educational harvest in later years, it was produced in part by the seeds that had been planted at the twilight of the monarchy. It was, after all, the 1976 group of 7-14 year olds who would grow up to raise the first generation of postrevolutionary children. Better educated, highly literate, these prerevolutionary youth naturally pushed their own children in terms of education when it came their turn to be parents.
Table 3-9: Urban and Rural Female Literacy Rates Ages 15-19, 1976-1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1976</th>
<th>1986</th>
<th>1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>75.40</td>
<td>85.80</td>
<td>96.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>19.80</td>
<td>53.00</td>
<td>86.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistical Center of Iran.

Again, looking at the female literacy rates for rural females (Table 3-9), it becomes easy to see how the gains made in the 1970s produced a momentum towards literacy that carried over into the 1980s and 1990s. Rural girls born around the time of the Revolution would take what had been a 19.8 literacy rate for 15-19 year olds in 1976 and lift it to almost 90 percent in 1996. Overall gains in literacy for the rest of Iran’s population separated by gender and age group are found in Table 3-10.
Table 3-10: Literacy Rates Ages 6-14 by Gender, 1966-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender and Age</th>
<th>1966 Census</th>
<th>1976 Census</th>
<th>1986 Census</th>
<th>1996 Census</th>
<th>2006 Census</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage of Total Population</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Population</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Population</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Population</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male and Female</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-9 Years Old</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14 Years Old</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>97.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>84.7</td>
<td>88.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-9 Years Old</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>92.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14 Years Old</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>97.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>80.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-9 Years Old</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>91.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14 Years Old</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>97.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistical Center of Iran.
I do not want to paint an unnecessarily positive picture. As a matter of planning the data suggests that the construction of schools in the countryside was more political than practical. Iran was already a mostly urban society at the time of the Revolution, though not by much.\textsuperscript{328} Internal migration, fueled in part by the war with Iraq, only accelerated the rise of Iran’s cities throughout the 1980s and 1990s. While decades if not centuries of neglect make it difficult to begrudge postrevolutionary planners for seeing to their fellow citizens living in the countryside, building rural schools at a time when rural life was fast diminishing was arguably not the best use of increasingly limited resources and no doubt contributed to the pressures being experienced by students and teachers in urban schools.\textsuperscript{329}

**Peasants Into Iranians**

Thus far I have given an account of the rapid growth of Iran’s school system. We now have a clear idea of how the parents of Iran’s so-called Third Generation responded to the educational opportunities that opened up for their children following the overthrow of the monarchy. Enrollment rates show that that response was, to say the least, quite enthusiastic. Under the Pahlavis, Iran’s school system at its peak enrolled around 9 million students and had a coverage rate that never surpassed 60 percent, most of it concentrated in the primary level. Today the school system has around 14 million students (from a peak of over 18 million) and coverage is around 80 percent overall, a rate spread relatively evenly across all levels of


\textsuperscript{329} The Statistical Atlas of Iran says that during the 1996-1997 school year 44,000 of the country’s 63,000 elementary schools (69 percent) were located in rural areas, despite the fact that most Iranians were by then living in urban areas, either because of internal migration, birth rates, or the transformation of previously rural areas into urban centers. Realization by the regime that it needed to reallocate its resources can be divined from the fact that between 1986-1996 the growth rate for urban elementary schools was much greater than that of rural schools, with 9000 schools built in urban areas versus only 2000 in the countryside.
schooling, from elementary to about the first year of high school. Whether we measure success in absolute numbers or in percentage of school-age children covered by schooling, the participation of ordinary Iranians in the educational project of the postrevolutionary regime has been at levels never before seen in the history of modern Iran.

What we have not yet had explained is why. Why did families respond so enthusiastically to a school system that was, in terms of its structure and course of study, quite similar to the one that existed prior to 1979? This is a difficult question to answer, especially if the answer is to be derived from observable behavior and not, as is often the case, deduced from inner states or the “essence” of ordinary Iranians. The challenge for any causal explanation of why schooling suddenly became so popular has to contend with the fact that, until 1979, the school system had been a relative failure in terms of overall coverage, especially outside of Iran’s urban centers. After all, it must be remembered that Iran’s revolutionaries achieved in a single generation—less than twenty years—what state planners had not been able to do in the previous seventy, namely make schooling a normal, natural part of growing up in Iran. Why was the Islamic state able to succeed when the monarchy had not?

One common theory, suggested in the paragraph above, has it that traditional schools made for traditional families. Observers have long attributed the success of the postrevolutionary school system to the ability of the Islamic state, drawing on its considerable religious authority, to disarm the skepticism of conservative parents. The strict enforcement of gender separation at school (e.g., male teachers assigned exclusively to teach boys’ schools), increased religion instruction in the classroom, and overall control of Islamic codes of public behavior supposedly gave mothers and fathers the necessary reassurance that their sons, and

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330 At least more evenly than under the monarchy. Nonetheless, primary schooling remains the most popular type of schooling, based on coverage rates and absolute numbers.
above all, their daughters, would not be corrupted when they left home to go to school. The monarchical school system, judged by many Iranians to be anti-religious (zed-e din) and even an instrument of colonial rule, could never have mustered the same credibility.

The “harmony of interests” explanation, i.e., the notion that Iranian families, being above all religious, were content to have their children attend schools where religion was sure to play a large part, is rooted entirely in a deductive claim. It is a theoretical stance that has much in common with scholarship that looks to Iran’s lumpen proletariat as the crucible for explaining everything from why the “Islamic” Revolution occurred to the supposed popularity of President Mahmood Ahmadinejad. Considering the merits of the harmony thesis, I am reminded of Asef Bayat’s excoriation of scholars who would look to the regime’s “natural” constituency for explanations of why the Revolution took place. The following passage is delivered in the context of a discussion on Iran’s urban poor, formerly the rural poor:

> What all these conclusions imply is a functional, structural, and even essential affinity between the poor and political Islam. Lacking adequate empirical backing, they are largely theoretical constructs based upon either an ideology or a deduction whereby the economic and social position of a group a priori determines its political behavior.

Access to schooling offers a more inductive basis than the harmony thesis for understanding the popularity of schooling in the postrevolutionary period. The IRI quite literally took schooling to places that it had never been before: By 1986 the vast majority of Iranian schools were located in the countryside, with nearly 70 percent of the primary schools, some

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331 The rapid expansion of schooling in the postrevolutionary period has been driven primarily by the entry of millions of girls into education for the first time.
44,000 facilities, serving rural areas of the country. Children who had never before seen a schoolhouse, much less a proper classroom and teacher, could now attend class just like their peers in the capital. It wasn’t just schools: new roads, better health, the provision of water and electricity provided a “package of access” that working in combination greatly facilitated state efforts to make it easier for families to send their children to school.

The “access” argument---the idea that kids went to school because the state finally provided them with the opportunity to so, in terms of roads and schoolhouses (the obverse being that without schools, children would not attend) appears at first blush to provide the empirical basis that the harmony thesis so lacks, therefore avoids the tautologies that the latter foments (i.e., Children are in religiously-run schools, therefore the children went to school because they are religious, etc.). Access, however, is at best a pre-condition for growth, a necessary but not sufficient factor. Building schools only prepares the ground, so to speak, for the expansion of schooling by creating the possibility that children will go to school. It does not explain the reasons why they attend in the first place. Put another way, access gives us correlation but on its own comes with weak causal linkages. Building a school does not necessarily mean that children and their families will come.

I do not reject either of the preceding two claims (harmony and access) out of hand and I agree that both must be incorporated into an explanatory model. Neither, however, carries on its own sufficient causal weight to explain why schooling expanded so quickly following the 1979 revolution. Instead I want to offer a different metric for explaining the growth and development of schooling post-1979, one that will allow me to measure how families consumed education.

For this, I turn to the example and precedent of history. Drawing upon enrollment

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334 Atles-e melli-ye Iran, 28.
patterns and ethnographical evidence, I am able to show that Iranians who participated in public education prior to the Revolution did so for its perceived benefits, be it basic literacy and math skills or as a building block for a future career. Parents sent their kids to school because it was economically and socially beneficial, a conclusion that I induce by tracing enrollment patterns from elementary to upper and tertiary education. I argue that, abetted by sympathy for the religious aesthetic of the Revolution (if not its specifics) and improved access to the facilities of education, postrevolutionary families who allowed their children to attend school did so for the same reason.

Arguments based on the evidence of behavioral patterns also run the risk of falling into the same tautological traps as explanations that rely solely on deductive methods. In other words, I must show that I am not working backwards from my observations (the intense struggle of families to have their sons and daughters accepted into university) when shaping my argument (families see schools as an instrument for personal use).

I avoid this circularity by contextualizing the numbers on schooling. Specifically, through the use of longitudinal data on enrollment rates I am able to demonstrate linkages between employment requirements of Iran’s labor market and student persistence in school. As the demands of public and private sector employees became more stringent in the late 1980s and 1990s, more and more students chose to stay in school in order to get their high school diploma and above all prepare themselves for the national university entrance exam, the konkoor.

At the root of my analysis is the assumption that postrevolutionary families are no different than their predecessors. Previously excluded poor and “traditional” families look at education for their children mainly through the prism of self-interest, and once they were given the same opportunities as those that came before them, they took to schooling because it
promised their children the best means for social and economic advancement. Again, the role of access and empathy (the harmony thesis) are not neglected, but put into dialectic with the utility that schools provide.

Ultimately this portion of the dissertation hinges on the notion that the true test of a modern school system is not whether it can draw in six, seven, eight, and nine-year olds. Parents will send their young children to elementary school if only for the basic skills that they acquire in the early grades, pulling them out once schools become irrelevant or, as in the case of young girls, inappropriate to their lives. Rather than limiting my assessment to elementary school participation rates, I judge the penetration of formal education in Iran based on what happens when children turn eleven, or better yet, when they become fourteen. Can the state convince families to send their adolescent to school, so that they might be sequestered “for 30 or so hours a week in a state institution?”

**An Education That Only the Public Sector Could Love**

“Most parents in Iran,” writes Salehi-Isfahani, “have a simple yet ambitious educational objective for their children---to enter university.” To get there their children must first pass through the national university exam, the *konkoor*. The *konkoor*, more than any ideology or religion, is at the center of the school system and the point around which everything else revolves. It can be said without exaggeration that the primary purpose of education in Iran

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335 International agencies, including the World Bank and UNESCO, tend to emphasize primary schooling as an important measure of educational development, paying careful attention to countries’ gross and net enrollment rates. Goal Two of the Millennium Development Goals, signed by every member of the United Nations in 2000, states that countries must strive to “Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.” See United Nations *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2009*.


today, from the elementary level (and increasingly, pre-elementary level) to high school is a preparation for doing well on this test.

I grew up hearing stories of how difficult, even impossible, it was to be accepted into university during the Shah’s reign.\textsuperscript{338} It is not uncommon for Iranians who were high school students in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when the university entrance exam was still relatively new, to have lingering resentment regarding the way in which the state determined access to college. To this day many judge Iran’s school system on the basis of what many considered to be an injustice. The \textit{konkoor} distorts their assessment: According to many, there were only two paths to college, either scoring impossibly high on the \textit{konkoor} or having connections within the system.

For my own parents and their friends, coming of age at the same time as the oil boom of the early 1970s, there were options other than university. Work (as well as entertainment) was plentiful during those days, particularly for residents of the capital.\textsuperscript{339} These diversions made the likelihood faced by millions of high school graduates that they would not pass the \textit{konkoor} (\textit{ghabool shodan}) much more tolerable. The good life did not necessarily require possession of a university degree.

The choices available to Iran’s youth are much more limited today. Particularly for public sector work, the university degree is absolutely indispensable for job seekers. The problem, according to Salehi-Isfahani is Iran’s rigid labor market has combined with a large state presence in the economy to artificially inflate the value of a university degree for students and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{338} The \textit{konkoor} was first implemented in the Iranian year 1343 (1964-1965).
\textsuperscript{339} One of the most durable discourses of Iranians old enough to remember the “good old days” involves the description of a typical day, going to work, going out at night, going to work the next day. The change and ease of life then is embodied in the conversion rate of the national currency, which for years remained at approximately 7 toman (or 70 rials) to one U.S. dollar. Today, the same conversion costs around 1000 toman (10000 rials).
\end{flushright}
their families.

The labor market incentivizes the university credential in two essential ways. The first relates to the outsized role that the state sector plays in Iran’s economy. Public sector has traditionally dominated employment in Iran, and continues to do so (Table 3-11). Return on degree in terms of salary lower, but security and relative measure of ease, if not prestige, make the work desirable. Originally, as a modern bureaucracy was being assembled in Iran at the beginning of the 20th century, the state hired from the high school ranks as a way to fill positions in its various departments and agencies, a pattern that was quite typical for MENA countries. This of course motivated successive cohorts of Iranian children to pursue secondary education, in the expectation that they too would be hired by the state based on their degree.

It was not long before public sector hiring gave rise to schooling’s lesser cousin, credentialism (*madrakgerai*). The state, unwilling to allow educated and potentially subversive youth to remain idle, responded by expanding the country’s bureaucracy, thus continuing the cycle of incentive. For a time this was sustainable. Buoyed by oil revenues in the 1970s, the state was blessed with an absorptive capacity that would not soon be repeated. A growing high school population was manageable but did not serve necessarily the interests of development.340

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Table 3-11: Types of Jobs for University Educated Workers, 1992-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Type</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>10.78</td>
<td>9.22</td>
<td>9.92</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Wage Worker</td>
<td>79.08</td>
<td>63.59</td>
<td>85.95</td>
<td>83.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Wage Worker</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>20.36</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>12.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid Family Worker</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The message to young Iranians is clear: “Getting the paper,” i.e., a college diploma (or better), is more important than what students actually while at college. By raising the minimum entry requirements state hiring practices since the Revolution have only accelerated the cycle of credentialism. Today, a high school diploma hardly merits notice by potential employers, especially the hiring agencies, ministries, and bureaus of the state sector. Where once a high school diploma was sufficient, now only a university will do.

For proof of this new reality, a young Iranian needs to look no further than the school system. The Ministry of Education touts the increased educational levels of its employees as an indicator of the improved quality of teaching. According to the *National Atlas of Iran*, new

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341 One individual associated with the educational system insisted to me that “Today in amoozesh va parvaresh (Iran’s school system) we have not one bad teacher.” He based this claim on the fact that for many years the Ministry of Education required that applicants for teaching positions possess a university degree or better.
hiring of teachers and support is reserved almost exclusively for those with postsecondary education. If we look at Table 3-12 and Table 3-13, we can see how in just a short time (10 years), the university credential came to dominate the resumes of MOE workers. Total numbers of teachers grew steadily between 1993-2003, but those instructors holding a college degree exploded. Just at the primary level, the number of teachers with a university degree or higher improved over 15 times in the same period, rising from 3,495 instructors in 1993 to 53,668 teachers in 2003. At the same time, the number of high school graduates dropped precipitously.

Table 3-12: Primary School Teachers by Level of Education, 1993-2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Undergraduate and Graduate</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993-1994</td>
<td>3495</td>
<td>202332</td>
<td>283859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-1995</td>
<td>5630</td>
<td>186513</td>
<td>278103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1996</td>
<td>8858</td>
<td>170217</td>
<td>270112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-1997</td>
<td>12534</td>
<td>165457</td>
<td>279751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>17096</td>
<td>182726</td>
<td>302068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>23081</td>
<td>186530</td>
<td>316990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>31515</td>
<td>177644</td>
<td>316939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>36742</td>
<td>169945</td>
<td>314654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>44270</td>
<td>158709</td>
<td>308105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>53668</td>
<td>142241</td>
<td>297711</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3-13: Secondary School Teachers by Level of Education, 1993-2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Undergraduate and Graduate</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993-1994</td>
<td>72436</td>
<td>8836</td>
<td>97771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-1995</td>
<td>77160</td>
<td>7487</td>
<td>99630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1996</td>
<td>86335</td>
<td>4391</td>
<td>103549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-1997</td>
<td>88750</td>
<td>6028</td>
<td>112827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>105076</td>
<td>5783</td>
<td>126204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>120299</td>
<td>6359</td>
<td>142731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>131195</td>
<td>4712</td>
<td>150151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>137271</td>
<td>3482</td>
<td>152986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>146958</td>
<td>2815</td>
<td>160878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>153824</td>
<td>2421</td>
<td>167570</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Another source of evidence is the relationship between women’s education and employment. The indispensability of the university degree has had a direct effect on female school enrollment rates, particularly at the tertiary level, as gendered hiring practices have propelled many young women go on to college the Revolution. Figure 3-13 shows quite clearly how despite a slight dip in the secondary levels of schooling (lower and upper), female students more than make up for this gender gap in postsecondary education, surpassing their male peers in persistence (time in school). Gendered hiring practices following the Revolution have propelled many young women to go on to college, and as a result, women have for many years vastly outnumbered men at the university level, with around 60 percent of today’s college students...
The rise of the female student, clearly illustrated in Figure 3-12, and that has in recent years been a major feature of the postrevolutionary educational system is directly due to the strong linkages between women’s employment patterns and educational level. While there is a clear premium associated with postsecondary education in Iran, particularly in the public sector,

Note: UNESCO combines lower and upper secondary figures under the heading of Secondary education. Declines occur in intermediate grades, and females recoup parity around the second year of high school.

Figure 3-13: Gross Enrollment Gender Parity, 2000-2007

[Graph showing enrollment parity for different levels of education from 2000 to 2007]

342 Female dominance of the tertiary level is a situation that has alarmed certain members of the Iranian leadership, and there has been in recent years serious debate in the Majles as to whether quotas ought to be placed restricting the number of women entering Iranian public colleges and universities (private postsecondary, presumably, would be left unaffected). See discussion in Mitra K. Shavarini, “The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education,” International Review of Education 51, no. 4 (July 2005): 329-347.
the benefits do not affect the genders equally. Table 3-14 shows that men who do not acquire a postsecondary education have their prospects for employment sharply reduced, though not completely closed off. Women who do not go on to college, on the other hand, have almost no possibility for employment, especially in the public sector where the bulk of Iran’s females end up working.

Table 3-15 illustrates the strong correlation between employment in the public sector and the persistence of women in schooling. Although a case can be made for reversing the causal arrows, i.e., the state hires women because they are educated, as opposed to the claim that women pursue education in order to be hired by the state, the male figures from the public sector indicate that less-educated women are given much less leeway during hiring than their male peers.

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343 According to Salehi-Isfahani and Egel 2007, 80 percent of recent graduates found employment in the public sector, down from 93 percent recorded in 1997.
344 There is in practice little competition between genders in the public sector. Competition is intra-gender. Men have more options, but women only one.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>22.60</td>
<td>14.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read/Write</td>
<td>20.38</td>
<td>12.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>35.43</td>
<td>29.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary</td>
<td>12.70</td>
<td>22.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>13.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>6.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Salehi-Isfahani, “Human Resources in Iran,” 132. Figures based on author’s calculations and data from the Statistical Center of Iran.
## Table 3-15: Education Level of Female Public and Private Sector Workers, 1992 & 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>25.46</td>
<td>21.51</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read/Write</td>
<td>25.93</td>
<td>13.62</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>27.31</td>
<td>19.00</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>10.04</td>
<td>8.37</td>
<td>6.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>10.65</td>
<td>22.94</td>
<td>42.97</td>
<td>34.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>12.90</td>
<td>39.54</td>
<td>61.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Salehi-Isfahani, “Human Resources in Iran,” 132.

The second way in which Iran’s labor market puts a premium on the university degree, according to Salehi-Isfahani, relates to Iran’s protectionist labor laws. An atavism of the Revolution’s leftist sensibility and commitment to social justice, the regime passed a measure in 1993 making it very difficult for a business or state agency to dismiss employees for cause. As a result of this law, according to Salehi-Isfahani, hiring became risky business for both public and private employers. In a normal labor market, employers are free to dismiss employees that are ill-suited to the work that they were hired for. In the Iranian economy, i.e., a restricted labor market, employers are effectively stuck with their employees once the latter were on the job; competence has little bearing on job survival.
Thus, employers now look for ex ante signal of worker competence and productivity. All things being equal, the *konkoor* has effectively become this signal as it offers a reliable and universal measure of skill, albeit a rarefied set of abilities relevant only, perhaps, to the *konkoor* itself:

…imagine a young student watching the behavior of her most likely employer: virtually all new public jobs require a university degree, once employed she will be paid according to the level of her formal schooling, and promotion and layoff are not directly related to her productivity. The signal is loud and clear: learn and study what you will but above all get a university degree!345

The Tyranny of the *Konkoor*

As the *konkoor* gained an outsized importance in the hiring practices of employers, a curious role-reversal began to emerge between Iran’s entrance exam and university education. Whereas the *konkoor* was intended as a device to determine who could go on to university and get trained for future employment, today the *konkoor* has effectively taken the place of the university education. The authority and legitimacy of the student’s university degree lies above all in his or her passage (*ghabool shodan*) of the *konkoor*. What happens at university is, in practice, increasingly irrelevant.

This peculiar situation is captured in the popular Iranian saying that going to university in Iran is a bit like trying to pass water or oil through a funnel with the thin side up and its mouth turned down to the ground: It is exceedingly difficult for students to get into university (the funnel), but once in, getting out with a degree is almost guaranteed. It is a scenario often compared to the college application process in the United States, where, at least as Iranians perceive it, the funnel is reversed with the “correct” side up (the mouth) and the thin part pointing downwards: American students have enormous opportunities for getting into college,

345 Salehi-Isfahani, “Human Resources in Iran,” 133.
but because of the difficulty college academics, they struggle to find their way out with the credential in hand.

The gravitational pull of the *konkoor* extends beyond the labor market. The top of the educational system increasingly distorts how teaching occurs at its lower levels. As the idea of going to university became more popular, beginning in the 1970s, the Ministry of Education responded by designing curricula and pedagogical practices that would best prepare the student for the *konkoor*. Now, nearly everything associated with university education, from instruction in its classrooms to its entrance exam, rewards little outside of habits and skills learned through the “drill and kill” training.

Of course, the pursuit of grades and a ceaseless pursuit of preparation for tests, big and small, is nothing new to Iran. Teaching and learning there has always been teacher- and textbook-heavy, suffused with a heavy dose of rote memorization. The teacher and the textbook are the center of the educational process. Ali Shariatmadari, a noted educational expert and former member of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution describes Iran’s instructional methods in the following manner:

> During the various stages of education, from elementary school to junior high, from high school and even until university, today’s education means that the instructor makes four important points and the students takes these same four points and memorizes them, then later repeats this information on a test so that he or she can ultimately acquire a certificate (*madrek*).[^346]

Because of the importance of the *konkoor*, Iran like many other countries where only a long memory-based and multiple-choice examination is used to determine admission to university, has seen its schools turn into “factories for exam cramming.”[^347] Students end up learning material that has little relevance to the reality of their daily lives, future careers, or, in the most

ironic turn of all, the economic and political needs of the state. Instead, children are trained in
the art of getting by and in making do with the social context in which they must live.

Though I have strived to diminish the importance of structural constraints in my
discussion of the postrevolutionary school system (if only to bring some balance and perspective
to the discussion) it is undeniable that overcrowding has played a role in sustaining a pedagogy
of testing and rote memorization. The large influx of students that occurred following the
Revolution only gave the state more incentive to stick with a “traditional” system, since multiple
choice testing delivered considerable efficiencies to the school, both in terms of cost and as well
as fairness. Multiple-choice tests are a cheap and ostensibly more objective alternative to
qualitative assessment. The budgetary woes experienced in the 1980s continue to this day.

Figure 3-14, drawn from data provided by the Ministry of Education, shows a school system
struggling to pay for the day-to-day operations of schooling and incapable of investing in long-

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348 Writing about the school system in Egypt, Starrett makes the case that a pedagogy in which critical thinking skills
are valued over mechanistic learning is a privileged one:

> Obviously, understanding and application are superior to memorization and repetition when it
> comes to life skills. Contemporary educators laud critical thinking skills as more important than
> memorized facts, but despite a century and a half of this criticism, in contemporary Egypt the
culture of memorization has hardly changed. That is not because of the stultifying influence of
Islam, but because school overcrowding makes this sort of testing the most realistic form of
evaluation, and because of the understandable desire by educators to retain prestige and control
over students…

in the Middle East, eds. Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner

349 Iran’s Ministry of Education has for many years acknowledged the need to introduce constructivist and student-
centered methods of instruction to the classroom, and despite ongoing problems with budgeting and overcrowding
some steps have been taken in that direction. The last major revision of the elementary school Farsi textbooks, for
instance, use an exclusively constructivist pedagogy and even include a “free lesson” (dars-e azad) in which
teachers can design their own lesson plan, if only for one day. Interviews with administrators and educational
experts, however, indicate that there are limits to how far even this reform can go. Principals told me repeatedly that
it has been a great challenge to implement the textbooks because many teachers continued to cling to a “traditional”
(sonati) method of instruction. This suggests that partial structural reform in which only one component of
schooling is changed (textbooks) is not sufficient for bringing overall change. Comprehensive reform is required.

350 A major exception to this is at the elementary level, where schools now combine non-graded methods with
testing when assessing students. There are still major tests which primary students must pass in order to advance
grade level, but these are much less than they were in the past.
term items.
In a context where demand far outstrips supply, the state sees the konkoor as a device in the service of justice. Hossein Tavakoli, the executive director of Iran's Sanjesh organization that, under the auspices of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (Vezarat-e oloom, taqiqat, va fanovari) oversees all of the country's examinations, in a recent interview with Iran’s Press TV noted that the state has little recourse but to rely on this “scientific” method of separating the qualified from the unqualified:

Given the limited capacity of universities and institutes for higher education and the huge number of applicants, we found it necessary to administer an exam to pick out the most diligent and the most capable of them…Capacities would be fairly distributed in proportion with the number of applicants. The applicants enter a logical and acceptable scientific competition. And so those interested in higher education would manage to get into universities.351

Not everyone shares Tavakoli’s sanguine assessment of the benefits of the konkoor. As I

351 “The Education System of Iran,” Iran Today.
carried out my fieldwork in Iran, the subject of the big test, and of standardized testing in general, was a regular topic of discussion in the media and a source of considerable consternation.\textsuperscript{352} In the same Press TV special, Esfandiar Ekhtiyari, a member of the Iranian Parliament’s Education Commission, cautioned that the \textit{konkoor} was leading many of the country’s youth into a dead-end, with little actually learned skill to show for it:

What we are actually assessing is the students' theoretical knowledge that they remember from school. We are testing those things that from high school that he or she manages to write on a piece of paper in 3 or 4 hours. That's to me a dangerous trend.\textsuperscript{353}

The merits of the \textit{konkoor} aside, there is little question that the most direct effect that the \textit{konkoor} has on education is to tilt the structure of schooling towards preparation for the university exam. Testing and grading take over many students’ educational experience, but is the state getting children to internalize the state’s message? What effect, in other words, does pedagogy have on the fate of the IRI’s political project to produce ideal Islamic citizens?

The editors of a recent survey of religious instruction in the Middle East note that while most of the countries in their sample require religion classes, they also make it so that such classes are “irrelevant to students’ grade point average (GPA), to their graduation requirements, and to their chances for career or college entrance” (Saudi Arabia and Iran being the major exceptions).\textsuperscript{354} As a consequence, students and even teachers often belittle classes on Islam as

\textsuperscript{352} Others have reported the same. See Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “On the Right Track? Iran Edges Towards Education Reform,” \textit{Brookings Institute, Middle East Youth Initiative}, December 11, 2007, http://shababinclusion.org/content/blog/detail/526/ (last accessed April 16, 2010). The author writes: “For years I have watched child and education psychologists lament on Iranian television the negative effects of the big test on child development. We are told that teaching and learning for the test has led to undue emphasis on memorization at the expense of increasing student curiosity and creativity.”

trivial and unimportant, a not surprising outcome if we accept the claim that most people view schooling as a device for personal use and advancement.

The Iranian sociologist Mohammad Rezaei addresses the issue of testing and grading in his study of indoctrination in Iranian high schools. Planners, he writes, see grades as an important tool for the advancement of ideology in the classroom. Their expectation is that by creating incentives for students to read the material found in the textbooks and listen to their instructors during class, grading will expose children to the formal ideology of the state, ultimately leading to its internalization.  

In practice, however, the opposite tends to occur. By connecting content to performance, grades end up creating incentives for children to cast an instrumental eye on the material, learning only those parts that are necessary for advancement.  

Worse still, students will often seek out the most effective methods for getting good marks. These techniques almost never have anything to with actual studying:

…students will engage in a variety of tricks until they arrive at the easiest way of acquiring the desired grade. One method involves resisting and evading actual classroom instruction. Students try to convince their teachers to reveal key questions as well as their accompanying explanations from the material. This way the children can avoid reading or studying the entire textbook for that particular subject…They do this even though students can easily find “cheat” books in the market that contain complete sets of answers to practice exercises found in the textbooks.  

If neither of these capers works, then there are other, more drastic measures available to the student, including the bribing teachers outright or disruption. Either way, Rezaei emphasizes that students possesses considerable leverage over their instructors:

promotion each year. Iranian students spend about 13 percent of their schedule to Islamic subjects, with promotion and admission to university dependent on obtaining passing grades in religion courses.


356 As one principal told me during a personal interview, “Any child can score well on an exam [receiving a 15], but it does not guarantee that when that same child leaves the classroom and sees something wrong taking place, for instance a faucet turned on with the water running, that he will know to turn the water off.”

357 Rezaei, Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari, 177.
teachers have little ability to resist student pressure, especially when the students choose to be disruptive. Inattentive pupils are able to easily upend classroom discipline and through the resultant chaos compel the teacher to answer their questions [regarding what students will be tested on].358

Occasionally students and administrators work together, either directly or indirectly, to intimidate teachers into giving up the answers. According to Rezaei, administrators take the side of students “so that the classroom and the school might not suffer from the ‘plague of grades’” that Iran’s education system is famous for. By giving students what they most want, i.e., the grade or the means of getting the grade, school principals hope to negate or minimize its importance. The author goes on to say that even this isn’t the end of it, as “final grades given at the end of the year are always open to change…”359

These are, obviously, dubious courses of action and their effectiveness in preserving order on campus is questionable, to say nothing of the corrosive effect that it likely has on teacher morale. But none of this really matters. Principals know that high schools are ultimately judged by how well they prepare their students for the university entrance exam, not how well children have been trained to be loyal citizens. If superficial memorization is the best means to that end, or making common cause with children and their families will make the process of preparation easier, then so be it:

…In practice schools are an instrument for guiding and preparing students for entry into college. Although there is nothing in the formal documents and memoranda of the school system indicating as such, parents and school teachers alike know that the administration of the work that goes on within the school is closely tied to this objective [getting students into university]…The essences of today’s discourse of school success deals with instruction, grades, passing into the next grade at the end of the year, and passing the konkoor (ghabooli dar konkoor).360

Again, this is not a new development. There is considerable evidence that high schools have always been judged on the basis of how well they train students for the konkoor. Even

358 Rezaei, Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari, 177.
359 Rezaei, Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari, 177.
360 Rezaei, Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari, 166-167.
before the university degree became a prerequisite for employment, high schools derived their legitimacy by the university education that (hopefully) came after afterwards:

Right down to the end of the Shah’s reign, the high school certificate continued to be seen as a passport to university admission. The quality of secondary education was such that it did not point its graduates toward any other destination and failed to signal to weak students that they stood no chance of entering the university. Graduates of both regular and vocational high schools thought of higher education as the only “natural” path for them to proceed along and as the only proper “return” for the efforts they had invested in the diplom (emphasis added).  

Not even the best schools in Tehran, equipped with the most creative and up-to-date educational techniques could escape. Menashri relates the following anecdote: “A headmaster of one of the most prestigious high schools in Tehran told me in 1976 that [success in having graduates admitted to prestigious universities and popular departments] was the only yardstick by which students and parents evaluated his school.”

It is a sentiment that would be echoed over thirty years later in promotional materials put out by what is today one of Tehran’s most important high schools, Mofid. Mofid, acting on its prerogative as a privately-run school to determine its own pedagogy, recently moved its entire instructional approach away from the old, top-down methods still prevalent in Iranian schools, replacing it with a more modern, constructivist approach. They did so with one major caveat, seen at the end of the following passage found in their brochure:

Research Oriented Education

In the traditional approach the teacher conveys the content to the students in a unilateral relationship…In the modern notion of education teaching how to learn is more important than teaching a specific piece of information. On this basis, research-oriented education, group learning and critical thinking emerge spontaneously. When a unilateral relationship turns into a bilateral and interactive one, the teacher must come down from his “tribune” and play his role in a new situation, close to the students.

In this approach, information is conveyed via questions and challenge and the teacher’s role turns into a guide. The teacher should deepen the concepts and trigger the students’ active thinking. Of course this method requires a lot of effort on the side of the teacher but there is no

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361 Menashri, Education and the Making, 205-206.
362 Menashri, Education and the Making, 206.
363 Private schools in Iran, or non-state schools (gheir-e dolat), known previously as non-profit schools (gheir-e entefai), must use the same curriculum and textbooks as state-run schools. Leeway is granted to the private schools in staffing, instructional methods, and extra-curricular activities that the schools may want to add to the school day.
other way because the output of the old educational system doesn’t meet the needs of modern society. Mofid has tried to familiarize teachers with this approach through holding festivals, workshops, different competitions and also forming teaching departments.

On the other hand, considering parents’ apprehensions about their children’s success in the university entrance examination, Mofid tries to convince them that a correct system of education enables the students to perceive the concepts of the textbooks more correctly and become more successful even on this [questionable test] (emphasis added).

We see quite clearly in the preceding passage that all for all of the innovations that a school like Mofid is trying to bring to education, reform must in the final instance be justified on the basis of how well they prepare students for the *konkoor*. Put simply, the de facto purpose of formal education in Iran is to prepare students for the *konkoor* because the *konkoor* is the gateway to the university and social and economic success. Against the *konkoor*, little else matters.

In this regard it can be said that schooling in Iran serves its clientele customer service. The school system as it exists today, for all of its challenges and shortcomings, provides families with clear, consistent benchmarks and measures of success. These qualities, however mechanical, are perfectly acceptable for most Iranian families. The immediate concern of parents is that their sons and daughters receive the necessary training needed to pass the *konkoor*, even if such training is not necessarily the best “education.” Schools or teachers who do not provide this, do so at their own peril.

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365 Which is not to say that parents are actually fond of the *konkoor* or the effects that this high-stakes test has on their children and by extension their households. David Menashri, writing before the Revolution, has described the great stress felt by families regarding college admissions. This stress has only increased since the fall of the Shah. Similarly, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani observes that when he visits Iran in the months leading up to the *konkoor* (usually administered in June), the high level of tension and anxiety in families with kids in high school is palatable:

At the level of the family, the [konkoor] is much disliked because of the immense stress it generates for the entire family and the huge financial burden it places on parents to pay for private school and private tutors. For years I have watched child and educational psychologists lament on Iranian television the negative effects of the big test on child development…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Schooling</th>
<th>Total Students (Public &amp; Private)</th>
<th>Total Private School Students (Gheir-e entefai/Gheir-e dolati)</th>
<th>Percentage Private School Students (Gheir-e entefai/Gheir-e dolati)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>37,164</td>
<td>3,796</td>
<td>10.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>478,369</td>
<td>47,427</td>
<td>9.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>287,660</td>
<td>45,061</td>
<td>15.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Academic Branch</td>
<td>260,480</td>
<td>55,756</td>
<td>21.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Technical Branch</td>
<td>19,149</td>
<td>2,988</td>
<td>15.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Vocational Branch</td>
<td>18,481</td>
<td>2,466</td>
<td>13.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Kardanesh Branch</td>
<td>36,174</td>
<td>6,245</td>
<td>17.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-university</td>
<td>58,731</td>
<td>16,072</td>
<td>27.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,196,280</td>
<td>179,811</td>
<td>15.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Islamic Republic of Iran, Council of Private Schools.

The delivery of educational goods and services is big business in Iran, and a burgeoning private sector servicing the anxieties of families and students currently has seen considerable growth in recent years. Visitors to Tehran will see in many of the capital’s maidanha, or public

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366 Figures are for the city of Tehran, not the (much larger) province with the same name.
squares, adverts for various test prep companies and tutoring services. Private schools have also become quite popular amongst middle and upper-income families. Required to use the formal state curriculum, private schools sell themselves in the educational marketplace through a menu of extracurricular activities, the quality of their teaching staff (hired at the school’s discretion), and of course, academic success, particularly the number of graduates accepted to university.

Table 3-16 shows that the popularity of private education is variable, based on grade level. Here the private school market is an excellent arena for determining parents’ preferences by comparing enrollment rates across different levels of education. Readers will note that as students progress towards high school—specifically its Academic branch—and pre-university education, enrollment rates increase noticeably. The more than 27 percent enrollment rate in private pre-university schools is much greater than the 15 percent overall rate of private school enrollment, and six percentage points higher than the second most popular type of private school, the Academic branch of high school, the latter of which, of course, feeds directly into pre-university and postsecondary education. When given a choice, families choose to enroll their children in those schools that are most relevant to the goal of doing well enough on the konkoor to get through the “funnel” of admissions, as it were.

Going to High School in Order to Go to College: A Rising High School By The Numbers

We have seen in this chapter a discussion of the incentives for going to university (labor market and social acceptance), as well as a basic description of how the school system in its pedagogy and to a large extent its content is geared towards preparing students for the university

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367 Private schools or National Schools (Madreseh-ye melli) as they were known under the Shah, were slated to be abolished and absorbed into the state system before the Revolution, a move designed to “raise standards and to bring about stricter state control of what goes on within the schools. See Keith Watson, “The Shah’s White Revolution---Education and Reform in Iran,” *Comparative Education* 12, no. 1 (March 1976): 30. Officially banned following the Revolution, private schools were again allowed to operate beginning in 1988. Initially designated as “non-profit schools” (Madreseh-ye gheir-e entefai), they are now officially labeled as “non-state schools” (Madreseh-ye gheir-e dolati).
entrance exam. What remains is a demonstration that the intent to go to college exists among students, not just in high school but as early as elementary. Discerning the inner states of Iranian children and their parents is behavior is not an easy business, but using the annual data produced by the Ministry of Education we see discernible patterns in the preferences of Iranian society.368

High school enrollment has steadily grown in the postrevolutionary period as the school system funneled a great many of the Third Generation students upwards through the educational ranks. In 1996, with the first of the boomers already in high school almost half (47.8 percent) of Iran’s 14-17 years olds were enrolled in the country’s secondary schools, a vast improvement on the 17.4 percent coverage rate recorded at the time of the 1976 census. These numbers become more amazing when we look at the breakdown in coverage by gender (Table 3-17). In 1986 coverage of Iran’s high school age population was 16.2 percent and 20.5 percent for girls and boys, respectively. Ten years later, not only had the rates more than doubled for both groups (48.2 percent girls, 47.5 percent boys) but the girls’ rate was almost one percent more than the boys! Gross enrollment figures (counting all high school students, regardless of age, in relation to the overall population) show the upward trend.

| Table 3-17: Coverage Rates Ages 14-17 by Gender, 1986-1996 |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Coverage of High School Age Population (14-17) | 1986 | 1996 |
| Girls | 16.2 | 48.2 |
| Boys | 20.5 | 47.5 |

Source: Atles-e melli-ye iran.

368 The evidence presented, unless otherwise indicated, is drawn from Ministry of Education figures cited in the Atles-e melli-ye iran.
An excellent way to appreciate the overall scale of the rise of the high school during the 1990s is to compare enrollment rates at both ends of the educational ladder, elementary versus high school. I observed at the beginning of this chapter that most of the major gains in primary education had already been made prior to the Revolution. Between 1956-1976, elementary students in Iran had grown threefold. The next twenty years, 1976-1996, despite the influx of the largest population boom that the country had ever seen, the elementary school population improved at a lower rate, in 1996 increasing 1.9 times what it had been in 1976.

Although the rate of growth in absolute numbers diminished, from a 300 percent increase (1956-1976) to a “mere” 190 percent increase (1976-1996), improved coverage rates signal that the slowdown in growth occurred because most of Iran’s 6-10 year olds were already in elementary school. Of the country’s elementary school-age children (6-10), 71.6 percent were attending school primary school in 1976. This ratio reached 90.3 percent in 1996, with only a 4.4 percent difference between boys and girls (in favor the latter). Expansion slowed down because the authorities ran out of room to grow at the elementary level.

With the elementary school figures serving as a baseline for comparison, we can now measure the rate of expansion at the other end of schooling. During the Pahlavi period, the high school student population grew at a blazing speed between 1943-1963, improving 16-fold in that
twenty year period. Growth slowed down considerably during the next twenty years (1963-1983) as the number of secondary students enrolled improved by the still considerable rate of 120 percent, rising from 816,000 students in 1963 to 1,015,000 in 1983.

Then things really started to pick up speed. From 1983 to 1993, a period in which the first members of the 1970-1974 cohort began to reach their teenage years, Iran’s high school student population level grew 2.5 times. In just the three years separating 1993-1996, student population grew another 130 percent, going from 2,584,000 in 1993 to 3,480,000 students in 1996! All told, in a single twenty-year span covering 1976 to 1996, Iran’s high school population grew from 942,000 students to nearly 3.5 million students, an improvement of 370 percent. The female student population alone grew by 500 percent between 1976 and 1996, compared to a “tepid” 300 percent for male students.

Readers will recall that less than half (47.8 percent) of Iran’s high school-age population was in school in 1996. In comparison to the already-popular elementary level, high schools had considerable room left to grow, and it expanded fairly rapidly as they began to draw from untapped segments of Iranian society.

The authors of the *Atles-e melli-ye iran* see it differently, crediting the growth that occurred at the high school level in the 1990s to the “completion” (*kamel shodan*) of elementary school coverage (Figure 3-15). Their argument rests on the basis that it was only natural that as a larger proportion of Iran’s children attended primary school, the rolls of the lower and upper secondary levels would also swell.
This claim is only partially correct. A greater amount of students in the front end of the school system certainly improved the *likelihood* that the overall system would grow. More elementary school kids enrolled in the system does not, however, ensure that more high school students will appear on the rolls years later.

The best way to proceed is by asking: Why exactly are families sending their kids to elementary school in the first place? The fact that by 1996 most students were not dropping out of primary school early but continuing on at least partway to the later grades strongly suggest that high school and even university had become the objective for more and more students. In

Source: Figure producing using data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics in EdStats, October 2009.
other words, families wanted more from the school system than just the basic skills taught at the elementary level.

Children wanted to go on to high school, but not just any high school. As the track that provides the most direct line of access to university, the Nazari branch has emerged as the preferred choice of parents and students. Naturally, the big losers in all of this have been high school’s other branches, the more practice-oriented Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) and Kardanesh schools. Readers will recall from Chapter Two that a major goal of the New High School (Nezam-e jadid) that was introduced in the early 1990s was the channeling of students onto educational pathways that would best match their skills and interests. In the long run, this would be more satisfying, reduce the importance of the konkoor as a rite of passage, and improve the quality of Iran’s workforce.

At first glance, Table 3-19 would seem to indicate that the goals of the New High School state have been relatively successful. The chart shows us where many of the first group of Third Generation students to continue into upper secondary landed. The Nazari branch declines while the least "academic" of the branches, Kardanesh, improved. Vocational education, although it did not register significant gains during this period, sustained enrollment levels around 12-13 percent.
If we break down by enrollment rates by high school year, however, a very different picture begins to emerge. Peak enrollment occurs in the front end of high school and state success becomes more tenuous between the first and second years of high, and even more so between the first and third years (Figure 3-15, Figure 3-16, and Figure 3-17). Although upper secondary is not mandatory, students persist to at least the first year of high school, in which students learn from a shared curriculum before being assigned to one of three tracks (Nazari or Theoretical branch, Fanni herfei or Technical and Vocational Education, or Kardanesh “Work Knowledge,” basically a work-study program). Whereas it used to be that students dropped out between the second and third grades, today they are opting to leave at the end of the first year of high school, the point at which track assignments are made. The consistency in drop-off rates between the first and second year, measured by enrollment in each of the three branches, indicates that students don’t even bother with the other two branches---it’s either Nazari or nothing (Figure 3-18, Figure 3-19, and Figure 3-20).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Theoretical Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>As a % of All H.S. Students</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>As a % of All H.S. Students</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>As a % of All H.S. Students</th>
<th>Girl</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>As a % of All H.S. Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>998-999</td>
<td>968598</td>
<td>1773311</td>
<td>75.32</td>
<td>130098</td>
<td>306180</td>
<td>13.01</td>
<td>79304</td>
<td>274820</td>
<td>11.67</td>
<td>1178000</td>
<td>2354311</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>999-000</td>
<td>993380</td>
<td>1782361</td>
<td>72.08</td>
<td>159586</td>
<td>378740</td>
<td>15.32</td>
<td>94123</td>
<td>311648</td>
<td>12.60</td>
<td>1247089</td>
<td>2472749</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>000-001</td>
<td>978904</td>
<td>1709803</td>
<td>70.85</td>
<td>156582</td>
<td>375844</td>
<td>15.57</td>
<td>103469</td>
<td>327632</td>
<td>13.58</td>
<td>1238955</td>
<td>2413279</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>001-002</td>
<td>947464</td>
<td>1633270</td>
<td>68.75</td>
<td>168691</td>
<td>419071</td>
<td>17.64</td>
<td>102777</td>
<td>323338</td>
<td>13.61</td>
<td>1218932</td>
<td>2375679</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>002-003</td>
<td>875621</td>
<td>1493480</td>
<td>66.49</td>
<td>184100</td>
<td>448315</td>
<td>19.96</td>
<td>101506</td>
<td>304490</td>
<td>13.56</td>
<td>1161227</td>
<td>2246285</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the evidence, we can now draw a more nuanced conclusion than that offered by Table 3-19 alone. Rather than simply observing that more 14-year olds today are attending high school than ever before, it is more accurate to say that 14-year olds are choosing to not participate in vocational education. It is an inescapable fact that, all things being equal, Iranians make their choices in the academic market based on how well the school or major will getting into university. Thus the rise in Kardanesh numbers observed in Table 3-19 are easily explained by the fact that, facing considerable pressure by parents frustrated that their children had been denied the possibility of going on to university, the state relented and allowed Kardanesh students to sit for the konkoor. Similarly, TVE numbers went flat because it does not offer a path to the university. Vocational education continues to be a distant “last choice” for families, its enrollment rates stagnating because most see it as an economic and social dead end.
Figure 3-16: Enrollment Patterns in Boys' High School by Cohort, 2001-2004

Figure 3-17: Enrollment Patterns in Girls' High Schools by Cohort, 2001-2004

Figure 3-18: High School Students by Year (New High School), 1996-1997

Source: Reproduced from Atlas-e melli-ye iran, 41.
Undoubtedly, it is all a bit of déjà vu all over again for Iran’s state planners. Menashri relates how then Minister of Education, Dr. Farrokhroo Parsa, had expected that the reforms of 1971-1972 (in which a three-tier system replaced the previous two-tier structure) would draw 40 percent of Iran’s junior high students to vocational schools. Given that vocational education accounted for only 2.2 percent of total secondary school students in 1970-1971, Parsa’s stated goal was, to say the least, rather ambitious. The restructuring of the schools did produce some gains in vocational education, but these were only minor, registering 7.39 percent of secondary schools at vocational schools in 1976-1977, far less than the 40 percent originally hoped for (Table 3-20).

**Table 3-20: Comparison of Vocational School Population to Total High School Population, 1941-1977 (Selected Years)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Total High School Population</th>
<th>Total Vocational School Population</th>
<th>Vocational Students as a Percentage of Total High School Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941-1942</td>
<td>28,757</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948-1949</td>
<td>37,055</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953-1954</td>
<td>103,641</td>
<td>792</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-1957</td>
<td>145,113</td>
<td>1,545</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962-1963</td>
<td>309,855</td>
<td>9,117</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966-1967</td>
<td>443,751</td>
<td>15,224</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1971</td>
<td>1,056,857</td>
<td>23,325</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-1973</td>
<td>1,477,774</td>
<td>47,561</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974-1975</td>
<td>1,723,292</td>
<td>69,682</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-1977</td>
<td>2,442,391</td>
<td>180,412</td>
<td>7.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reproduced from Menashri, *Education and the Making*. 

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The blame for vocational education’s paltry growth, then and as now, lies not in poor instruction at the school site or inadequate equipment, though to varying degrees these have been factors holding back growth. The main reason that vocational education has not flourished despite state engineering of the school system to make the trades an attractive alternative to the university (1971 and 1991) lies mainly in public perceptions of what legitimately counts as “an education.” History shows that most Iranian families are not prepared to accept vocational education as an alternative to college. For example, Menashri reports that a classified survey of vocational school students by the Planning and Budget Organization in 1976 revealed that an incredible 75 percent of vocational school graduates wanted to go on to a university, with only 6.7 percent committed to working as technicians---despite the fact that the purpose of their training was to prepare them to enter technical fields and not college. These results led the authors of the survey to offer the following trenchant observation:

> The yearning for degree, which constitutes one of the main problems of the Iranian society today, has been conspicuous in this survey too. Although the graduates of...[vocational] schools did not stand much chance of being accepted at a university, and although many of them do not have the qualifications for academic study, yet 75 percent of them want to continue their studies at a university...If vocational education is doomed to become a copy of the regular high school system, i.e., to supply university candidates, why do we have to invest in vocational education sums that are [proportionally] several times higher than those invested in the regular high schools?369

Hedging one’s bets and vocational students keeping hope alive vis a viz university education is nothing new, as the recent history of the Kardanesh branch amply demonstrates. Without the possibility of entrance to university education, it is unlikely that the Kardanesh numbers would have grown as they did. Again, one need only look at the TVE enrollment rates---the sole branch excluded from university education---for proof of this.

Figure 3-19: Branch Assignment, 2001-2002 Cohort


Figure 3-20: Branch Assignment, 2002-2003 Cohort

No Work No School

The truth is that high school has always been a bit of the black sheep in Iran’s school system. Throughout most of the 20th century, planners had a difficult time figuring out what to do with this stage of formal education. They mostly treated secondary school as an educational way station, never the destination. Menashri writes that under the monarchy the struggle for budgetary priority was fought between respective advocates of elementary and higher education, usually at the expense of secondary school. He notes that, as its Persian name implied [madreseh-ye motavaseh] implied, high school was seen as no more than a link in the chain leading from elementary to higher education, “with no defined aim of its own---a means (vaseleh)” for securing a desk job in a state office (posht-e miz karkaran), gaining university
admission, or returning to the classroom to teach at the elementary school level.\textsuperscript{370}

As members of Third Generation entered into the school system’s upper grades, the career possibilities associated with the diplom had already winnowed considerably. And as post-secondary education became more prevalent, the excesses of the high schools---too many students studying too few subjects in the hopes of obtaining an ever-shrinking pool of jobs---were displaced to the country’s universities. Since the inception of the konkoor, in any given year no more than 11 percent of students have been able to gain admission to public university. Growth of private universities has in recent years raised admission rates, providing some relief to a system in which applicants far outnumber available spots, but if we measure “real” admission rates by the intense competition for coveted spots in Iran’s top universities, then little has changed:

Right now, due to the different higher education courses and the different ways to accept applicants, there's room for almost everybody who wants to pursue their studies. In other words, they can get into university whenever they decide to unless they want to study a specific major in a specific university. That's where competition becomes stiff.\textsuperscript{371}

Famously, mohandes ya pezeshk [engineer or physician] are the preferred career choices of Iranians. In order to become either, however, scoring in the top ten and even one percent on the konkoor is key.\textsuperscript{372}

\textsuperscript{370} Menashri, Education and the Making, 186-187. State planners in Iran for decades struggled with the chicken-and-egg dilemma of whether to concentrate resources on developing upper secondary and tertiary education first, or to produce quality elementary schools that would in time feed qualified students to the high schools. The former ran the risk that unprepared students, i.e., students who had not received a primary education, would not be able to survive the rigors of high school. Without high school graduates, however, elementary schools would likely lack qualified teachers. Only in the past 40 years or so, with students entering all levels of schooling in relatively high numbers, has the state been able to resolve this issue.

\textsuperscript{371} Interview with Hossein Tavakoli, "The Education System of Iran," Iran Today.

\textsuperscript{372} Sometimes even that is not enough. Salehi-Isfahani recounts “a sad phone conversation with a mother who wepted because her daughter had ended up in the 4000th place a few years ago (in the top 1%) because it took her out of engineering range.” Salehi-Isfahani, “Intense Competition for University Admission.” I myself witnessed a similar situation involving my cousin. Accepted into a public university but not for his preferred degree in engineering, he chose at the last second to retake the konkoor, at risk of doing the same or worse on the test. Though he was able to do well enough to be accepted with the major he wanted, my cousin effectively “lost a year” between examinations.
For the rest, the other 99 percent, the prospect of future success becomes uncertain. Credentialism’s rise (often confused with the rise of meritocracy) means that students have little choice but to pursue the brass ring of postsecondary education. *Above all get the paper*, but in the end it turns out that not all papers are created equal. Students accepted into Iran’s private and non-state universities learn in the most painful way that their education does not translate into the guarantee of employment. In fact, ironically, perhaps tragically if we consider the effort that goes into reaching college, the intersection of a university degree with youth is currently one of the strongest predictors of unemployment in Iran:

While male unemployment fell by one-third, the female rate increased, from 17.0% to 18.3%. Even more telling is the substantial gap between the unemployment rates of the young (under 30) and mature adults (over 30). For the latter, unemployment has all but disappeared. Economists consider unemployment rates of less than 4 percent, such as what we observe for the over 30 age group, very hard to eliminate (the natural rate). The unemployment rate for women aged 20-29 years actually *increased* during the Third Plan period [2000-2005]. Nearly one in four young men and out of five young women were unemployed in 2004.\(^\text{373}\)

For women education turns out to be a venture fraught with peril. Unlikely to be hired even with a university degree, certain not to be hired without it, most choose to at least take their chances by continuing their education.

On the other hand, the university degree has become more than just a credential. The *license* serves as a social badge, signaling to other members of society, above all to the families of potential mates, one’s worth and rank in the world. A university education may not guarantee a higher income or even a job; it is sure however to ensure one’s social status.

It may be the case that an irrational valorization of being educated (*tasil kardeh*) insulates what has become schooling’s crown jewel, the college degree, from criticism. Still, reality has a way of eroding even the most irrational of beliefs. If self-interest based on labor market signals

is in fact the primary reason that students pursue a high school and university education, as I have argued in this chapter, then it follows that secondary and postsecondary education will become less appealing as those same signals dim. Already, there are signs that young men’s participation and interest in obtaining a university education has peaked, and their declining numbers are likely to continue as they increasingly forgo college and seek their fortunes on their own.

Looking over the educational situation in Iran with an economist’s eye, Salehi-Isfahani writes that at the end of the day Iran’s economy receives very little return in terms of productivity from a rising education. Per capita growth in Iran has more to do with fluctuations in the price of crude oil than with improvements in the country’s educational levels:

> But if education is not contributing to higher output why is more education being produced? It would seem that individuals benefit from education (i.e., private returns to education are high) while the economy does not (social returns are low)…The most important wage premium, the one that drives incentives for formal schooling, is that of the university educated over high school. This premium increased from 23 percent in 1992 to 36 percent in 2001…Iran fits the bill better than most developing countries in having driven a wedge between private and social returns to education, that is, wages increase with education while productivity does not…(emphasis added)³⁷⁴

There is little reason to think that political and social returns on education are any different. Overwhelmingly, children learn in order to do well on a test, and ultimately, to do well on the konkoor. They do not learn in order to become ideal citizens. This is not to say that children are not exposed to the state’s message—far from it. But students very quickly learn the difference between what is necessary to get by (begzarand) and what is irrelevant to their own success. They become adept at positioning themselves for the grade and for the pass. Those who do not, or simply do not care, drop out. The upshot is a climate of learning based mostly on appearances (zaher), a phenomenon that I refer to as “memorization not internalization.” Memorization not

We Want to be Modern Too

In 1974 Ali Banuazizi of Boston College, in collaboration with a team of researchers from the University of Tehran, conducted a series of interviews with the Nava’i family, a poor migrant family then living in what was known as the “Professor Brown Squatter Settlement,” located near the University of Tehran (central Tehran). As part of the life histories prepared by the research team, Banuazizi spoke with Ni’mat and Muhammad Qasim Nava’i, brothers aged 21 years and 19 years, respectively. The two described to Banuazizi the constant harassment and ridicule that they encountered outside of the settlement because of their “poverty-stricken” appearance. Without a proper address or place of residence, the brothers were denied many of the capital’s resources, including access to the local library.

For Muhammad Qasim, who was still in high school, library cards were the least of his woes:

He claimed that he was not accepted by his classmates because of his poverty-stricken appearance. They had often pointed to his squatter life and teased him about it…Muhammad Qasim thought that some of the teachers discriminated against him and at times ridiculed him publicly. He explained that once he let his hair grow a bit longer since that was the popular style. One of the teachers told him in the classroom: “Do you too have to grow your hair? Your face looks more and more like a butcher’s.”…Last year when his father, after much effort, borrowed 158 tumans to pay his tuition, the school principal told him: “I don’t know why some of the southern residents of Tehran insist on placing their children in northern schools. Next year please put your son in a school in your neighborhood more suited for him.”

Over time the grinding reality of Muhammad Qasim’s poverty combined with the denigrations that he daily received at the hands of his classmates and teachers instilled in him a cramped and reflexively self-defensive view of the world. As he made clear to his interviewer, he felt trapped in his context.

375 Kazemi, Poverty and Revolution, 129.
Muhammad Qasim nonetheless nurtured the ambition of escaping through education from his circumstances. This in and of itself is not surprising—the idea that education can be a “silver bullet” against poverty is perhaps one of the most universally held beliefs in any country with a modern educational system. What makes Muhammad Qasim’s ambition so compelling, even heartbreaking, was the fact that his desire for an education paradoxically existed side-by-side with his personal conviction that even education’s promise could not deliver him from his fate:

The last time we saw the brothers we asked them what they wanted in the coming year and how they saw their future. Muhammad Qasim, the younger brother, answered: “I wish to get my twelfth-grade diploma. I like engineering most, but they say engineering is not for third-class members like us…Basically, what difference does it make what we want?”

Whatever one may think of the 1979 Revolution, for the millions of Muhammad Qasims living in Iran’s slums and villages during the ancien regime the rise of the Islamic Republic meant that they no longer had to see the circumstances of their existence as a fait accompli.

The regime’s attitude towards those Iranians “left behind,” a category that included not only young girls but more broadly most members of Iran’s rural and urban poor communities, can only be characterized as one of determined righteousness. Even if only instrumental, the expansion of public education into the country’s rural and urban areas has been one of the regime’s most successful and important achievements, especially when we consider that it came in combination with the delivery of desperately needed services such as public health clinics, roads, electricity, and clean water.

That the “dispossessed” (mustazafin), then the vast bulk of Iran’s unschooled population, took so quickly to schooling speaks both to the sympathy that many felt for the Revolution as well as to the broad appeal that modern goods universally have in Iran. Traditional families did

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376 Kazemi, Poverty and Revolution, 130.
not send their sons and daughters to school so that tradition might be reproduced; tradition was but the means of accessing modernity, of making it manageable.

It is therefore not surprising that when new families entered the school system many repeated many of the same, sometimes dysfunctional patterns of behavior as the families that came before them. If anything, the response of these newest members of Iran’s schooled society humanizes them, makes them what they are too often not thought of as—normal.377

Which brings us to the final turn in the story of how ordinary families came to use the Islamic school system for their own benefit. The provision of public goods became more than the sum of their constituent parts, as they represented for many in certain segments of Iranian society the first instance that leaders genuinely cared about their plight. Attention brought a measure of dignity and self-worth to these long-neglected groups. It is a feeling captured by the Persian expression *adam hesab shodand*, literally, “they were counted as humans”:

> Although the Shah’s reform program had given peasants land and thereby increased their wealth and income, coming from above, it did not provide them with a new identity to go with the land. The newly liberated *ra’iyat* class [sharecroppers, literally “subjects”] still knew who they were and did not consider themselves full citizens. Even the many landless rural residents who migrated to the cities in the 1970s could not easily shed their identity. While no longer *ra’iyats*, they remained *dehatis* (villagers), a pejorative term still used in Iran to refer to people with poor manners or crude taste.378

The socio-psychological impact that recognition by public authority had on these groups cannot be underestimated. Families that had previously been excluded from modern institutions or who

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377 To some extent, families like the Nava’i had already found ways of accessing modernity on their own. Asef Bayat has written eloquently of how adept Iran’s so-called marginal populations were at appropriating the fruits of modernity, including electricity and access to water, while avoiding its restrictions. See Bayat, *Street Politics*, 11 for a discussion of how the poor welcomed the liberating dimensions of modern goods so long as they could obtain such goods through informal means (i.e., outside of state surveillance). In general, the postrevolutionary project as it unfolded in Iran’s hinterlands and urban slums made such evasions unnecessary. Members of Iran’s subaltern population were willing to accept the rules and restrictions of modern life, seeing the tradeoff as worthwhile because of the benefits that came with full participation and a formal lifestyle, as opposed to the informality of squatting or rural existence. The possibility for participation grew daily as the state delivered goods and services that had long been neglected by the monarchy and today hardly a day passes in which the Ministry of Education does not announce the recent construction of new schools.

had chosen not to participate because they saw the monarchy as being hostile to their religion embraced postrevolutionary institutions not just for the modern “goodies” they offered. Beyond the utility of education there is the feeling that, under this regime, Iran’s subalterns were able to (finally) claim their place in society as *citizens*, Islamic or otherwise. Sending a son or daughter to school, praying for him or her to be accepted at a university, became a form of justice.

Today you can see…a great many discussions regarding the failure of the schools. There is not a day that passes in which one of the newspapers doesn’t run an article or essay about this failure…

Hojjat-al-Islam Zo’alem, Chief Designer for National Curriculum, “National Curriculum: First Step, not the Final Word” (Barnameh-ye darsi-ye melli: Gam-e aval, na harf-e akhar)

The general picture reflected by the Iranian school books does not bode well…the curriculum’s declared goal is to prepare the students for a global struggle against the West which bears alarming Messianic-like features to the point of self-destruction. This line of indoctrination…was designed and developed by the founder of Revolutionary Iran, the late Ayatollah Khomeini, and has been implemented since the very beginning of the new regime…

Arnon Groiss, “Iran’s Global War Curriculum”

Nearly three decades after the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy Iran’s Supreme Leader announced that the country’s school system was in need of “fundamental change.” Ali Khamanei condemned the existing curriculum as outmoded and stuck in the old “weststruck” and “anti-religious” ways of the previous regime. Calling the prior reform efforts of the postrevolutionary period as superficial, he declared that Iranians schools had failed to serve the needs of the Revolution and the people and they required change “from the roots.”

The Leader’s comments would set the state’s educational apparatus whirring into motion. Committees were set up, conferences and workshops planned, summary reports issued, all with the purpose of producing a national curriculum that would rectify the failings of the current system. Change, it was understood, would have to be dramatic. With a conservative administration in power, there appeared to be little limit to how far the winds would carry Khamenei’s mandate. It came as little surprise when in 2008 Education Minister Ali Ahmadi announced a scheme to segregate the textbooks by gender.

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Complete overhaul of the school system was not without precedent in postrevolutionary Iran. The fundamentals of schooling had already been changed numerous times in the years since the overthrow of the monarchy. These included: The immediate reforms to the Pahlavi textbooks following the Revolution (1979-1981); the establishment of the Headquarters for the Cultural Revolution (1980), later the permanent Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (1986); the Supreme Council for Fundamental Change in the School System (1985); the New System (*Nezam e jadid*) (high school only) (1990); and finally the complete revamping of the elementary textbooks in Farsi (2003). As for expert opinion on the matter, Iranian and American scholars working on schooling in Iran have for years agreed that the reforms made to Pahlavi era elementary textbooks came quickly and were thorough, marking a full break with the past.\footnote{Indeed, Western scholars would appear to have greater faith in the efficacy of Iranian textbooks than Iran’s current leadership. A pair of widely-covered reports, published in the U.S. at roughly the same time as Khamenei was delivering his edict, argued that Iran’s postrevolutionary curriculum successfully bred intolerance towards minorities and women and instilled “in the souls of school students, especially in the higher grades, feelings of hatred” towards non-Muslims in anticipation of an eschatological struggle between “the forces of Good and Evil which is to culminate in the reappearance of the…Hidden Imam. Saeed Paivandi, *Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran’s Textbooks* (Freedom House, 2008); Arnon Groiss, “Iranian Textbooks: Preparing Iran’s Children for Global Jihad” (Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP), 2007).}

What need was there, then, for change? What had Iran’s textbooks been teaching to that country’s youth for the past 30 years if not the political Islam and ideology of the state? What can the formal curriculum tell of us about the politics of the IRI? This essay uses content analysis of textbooks published after the 1979 Revolution to answer these questions. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a window into the educational system and Iran’s governing structure through the changing textbooks. The following research marks the first ever effort to analyze the development of textbook content within the *entire* postrevolutionary period (1979-2009).\footnote{There exists a study not yet available in English by the Japanese scholar Keiko Sakuri with a similar post-revolutionary scope. Keiko Sakurai, *Kakumei iran no kyokasho media: Isuramu to nashonarizumu no sokoku*} I argue that textbooks have been unstable across this time, in part reflecting the weak
institutionalization of the school system and ongoing factional politics between elites over the direction of the education ministry. The evidence will show that schooling in Iran, seen through the prism of its primary instrument, the textbook, is a highly politicized, contingent, and contested institution. This reinforces the basic argument made in the previous chapter that state efforts to inculcate ideology have been hampered by the inability of the state to consolidate around consistent and uncontested notions of one, what it means to be a citizen of the Islamic Republic, and two, what the best means of achieving the educational goals of the state are.

Current scholarship treats the postrevolutionary textbook regime as static and consistent, with the changes made in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution as complete, coherent, and final—in effect transforming the curriculum and the textbooks into static and “sacred” objects. My goal is to reveal the profanity, so speak, of the books by excavating the layered contradictions and inconsistencies found within and across subject matters, and by documenting the instability of the material across time. What I am asking the reader to do here and throughout my dissertation is to consider that politics did not end with the 1979 Revolution, and that the ongoing changes to textbooks in the postrevolutionary period are not “updates” to a system but markers and indicators of politics.

In the preface of this dissertation I stated that I seek to understand why it is that the Iranian educational system has struggled to inculcate feelings of loyalty to the current regime. To get at the question of “why?” I look at the “what” and “how” of schooling: I ask what is taught to children and how teachers and textbooks deliver the material to the students in the classroom. Drawing on original research carried out during 2008-2009 in the archives of the Iranian Ministry of Education’s Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP), I

trace the social, religious, cultural, and political messages found in postrevolutionary elementary Farsi textbooks (Grades 1-3) over the past 30 years. More than just primers, these textbooks serve as the foundation of the state's project to produce the New Islamic Citizen by providing young students with their first exposure to the ideology of the Revolution and the official values of the Islamic Republic. Particularly in the first years of the postrevolutionary period, student attendance dropped considerably after elementary school due to limited mandatory attendance rules, as well rural and poor children leaving school to go to work. As a consequence, state planners have paid considerable attention to elementary textbooks so as to not lose the opportunity to influence this “captive audience.” Farsi primers and textbooks in general give us a good idea of the social and political outcomes that state leaders want, especially in a country such as Iran where the process of textbook compilation remains centralized and relatively insulated from various market and interest group pressures.  

Textbooks matter because they contain what Mandana E. Limbert refers to as official “wish images,” idealized projections manufactured by elites of the perfect (and obedient) society against which daily life can be measured and benchmarked. As I noted earlier, content analyses of such images presume a level of coherence and consistency within particular subjects as well as across the curriculum. Scholars tend to treat schoolbooks as stable and relatively fixed objects, primarily because they limit the scope of their research to a narrow and well-defined timeframe of publication.

382 I say relatively, as the past decade has seen a marked increase in the influence of private companies geared towards the growing reliance on standardized testing in schools, as well as the organized lobbying of religious groups to change the textbooks.  
I instead loosen the temporal brackets that normally hold content analyses together, and within this expanded analytical space I splice together Limbert’s “wish images” from the several iterations of Farsi primers found across the postrevolutionary period. I then put the images into motion, running the reel on textbook lessons from 1979 to the present day. By spooling the film forwards and backwards, there emerge contradictions and inconsistencies that are otherwise hidden to the viewer when the curriculum is seen in stills and snapshots. What we discover from watching the movie on education in Iran, as it were, is that the ideal “Iranian-Islamic” society found inside of the textbooks is neither perfect nor permanent, nor is there such thing as “a” curriculum. Postrevolutionary textbooks pass through at least four distinct phases, including the late Islamicization of primers during the latter part of the 1980s, nearly eight years after the Revolution.\footnote{I found instability and variance in other. Elementary School Social Studies and High School Iranian History. Variability of Social Studies curriculum was not nearly as dramatic as the History text. Taught to all Iranian schoolchildren, regardless of course of study or type of school, the History textbook curriculum shows clear signs as a site of elite struggle.}

Ultimately, my research indicates that internal struggles to consolidate the Revolution as well as to institutionalize the postrevolutionary Ministry of Education continued well after 1979, and that elite disputes over basic matters of form and content---for instance whether or not books ought be separated by gender---continue to this day. These ongoing and unresolved elite-level disputes contribute to the manufacture of contradictions within the material, which in turn provide potential openings not only for ordinary citizens (students and parents) but also agents of the state (teachers and principals) to criticize, appropriate, and develop personal subjectivities in opposition to the official curriculum.\footnote{For an example of the problem of having “many hands” fighting for control of the state’s educational apparatus, see Sam Kaplan, \textit{The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in post-1980 Turkey} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). Kaplan’s finds that lobbying by the military, business community, and clerical leadership undermines efforts to produce a cohesive Turkish identity through schooling.} I conclude that future research on textbooks needs to be
less concerned with the impact that textbook content has on inner states and more focused on textbooks as a means of understanding the limitations and possibilities of formal discourse. At best, textbooks are official place-markers that signal to the public and elites what the content of the national conversation---politics---is to be about. The effects of textbooks may be uncertain, but textbooks give us some idea of the categories in which protest and contestation are likely to occur.

A Brief Look at the Literature on Postrevolutionary Schooling

Khamenei was in a sense correct. Iran’s school system is in fact “Western,” its design and basic structure based on the French model of schooling, modified and articulated to the Iranian context. And although Iran’s revolutionaries made much of the Shah’s capitulations to the West and to America in particular, they kept the educational infrastructure that he and his father erected intact following the Revolution. Notably, no attempt was made by the clerical class to restore the traditional system of education, the *maktab*, following the triumph of the Revolution. The utility of modern schooling far outweighed romantic and ideologically driven calls for a “return to the past.” Iran’s new leaders came into power with a modernizing agenda as well as a plan to consolidate “the revolution in values.” Both required a workforce and populace that only a modern school system could deliver.

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The incorporation of these groups’ different agendas results in the layering of contradictions in the curriculum. Students clasp onto these contradictions to develop subjectivities different from the formal goals and vision of the state. For an excellent overview of how research on schooling in Iran has moved from top-down approaches to approaches concerned with understanding how modern schooling has been adapted, and changed, by the Iranian context, see Mikiya Koyagi, “Modern Education in Iran During the Qajar and Pahlavi Periods,” *History Compass* 7, no. 1 (2009): 107-118. H. E. Chehabi reminds us that the constant claim of the founders of the Islamic Republic is that “Islam is not outdated, that—if properly understood—it has all the answers to the problems of the contemporary world…” H. E. Chehabi, “Religion and Politics in Iran: How Theocratic is the Islamic Republic?” *Daedalus* 120, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 69-91.
The adoption of the French educational model meant that textbooks would play an outsized role in Iran’s school system. Since the early 1960s, every school year every student in Iran uses the same set of textbooks, following roughly the same “pacing” chart as their graded peers across the country. Grades and advancement are distributed on the basis of students’ performance on a regular battery of standardized tests drawn directly from textbook content.

Not surprisingly, textbooks also loom large in the literature on schooling in postrevolutionary Iran. Content analysis of textbooks offers scholars an alluring means of “unlocking” the aims of the Islamic Republic’s school system as textbooks are, especially in the public school system, the curriculum. Oddly, perhaps because of limited access, little research existed on postrevolutionary textbooks until the publication in 1989 of Golnar Mehran’s “Socialization of Schoolchildren in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” In this article drawn from her doctoral thesis, Mehran examines textbooks as a way to “analyze the Islamic Republic’s efforts to create a new generation of committed and doctrinaire Muslims through the study of socialization in the schools.” She draws from the content of textbooks used during the 1987-1988 school year, justifying her study’s temporal scope by arguing that major changes have not been made to textbooks since their complete rewriting in 1981-1982. The postrevolutionary program of socialization found inside the texts, according to Mehran, is fully thought out and delivers a basic message in the early grades that gradually becomes more complex as students

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388 Extracurricular activities are included in the schedules of both public and private schools in Iran, though the latter put much more stock. Both public and private schools use the same curriculum.
391 Many scholars have cited Mehran’s claim without question. This is problematic due to the fact that textbooks have in fact gone through several important revisions during the period leading up to the 1986-1987 school year. I describe these changes in detail later in this dissertation.
move up in grade. The goal is to produce “The New Islamic Person,” whose qualities she sums up in the following:

The New Islamic Person is religious, politically aware and involved, proud of his/her heritage, ready for self-sacrifice for Islam and the revolution, respectful and obedient to his/her country’s religious and political leaders. He/she hates the prerevolutionary regime, rejects any form of dependence on the West, mistrusts the non-Muslim world and is highly critical of Western ways, and sympathizes with all oppressed peoples, especially Muslims.\(^{392}\)

Although the actual “effects” of textbooks on children lies outside of the scope of her study, Mehran speculates that the presence of socializing agents other than the school in the lives of children, in particular the family, results in textbook materials having different effects across the student population (e.g., the urban and rural poor are more apt to internalize the state’s message than the “Westernized” residents of North Tehran). As so often happens in discussions and research on political Islam in Iran and elsewhere, socioeconomic status trumps all other causal variables, including even formal schooling.\(^{393}\)

Focusing on the Differences

Mehran’s work greatly influenced the emerging literature on textbooks in postrevolutionary Iran, and her findings would provide the basic---and mostly unquestioned---outlines of the aims and goals of postrevolutionary schooling in Iran for future researchers.\(^{394}\)

Academics working in the subsequent wave of research, or what I label the “scholarship of

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\(^{392}\) Mehran, “Socialization of Schoolchildren,” 49.

\(^{393}\) Asef Bayat is positively scathing on this point. He argues against the tendency to assume a functional, structural, and even essential affinity between the poor and political Islam. “Lacking adequate empirical backing, they are largely theoretical constructs based upon either an ideology or a deduction whereby the economic and social position of a group a priori determines its political behavior.” Bayat, Street Politics, 38.

\(^{394}\) See Mojgan Majdzadeh Tabatabaei’s 2006 dissertation for a recent example. Mojgan Majdzadeh Tabatabaei, “National Identity and Civic Values in the Pre-Revolution and Post-Revolution English as a Foreign Language Textbooks in Iran,” PhD, Loyola University Chicago, 2006. To be fair, Mehran’s later writings do address the political and social development of textbooks, or more accurately, the lack of change in the curriculum. In a piece written during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, Mehran argues that despite Khatami’s reforms and a general moderation of the political and social spheres in Iran, Iranian textbooks remained highly ideological and little changed. Thus emerged an important contradiction between the message of the Khatami government and the lessons being taught by the country’s schools. See Golnar Mehran, “Khatami, Political Reform and Education in Iran,” Comparative Education 39, no. 3 (August 2003): 311-330.
dissonance,” seek to extend Mehran’s understanding of the postrevolutionary project through comparative analyses of textbooks from the pre- and postrevolutionary periods.

For these authors, 1979 is an insuperable fault line. Changes to the textbooks following the Revolution are considered to be complete, coherent, and final. A curriculum that was Western-oriented and apathetic to religion became Islamicized after the Revolution, then nothing more. This allowed for researchers to engage in a scholarship of sharp contrasts. We see the “modernizing, secular, nationalist” agenda of the monarchy set against the “Islamist, universalist, pan-Islamic” program of the IRI, with research designs built around the careful comparison of themes, pictures, and stories, typically framed by antinomies such as “secularism versus religiousness,” “monarchism versus popular revolution,” “nation versus religion,” “Persian versus Islam,” among others.395

The “dissonance” literature tends to paint a portrait of a postrevolutionary curriculum that is almost exclusively about ideology. The differences with the Pahlavi system are politicized as a rejection of the ancien régime, and as a consequence this portion of the literature tends not to consider or take seriously the considerable number of mundane and non-political lessons found in postrevolutionary textbooks.396 Lessons are assumed to be consistent within each subject and across the curriculum, locking together to produce a coherent, complete, program of


396 Mehran writes that “education in the Islamic Republic is openly and avowedly political and every topic is used for consciously political ends.” Mehran, “Socialization of Schoolchildren,” 49. While the openly ideological quality of the school system is beyond question, particularly in the period under examination by the first wave of scholarship on schooling, not every topic served political ends. Benign lessons on washing hands or showing compassion to humans and even animals have always existed in the texts. These became more prominent as the IRI entered the 1990s.
indoctrination, thereby “reiterating the conventional wisdom of Iran’s monolithic ‘return to Islam.’” Authors make little effort to separate grades or subject matter, eliding content from different grades and subject matter together.

If notions of what comprises the Good Muslim are presented as unproblematic, so too are ideas of what she is not. For researchers working in the “dissonance” framework, state planners are bent on extricating all things Pahlavi from the curriculum, not least of which is any celebration of an Iranian identity that is not subordinate to the Islamic identity of the country. Analytical blinders such as these prevent scholars from seeing the tensions that result from a curriculum focused on teaching children about the uniquely Iranian nation and the ummat, or community of believers.

**Correspondence With the Past**

In recent years scholars have begun to look more skeptically at the sloganeering and official pronouncements of Iran’s educational planners. Comprising a “scholarship of correspondence,” these researchers are less concerned with chasing down postrevolutionary differences with the Pahlavi curriculum than they are with finding continuities across the two periods. These scholars tend to look at the practical challenges and conflicts that emerge from a modernizing curriculum that is also geared towards preserving and reproducing a uniform national identity.

Haggay Ram uses an analytical comparative perspective of pre- and postrevolutionary education to explore the fate of the Pahlavi nationalist narrative after the 1979 Revolution.

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398 A typical example of this is Hamid Dabashi’s study of elementary textbooks (many of which were woefully outdated at press time) in Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York, New York University Press, 1999).
Despite what he deems “the revolutionary and Islamic-universalist hyperbole” of the IRI, Ram finds that political Islam remains within the confines of an Iranian nationalism, ironically derived from the Pahlavi dynasty’s “conception of the ‘immemorial Iranian nation’ (or the ‘Aryan hypothesis’) as it was first articulated by European scholars of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”

Not only do the nationalist imaginings of the Pahlavi era persist into the Islamic age, Islamic motifs take on distinctly “Iranian” flavorings. Ram demonstrates that Iran’s revolutionaries have built their regime on the models and assumptions of nation state politics even as they condemn those models and assumptions as Western impositions designed to undermine the unity of the ummat.

Working in a similar vein, Patricia J. Higgins and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari find that textbook content in the Pahlavi and IRI eras regularly run counter to the official policies of each regime. They show, for instance, that the traditional depiction of women as stay-at-home mothers and caretakers has changed little since the Revolution. The empirical data suggests that tradition and patriarchy in Iran are transitive phenomena. There is no significant difference with respect to women’s occupations before or after 1979, despite the Pahlavi regime’s reputation as a progressive force for gender equality in the Middle Eastern.

Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari also indicate that although the monarchy downplayed the importance of Islam in national life, religion plays an important role in both periods. Indeed, ironically the Pahlavi textbooks appealed to a more universal vision of Islam than that found in the manuscripts of their successors. None of the religious lessons found in the Pahlavi primers focus exclusively on Shiite figures or events, whereas one-third of the lessons on religious topics

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400 This applies to the reception as well as production. Themes that are not strictly Iranian, as with the case of Palestine, is understood by many Iranians to be as much about the need for the Iranian regime to stay in power as it is for the liberation of the Palestinian people.
in the IRI are sectarian in nature. For all of their emphasis on pan-Islamism, postrevolutionary textbooks reveal that IRI planners also participate in what is a *nationalist* project of identity formation based on the uniquely Shiite character of Iran.

The new line of research represented by the two works cited above supports the view that the basic purpose of schooling in Iran today is the same as it was when Reza Pahlavi first set it up, i.e., the training of a capable workforce as well as the transmission of a set of values, ideas, and practices that would “dissolve…divisions between state and society.” Whether it is the *ummat* or Iran, the Pahlavi monarchy or the IRI, modern state planners face a shared challenge of managing difference and diversity. Textbooks offer an important means of producing a uniform national identity. The task is not so much their elimination, an unlikely solution in a country with the array of ethnic and linguistic groups, but rather of depoliticizing difference through the “organization of diversity.”

Finally, both of the above articles point out that the *experience* of schooling changes little with the swapping of regimes in 1979. School remains a place where kids go and learn from instructors using traditional, teacher-centered methods of dictation and rote memorization. Like the persistence of patriarchal content across regimes, the continuity of such a pedagogical approach across time reveals deep-seated attitudes about what constitutes teaching and learning, and especially the role of authority in the classroom and social life. These non-ideological components of schooling likely have more effect, and are more reflective of the world “beyond the school” than the politics found inside of textbooks.

While the two works discussed above reflect new approaches to understanding schooling in Iran, this still-growing corner of the literature comes up short. Though they rightly downplay the differences with the purpose of schooling in the Pahlavi period, scholars do not highlight
existing contradictions and inconsistencies, i.e., internal differences, within the texts. And like their counterparts in the earlier wave of research, authors working in the “correspondence literature” base their analyses on a narrow historical window of textbook production.

Why does the current content of textbooks compel Khamanei to declare that change is needed? We have no way of accurately answering that question with the literature as it currently exists in “snapshot” form. In the following sections, I will demonstrate that the conventional wisdom on postrevolutionary textbooks both underestimates the continuity with the Pahlavi period even as it overestimates the coherence and finality of the changes made in the postrevolutionary era.

Towards a New Understanding of Textbooks

I began my work in the archives over two years ago with the assumption that I would find fissures in the façade of the ideological state. History strongly suggested that I would find competing the state’s message, as the Ministry of Education has for many years been a heated site of conflict between dueling factions. My own fieldwork had produced the picture of a ministry that was unstable and with little institutional memory. More than one individual had described the educational system to me as one in which there was a structure, but no system, i.e., a set of burdensome rules and regulations with no continuity of policy and leadership across time.

With this as my context, I set out to inductively trace the themes and stories found inside of the textbooks. Again, my goals are to “desacralize” the textbooks as static and permanent objects set off from pre-revolutionary history and immune to the machinations of contemporary politics. As I argued in the previous chapter, by setting aside the obvious differences in schooling found across the pre- and postrevolutionary eras and focusing instead on comparisons
within the postrevolutionary period, we can make inroads into identifying and understanding the politics of schooling in the IRI. The evidence demonstrates that the concept of an Islamicized school system is a highly politicized and charged topic, and the source of intense contestation between postrevolutionary elites and state leaders.

Politics in schooling undermines coherency. I self-consciously engaged in a search for towering contradictions as well as major consistencies with the past, but let the themes and historical layering of the curriculum emerge through the research. In terms of periodization, the textbooks sorted out into roughly four distinct eras of development:

- **1978-1985 (1357-1364), The Initial Narrative:** Consists of a blend of leftist and religious themes. Depictions of Revolutionary leaders, including Khomeini, are limited. An image of Iranian life and society as being humble and primarily rural.

- **1986-1996 (1365-1375), Peak Islamicization:** The textbooks increasingly and more stridently contain messages of a militant political Islam. Previously blank back covers show children rallying to defend the revolution. Men and women are drawn much more modestly. Women donned in full, black chadors replace earlier illustrations of females dressed in headscarves or modest dress tops (at times women are completely replaced by men). At the same time and paradoxically, Islam is more frequently used instrumentally to legitimize non-religious, modern concepts such as nationalism. The rise of a “cult of personality” around Khomeini and his successor Khamenei emerge during these years, particularly in the front matter of textbooks.

- **1997-2002 (1376-1381), From Revolution to Governance:** A transition period marking the shift away from the militancy of the preceding periods and the major
reforms of 2003. Many of the most ideologically charged lessons are removed from the texts, especially in the Second Grade primer.

- **2003-Present (1382-Present), Moderation and Normalization:** Textbooks are completely revamped, with very little resemblance to earlier periods. Multiple styles of artwork are used, alongside a “whole language” and student-centered pedagogy. Books are clearly made more “rational,” and are now organized by thematic units and lesson plans that are more consistent across grade levels. The idiosyncrasies of each grade are greatly diminished. Islam as a way of life is normalized, and political themes are greatly diminished.

What we see from this chronology and periodization is that despite conventional wisdom that postrevolutionary textbooks are in the main “about religion,” religion follows an unexpected arc, initially entering the material in fits and starts, becoming increasingly militant until it peaks in the late 1980s and early 1990s, then made routine in the textbooks in their present form.

The most dramatic changes occur in the post-2003 period. Of the four periods, the first three (1978-2002) stand together in terms of the basic structure, look, and pedagogy of the texts. While there are important changes during this time, the post-2003 reforms are such a substantial break from past versions visually, pedagogically, and substantively, as to merit a separate treatment.

As I progressed in my archival work, distinct themes and sub-themes began to emerge, which I use to organize the exposition of my survey work. I did not start the analysis with pre-existing categories. The categories listed below are mine and I should note that this categorization, like any attempt at organizing large amounts of written data, should not be taken as the final word. The themes that I use are neither exhaustive nor do they in any way neatly
capture the content. There is some overlap across groupings (nationalism and modernization, for example) and I make note in my narrative where such overlaps require the consolidation of themes.

- Front Matter
- The Imagined Iran
- Modernization
- Islam
- Nationalism
- Norooz, or The Persian New Year
- The Revolution and The Islamic Republic

The organization of my analytic narrative is by textbooks, followed by the above themes analyzed in chronological order. While there were a number of ways that I could have presented my findings, I chose this style in order to preserve the distinct personality of each graded textbook. My research reveals that each grade possesses its own unique identity and purpose, as well as pattern of change and development. Studying the textbooks separately by grade provides a middle-range focus for understanding the overall curriculum, in other words how the politics of each grade compares and contrasts with each other. Within this middle-range level of analysis I apply a micro focus on individual lessons, exploring how stories are constantly changing due to important additions and edits of the text.

I shift my structure of analysis when looking at the post-2003 textbooks. While the new books repeat many of the earlier religious, social, and political lessons, changes are comprehensive and include new themes and chapter. The goal is to demonstrate how different

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401 By this I mean the overall character or “personality” of the textbook, each grade’s idiosyncrasies. This is less a factor in the post-2003 era.
the textbooks being used today in the classroom are from their predecessors, a comparison that will give the reader the perspective necessary for understanding the development of the curriculum over the past 30 years, highlights of which I briefly detail below.

**Pedagogy:** In terms of format and structure, the three primers under study here until the early 2000s are characterized by a pedagogy rooted in traditional methods of rote memorization and dictation, strictly directed by the instructor who in turn is bound by the format of the textbook. Following the reforms of 2003, the textbooks adopt a whole language approach, with limited gestures towards allowing for increasing the creativity of teachers and students.\(^{402}\) There is for the first time a “free lesson” at the end of the textbooks so that teachers. The old didactic system of question-and-answer based on rote memorization is set aside for a more “constructivist” approach to teaching, one in which student and teacher work together to build an education.\(^{403}\) The post-2003 Grades 1-3 textbooks are gorgeous in their external and internal design. There is a greater professionalism and order to the materials, and each grade comes with a clearly delineated series of themes and sections. Where the previous texts used a handful of artistic styles, the current curriculum draws upon a wide range of illustrative techniques, from graphic design to more traditional oil and watercolor paintings.

**Islamicization Delayed:** Surprises were to be expected in the research, but none was as impressive as the delayed “arc of Islamicization.” Radicalization of the texts occurs some eight years after the Revolution, with the apotheosis of Islamist fervor coming sometime near the end of Khomeini’s life and the termination of the Iran-Iraq War and not, as I suspected when I began

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\(^{402}\) One of the more entrenched, and to the Ministry of Education’s credit, acknowledged challenges for Iran’s school system is the recognition that teachers need more opportunities for creativity in the classroom. Testing and a highly centralized educational system are structural impediments to reaching this goal.

\(^{403}\) The success and effectiveness of this approach remains uncertain. Schooling in Iran is increasingly adopting the instruments of benchmarking and standardized testing, thus undermining the more open-ended pedagogy found inside of the textbooks. Author interviews in Iran also suggested that despite revisions to the textbooks, many teachers continue to teach using “traditional” methods.
my research, in the years immediately following the Revolution. This supports my earlier argument that, particularly in the first decade of the IRI’s existence, internal elite differences combined with material challenges to limit the effectiveness of its Ministry of Education.\textsuperscript{404}

The key tension throughout all of the periods and across the curriculum is, interestingly enough, what to do with Islam. There is a temptation to use Islam for purposes other than religion. The anthropologist Brian Street describes this paradox:

As Muslims would themselves say, the Koran is the Word of God and so there is no need for interpretation…However, there is more the transmission of knowledge in Islam than this, as indeed there is to all religions of the Book. As Parry (1982) says, in describing similar views of the Hindu tradition, the authority and apparent fixity of the written tradition in such religions is the very characteristic that provides scope for individual mediators to offer their own interpretation as the authoritative one…\textsuperscript{405}

This I think describes well the struggle that state planners have with the role of Islam. On the one hand there is exposition of Islam as a core element of national identity. On the other hand, we see Islam being inserted in different ways to justify less-than-sacred policies that the state sees as necessary and vital. Thus, state planners use stories and figures from the Koran and hadiths to justify modern phenomena of nationalism and science, as well as less more mundane and non-ideological matters such as hygiene, compassion, and being polite. What we get by looking at the books over time is a sense of how this habit steadily layers contradictions into the texts.

\textbf{From the First, Iran:} Like Marashi, I reject the notion that nationalism and commitments to a secular, pre-Islamic society are inseparable.\textsuperscript{406} Planners employ Islam to


\textsuperscript{405} Brian Street, \textit{Literacy in Theory and Practice} (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984).

\textsuperscript{406} The following is an example typical of the tendency to by scholars to set nationalism against religion as rival sources of authority, the two incompatible:
constitute the cultural nation, despite official pronouncements against nationalism as a “Western imposition.” The evidence from the textbooks supports this position. Nationalism plays a major role in the curriculum, and does so from the very beginning of the IRI.

This is not to say that pan-Islamism or a worldwide “brotherhood of Muslims” is not a state goal. The problem is that the IRI wants both. In the early postrevolutionary period, there is a great uncertainty as to whether national identity is to be rooted in the universalism of a pan-Islamic revolution, or an Islamic-Iranian identity that combines both Iran’s Shiite and pre-Islamic pasts. Unity is a major goal the IRI but the curriculum oscillates between calling for the unity of all Muslims, Sunni and Shiite, and the unity of the Iranian people. As we’ll see, the lessons dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli issue capture this tension. The cause of Palestine provides a model and inspiration for global action against injustice, especially against the injustices inflicted on “brother Muslims.” At the same time, textbook authors use this issue as a way to promote love and defense of the Iranian homeland amongst students by vividly illustrating to their readers what happens when a nation loses its country to occupation or war.

City and Country: Gregory Starrett writes that the twin goals of cultural conservation and cultural innovation are endemic to many of the national curriculums found in the Middle East. The difficulties of reconciling cultural conservation with the imperative of cultural innovation invariably produce irreconcilable tensions within and across the curriculum. State...
leaders seek to preserve an “authentic” self, but at the same time aim to foster the requisite creativity and independence of thought needed for development and technological advancement. They do so without realizing that one often cannot be had with the other. 407

Throughout the Grades 1-3 Farsi textbooks, lessons on the importance and promise of modernization are in tension with the state’s valorization of rural life. State planners struggle with how to preserve Iran’s identity as a faithful and rural-based society, uncorrupted by the material temptations of modernity, while at the same time fostering an educated and urbanized society. How can Iran produce factories and laboratories while preserving the pristine and traditional Iran? State planners try to have both, with the outcome a curriculum hobbled by a deep ambivalence towards modernization and the inevitable changes that accompany industrial growth.

Norooz: My expectation coming into the research was that the Persian New Year would be either eliminated or ignored, especially in the early years of the IRI when presumably revolutionary passions would be greatest. As a thousands year old tradition with origins in Iran’s pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian past, Norooz presents a thorny challenge for a state intent on establishing Islam as the core element of Iranian identity. The textbooks reveal a tactic of appropriation and minimization. Rather than trying to end this ancient celebration, the postrevolutionary state seeks to contain its importance, typically by tying it directly to revolutionary events. Over time, these ties have disappeared, leaving the holiday in the latest set of textbooks to be a stand-alone tradition.

The Incredible Shrinking Khomeini: As the epigram by Arnon Groiss illustrates, it is not unusual for observers, inside or outside of Iran, to conflate the historical figure of Khomeini with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The evidence from the textbooks shows that Khomeini becomes the embodiment of Iran in the postrevolutionary period, his reputation and historical position built over time. This correspondence reaches its apex in the late 1980s, after which time the IRI’s founder fades to a memory. In the current editions of the textbooks, Khomeini-as-revolutionary has been replaced by the representation of Khomeini as a kindly grandfather.408

First Grade Farsi

Front Matter
The 1979-1980 edition of the first grade primer, hastily assembled in the short period between the fall of the monarchy in February and the start of school in September, begins with an essay for the adults. Spread across two pages and suffused with leftist themes, the sprawling introduction makes no reference to the “Islamic” character of the revolution or any intent to make “good Muslims” through education. The text’s authors instead cast schooling as a

408 This will not surprise those who have spent any time in Iran in recent years. Khomeini appears in state media, but not constantly and at times, infrequently. His ubiquity on walls is matched by his absence. His absence becomes apparent during those periods, particularly during the annual celebrations of the Revolution’s anniversary and Khomeini’s passing in the summer of 1989.
bulwark against the enemies of Iran. When left unprotected by the people, foreign “imperialists”
and their domestic allies will use and corrupt schools as a means of domination:

...the enemies of religion, the world dominators, in all of the world, in order to damage the
peoples of the world, first go after the culture and the ideas...they immediately go after the school
system. So too in our dear country, the imperialists with the help of their accomplices, were doing
this very thing...They wrote the textbooks in such a way so that after many years you gradually
become a stranger to your own essential culture.409

That “essential culture,” the reader is made to understand, is Iranian and Islamic. The figure of
Khomeini is surprisingly absent from this first edition of the First grade textbook, both in word
and in image, likely an indication of the still-fluid leadership situation in Iran during 1979.410

The first image that the children see in the 1979 textbook is that of a boys’ classroom led
by a female teacher wearing a headscarf (hejab), her garb the only “Islamic” element to the
illustration (Picture 2). This drawing is the first layer of sediment in a decade-long process of
Islamicization of the opening matter. As we move forward in time in our “reverse excavation,”
we see that religion and politics build into the scene gradually. In 1981, the boys are replaced by
hejab wearing girls, one of which stands at the blackboard pointing to a depiction of a rural
setting, with a dog in the trail. The now-ubiquitous sign with “In the Name of God” written on it
appears above the chalkboard by 1982 (Picture 3). As the Islamicization of the curriculum
moves towards it peak, the dog in the poster disappears in the 1987 edition, presumably because
of religious prohibitions against dogs as unclean (najes) animals, leaving the young girl to point
at an empty country road (Picture 4). Khomeini appears in this scene for the first time in 1988,

410 Khomeini is mentioned in the 1979 textbooks for the second and third grades, albeit more as a partner in
revolution rather than the central figure, even cause of the 1979 Revolution that he develops into during the mid-
1980s. The creation myths surrounding the reasons for the Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic
would take several forms over the years. It is possible that the authors felt that the first grade text was an
inappropriate forum for discussing political figures, if not politics itself (see the lesson “Freedom” discussed later in
this section).
portrayed in a photograph cropped into the classroom scene (Picture 5). Following his death in 1989, a photograph of the current Supreme Leader and Khomeini’s successor, Ali Khamenei, appears next to Khomeini’s, providing the final layer of politics and Islam to the opening of the first grade text (Picture 6).

Picture 2 Front Matter 1358/1979       Picture 3 “In the Name of God” Added 1361/1982

411 The use of photography in this way is an important ideological device, and one of the few constant techniques found in the elementary level textbooks, one that continues to the present day. Authors use photographs, set against the “cartoons” of lesson illustrations, in order to highlight the “real,” non-fictive political figures and events connected to the Revolution and the establishment of the IRI.
Picture 4 Dog Removed 1366/1985

Picture 5 First Appearance of Khomeini 1367/1986

Picture 6 “The Kind Imam” 1371/1992

Picture 7 Eating and Drinking in the Traditional Style 1358/1979
The Imagined Iran

The First Grade primer of the period 1979-2001 consists of three sections, all contained within one volume. The first of these sections introduces children to the orthography of Farsi, followed by a second section that presents illustrated lessons on reading and writing fully-formed words, ultimately building up to short phrases and sentences, then finally paragraphs and full stories. The third and final section begins after the final lesson on the alphabet. It is the most unstable portion of the textbook, and the part that deals most directly with politics and religion.

Together, the first two sections comprise the bulk of the First Grade textbook, and deal with mostly non-ideological themes. Direct socialization centers on such benign issues as proper hygiene (“Amin Likes Cleanliness” (Amin tamizi ra doost darad), “Amin and His Sister Akram Brush Their Teeth and Wash Their Hands” (Amin va khaharesh akram mesvak mizanand)) and showing compassion to those who are not well or poor (“Tahere is Sick”). It is only after the final lesson on the alphabet at the end of the second section that the text shifts to matters of politics and religious training.

The aesthetic of the first grade textbook is ascetic. Its “wish images,” to use Limbert’s phrasing, depict typical life as being unconcerned with material goods and consumerism, and the days of ordinary Iranians are spent close to the land and family. Illustration after illustration depicts people leading humble lifestyles: families drink tea from a samovar in the traditional style poured into a saucer to cool (Picture 7); parents and their children sit on the floor or against pillows, never at a table (Picture 8); meals are taken at the traditional sofreh or cloth spread placed on the floor, prepared by the mother using a rudimentary portable gas stove.

Beginning in the late 2000s, the 1-3 Farsi textbooks split into two volumes, “Let’s Read” (Bekhanim) and “Let’s Write” (Benevisim).

Mothers and daughters in general are tasked with the cooking, while fathers and sons see about more “masculine” pursuits such as repair and industry. At best, fathers help out in the kitchen, though this only occurs in the current
Vocabulary lessons reinforce notions of the authentic through the use of objects associated with “traditional Iran.” Among the first words that first graders learn to spell are bread (nan) and pomegranate (anar) (Picture 9).

There is a deeply romantic, even Rousseauian, notion of the “good” or typical Iranian threaded throughout all three of the grades under study. Throughout the textbooks, but especially in the First Grade, authors depict the countryside as the sacred source of values, a place sanctified by the labor of men and women working in traditional occupations. It is in the countryside, amongst the common folk of Iran, that the children can access scientific knowledge (elm), wisdom (danesh), and religion (din), often in the same lesson. An example of this is the story of “Fields of Wheat” (Mazraeh-ye gandom), in which students learn from their teacher how the wheat crop is planted and harvested. They see real-life examples of hard work and discipline by the farmers out in the fields (Picture 10).

set of textbooks. Though I earlier made passing reference to the continuities of male and female roles found in the pre- and post-Islamic textbooks, a shortcoming of this essay is its lack of attention to gender.
Modernization and Development

If national identity has its origins in the countryside, so too does the good life. We see this in the poem “City and Country” (Shahr va roostah). The text reads:

What great fortune,
Oh country dwellers!
What happiness and bounty
What kindness

In our city there is nothing
But shouting and yelling
Good for you
That you are free.

In our city there is nothing
But smoke and cars
My heart is sad
From this and from that.

Oh, that I were also a bird
With happiness I would flap my wings

I would leave the city
And go to the country
There where there is a good environment.  

414 Birds are used throughout the textbooks as symbols of freedom. See the First Grade lesson “Azadi” below.
Appearing for the first time in mid-1980s, “City and Country” reveals in dramatic fashion the state’s great uncertainty and ambivalence towards the need to take the country on a course of modernization and development. There is in the poem a sense of unwanted destiny, bordering on desperation (“My heart is sad...”), to life in the city. The narrator wishes to leave town, but has to remain, perhaps to work in the sort of industry that bring with it smoke and noise.

The text of the poem is a stark contrast to the accompanying illustration. The original drawing for “City and Country” depicts a life without machinery or material progress normally associated with development. It is a peaceful scene, filled only with the expected rhythms and routines of agricultural life (Picture 11). There is a child feeding chickens in a dirt yard as a male adult returns from the fields, a shovel or spade slung over his shoulder. In the distance another farmer is busy at work, laboring behind ox and plow.

Like the poem’s narrator, state planners are torn between need and desire. Again and again we shall see that although the Revolution is depicted as bringing modernity to Iran, state planners are anxious that said progress not erode what the values and professed purity of rural lifestyle. Unlike the narrator of the “City and Country,” who from the text is stuck in his life, textbook authors are able to reconcile life in both worlds. Illustrations provide a visual antidote to the state-inflicted tension that exists between tradition and modernity in the textbooks.

The 1988 edition of “City and Country” retains the old text of the poem but comes with an updated image, one perfectly balanced between rural life and modern development. Instead of feeding chickens, our young child and his sister are now heading off to school. The schoolhouse is clearly visible on the drawing’s horizon, marked by the flag of the IRI to remind readers that this is a development brought to the countryside by the Islamic state (Picture 12). The children, school cases in hand, wave goodbye to their mother who waves back from the
porch of their thatched roof home. The plow and oxen are replaced, and in between the home and the school, just across a creek, there is a tractor with smoke billowing gently out of its exhaust, an indicator of the mechanization of farming.

What is particularly fascinating about this illustration is how neatly it reconciles the goals of modernization with the desire to preserve traditional society. A creek runs across the middle of the frame, with the village home and nurturing mother at the bottom of the image and the accoutrements of progress lined up at the top, pushed towards the horizon of the future. The creek symbolically separates traditional life from modern life, and for the characters of the story—again, unlike the narrator of the accompanying poem—going between the two realities is as simple as crossing back and forth across the bound and wooden planks that connect the two sides of the creek together.
Nationalism

Lessons tied to notions of a unique Iranian national identity (Iranniyat) are evident from the very first edition of the postrevolutionary First Grade Farsi textbook. Students are introduced to “Our Homeland” (Mihan-e ma) and “The People of Our Homeland” (Mardam-e mihan-e ma), lessons that lay the foundation of an “eternal” Iran, beginning with descriptions of the country’s diverse geography, the permanence of Iran (literally) set in mountain stone, and the identities of the various types of Iranians that live in those settings. Diversity and difference is not ignored or eliminated, but de-politicized.416 Seven distinct and varied ethnic visages surround the lesson, men wearing the garb of their native province (Picture 13). Children are told that wherever they live---be it city or village, by the water or in the mountains---these different kinds of people are Iranians (Irani hastand).

Nationalism takes on religious layering beginning in the 1984 poem, “Iran our Home.” The poem links the Iranian nation linked not just to the physicality of Iran but also the spirituality of its religion: “I am friends with…your mountains and fields…The sun of Islam once more shines on you, Allah akbar!”417

Picture 13 “The People of Our Homeland” 1361/1982

Iranian nationalism receives its most important validation not from the fevered imaginings of state planners, but from Islam itself. The 1988 edition of the first grade primer the book’s authors insert the following remarkable sentence to the previous end of “My Homeland”:

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416 Anthony Wallace describes modern politics as the effort to achieve the “organization of diversity.” Cited in Eric R. Wolf, Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 66.
417 “Iran, Our Home,” Farsi, First Grade 1363/1984: 95.
Wherever we live, we love our homeland. The Prophet of Islam has ordered: “Loving one’s homeland is a sign of religious faith” (Payghambar-e islam farmoodeh ast: Doost dashtan-e mihan neshaneh-ye iman ast.) (emphasis added).418

The addition of this one line at the height of the re-Islamicization of the textbooks is an important turning point of the postrevolutionary curriculum, and represents a high-water mark for politicized Islam. Nationalism, Haggay Ram reminds us, is modernity par excellence.419

What we have here in this single lesson, expressed by a sole sentence, is the validation of the modern by the pre-modern, i.e., the religion of Islam. By recruiting the Prophet to legitimize the lesson, textbook authors provide a wonderful illustration of the way in which the authority of the “permanent” and sacred can inspire manipulation and interpretation in the service of “practical” aims.

Norooz

As I noted in the introduction, lessons on the Persian New Year, Norooz, are found in the textbooks from 1979 to the present day. The First Grade treatment of this ancient holiday from 1979-2003 is the most straightforward of all of the textbooks. There is none of the political or religious linkages and appropriations of the holiday found in the other grades. Even as the textbooks enter their most strident period (1986-1996), Islam and ideology remain absent from the lesson. The text itself remains virtually unchanged until the early 2000s, and reads simply:

We call the first day of the year Norooz. Norooz is the holiday of the Iranian people. Before Norooz the people of our country clean their homes.

During Norooz we go to see each other and of those who are sick. It is one year from one Norooz to the next Norooz.420

419 Ram, “The Immemorial Nation,” 68.
420 “New Year,” Farsi, First Grade 1358/1979: 103.
The only notable change over the years is the insertion of the traditional *haft sin* display (seven items that all begin with the letter “sin”) along with a copy of the Koran, the latter clearly labeled beginning in the 1988 edition, nearly a decade after the Revolution (Picture 14 & 15)!

Islam

The First Grade textbook compartmentalizes lessons on Islam and politics by placing them at the very end of the primer. This is likely to ensure that most children will be literate enough to read and comprehend short paragraphs. In a series of nondescript and literally colorless lessons, the textbook introduces four basic components of Islam (Picture 16 & 17). These are taught in order of importance: “God” (*Khoda*), “The Prophet” (*Peyghambar*), “Koran,” and “Some Sayings of Imam Ali” (*Chand sokhan az hazrat-e ali*). Apart from the

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*Figure 13 “God” & “Prophet” (1979/1358)*

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421 The separation of religious instruction from the rest of the text gives way to the increased Islamicization of the textbooks during the mid-1980s. In the 1987 textbook religiosity seeps into the earlier lessons, notably the lesson “Prayer” (*Namaz*). In this lesson, children watch their father and mother go through the steps of prayer, the kids watching and learning in preparation for the day when it will be their turn to worship.
notable exception of “Some Sayings of Imam Ali” the lessons are non-sectarian treatments of Islam.

Overall, the treatment of Islam in the First Grade primer is straightforward. There is little to complicate what it means to be a Muslim, though an important tension is introduced in the 1982 edition with the insertion of “The Festival of Sacrifice” (Eid-e ghorban). The lesson deals with the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, or “the house of God” as the text puts it:

Every year on this day Muslims gather in Mecca to show their unity to all of the world. The Festival of Sacrifice is one of the great festivals of we Muslims.422

Shiite Iran and the rest of the Muslim and Sunni world are set against each other in the space of just a few pages. “The Festival of Sacrifice” speaks of “we Muslims,” but of course not all Muslims consider Ali to be the inheritor and heir of the Prophet’s mantle (Picture 18).

As we’ll see over and over again, textbook

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authors wish to teach children that they are part of a universal and worldwide community of believers, but at the same time make certain that pupils are familiar with the imamate of the Shiite faith, and above all with the figure of Imam Ali. The practical result of these different goals is to give actors a choice as to how their identity will be shaped. Choice of course, is not an auspicious quality in a curriculum geared towards producing a uniform nation.

**Revolution and the Islamic Republic**

Sedimentation is a common feature of many of the lessons found in the 1-3 curriculums. The additions and subtractions made to specific lessons give us insight into the ways in which the politics of state/society relations can shape the curriculum and official message of the state. A particularly revealing example is the lesson “Freedom” (*Azadi*). Through the metaphor of birds the authors present the importance of freedom and independence in a simple and accessible way:

> These birds are free and they fly from tree to tree. They take pleasure from this. But some people capture birds and put them in cages. They cannot build nests and they can’t flit from tree to tree. These birds are always hitting themselves against the walls of the cage (struggle) until maybe they can be free again. They do everything possible to be free again. They like freedom. Humans also like to live free.423

Struggle against those who would take away freedom is not only justified, but lies beyond the realm of choice and reason. Humans will be driven to hurl themselves against whatever “cage” has been imposed on them. Freedom is the natural state, its denial an unnatural condition unto death (Picture 19).

There is, it turns out, a major difference between birds and humans, one that is taught for the first time in 1982, three years after “Freedom” is first published:

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The freedom of humans is different from the freedom of birds. *We cannot live however we please. We are not free to do whatever we want. We make laws so as to know how much freedom we have.* (emphasis added)\(^\text{424}\)

Freedom once unfettered and unquestioned has become a problem for the former revolutionaries who must now deal with matters of governability as they try to run and manage the state (Picture 20).

Freedom once unfettered and unquestioned has become a problem for the former revolutionaries who must now deal with matters of governability as they try to run and manage the state (Picture 20).

God, religion, and obliquely, politics get mentions in the 1979 textbook but the political history receives no treatment in the first edition of the First Grade primer. Khomeini makes his appearance by 1981, sharing the stage with the revolutionary crowd in the lesson “The Islamic Revolution of Iran” (*Enqelab e islami ye iran*). If we compare this to the later Second and Third Grade “creation myths,” Khomeini participates as a co-equal in the Revolution, inspiring but not singly causing the revolution: “The people wanted, with the leadership of Imam Khomeini, to run the Shah out of the country.”\(^\text{425}\) Khomeini returns to Iran, which inspires the people to double their efforts, but it is only when “the [Shah’s] soldiers and the people” become one that


the Revolution is triumphant. The partnership between the people and Khomeini changes dramatically the following year. The 1982 edition of “The Islamic Revolution of Iran” is the first major attempt to “fix” this as an Islamic social movement, with Khomeini the primary force driving the Revolution. The “people” becomes “the Muslim people of Iran” (mardoom-e musalman-e iran), and tired of the Shah’s crimes they wanted “independence, freedom, and an Islamic republic” (esteqlal, azadi, jomhoori islami), the famous slogan appearing for the first time in the First Grade text.426

426 By 1982 the original coalition that had comprised the revolutionary movement against the Shah had been effectively eliminated with the defeat of the regime’s sole remaining rival, the People’s Mojahedin of Iran (MEK). With the end of what was a de facto civil war between the MEK and the Islamists, Iran’s clerical leadership was able to consolidate their power and move forward in what would heretofore be referred to as the “Islamic Revolution.”
Today’s First Grade Textbook

In the current edition of the First Grade Farsi textbook, a scene of familial calm greets students when they open up their textbooks.

Shown earlier in this essay was the 1997 portrait of

**Picture 22 "Imam-e Mehraban"**

the Leader, his toddler grandson placing a kiss on Khomeini’s cheek and accompanied by a large caption resting on a splay of flowers that reads “The kind Imam” (Imam-e mehraban) (see Picture 6 earlier). Today’s picture shows Khomeini in the informal setting of his private residence, without clerical vestments and accompanied by his grandsons. As we’ll see in all of the textbooks, the “gentle” Khomeini replaces the fierce and unsmiling revolutionary, the kindly grandfather the new metaphor for a Founder who is to be remembered more for the love that he has for his people than the animosity he held towards those he considered to be Iran’s enemies.

Indeed, Khomeini is less an active character, fomenting revolution and sparking change than a fading historical figure that has to be recovered from oblivion. The lesson “The Islamic Revolution of Iran” no longer appears in the textbooks, replaced by the aptly titled “A Memory of the Revolution.” In recognition of the fact that today’s readers have no memory of the Revolution, the lesson uses the voice of a school principal speaking to his students (Picture 23). He describes what it was like to be in Tehran during the Revolution, and how the people were waiting for their “Imam” to come back to Iran:
You were not yet born in those days. Our people under the leadership of Imam Khomeini had taken to the streets and were marching. They shouted slogans: Allah Akbar, Khomeini *rahbar* (leader)!

The Shah had forced the Imam to be far from the people. The people didn’t want the Shah. Before long the Shah escaped from Iran. Imam Khomeini came to the homeland, that day was the 12th of Bahman…

By placing the narrative around the figure of Khomeini, the text transforms the experience of the revolution from that of the crowd acting on behalf of its leader, to a story in the life of the founder. “A Memory of Revolution” represents the transformation of revolution from social movement to political biography.

**Picture 23 “A Memory of Revolution” 1386/2007**

If Khomeini’s presence is somewhat diminished in the new edition of the First Grade textbooks, Islam’s presence and influence has been made greater, though not in the strident manner of the mid-to-late 1980s. The current edition of textbooks interjects practices and images of faith throughout the lesson plans. Islam changes from a separate category, to be taught at the end of the textbook and the school year, to an “intertextual” component of the curriculum and of everyday life. It is a subtler strategy of advancing religion, one in which Islam is made important by making it normal rather than something that needs to be “pushed” onto the pupils.

Reconciliation of Iran’s pre- and post-Islamic pasts, or what Marashi refers to as the “dual cultures problem,” is perhaps the most striking feature of the new textbooks. Islamic and pre-Islamic artifacts of the nation are redolent and (literally) sit without problem or complication next to each to other in the lessons. The First Grade textbook reveals this new style on its very

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first page. We see a scene of a family, mother, father, daughter, and son, reading together in their apartment’s living room. On the bookshelf just in the corner are the epic poems of Iran’s national poets, including the divans of Hafez and Ferdowsi. Next to these are the Koran and works by Khomeini. Visible on the wall behind the family is framed picture of the ruins at Persepolis (Takhteh jamshid) (Pictures 24-26).

Picture 24 “Welcome to Our Home” 1386/2007

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428 It is interesting to note that in this and other lessons, there is gender-balance in the illustrations. Mother and father share in child-raising duties, here that of reading to their children.

429 One commentator suggested to me that it was unlikely that any 5-year would notice or be interested in the significance of a framed picture of Persepolis hanging on the wall. As a former elementary school teacher, I do not disagree. The point here is that the frame exists in a textbook when, just a decade ago, it would have been unthinkable. Textbooks are made for adults, including teachers, parents, elites, and international organizations, as much as they are for the children, a point that must be kept in mind in any content analysis of curricular materials.
Just as impressive is the reconciliation of national identity and urbanization. State planners, it can said, are finally at peace with their previous agonizing over the urban-rural divide in Iran. Most of the stories in the First Grade textbook take place in city contexts, reflecting the reality that some thirty years after the birth of the IRI is a mostly urbanized society (Picture 27). The countryside, once a place where the “real” Iran was located, and a place for children to go to in order to learn and acquire values, is now a site of recreation, a place to go (temporarily) with one’s family not to learn about science or religion but to have a good time. Camping, scenes of boating and fishing all reflect the lifestyles and leisure patterns of Iran’s growing middle-class (Picture 28).


Picture 28 “Yes Yes, How Beautiful” 1386/2007

It can be said that the middle-class is the central character of the new textbooks. The text is no longer situated in an aggressively ascetic context. Material success is finally accepted by
the state and ownership of “goodies” is even celebrated as a measure of progress and development. Returning to the image of the family in the opening lesson (Picture 24), we the see markers of modernization. These “objects of modernity” could be straight out of Daniel Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society*, including a television, a radio, and even the presence of a library—-an indicator of growing literacy.\(^{430}\)

Finally, as a place of diverse ethnicities that nonetheless unite under the singular label of “Iranian,” continues to be in the little-changed lesson “Our Homeland.” Children in traditional clothing stand next to each other, their collective framed by the feline outline of Iran’s borders. These borders are fixed and, as the adjacent lesson “Soldier” suggests, these are to be defended (Picture 29).

Schoolchildren began the 1979-1980 school year with the lesson “Welcome to Second Grade” (Be kelas-e dovom khosh amadid). There is little in the lesson’s text or imagery to suggest that religion will play a great role in their education aside from the modestly veiled (ba hejab) teacher standing at the front of the classroom (Picture 30). The illustration signals change from the Pahlavi period, certainly, but it is hardly final. Three years later Islam is much more prominent in the beginning of the book, signaled by the lesson’s new title, “In the Name of God the Forgiving and Kind, Welcome to Second Grade” (Be nam-e khoda-e bakhshandeh-ye mehraban, be kelas-e dovom khosh amadid). The slogan “In the Name of God” appears not just in the title, but written prominently in the center of the black chalkboard. The perspective is from the back of the classroom looking forward (Picture 31). The composition directs all eyes---teacher, student, and reader alike---at the chalkboard. In the lesson the teacher says:

When everybody was in their seats, the teacher said: “Dear children, look carefully at the blackboard and tell me what is written upon it.”

The children…together and with a loud voice answered: “In the name of God.”

The teacher said: “Yes…All of you know that we start all endeavors in the name of God and from Him we ask for guidance and his help.”

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The authors are not finished with moving God around the opening of the Second Grade textbook. Initially completely absent (1979), then the center of attention (1982), by the post-2003 reforms God will have quite literally faded to the background of the scene (Figure 42 below).

Picture 31 “In the Name of God the Forgiving and Kind, Welcome to Second Grade” 1361/1982

As the prominence of God in the classroom increases, so too does the modesty of the characters depicted in the textbook. The different outfits worn by female figures provide benchmarks for changes in official opinion as to what is considered to be appropriate clothing (lebas-e monaseb). We see for example that the teacher from the 1979 edition wears a colorful headscarf knotted beneath her chin and an otherwise non-descript outfit. She is replaced in the 1982 edition by an instructor wearing a maghnaeh (tight-fitting hood). More dramatically, an illustration of a mother bringing her son to school on the first day of second grade features the former wearing a pink hejab and an unadorned blouse and skirt (Picture 32). In 1987, after eight years of exposing children to the corrupting ensemble, the mother receives a rigorous, if somewhat comical “update.” The drawing in the textbook remains the same save for the full-length chador poured over the mother’s figure (Picture 33).
A similar excavation can be made of the back covers. Though initially blank in the years following the revolution, by the mid-1980s back covers become a canvas for the state to promote social and political messages. In the 1987 editions of the First, Second, and Third Grade primers there appear two columns of children, segregated by gender, converging into a single mass at the bottom of the page. The young girls are depicted in full-length chadors and face towards the viewer, while the more active young boys are marching sideways into the image, their fist raised high (Picture 34). The scrolling message on the back makes the purpose of their “march” clear. This is a declaration of support for the Revolution:

We with faith in God, with purity and honesty, with gainful knowledge, with hard work, sacrifice, and thrift, independence, freedom, and the Islamic Republic do defend.  

As the curriculum enters its moderate phase sometime in the mid-1990s, the back covers of the second grade textbook takes their own course towards moderation. The messages are more

practical and mundane, at times bordering on the absurd. The 1997 back cover shows young people involved doing all sorts of dangerous activities, like playing with knives, touching a hot pot, sticking his hand into a meat grinder (!), or jumping into a fire (Picture 35).

Khomeini remains absent from the front matter of the Second Grade primer much longer than what we saw in the First Grade textbook (though this is more than balanced by his greater prominence in the rest of the textbook). He appears for the first time in the 1990 edition, accompanied by the same message that we’ll later see in the Third Grade Farsi textbook:

My hope is with you, the elementary student. My hope with you that, God willing, that the progress of our country is in your hands and that you be its inheritor.433

The Imagined Iran

Whereas the first grade book depicts an Iran made up of humble, traditional folk, the second grade text represents Iranians as an outward-looking nation, concerned mainly with matters of universal justice, self-defense, and vigilance against the imperialism of the world’s

433 Farsi, Second Grade 1379/1990.
“arrogant powers.” The Second Grade curriculum is easily the most politically strident textbook series of the three grades, a status it keeps until at least until the mid-1990s when much of the overtly political material is stripped out and replaced by a more moderate agenda.

Politics for second graders is packaged in the metaphors of childhood. The book enlists a veritable “animal parade of freedom” to tell stories in which the weak (Iran and the developing world) use their wits to prevail against much stronger enemies (specifically the U.S. and the Soviet Union). Almost all of these stories deal with the defense of the homeland. A prominent example is the two-part story, “Way to Victory” (Rah-e piroozi). In this tale, a flock of desert birds experience the destruction of their nests by an elephant. The birds are distraught and uncertain as to how to protect their homes from further damage. Many are ready to give up hope but are encouraged by their leader to not acquiesce to the elephant’s strength so easily:

This desert is our homeland (vatan). We’ve got to door the (the elephant!) We have to protect our children.

But who can stand up to such a strong elephant?

When we all work together, we can do anything.

It is a crucial point in the narrative that the birds choose to first confront the elephant peacefully. Self-defense, both as a concept rooted in Islamic stricture and as a means of distinguishing “we

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434 The popular slogan “Neither West nor East” (Na ghabr na sharq) expresses the desire of the IRI’s leadership to plot a course of independence based neither in liberal capitalism or Soviet communism, but in an Islamic democracy.

Iranians” from her enemies, is a fundamental trope of postrevolutionary discourse in Iran. Violence is justified only after all other options have been exhausted.\textsuperscript{436} By speaking before acting, the birds legitimize the use of force should it become necessary.

Ultimately, the elephant’s obstinacy does make violence necessary. Confident in the authority granted to him by his overwhelming strength, the elephant informs the birds that he can do anything he wants to. The birds do not hesitate and acting in concert surround the elephant and peck at his eyes until he can no longer see (Picture 36). Once blind with arrogance, and now literally blind, the doomed beast tumbles into a ditch where he meets his demise.

“Way to Freedom” uses the bird as a symbol and agent of freedom, a common trope across the curriculum. Another animal, used for quite different purposes, is the wolf. Postrevolutionary slogans and imagery regularly feature the lupine beast as a metaphor for Iran’s enemies, above all the U.S. and Israel. In the “Wolf and Cow,” the authors of the Second Grade text proffer up a highly gendered lesson on the necessity of retaining any means necessary for preserving the sanctity of the vestal nation. The story features a fair maiden Mariam and a helpless calf facing imminent death at the hands of a wolf. Trapped against a tree, her father’s cow appears in the nick of time to save them from tragedy (Picture 37 “Cow and Wolf” 1358/1979).

\textsuperscript{436} Self-defense as a sacred act is enshrined in the official name for Iran’s eight year war with Iraq, known in Iran as “The Holy Defense” (Defah-ye moqades).
The fierce cow uses its long horns to fend off the lupine predatory, the same horns that Mariam’s father, Amoo Hussein, had earlier intended to remove. Rushing to the scene, Amoo Hussein becomes elated at this show of God’s compassion. He marvels at how close his own shortsightedness came to causing disaster: “Amoo Hussein...became happy and he learned that God never does anything without a reason. He thanks God that he had not cut off the cow’s horns.”

The story’s primary message is that it is the right and the obligation of any country to possess the tools by which it can defend itself. Any doubt the accompanying homework (taklif) questions. This cow stands in for the state, upon whom falls the task of preparedness in defending the nation, its women and children aptly represented by Mariam and the calf. The cow, like the state, is more than just a defender---it is also a provider, as it gives milk for Mariam’s entire family, with enough left over to provide an important source of income for her and her father.

Picture 38 “Cry for Freedom” 1358/1979

Wolves are again on the prowl in the lesson “Cry for Freedom” (Farayad baraye azadi). A baby sheep, despite being warned by her shepherd to always stay with the flock, wanders away. It is a perilous
choice, and it is not long before she draws the attention of the hungry wolf (Picture 38). Physically helpless against the predator, the sheep remembers the shepherd’s instruction to bray whenever there is an emergency. The shepherd and his dog arrive just in time to save the sheep from an untimely demise. The point of the lesson is to teach students about the importance of maintaining unity as a defense against potential enemies. Not following the rules or acting on one’s own invariably leads to trouble. Likewise, rules offer redemption and a way out of trouble. By following the rules at the end, the sheep was saved.

**Nationalism**

Training in the virtues of self-defense does not always take place in the allegorical language of children. In a series of stories about the fate of the Palestinian people introduced in the Second and Third Grade textbooks, the authors drop metaphor in favor of direct exposition. Little is left to the imagination in “An Orphan Schoolboy” (later renamed “Letter From a Palestinian Schoolboy”). Written in the first-person voice of the title character, the young narrator describes how he and his family have been forced from their country (*keshvar*) by “the enemy.” They must live in tents in the desert and despite their precarious existence, he and the other Palestinians try to continue on with their lives, even carrying on with their studies. The enemy, however, is relentless and unsparing, killing young and old, and even bombing the infirm in hospitals. The boy asks his Iranian audience, “Do you know why? Because we want to return to our home and country and to run the enemy out of our homeland.” There is hope despite the misery, and the boy tells his reader that “from the time that your revolution was successful, our

439 It is interesting that the narrative reinforces the widely held reputation of Palestinians as a studious people.
enemy has become very scared…because [of your revolution the enemy] has bothered us more.\textsuperscript{440}

“Letter From an Orphan Schoolboy” is a prime example of how competing state agendas can disrupt the consistency of the textbook. The very first paragraph establishes the fellowship of Palestinians and Iranians around their common religion (sectarian differences are, of course, not mentioned): “Do you know who we are? You and I are brothers. I am a Palestinian, we are Muslim Palestinian children.”\textsuperscript{441} Their fellowship is ultimately expanded beyond the Islamic world to include “free people everywhere.” Though the narrator “labels” himself as Palestinian and the audience reading his letter as “Iranian,” he makes clear that all of the righteous nations are united in outrage at the Palestinian’s plight at the hands of their common enemy, revealed at the end of the lesson to be Israel. Students are to put aside their local and national identities in the defense of universal ideals of freedom and justice, with Israel as the common enemy of both.

“Letter from an Orphan Schoolboy” and more broadly the Palestinian issue present students with a powerful alternative to nationalism, a message of pan-Islamism that is reinforced constantly both inside and outside of the classroom.\textsuperscript{442} Yet this message is constantly undermined by overt messages designed to foster a uniquely Iranian identity. Turning again to the text, the second paragraph unwinds the cosmopolitan unity constructed at the beginning of the essay. The narrator differentiates himself from his Iranian reader by nationality, making clear in the process that one’s own “country” (\textit{keshvar}) is where the home is: “The name of our country is Palestine and the name of your country is Iran. You live in your country, and in your

\textsuperscript{442}The Annual Qods Day march, in support of Palestinian freedom, or the frequent rallies held in support of Palestinians in Palestine Square (\textit{Maidan-e felestin}) are but two examples of outside socialization related to the Palestinian issue.
The Palestinian has no home, however, because he has no country—a message that runs counter to the notion that Muslims live as a community of believers and not as a collective of different nationalities. Indeed, the consequences of not living in a country are on full display in this lesson. Iranian students learn that to lose one’s homeland is to live in misery, like the Palestinians.

Over the course of its history, the lesson becomes more about Iran than it is about Palestine. Beginning with the 1982 edition of the Second Grade primer, the Palestinian in the story attributes his people’s uprising to “the victory of your Islamic revolution with the leadership of Imam Khomeini” (my emphasis). As we’ll see over and over again in the later stages of the curriculum, Khomeini not only leads an “Islamic revolution” in Iran but in fact sparks “Islamic awakenings” worldwide. Even as the story teaches that the 1979 Revolution is a model of revolt with universal application for other Muslim countries, it also pushes Iranian exceptionalism, embodied in the figure of Khomeini. Iran inspires the Palestinians to resist, and it is Iran that generates fear in the hearts of Israelis who, before the “Islamic Revolution,” had no cause to worry about its oppression of the Arab Muslims.

Modernization and Development

Picture 39 “Make Your Homeland Flourish” 1358/1979

Separating “the nation” from progress can be an artificial exercise, evidenced by the title of the Second Grade lesson “Make Your Homeland Flourish.” A boy sits in the

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foreground, his back to the viewer. He looks across a verdant field, where we see a farmer on his tractor and off in the distance a factory billowing smoke. The image changes later but the blocking and composition suggests the same message of gazing towards the future.

The message remains mixed. Again, as a way to prevent modernization from overwhelming or replacing traditional lifestyles, progress is made to appear in discreet and (literally) fenced-off scenes of daily life in the country. Authors “surgically” insert the evidence of development—a factory or a new school—neatly into bucolic and rustic settings (Picture 39). As in the First Grade textbooks, the future arrives complete and whole, its impurities quarantined by the surrounding countryside.

![Picture 40 “Make Your Homeland Flourish” 1367/1988](image)

Another way of “disciplining” change and progress is to bind it to the provenance of Islam. Science is taught in the Second Grade as a blessing of religion. The authors remind their charges that whatever we as humans have and will achieve can ultimately be attributable to Allah. In the story “Feather and Wings” (Par va bal), humans do not have the natural ability to fly, but they have reason given to them (ofarid) by God.

Azadeh said: Oh how I wish that God had given me wings and feathers so that I might fly in the sky!

Ali said: God has given us feathers and wings. Our ideas are our feathers and wings. Others, who like you desired to fly, used their ideas to invent the airplane.445

Such an approach serves the interests of the postrevolutionary state in two ways. By linking religion to science, state leaders are able to attribute development and technology to God’s grace.

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and blessing. In turn, technology and progress validate Islam as the one true religion and the basis for state rule. It is the embrace of Islam—tradition—that results in progress and development.446

Norooz & Revolution and the Islamic Republic

Norooz, because it lies outside of political Islam and has its own legitimacy as an ancient and non-political tradition, presents a potential site of subversion to the formal ideology of the state. We have already seen that from its inception the Iranian state has not sought the removal of Norooz from the formal curriculum. It instead uses a number of strategies to appropriate this holiday. One way that the state has tried to “own” Norooz has been to gradually transform this pre-Islamic celebration into an Islamic or quasi-Islamic holiday, something that we saw in the First Grade textbooks. Another technique, used here in the Second Grade textbooks, is to enmesh the ancient Persian New Year celebrations in the contemporary politics of postrevolutionary Iran. In the following paragraphs, I describe the development of the lessons on Norooz and the 1979 referendum vote on the Islamic Republic, respectively, and the way in which state planners fuse the two together into a single event.

Norooz precedes by a few days the official “birth” of the Islamic Republic of Iran on April 1, 1979, celebrated as the 12th of Farvardin, 1358 by the Iranian calendar). It is not by accident that “Persian New Year” and “12th of Farvardin, Islamic Republic Day” appear together for most of the history of the Second Grade primer. By tying the pre-Islamic tradition of the New Year with the politics of the Islamic Republic, the state fuses two creation myths together, one ancient and traditional, the other rooted in contemporary politics.

446 The postrevolutionary discourse surrounding the bringing of electricity, schools, and water to villages is part of this. According to this script, the Shah failed to bring the most basic elements of modernity to the country, a situation that only the Revolution and Islamic governance could rectify.
For the first years after the revolution, the Second Grade lesson on Norooz described a celebration in which Iranians gather with their families. The New Year is presented as a season of rebirth, in nature as well as in personal relationships. The narrator is a young girl, presumably in the second grade. She relates to her friends how she and her family participate in the usual Norooz traditions: cleaning, visiting family and neighbors.

Islam plays a much more central role in the Norooz celebrations of the Second Grade than what we witnessed in the First Grade textbooks. The illustration is of the family gathered around the traditional New Year’s sofreh, with the father reading from the Koran (Picture 41). He prays for all Iranians and asks God for their complete success and triumph. The mother offers a prayer also, a prayer on behalf of all women, and especially for the “children of the world,” asking God to grant the young their freedom.447

The text begins its climb towards peak Islamicization several years later. Fatimeh, the narrator, now tells her friends that on New Year’s morning she and her family go visit the families of martyrs (from the ongoing Iran-Iraq War, though the term also covers those who perished during the 1979 Revolution):

Several families of martyrs live near our home and the people love them dearly. On New Years many people had gone to see them to wish them a happy New Year and to pray for the victory of all of the world’s Muslims.448

![Picture 41 “New Year’s” 1361/1982](image)

These families take precedence over her own grandparents, who come second on the visitation circuit.⁴⁴⁹ In fact, the prayers for “all of the world’s Muslims” indicates that authors want children to value the “community of believers” (*ummat*) over their own nation and even their own families. In this story at least, the martyrs died first for Islam and then for Iran.

Like the “New Year Holiday,” the lesson “12⁰ of Farvardin, Islamic Republic Day” provides a good illustration of why the postrevolutionary curriculum must be studied in motion and not as a static artifact. Changes to the textbook are neither minor nor random, but instead reveal the shifting political, social, and religious agendas of Iran’s state planners. As noted earlier, the *Norooz* lesson is immediately followed by the lesson “The 12⁰ of Farvardin, Islamic Republic Day” (*Davazdahom-e farvardin, rooz-e jomhoori-ye islami*). In 1980, the Revolution is still a part of recent memory, and the narrator rhetorically asks his readers if they remember those days. He goes on to tell the story of the revolution, one that in this rendition is of a much more detailed and fixed event than the shifting memories found in the same lesson of the First Grade. The Revolution is portrayed as a mass movement, and the action in the story centers on the decisions and determination of the protesting crowds. Khomeini is the acknowledged leader, but his role never surpasses that of the people. It is the Muslim people of Iran that is the force driving history.

In 1988 the lesson changes dramatically, both in tone and in content. Already, the Revolution is becoming a fading memory and the authors are eager to tell children about a time that may be unimaginable to them (“Years ago, our country was very different.”). They celebrate the victory of the Revolution by setting up the Shah as a foil for the freedom and

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⁴⁴⁹ Iranians reading this story cannot miss the significance of Fatimeh’s family visiting the families of martyrs first over her own grandparents. The seeing of families during the New Year holidays (*Eid didani*) is a very specific and even rarified ritual, carried out over days and even weeks, with the oldest member of one’s extended family the traditional first stop on the circuit.
independence that Iranians currently enjoy. The Shah was a “foreign servant” who “did not like the Iranian people,” and to the extent that he could, the Shah would torture, hurt and torture Muslims, preventing them from living life as God intended.\textsuperscript{450} What was previously a partnership between Iranian society and its clerical leadership to end the monarchy has now been distilled into a battle between good and evil, personified by the figures of Khomeini and the Shah. The anonymity and agency of the crowd is lost to the biography of Khomeini and his endless struggle against the monarchy. He is the spark:

For many years Imam Khomeini invited the people to resist the Shah. Little by little the people woke up and followed the Imam’s orders. At the direction of Imam Khomeini the people took to the streets and marched and protested. Together they chanted “Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic!” and they shouted “As long as there is blood in our veins, Khomeini is our leader!”\textsuperscript{451}

Despite the different agendas found in the two versions of “12\textsuperscript{th} of Farvardin, Islamic Republic Day,” both lessons draw the conclusion that \textit{Norooz} and “Islamic Republic Day” are celebrated together, and that the latter is the “most beautiful” day, because it is the day of the freedom and freedom of all of the Iranian people.

\textbf{Islam}

Although all politics is Islamic in postrevolutionary Iran, not all things Islamic are political, at least not in the textbooks. The Second Grade offers students lessons on compassion (\textit{delsoozi}) and justice rooted in Islam and class justice. “Equality” (\textit{Barabari}) tells the powerful story of Imam Reza angrily upbraiding one of his disciples after the latter complained aloud after witnessing black laborers sitting at the same \textit{sofreh} or meal with the (non-black) household servants. In a remarkable and unexpected lesson on anti-racism, Imam Reza uses language reminiscent of the American civil rights movement:

\textsuperscript{450} \textit{“12\textsuperscript{th} of Farvardin, Islamic Republic Day,” Farsi, Second Grade 1367/1988: 171-174.}
\textsuperscript{451} \textit{“12\textsuperscript{th} of Farvardin, Islamic Republic Day.”}
Be quiet! Why should I separate their sofreh? Our God is one. The father of all of us is Adam (Hazrat e Adam) and our mother is Eve (Hazrat e Hava). The value and worth of each individual is measured by his actions.\textsuperscript{452}

Imam Reza’s reproach is authoritative because of his position as the eight Shiite Imam (and the only one of the original 12 Imams buried in Iran), but also by his reference to humanity’s common lineage from the first man and woman, Adam and Eve.

“Equality” is not the only story to pursue class equality through religion. In “Right of the Worker,” children learn that labor, no matter how menial, must be rewarded and honored. In the lesson, Imam Sadeq employs a number of workers. When their task is finished, Imam Sadeq orders his foreman to pay the men “before their sweat had dried,” just as the Prophet has ordered.\textsuperscript{453} This lesson is less about passing on knowledge about Islam as it is about the correct treatment of labor. Islam, in other words, is being used to advance a political agenda that at best overlaps with the religion.

The correct treatment of labor is also the central lesson of “Where Are You Hasanak?” (“Hasanak koojai?”). “Where Are You Hasanak?” deals with the relationship of humans and animals. In this much beloved story, Hasanak is a young boy who has been taught by his father that humans are mandated by God to be kind to the animals in their care, and to see to their comfort. Hasanak worries that he will not be able to fulfill his obligation to the animals in his barn because of their “closed tongues,” in other words, their inability to speak.

Despite their muted condition, the animals communicate with the young Hasanak by braying, yelping, and noise-making. Hasanak realizes that they are hungry and he comes to feed

\textsuperscript{453} “Right of the Worker,” Farsi, Second Grade 1358/1979: 138.
them. The story ends with the message that a good master, embodied in the character of Hasanak, is also a good servant.454

Another example of the generosity of children is found in the touching tale of “Kindness and Sharing” (Mehraban va gozasht). Mehdi lives close to school, but chooses to bring his lunch with him to school so that he can eat with his classmates. When his friend Hassan asks him why it is that he doesn’t go home at noon for lunch, the humble Mehdi demurs, leaving his mother to provide the answer:

Mehdi doesn’t eat his dinner at night and most of the time only eats a few bites of bread. He tells me: I have to take my food to school to eat with my friends, since some of them don’t have any the opportunity to eat a warm meal. They are my brothers, I have to help them.455

The Second Grade textbook also provides the counterfactual of what happens when compassion is not practiced. Birds return this time as symbols for the unhappy outcome of freedom denied, in “An Incident” (Yek pishamad). The main character, Hussein, finds a small bird and decides to keep him in a cage at home. His mother warns him to let it go, that keeping it is not good for either Hussein or the bird. Hussein fails to listen to his mother, and one day when Hussein opens the bird’s cage to feed it, the sparrow bolts for its freedom. Tragically, it slams against a window and falls, leaving Hussein incredibly sad and lost in thought for days afterwards.

Today’s Second Grade Textbook

And then they’re gone. By 1997, the lessons on militancy and anti-imperialism that had defined the Second Grade curriculum have been expunged. The discourse of class and racial equality is gone as well. Of the lessons discussed above, “Equality,” “The Right of Workers,”

“Way to Victory,” “Wolf and Cow,” “Cry for Freedom,” “New Year’s Holiday,” and “The 12th of Farvardin, Islamic Republic Day” are all removed from the primer.

Picture 42 Front Matter 1376/1997

These reforms represent an intermediate step towards the complete overhaul of the curriculum, making the Second Grade textbook the first of the three books under study here to undergo comprehensive change.\(^{456}\) Although state planners excise many of the lessons in the 1990s, the textbook retains the same basic structure and pedagogy until 2003. In that year, we see the introduction of a thematic approach to the material. Lessons are divided into the following sections, written in order of appearance:

- “Institutions” (Nahadha)
- “Hygiene” (Behdasht)
- “Individual and Social Morality” (Akhlq-e fardi va ejtemai)
- “Knowledge and Scientists (Scholars)” (Danesh va daneshman)
- “Religion” (Din)
- “Nation and Homeland” (Melli va mihani)

\(^{456}\) It is tempting to attribute these changes to the inauguration of the administration of Mohammad Khatami, whose presidency marked a moderation and routinization of politics, domestic and foreign, in Iran. However, this cannot be the case, as Khatami won office in May of 1997. There simply was not enough time for his administration to directly influence the textbooks that year.
The new design represents a more holistic and bureaucratic (as opposed to a politicized) attitude towards schooling. The material stretches across grades and curricula in a rationalized and more consistent fashion.

**Picture 43 Front Matter 1386/2007**

God and the Leader preface the school year. The previously austere portrait of Khomeini used in the earlier editions has mellows considerably by the late 1990s. In the 1997 edition Khomeini is drawn in watercolor, and he is shown reading a book out of which emerge flowers and butterflies (Picture 42). The accompanying message is a condensed version of the one that appeared previously: “My hope is with you, the elementary students” (Omid-e man ba shoma dabestani hast). By 2003, Khomeini’s transformation into the kindly grandfather is complete. Khomeini, once the revolutionary of the “12th of Farvardin” lesson, has been domesticated.

Instruction opens with the giving of thanks to God. The accompanying image is that of a young girl praying over her books and homework, with scenes of her daily, childhood life in the background, including the institutions of family, mosque, and school. The narrator expresses her appreciation for the passage of the previous school year, her teachers and her parents.

**Picture 44 “Our School” 1386/2007**

The textbook’s authors exhibit a greater confidence in their religion, no longer relying on the “in-your-face” lecturing style of the earlier editions. It is a
strategy of “naturalizing” religion by not constantly announcing its presence. “In the Name of God the Forgiving and Kind, Welcome to Second Grade,” for example, is replaced by the much simpler “Our School.” Neither title nor text makes any sort of announcement about the need to always starting activities with invocations of God. God’s only appearance in the entire story is in the sign “In the name of God” posted at the top of the chalkboard. Students sit around a table, their attention focused on the teacher and their work (Picture 44).

The training of children in civic virtues such as patience and hard work becomes more prominent in the current edition. The lessons instruct children in values as necessary, but also as individual choices. For example, the story of “Koosha and Noosha” introduces Second Graders to two brother birds we who are born with the same abilities and promise, but who take very different paths in life. Put simply, Koosha works while Noosha does not. This results in catastrophe for Noosha. The takeaway for children is that while God makes all creatures alike (barabar), God also endows them with the capacity to think (aql) and choose for themselves. Misuse of this capacity through unwise choices is an affront to God and leads to the sort of catastrophic fate that met Noosha.

It is not the first time that we have seen the concept of choice and subjectivity in the curriculum. The new textbooks differ, however, in that subjectivity has a greater presence, as evidenced by the use of a student-centered pedagogy. While the move towards individualization

\[457\] The textbook models the constructivist classroom in which teacher and students work together during class. The old benches (nimkats) in which students sat three or four to a row have been removed, though this is more wish image than reality. In practice the shared bench remains in many if not most of Iran’s schools.

458 “Way to Victory” and the poor decision-making of the elephant comes to mind, though there readers are left with the impression that the arrogance born of the elephant’s strength made it unlikely that it could have chosen a more auspicious course.
represents a modernization of the curriculum, it potentially threatens efforts to homogenize attitudes towards the state and state values.\textsuperscript{459}

At the very least, asking children to make choices at the same time that they are told to submit to the group can lead to confusion. The concept of unity, previously tied to themes of anti-imperialism and national defense, remains an important part of the curriculum. Now greatly depoliticized, we see in lessons like “The Colors of the Rainbow” and “Family” that unity serves the domestic and individual needs of Iranians. The message is that life is best lived by working together. These are far cries from uniting around a Leader or in working together to oppose a marauding and much stronger enemy, themes that played major roles in the textbooks of the 1980s.

Islam is made more routine, even ordinary in the current Second Grade textbook. We see little of the instrumental application of religion, as for example in the lesson “The Right of Workers” or “My Homeland” in the First Grade textbook. Authors focus instead on the practices and rituals that constitute belief.\textsuperscript{460} They also continue to struggle with balancing the Iranian nation with pan-Islamism. The introduction of the First Grade textbook revealed a strategy of acceptance, of letting the pre-Islamic and the Islamic “sit” next to each other. Nonetheless, state planners are unable to avoid pitting Iranian identity as a potential rival to identity rooted in more universal claims. In addition to the ummat, state planners during the Khatami period demonstrate an eagerness to make Iranians part of the world community, or at the very least, one of a co-equal collection of “civilizations.” Where we once saw Islam being used as a tool for legitimizing non-Islamic concepts, state planners now turn to nationalism as a way of making

\textsuperscript{459} Kaplan, The Pedagogical State.
\textsuperscript{460} As we’ll see in the following chapter when I discuss the daily routines around religion in Iranian schools, making Islam about its practices carries the risk that worship will become a performance, a “weapon of the weak” carried out by children for the benefit of the grownups.
Iran and Iranians “normal.” By this, I mean that students are taught that many of the symbols and practices found in the IRI are also found in other parts of the world. Isomorphism, be it around the flag or the annual celebration of the start of spring, includes Iran in the community of nations.

Lessons that deal directly with Irandiyat take place within the fencing of the section “The People and the Homeland.” This portion of the book begins with the lesson “Our Iran,” in which a family takes a road trip across all of Iran, visiting pre-Islamic and Islamic sites, including the ruins of Persepolis, the tombs of the poets Sa’adi and Ferdowsi, as well as the Eighth Shiite Imam, Imam Reza buried in the northern city of Mashad (Picture 45). Mashad and Imam Reza are also featured in

**Picture 45 National Sites Islamic and Non-Islamic 1386/2007**

**Picture 46 “Pilgrimage” 1386/2007**

the lesson “Pilgrimage” (Picture 46). “Pilgrimage” appears in the “Religion” section of the textbook and despite being a lesson on how families travel to the tomb of Imam Reza to seek blessings and to have their prayers answered through 

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461 The significance of nationalism having its own billet cannot be overstated. Formal instruction centered on the homeland, and that is explicitly acknowledged as such, goes against the conventional wisdom that the IRI is interested only in an Islam that transcends national borders.  
462 Marashi observes that mapping national identity onto “neutral” physical sites is a key element of nation-building. See also Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).
Reza’s intervention, it can also be read as a specifically *Shiite Iranian* lesson. The practice of making pilgrimages to sites that are outside of Mecca, much less to visit the tombs of the Imams, is unthinkable to the vast majority of the world’s Muslims who are Sunni practitioners of the faith.

One of Iran’s most celebrated poets provides another opportunity to celebrate Iranian identity. In “Ferdowsi” a family takes advantage of their pilgrimage to Mashad to pay a visit to Toos, former home and burial site of the Iranian national poet, Ferdowsi (Picture 47). Religion comes first---the family, after all, was in Mashad when they decided to go to Toos, almost as an afterthought. Nonetheless, the adventure in Toos would have a tremendous impact on the story’s narrator, who learns after 30 years of toiling away at the epic poem *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi single-handedly saved the Farsi language from oblivion.463

![Picture 47 “Ferdowsi” 1386/2007](image)

Shortly after “Our Iran” there is a lesson on the national flag, titled simply “Flag.” A father asks his son if he knows why there is a flag. When the son answers that he does not, the father explains: “Every country has a flag. The flag is a symbol of the freedom and dignity *(sarbolandi)* of that country.”464 The flag makes Iran a member of the world community, even as it represents the unique sacrifices and history of the Iranian people (Picture 48). And the son, having been given this lesson on the purpose and meaning of the flag, now feels more a part of the *Iranian* community. The story ends with the father dropping off his boy at school. The boy

enters the schoolyard and sees his country’s flag and thinks to himself: “I felt I loved [the flag] more than I had before and like any other Iranian, I took pleasure in watching it.”

“Flag” represents a radical departure from past practices. Previous textbooks displayed Iran’s national flag, most notably in lessons on development where it was necessary to visually mark the progress that the postrevolutionary state had brought to the countryside (e.g., new schools). There was never a specific lesson on the flag itself. It would have been unthinkable, as evidenced by the following comments made by a Tehran principal:

We especially condemn nationalism. Imam Khomeini held nationalism to be a source of division. We must not propagandize nationalism in the school. This would be like teaching racism. We need to be sensitive to two issues...Are we teaching the Koran? Do we start the morning assembly with the name of God? Do we have prayer in the morning?...We must not do anything that would lead to the flag taking the place of the Koran. It’s not important whether or not there is a flag but the Koran must be, velayat (guardianship) must be, the Imams and the holy sites must be.

The principal’s appeal to Khomeini and “what he really wanted” speaks to the role that Khomeini, even in death, continues to play as a source of legitimacy.

“Flag” tries to strike a balance between the particularity of Iran’s national identity, and Iran’s general place in the community of nations. The same goal is sought in the revised version of “New Year,” now restored to the textbook after its brief removal in the late 1990s. The

465 “Flag.”
466 Rezaei, Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari, 160.
lesson’s first sentence informs children that Iran is like other countries, but even better: “Many of the world’s people celebrate the first day of their country’s new year. All of these celebrations are beautiful but the *Norooz* celebration has its own glory.”^468^ No mention of the 12\(^{th}\) of Farvardin is made anywhere in the textbook. The New Year is no longer bound to any greater cause other than its traditional role as an ancient holiday, and children are told directly that the Iranian New Year is thousands of years old (Picture 49). Prayer continues to play an important role in the celebrations, but the purpose of prayer shifts from wishing for the victory of all Iranians everywhere to one of self-help. Families ask God for assistance in so that they might become better people, defined by “good values.” The order of visitation used in the lesson during its most strident iteration---martyrs’ families first, then the grandparents---is reversed in this version of the textbook. Martyrs are still to be honored, but they are not the highlight or the purpose of the lesson.

Third Grade

Opening Matter and the Imagined Iran

The 1980 edition of the Third Grade primer begins with a blessing. The opening essay (which will remain little changed for nearly 20 years) sets the tone for what is the most religious of the three books under study:

Oh Lord, now that I am one year older and have once again come to class, I give thanks to you and I ask of you to preserve us, to always remind us to only accept you, and to only follow the path of righteousness and honesty.

As in the other grades, Khomeini is absent from the front of the book until the mid-1980s. His photograph in the first pages of the Third Grade textbook includes a lengthy anecdote by one of his children, one designed to reinforce the official memory of the former Supreme Leader as a humble, grandfatherly figure and role model for the nation:

During his entire life, I never once saw the Imam raise his voice to anyone. He never disrespected workers, and he always took care to speak highly of them and to even bestow honorifics to their names.

The back covers of the Third Grade primers follow the same arc of political development seen above. Following the peak radicalization of the mid-1980s/early 1990s, the textbook appears with a message extolling children to exercise, signaling that authorities are more anxious about the preservation of healthy bodies than the preservation of the Revolution.

Picture 50 “Let’s All Exercise Together” 1375/1996

469 The 1979 edition of the third grade textbooks was unavailable at the OERP archives at the time of my research.
471 Farsi, Third Grade 1375/1996.
Modernization and Development

The Third Grade textbook replicates the valorization of rural Iran found in the First Grade textbook, as well as the resultant tension between the countryside as the site of the “good Iran” and the desire for a developed, technologically independent Iran. Iran consists of two places, city and country, and that in the latter one will see things that “can never be seen in the city.”

Picture 51 “Last Summer” 1365/1986

The first lesson, “Last Summer” (Tabistan kay gozasht), introduces the reader to a group of Third Graders sitting in a circle and discussing what they did last summer (Picture 51). The main character, Reza, describes his summer vacation in the village of Ali Abad, a place of ceaseless labor where even women and children work alongside men to bring in the harvest. The villagers work hard so that the crops can sooner reach their fellow countrymen (mihanashenan).

The Third Grade textbooks also replicate the Second Grade conceit that the countryside is a source of science, knowledge, and religion. Lessons teach children that the natural and man-made marvels of the world are attributable to God, and that accessing religion and science requires little more than conversing with the locals. In “The Lesson That a Shepherd Gave” (Darsi keh yek choopan dad) two city boys, Akbar and Hussein, are visiting a shepherd and his

\footnote{472}
flock (Picture 52). The boys marvel at the instinctual behavior of the sheep, such as when a baby sheep goes to drink milk from its mother. The shepherd answers their many questions:

Akbar said to Hussein…How does the baby sheep know that his mother’s udder is full of milk and that it is under her stomach? Who taught it that? A baby sheep so small, where does it get this knowledge and ability from? The shepherd who had been listening to the conversation between Akbar and Hussein said: My dear children! Our kind God gave that little baby sheep the knowledge and ability to find its own meal…

Sheep are not the only animals to receive blessings from God. Science and religion come together again in “Do You Recognize Us?” (Mara mishnasi?). In this story a duck “speaks” directly to the children, asking them if they how it is, for example, that ducks are able to swim:

Do you know how we swim? Have you seen our feet? They have a thin webbing that God placed between my toes, have you seen? If this webbing weren’t between my toes, how could I swim?

The duck goes on to describe other God-given attributes, concluding that these demonstrate the beauty, power and wisdom of the Lord.

Who gets to do science?

David Menashri has argued that throughout the history of modern education in Iran, state leaders have sought to import Western technology while filtering out Western culture. Science, according to this approach, has no national origin but is portable knowledge, and can be compartmentalized and insulated from politics. Thus, the corruption and arrogance of the West does not prevent the

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475 Menashri, Education and the Making.
Third Grade textbook from offering a two-part lesson on the “Story of Flight” (Dastan-e parvaz), featuring two brothers from Ohio, Orville and Wilbur Wright (Picture 53). In later editions, Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison are added to the list of Western inventors and scientists taught to Iranian children.

Science does not entirely escape politics and ideology, and as we have already seen lessons on technology and development regularly serve nationalist goals. The authors of “Abu Ali Sinna, Great Iranian Scientist” want children to know that Iran and Iranians have also been successful at science, often many centuries before the West. Abu Ali Sinna’s works, especially on the physiology of the human body, are even used in Western medical schools.

But *who* is Abu Ali Sinna, or put a different way, *to whom* does his legacy belong? He is an important figure for state planners because he hails from Iran. The story also celebrates him as a *Muslim* thinker and scientist. Being Muslim and being Iranian are not incompatible concepts. The point here is that the text does not reconcile the two within the lesson or across the curriculum, producing gaps in the narrative that are potential openings for children and adults to pursue personal subjectivities different from the state’s agenda.

**Picture 53 “Story of Flight” 1359/1980**
Nationalism

The accidental rivalry between Islam and being Iranian is an important feature of the curriculum, and critical for understanding the limitations that inhere in the school system’s efforts at inculcation. It is captured in the space of three back-to-back lessons, a sequence in which the textbook oscillates from Iranniyat to Islamiyat and back, sometimes within the same lesson. The first story in the series is “Better than Whom?” The lesson opens with the Prophet conversing with his disciples in a mosque. Salman Farsi enters and comes over to join the conversation already in progress. Farsi’s appearance upsets one of the Prophet’s disciples.

Farsi, who as his name indicates is an ethnic “Fars” or Iranian, is not welcome:

Salman is a Farsi speaker and we are Arabs. He ought not sit in our group and or above us [in the assembly]. He must sit in a lower level of the room than us.

Suffice it to say, the Prophet is greatly displeased at this outburst:

No! It is not so. Being Farsi or being Arabic is not a reason for thinking better or worse of a person. Neither color nor ethnicity makes one wiser.

The lesson concludes with the following direct instruction:

Based on this valuable guidance, we Muslims know each other as equals and as brothers. Accent and language do not separate us from one another. Where we live, ethnicity, or our color cannot separate us one another. Nothing save “piety and faith” makes us better.

What is this lesson really about? On its surface, the Prophet is telling the reader that Muslims all belong to a single community of believers regardless of their many individual backgrounds and nationalities. The tale can be read in another way, however. At the same time that the story is advancing the concept of the ummat it is also highlighting the equality of Iranians—non-Arabs—with Arabs. It is not by accident that the subject of reproach and the

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477 “Better than Whom?”
478 “Better than Whom?”
catalyst for the Prophet’s lesson is Salman Farsi. This is a story designed to teach Iranian children that they should never accept second-grade status in the Muslim community.

Following “Better than Whom?” the textbook pivots to the Third Grade lesson on the nation, “Oh Iran, Oh My Homeland” Islam suffuses what is also the most directly nationalist lesson of the Third Grade:

Oh Iran, oh my homeland! Oh Iran my glorious home. I love you, the laughter of your children. The shouts of your youth, the clamor of your people, I love them all. Oh glorious home, its pure soil colored by the blood of martyrs. I respect you. Each morning and night I kiss the red tulips that grow in your cemeteries. Oh Iran, oh my glorious home. Your tall mountains are the symbol of the glory and dignity of your children. Your wide fields are symbols of your freedom and liberty. The rush of your rivers is a reminder of the shouts of freemen yelling “Allah akbar!” Oh Iran, oh my glorious home! Oh land of the pure and brave, oh land of free Muslims. Oh land of Islam and faith. I pledge allegiance to you, I strive with love for your development. I love the true faith of your free people and stand ready to assist them. With anger and hate I destroy your enemies.479

**Picture 54 “Oh Iran, Oh My Homeland” 1359/1980**

The illustration in 1980 is of a young boy visiting bending over to smell large red tulips, the traditional symbol of martyrs. (Picture 54) Rows of graves are visible behind him. In later years the drawing is replaced by a photograph of worshippers visiting the graves of martyrs at Behesht-e Zahra, the vast graveyard located south of Tehran, a scene that is eventually replaced by a picture of a mass rally that is redolent in martial themes (Picture 55). Regimented and anonymous soldiers stand at attention in a stadium, the gathering flanked by an enormous canvas with Khomeini’s picture on it, so large that it has to be hoisted by a hydraulic crane.

479 "Oh Iran, Oh My Homeland,” *Farsi*, Third Grade 1359/1980: 91-93.
“Oh Iran, My Homeland!” establishes the country of Iran as the source of children’s identity, one that is unambiguously Islamic-Iranian. Then, in the next lesson, the textbook abruptly shifts back to a message of pan-Islamism. In the final lesson of the

Picture 55 “Oh Iran, Oh My Homeland” 1366/1987

Iranniyat to Islamiyat sequence, “An Adolescent from Palestine” (Nojavani az felestin), an Iranian narrator approaches a young Palestinian boy leaning against a tent pole, lost in thought and looking off towards the ruins of his former village (Picture 56). The narrator hesitates before finally asking the Palestinian what it is that so troubles him. The young boy relates a tale of woe to the narrator very similar to the one learned by Second Graders:

The Israelis mercilessly set fire to our desert tents. They destroyed classrooms with young children still inside, and with an uncivilized attack they destroyed hospitals and burned our children with bombs disguised as dolls.480

These atrocities, the text tells us, must be stopped. Unlike the Second Grade textbook, the Third Grade version of the lesson on Palestine challenges the reader directly to do something about what they have just read. The Palestinian declares:

Brother! This sadness weighs on my heart and on the hearts of free peoples everywhere. To save my heroic and Muslim people and my home and homeland I need comrades. Oh brother, how will you help me in my journey?481

By 1988, the Palestinian youth has decided to take matters in his own hands. “An Adolescent from Palestine” disappears from the text by the 1990s, but not before significant modifications are made to the narrative and the accompanying photos, reflecting the increased stridency of the

481 “An Adolescent from Palestine.”
overall curriculum. Instead of the passive victim of the early textbooks, schoolchildren in the mid-1980s are introduced to a well-armed and disciplined Palestinian youth living in southern Lebanon. With his Kalashnikov in hand, the boy describes the Palestinian describes how he and his family were driven out of their homes by the Israelis, and that since that time he and his fellow Muslims have fought against their oppressors (Picture 58). In this version, bearing witness is not enough. At the end of the lesson Palestinian youth dispenses with asking for help and leaves once more for the front.

“An Adolescent from Palestine,” like all of the narratives on Palestine, is riddled with tension between the concept of Muslims uniting together against the “Zionist usurpers” (or usurpers of any kind), and the aim of teaching Iranian students on why the nation is important and must be defended. After all, the goal is not to eliminate Israel so that the Palestinians can become part of the community of Muslims---they already are a part of the ummat. The aim is to push the Israelis out in order to restore the Palestinian homeland.

A note on the instability of pictures: As with the shifting images at the front of the textbooks, there is a correlation between politically charged topics and changes to lesson illustrations. The image used for “Letter From a Palestinian Boy” changes no less than three times before its removal from the text. While we must be careful not to read too much into these changes, they do suggest that the question of how to portray Palestinians---as victims or as potential revolutionaries---remains unsettled amongst elite planners.
Norooz

Third Graders receive nearly the same lesson on Norooz as the children of the Second Grade. The New Year does not stand alone but is linked directly to “Islamic Republic Day.” The Third Grade book comes without the lengthy history of why there is an Islamic Republic Day but the aim and purpose is the same, specifically to contain the holiday within the revolutionary experience: “Every year we congratulate each other on the ‘freedom of spring’ alongside the spring of nature and we celebrate the cry of Norooz along with ‘Islamic Republic Day’.” There are the requisite visits to the graves of martyrs and prayers to God asking for the continuing freedom and progress of Iran. The Third Grade textbook takes it one step further than its Second Grade counterpart by expressing the hope that the Islamic Revolution will be “introduced” to the rest of the world, a line that remains in the text even throughout the period of moderation in the 1990s. This represents a major exception to the “arc of Islamicization” that I have described elsewhere. In fact, the Third Grade “New Year Holiday” is notable for being one of the few lessons that remains untouched until the 2003 revisions.

Islam

How is Islam treated as a separate topic when nearly every lesson is directly tied to religious precepts? Stand alone lessons on religion in the book deal primarily with what is required of the faithful. The conditions for reaching salvation, however, are not consistent in the curriculum. For example, in “Sinful Property,” the Prophet preaches that the appearance of righteousness (zaher) through a lifetime of good acts will not be enough to save the individual

483 The line appears some time after the 1980 text. Adequate data is not in my possession to fix the precise year.
from Hell. Going through the motions of being a Muslim, such as prayer or pilgrimage, cannot replace true faith.

Ritual receives its due in “Letter from Father.” As the title indicates, the lesson is presented in the form of a father’s letter to his children (Picture 59). After telling his son and daughter that he loves them very much, the father wishes that he could be home. The father wants his children to know above all that prayer is “the vehicle for our faith and it is the most important pillar of our religion.”484

The goal of “Letter from Father” is to return the reader back to pan-Islamism, as the family in the story is defined as being Muslim, not Iranian.

“Letter from Father” more comfortably fits within the day-to-day of schooling in Iran than “Sinful Property.” Iran’s public sphere fosters a spirit of performance, in which individuals use external expressions of faith and piety such as prayer and attention to “proper” (monaseb) clothing in order achieve their personal goals.485

It does not take reading Foucault to know that routines and rituals are important components to maintaining control inside of schools. Inner states are uncertain territory, but at

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485 Or to simply get through the day. External appearance, particularly clothing and hairstyle, is a certain way to either blend in or to draw unwanted attention.
the very least the state can compel children to perform, particularly when performances are in the self-interest of students seeking to advance into higher education. Though it may not be the ultimate goal of state planners---this is a system that seeks legitimacy---given the serious challenges faced by the school system in terms of resources and institutional capacity, compliance is better than nothing at all.\footnote{In this sense, Iran differs dramatically from a country like Syria. For a vivid description of the politics of compliance (“as if” politics), see Lisa Wedeen, \textit{Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).}

It remains unclear in the end whether the Islamic identity valued by the state is a borderless, non-sectarian Muslim, or a Shiite with Muslim. The idea that “we are all Muslims” or that Sunni-Shia differences are not important is undermined by the stories “Lesson in Freedom” (\textit{Dars-e azadi}) and “Celebration of Ebadat” (\textit{Jashn-e ebadat}). The former is a retelling of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala, \textit{the} defining event in Shiite hagiography, and the latter is the story of how the Prophet designated Imam Ali as his successor, a succession that would of course be rejected by what is now the Sunni Muslim community. Both are strictly Shiite tales, and necessarily separate the Iranian experience and encounter with Islam from that of the rest of the world’s Muslims.

\textbf{Revolution and the Islamic Republic}

The Third Grade “creation myth” gives the history of one of the Revolution’s pivotal events, the massacre of protestors in Jaleh Square, today known as Martyrs Square. Just as in the Second Grade textbook, “Martyr’s Square” in its early versions features the people leading the charge against the Shah:

They had come to this square to announce to all that “We are tired of the oppression of the Pahlavi government and we don’t want this genocidal and treasonous government.” They announced that “We are Muslims and we want an Islamic government, we are followers of the Koran and we want Koranic law, and to pick our leader and head of our country for ourselves.\footnote{“Martyr’s Square,” \textit{Farsi}, Third Grade 1359/1980: 148-150.}
The collective pronouns give a good indication that the authors of that time saw the people as the foundation of the IRI---Khomeini is not mentioned in the entire lesson. One major difference with the Second Grade version is that the masses remain in charge of events throughout the lifetime of the lesson. Given how unstable the lessons on the Revolution and the subsequent formation of the Islamic Republic have been, perhaps the most notable quality of “Martyr’s Square” is its durability. Like “New Year,” the story barely changes until its replacement in 2003.

Khomeini may be absent from the historiography of revolution, but he does receive his due in the textbook. At the risk of stretching interpretation too far, the authors seem to draw parallels between the Founder’s trials at the hands of the Shah and those of the Prophet in the story “The Sacrificing Leader of Islam” (*Rahbar-e fadakar-e islam*). The Prophet had to struggle for nearly twenty years until he and his followers triumphed, and while this may not be a direct analogue to Khomeini’s experience of exile, the lesson provides an opportunity for teachers to make the necessary connections between Khomeini’s patience to what is now seen as the inevitability of the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic government in Iran.

**The Third Grade Textbook Today**

*Picture 60 "Imam Mehraban" 1387/2008*

Like the other grades, the post-2003 edition of the Third Grade primer represents a greater professionalism in textbook production as well as a more “scientific” (*elmi tar*) approach to education. The material is organized by the same themes found in
the Second Grade textbook and adopts the same constructivist approach to instruction. Students read lessons then participate in a battery of events that include question and answer, re-enactments and play, partner and group work. Overall, the Third Grade book retains its religious character in relation to the other textbooks, though this is lessened somewhat in the new edition. Routinization of the curriculum has made it possible for state planners to finally link lessons and themes across grades, resulting in the elimination of textbook “personalities.”

God still gets the first and last word. Thanks are given to Allah in the opening and closing chapters for the opportunity of coming to school, as well as for the grownups who are guiding the children on their educational journey. Khomeini is in his usual place at the beginning, this time alone and beaming a large smile at the reader. Imam-e mehraban, “The Kind Imam,” reads the caption beneath the picture, he is again designated as Iranian children’s gracious grandfather.

There are in this edition the echoes and shadows of themes found in the earlier editions. The image of a family sitting together and taking their tea on the floor reflects an unwillingness to fully let go of an idealized lifestyle based on the pursuit of values and not

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488 The image is from the lesson “Bus,” which tells the story of a young man who gives up his seat on a crowded bus for a senior citizen. “Bus” also teaches students that the young can be models of good behavior for those who are older, a theme repeated in the lesson “The Palestinian Teacher.”

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Picture 61 “Bus” 1386/2007
material wealth (Picture 61). On the whole, however, urban life dominates the imagery of daily life. There is no longer any of the tension or sense of trying to have it both ways, of preserving the bucolic countryside and the modern city, seen in the earlier texts. The problems have not gone away, however. Children, teachers, and families live in the city, but the city remains a place filled with noise and pollution, so bad that sometimes even the trees are forced to run away.\textsuperscript{489} The difference now is that authors depict the city as a place that can and must be redeemed by its residents. Lessons like “We Only Have One Planet Earth” and “Our City, Our Home” engage students in what is known as \textit{farhang sazi}, literally “culture building.” It is not the place that is bad (recall the polluted and noisy city in the Second Grade poem “City and Country”) but the behavior or city residents, which the textbooks urge students to modify and reform.

To a limited degree, past militancy is also retained in the new Third Grade textbook. Children are given lessons reminiscent of the Second Grade lesson plan in the late 1980s, with stories of self-defense and martyrdom. These stand out against the context of moderation that on the whole defines the new curriculum.

So for example, there is the tale of “The Strongest Bird in the World.” Returning to the imagery of birds-as-freedom, the tale is of a mother sparrow whose nest is disturbed by an inconsiderate elephant. The elephant rams his head into the tree

\textbf{Picture 62 “The Strongest Bird in the World” 1386/2007}

where the bird and her little chicks have nested, nearly causing their nest to fall to the ground. Making matters worse, the mother and her family cannot drink water from the local river, as it is being hoarded over by a crocodile that is just as selfish and inconsiderate as the elephant. After trying to reason, to no avail, with both of her tormentors, the mother tricks the elephant and crocodile to participate in a contest of strength.

Each thinks that it is pulling against the tiny sparrow in a tug-of-war, when in fact the sparrow has secretly given the ends of the rope to her two tormentors (Picture 62). The upshot is that by using her wits, the sparrow ultimately triumphs over her enemies.

**Picture 63 Riz Ali in “Sacrificers” 1359/1980**

What does this story mean in terms of political socialization (parvaresh-e siasi)? There are none of the leading questions found in the textbooks of the previous decades, meaning that interpretation is wholly left to the teacher and her students. The purpose of “The Strongest Bird in the World” is left uncertain. It could be nothing more than an entertaining story about animals that cannot get along. Or perhaps the story represents Iran’s determination to not be dominated by any power, “neither West nor East” as the old revolutionary slogan would have it.490

**Picture 64 Mohammad Hussein Fahmideh in “Sacrificers” 1386/2007**

490 Na sharq na gharb. East, or sharq, represents the former Soviet Union.
There is less ambiguity in the story of Mohammad Hussein Fahmideh in the lesson “Sacrificers” (*Fadakaran*). “Sacrificers” is a carry-over lesson from the 1980s, and deals with real-life examples of Iranians who risked or, in the case of Fahmideh, sacrificed their lives in the service of others. Originally, the lesson told only the tale of Ali Reza, a brave Iranian from the country’s Turkish region\(^{491}\) whose quick thinking saves the passengers of an oncoming train from crashing into a rockslide that has spilled onto the rails (Picture 63). Following the reforms of 2003, two additional heroes were added to “Sacrificers,” one of whom is the late Fahmideh, who as a 10 year old *basiji* volunteer during the “Holy Defense” against Iraq famously through himself under an Iraqi tank, a pair of hand grenades held in his hands (Picture 64).

**These tales of militancy must not be exaggerated.** The new Third Grade textbook is on the whole “ordinary” and much more mainstream, its pages filled with the sort of lessons on hygiene and compassion that might be found in textbooks anywhere in the world. Certainly, the textbook offers many other role models for children to follow than that of Fahmideh, including the formidable example of the “foreign” inventors Alexander Graham Bell (Picture 65) and Thomas Edison (Picture 66).

The Edison story merits closer attention. The title of the lesson, “An Enlightened Thought” (*Fekr-e roshan*), is a clever play on Edison’s fame as the inventor of the light bulb but also the Farsi word for “intellectual,” *roshanfekr*---literally “enlightened thinker.” The Edison story brings pupils to the intersection of science and religion. A young Edison saves his mom from likely death by arranging candles around their home, thus enabling the mother’s physician

\(^{491}\) Ali Reza is one of the rare occasions in which the textbooks mention ethnicity as a *personal* attribute. Comprising almost 30\% of Iran’s population, Iran’s Azeri-speaking population are by far the country’s largest ethnic minority.
to perform a critical operation. This apocryphal story gives us a glimpse of Edison’s future genius and inspiration, and in a remarkable ending scene, we also see the piety that lies at the root of it all. Edison---an American Christian!---raises his hands in prayer to give thanks to God for saving his mother’s life.492

Another lesson carried over from the earlier versions of the textbook is “Class Representative” (Namayandeh-ye kelas). “Class Representative” teaches Third Graders about democracy and voting. In earlier versions of the lesson from the 1980s, the action centers on the teacher explaining to children that they have the right and the power to select their own class representative. Prior to voting, he asks the students to describe what qualities qualify someone to be an elected representative.493 Their answers to the question include just, faithful, and studious.494

The new version of “Class Representative” has an already-elected representative abusing his power in the classroom. Amin needlessly penalizes his classmates, causing what can only be

493 A similar discourse exists for the grownups. I was in Iran during the 2008 elections for Parliament (Majles) and saw regular features on state television in which a reporter took to the streets to ask ordinary citizens what it was they wanted in an MP.
described as mini-uprising against his authority to occur. Not surprisingly, they appeal to their teacher for relief:

The children were not silenced by fear. When the teacher came into the classroom the children raised a ruckus. When the teacher realized what was going on, he said: “It appears that Amin has forgotten what qualities a good representative is supposed to have.”

By changing the story to post-election accountability, the textbook shifts its focus to training students to be vigilant citizens, willing and “unafraid” to hold their elected officials accountable. Just as important is the manner of petition---the students take their complaints to the teacher, whose wisdom and learning allows him to resolve the conflict. The teacher, in other words, serves as a metaphor for Iran’s Supreme Leader whose duties include the neutral arbitration between right and wrong.

Lessons on religion, now compartmentalized in their own section, focus mainly on the rituals and rites of passage of being a Muslim. “The Most Beautiful Day Of Life” tells the story of Nikoo, a young girl of nine years who one night cannot fall asleep. Her mother comes to check on her, and seeing that Nikoo is still awakes, asks what is the matter. Nikoo replies that nothing is wrong, and that she is in fact unable to sleep because she is overjoyed. At school they had celebrated ebadat. As a rite of a passage, the ritual of ebadat marks the transition of females from childhood into adulthood, and above all, the duty of daily prayer. Nikoo’s happiness signals that she sees prayer---as ought the reader---as an opportunity and not a burdensome obligation.

Nationalism is acknowledged with its own section, labeled “The People and the Homeland.” The nationalist poem “Oh Iran, Oh My Homeland” has been updated to include a new roster of famous Iranians for children to emulate, a mix of the ancient and the modern.

There are poets (Hafez and Moulavi) and scientists (Abu Ali Sinna), warrior champions (Rostam) and wrestling champions (Takht). These *palavans*, or champions, embody authors’ “wish images” of the “good Iranian.” They are paired with the countless martyrs who have died for Iran, living in the permanence of a land of mountains and one of the most ancient civilizations on the planet.

![Picture 67 “Oh Iran, Oh My Homeland” 1386/2007](image)

The potent mix of Islamic nationalism receives further treatment in “The Imam and the Butterflies.” Imam Ali delivers honey to the children of martyrs, and they crowd around him like the “butterflies” of the story’s title. When he is asked why he is giving so much to these children, Ali replies, “These are the children of the best of us (*baytarin mardoom*). They are the children of men that martyred themselves in the line of God and for the defense of the Messenger’s religion.”\(^{496}\) The reference to the “local” in “The Imam and the Butterflies” is unmistakable. The universalism of Ali’s message of compassion and obligation to those who have given their lives “in the line of God” also evokes Iran’s revolutionary and war martyrs, whose images and stories comprise a major foundation of the official public discourse in the IRI.

Particular lessons on Iranian nationalism are followed, once again, by the universal tale of the Palestinians. Students receive another dose of border-crossing outrage in the tale of Khaled, a young Palestinian who has the misfortune to be captured throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers. Pressed by the callous troops to tell who taught him to throw rocks, Khaled at first

resists, then finally says “Mohammad.” Convinced that Mohammad is the ringleader of their tormentors, the troops force Khaled to take them to the home of the “Palestinian teacher.” He complies. Mohammad, it is revealed, is Khaled’s three-year old brother. The story takes a tragic turn. Khaled says to his brother:

“This time you come too and strike them with rocks. Don’t be scared! Alright?” Mohammad nodded his head and said: “I too will come and hit them with rocks.” In that moment, the Israeli officer slammed the butt of his rifle into Mohammad’s head and warm blood spilled onto Khaled’s hands. From Mohammad’s gruesome martyrdom we finally learn the significance of the lesson’s title, “The Palestinian Teacher.” Even the youngest amongst us are capable of being “teachers” against oppression. The Israelis, for their part, remain unreformed and as merciless as ever.

From Mohammad’s gruesome martyrdom we finally learn the significance of the lesson’s title, “The Palestinian Teacher.” Even the youngest amongst us are capable of being “teachers” against oppression. The Israelis, for their part, remain unreformed and as merciless as ever.

As always, the Palestinian lesson leaves the reader unclear as to what political message being taught. Its placement at the end of the “Nation and Homeland” section, just after the nationalist poem “Ay Iran,” defines the lesson as being on nationalism and the virtues of preserving one’s homeland at all costs. The example of the young boys standing up to the Israeli soldiers is a powerful example of bravery, one geared to inspire similar action in the young children who will read the story. If this is the case, than the details of the occupation of Palestinians by Israel are unimportant. Like we have seen before, the Palestinian story is really about Iran and Iranians and the necessity of never losing one’s home to foreign occupiers.

497 “The Palestinian Teacher,” Farsi, Third Grade 1386/2007: 133-135. The lessons is unaccompanied by exercises or questions, making its purpose more open to interpretation.
Of course, the lesson can also be read as being strictly about the cruelty of the Israelis. Few students would not be moved by the treatment the children receive at the hands of the soldiers. The violence administered against the (“the blood flowed”) seems calculated to evoke a visceral response from the reader, perhaps even hatred towards the “Zionist” state.\textsuperscript{498}

\textbf{What’s School Got to Do With It?}

In October of 2008 a special edition of the weekly magazine \textit{Hamshari-ye javan} (“Young Citizen”) appeared in kiosks across the country. \textit{Hamshari-ye javan} is a publication aimed at a young audience, typically adolescents to university undergraduates. This particular issue was written from the perspective of those Iranians who were grade-school children in the “60s,” i.e., the 1360s (1980s by the Gregorian calendar). Through a series of articles, the editors show today’s kids what it was like to go to school in the first decade of the IRI. It is a bitter-sweet survey of that time in Iran, one in which politics and religion take a back seat to nostalgic remembrances of overcrowded schools, wartime deprivations, toys and TV shows for children, and above all, the textbooks. Archive curators interviewed for the piece describe how former students come from around the world to look up their old textbooks, some even moved to tears by the experience.\textsuperscript{499}

Is this sort of gauzy sentimentality the best that Iran’s state leaders can hope for? What happened to the inculcation of ideology and the creation of a “New Islamic Citizen” devoted to the defense of the Revolution? What are the political effects of the textbook curriculum on its intended audience, that generation of Iranians that Khomeini famously deemed “his hope”?\textsuperscript{500}

\textsuperscript{498} Or perhaps not. “The Palestinian Teacher” comes with no follow-up questions or activities, leaving open the possibility that this is simply another story for students and their teachers to read at the end of a textbook section.

\textsuperscript{499} “\textit{Yaran-e dabestani-e man!”} [“My Grade-School Friends!”], \textit{Hamshari-ye javan}, 13 Mehr 87/2008, 79.

\textsuperscript{500} For years textbooks opened with a portrait of the late founder and the caption “\textit{Omid-e man ba shoma dahbestaniha ast}” [“My hope is with you, the elementary students.”].
For all of the debates about what textbooks are, there is surprisingly little understanding of what textbooks actually do. Answers frequently come in the form of speculation, or in confused truisms with little basis in empirical evidence. At best, authors excuse themselves with the disclaimers that textbook effects are beyond the scope of their current research.

Looking beyond the curriculum, we must also ask what influence, if any, does the context in which textbook messages must ultimately circulate have on the state efforts to produce loyalty to state rule? Here the scholarship splits into two. On one side of the debate are those who argue that the world beyond the school walls is a verdant ideological environment, offering Iran’s ruling class the blessing of a unique form of legitimacy. Socialization through schooling is effective because it matches pre-existing values in Iranian society, reinforced daily by the mosque, and above all, the families.501 Taken together, the synergy and harmony of Iran’s various socializing agents produces a nurturing context for textbook messages.

Opposed to this viewpoint are scholars who argue that the vast gulf between what is taught in school and what children experience and learn in the world beyond the school, especially at home, results in a youth population that is increasingly lost and confused. Bihoviyat (without identity), chandganeh (multiple identity) and gij (dizzy) are terms that are frequently used to describe current generations.

Each of the above perspectives raises its own set of questions. If schooling is in harmony with the world outside of the classroom and schoolhouse, then why does the state bother with socialization in the first place? Many Iranians, including the pious, chafe against state efforts to

501 “The IRI, unlike most other revolutionary governments, does not feel threatened by other socializing agencies like the family, the peer groups, and places of work and worship. In Iran these are mutually reinforcing institutions. The differences among them, which the texts try to minimize, are more in the level and degree of intensity of the value inculcation rather than having conflicting values.” M. Mobin Shorish, “The Islamic Revolution and Education in Iran,” Comparative Education Review 32, no. 1 (1988): 58-75.
“make believers” out of the population. Events from this past summer demonstrated that using religiosity as a predictor of loyalty is tenuous at best. The related claim that socialization works better on children from more traditional/religious families than those from secular/Westernized was severely undermined by the presence of a large number of protestors who hailed from religious backgrounds.

If, on the other hand, we look at schools as being in disharmony with social life, then the question becomes why does the country’s system of governance hang together despite the growing anomie of its children, a group that for years has comprised over 70 percent of the country’s population? How is it possible to have a school system that, in the words of no less a figure than Iran’s Supreme Leader, is failing but whose failures have not resulted in serious challenges to the regime?502

Together the conclusions of both the “harmony” and “disharmony” camps read like Durkheimian musings on the ills and cures of modern society. This is a sociology of functionalism, in which the correspondence of textbooks and schooling to the banalities of everyday life is the inverse measure of alienation and anomie. Whatever their conclusions, nearly all of the authors cited above share in common a concern with schooling as a top-down project driven by inputs (textbook lessons) that produce easy outputs (fully-formed citizens). Schooling is seen as mechanical, based on a factory-model of education. The intersubjectivity that lies at the heart of the school experience is ignored, and if the process to teaching and

502 I have made the argument elsewhere that the biggest threat to the system comes not from the failure of schools, but from their successes. Children have internalized lessons on citizenship, honesty, and democratic representation, as evidenced by the rhetoric of Iran’s youth movement over the past decade. See Shervin Malekzadeh, “‘Death to America’ Day: How Iran Trained its Young to Protest,” Time.com, November 4, 2009, http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1934584,00.html (last accessed December 23, 2010).
learning is mentioned at all it is often at the end with a call for more research, or a disclaimer that textbook effects are beyond the scope of the author’s project.

Textbooks effects may be uncertain, but there are ways to flesh out the contingent ways in which everyday encounters between state and societal actors produce a framework that preserves, if temporarily, the power of dominant groups. I see this as a process by which relationships of power interact in specific historical and empirical contexts. Schooling is but one part of this process, and likely affects it in important ways. I find myself in agreement with Gregory Starrett’s caution that we might do better to consider the materials found in classrooms as symptoms, rather than the causes of political outcomes:

They are symptoms of a political order whose reformist modernism proclaims that the future can be shaped through the personal transformation formal education brings, at the same time that it hedges its bets, as all states do, by deploying the ancient and indispensable troika of police, patronage, and propaganda that shapes people’s interpretation of the books they read in school.503

Starrett argues that the curricula produced by ideological regimes in the Middle East are rarely coherent and that lesson plans in different subjects frequently contradict each other. The interaction of all of these moving parts results in contradictions and contingencies that even the most thorough of state planners cannot anticipate. Efforts to produce a uniform populace (in terms of values and beliefs) committed to a particular form of rule only heighten and accelerate the contradictions.

Schooling shapes, yes, but does not determine identity. Rather than asking what textbooks cause (or fail to cause) people to do, we should ask how the barrage of state-produced messages constrain and nurture the imaginations of its audience. To answer this question, greater attention must be given to the consumption of schooling by students, parents, teachers, 

and administrators, a task already taken up in the third chapter of this dissertation, and one that will be revisited in Chapter Six, “Parvaresh: Case Study of a Concept, Part Two.”
Chapter Five “Parvaresh: Case Study of a Concept, Part One”

“Without compromise before the enemy, self-denying and the follower of a simple life, paying little attention to salary, material goods, clothes or appearance, passionate and idealistic, a defender of Islam…”

--- A description of the first generation of morabian

“Due to the carelessness of some, the system and foundation of parvaresh that had been laid down at the time of the Revolution was removed from the structure of the educational system, and gradually diminished until it was practically eliminated altogether. Now you [are believers] in this issue. Carry it out; get it done. If parvaresh isn’t more important than amoozesh, then it is surely not less.”

--- The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, April 29, 2009

One of the important questions that might be asked is: Is it necessary to address change within the Deputy Ministry of Nurture and Physical Education? Why must there be an engagement with such a change? Is it necessary?

--- “Mauvinat-e paravaresh; chera tahavol bakhsh?” [“The Deputy Ministry of Nurture: Why Partial Change?”]

The terms amoozesh and parvaresh, along with their Arabic analogues, talim and tarbiat, make reference to the concept “education” in all of its many varieties, both formal and informal. While the particular meaning of amoozesh/talim is straightforward (academic or knowledge instruction) there is some looseness of fit between parvaresh/tarbiat and its English versions. In addition to “nurture,” parvaresh can be translated to mean “training,” “character formation,” or “upbringing.” Moreover, although parvaresh and tarbiat are frequently used interchangeably, there are many who treat tarbiat as an omnibus term encompassing both the concept of “knowledge” as well as “nurture,” in other words, amoozesh and parvaresh. By this latter construction, parvaresh is a subset of tarbiat, not its equivalent.

Distinctions in the meanings of the two terms became political in the fall of 1964. State planners in that year divided the Ministry of Culture, once the sole overseer of education, into three separate ministries: Education (Amoozesh va parvaresh), Culture and Art (Farhang va honar), and Science and Higher Education (Oloom va amoozesh-e ali). The decision to use the compound construction “amoozesh va parvaresh” for use in the title of the new Ministry of Education (MOE) was not by accident. At the time of the new Ministry’s founding, the
consensus amongst state planners and educational experts was that the goal of producing the “complete human” (insan-e kamel) could best be achieved by treating the “growth and nurturing” (roshd va parvaresh) as an autonomous field of knowledge, distinct but complementary to its academic counterpart amoozesh. The singular of “education” was therefore made into two, with all of the concomitant implications that such a division had on the organization, governance, and planning of Iran’s school system.

It was a fateful decision, one that eventually came to be seen as a historical mistake, in some ways the original sin of Iran’s current school system. In the half century since taking on its new name, Ministry of Education has struggled, and generally failed, to find the proper balance between amoozesh and parvaresh, academics and virtue. Chapters Two (“Structure no System”) and Three (The Expansion, Overcrowding, and Appropriation of the School System by Ordinary Iranians, 1979-2008”) introduced us to the existence of a number of structural impediments standing between the Iranian state and its efforts to school the “whole child.” Contingencies of overpopulation and war, together with the combined weight of the konkoor, the idiosyncrasies of Iran’s labor market, and the relentless pursuit of credentials (madrak gerai) by students and their families tip the balance of schooling in favor of amoozesh. The state “thumb” presses the scales even further through an overburdened national school system better equipped

504 For state expression of this view of the “original sin,” see...For a non-state version, expressed by a critic of the state, see Shirzad Abdollahi, “Baytarin kar enhalal-e omoor-e tarbiati bood” [“The Best Course of Action Would Have Been to Dissolve the Omoor-e tarbiati”], Bank-e etelat-e amoozesh va parvaresh-e iran, 3 Mehr 1385/2006.

505 The struggle of the Pahlavi-era school system to produce a robust program of parvaresh, discussed at length in Chapter Two, is another example of the important continuities the pre- and postrevolutionary school systems. See David Menashri, Education and the Making of Modern Iran (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), especially Chapter 8. For a more recent discussion dealing with the elimination and restoration of parvaresh at the ministerial level, see “Majles tarh-e ayia-e mauvinat-e Parvareshi ra tasvib kard; Tavajo dobareh be ‘parvaresh’” [“The Majles Passes the Plan to Restore the Mauvinat-e Parvareshi; A Return to ‘Parvaresh’”], Quds, 13 Bahman 1384/2006, http://www.qudsdaily.com/archive/1384/html/11/1384-11-13/page9.html#1 (last accessed December 15, 2010).

506 The notion that schooling produces the “complete human,” or the ensan-e kamel, is widely-held in Iran.
to identify and reward academic merit (and then only of a very particular type) than measuring the moral development of its students. Despite its self-proclaimed identity as a regime produced by the “revolution in values,” in which “purification would come before academics” (tazkieh ghabl az talim), against all expectations parvaresh under IRI rule remains the more troubled half of Iran’s school system, disputed and controversial, even diminished by its counterpart, amoozesh.

This chapter introduces another layer to the challenges facing the IRI as it seeks to inculcate Islamic values in its students. Here I will argue that the overtly ideological character of the Iranian school system, manifestly produced by a regime committed to the creation of an Islamic society loyal to the formal values of the state, results in the politicization and paralysis of that same school system. This politicization of education, produced because of qualities endogenous to postrevolutionary schooling, is the primary reason that the IRI fails to reach its goal of transforming students into idealized Islamic citizens.

Put more simply, Iranians schools over the past thirty years became increasingly politicized because postrevolutionary education is itself political. The “unhidden curriculum” that lies at the heart of the Iranian state’s systematic intervention in children’s political socialization spurs “policy and opinion makers to…lobby their claims and repudiate the opposing case, in short, to act as moral agents in education.” Moreover, by raising the stakes

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507 The neologism of the “unhidden curriculum” simply means that the state makes no effort to conceal its political and cultural agenda. Most of the educational literature deals with its nominal opposite, the “hidden curriculum,” or the norms, behaviors, and roles implicitly transmitted to students during formal instruction in the academic curriculum. My claim is that the Iranian school system makes this normative training explicit. Put in the language of literary studies, what is often subtext in an American context is all text in Iran.

508 Sam Kaplan, *The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), 63. In the case of Turkey, moral agents seeking to mediate between state and society are members of civil and quasi-society groups and associations. Turkey’s democracy, though by no means perfect, allows for and encourages associational life, a phenomenon that is for the most part absent from Iran’s much narrower democratic sphere. This is not to say that moral agents do not exist in Iran or that
on the success (and failure) of postrevolutionary schooling, in other words, by directly linking the future survival of the IRI with the schooling of future generations, the state encourages and facilitates a debilitating politics of contention around education as individuals, groups, and factions compete with one another for the authority to insert their own vision of the Islamic society into this “indispensable” institution.

In order to demonstrate that the Iranian school system is plagued by what might be called the “pathology of politics,” I diagnose two symptoms brought on by the unhidden curriculum. The first of these I label as the “discourse of science and expertise.” Unlike other social and political arenas in Iran, where reference to Islamic rhetoric and precedent establishes the legitimacy of participating actors, would-be reformers of the postrevolutionary school system must demonstrate their authenticity through science and research (elm va taqiqat), based on the general consensus that politics, being a profane art, not be allowed to enter the sacred sphere of schooling.

The insistence that educational reform be decided on technical merit alone masks in reality the quest for power. Acting under the pretense that disinterested educational research is a virtue, government planners recruit the authority afforded by “objective science” as a hedge against claims that Iran’s schools are being politicized to serve their narrow, partisan interests. Conversely, using the same logic, government critics produce claims that there is an absence of research supporting educational policy proposals in order to demonstrate their opponents’ bad faith. This latter movement, in which adversaries use appeals to the scientific method to batter and delegitimize each other, reveals the discourse of science and expertise to be both a symptom they are incapable of inserting themselves between state-driven educational programs and the consumption of those programs by ordinary families. Rather, as we’ll soon see, they tend to be restricted to elites already within state institutions, including but not limited to the Ministry of Education, the semi-independent Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP), and the Parliament (Majles).
and a driving factor of the politicization of postrevolutionary schooling, or phrased in the language of social science, a dependent and independent variable.

The second symptom of politicization discussed in this chapter is the “perpetual crisis of fundamental change.” Regular bouts of fundamental change, a feature of Iran’s educational system since the mid-1980s, stem not from any pressing need to improve or “save” schooling but are instead created by administrators determined to distinguish themselves from their immediate predecessors. Change is simply politics by other means, and therefore no amount of “objective research” is likely to end or slow down the politicization of Iranian schooling. Educational planners who wrap their reform agendas in the protective mantle of science discover that not even science can preserve them from the corrosiveness of politics and ideology that lies at the core of Iran’s postrevolutionary school system.

We witnessed just such a dynamic of constant change earlier in Chapter Two, in which I explored the ways in which Iran’s Ministry of Education constitutes a “structure with no system.” There I argued that the failure to fully consolidate the postrevolutionary Ministry of Education provided openings for successive ministers to provide the “final” transformation of the old Pahlavi school system. Linking the politicized nature of Iran’s educational project to the history of educational reform since 1979 allows me to modify and extend that earlier analysis, which was based solely on an institutional approach to politics. Even if the IRI had managed to fully secure (i.e., settle and conclusively define) the Islamic nature of the school system during the first decade of its rule, the presence of competing elites with diverse preferences and a shared, irrepressible faith in the imperative that only the are able to get “schools right,” lest the Revolution be lost, makes consolidation a necessary but not sufficient condition for ending its politicization.
I showcase evidence for both the discourse of science and expertise, as well as the perpetual crisis of fundamental change through this, the first of a two-part case study of parvaresh. Parvaresh is the centerpiece of the Iranian school system and the state’s primary mechanism for the transmission and reproduction of its ideology. Universally celebrated as the most important component of education, parvaresh has nonetheless been fraught with contention throughout the history of modern education in Iran, particularly in its application. Under Islamic rule, elite conflict over the use and content of parvaresh has become quite acute, reaching crisis levels in recent years.

Despite its long history of controversy, I argue that current contention around parvaresh is fundamentally different than the politics of schooling that occurred during the previous regime. Parvaresh is a non-negotiable concept; it is also the prized and central feature of postrevolutionary education. The presumed influence that parvaresh will have on future generations of Iranians commits rival groups to seek the power to determine education’s content. In other words, the politics that occurs within the Ministry of Education is not a reflection of the larger, fractured political environment in Iran, but is itself a source and engine of factional politics.

To support this claim, the empirical content of this chapter showcases the creation, elimination, and subsequent restoration of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi, or Deputy Ministry of Nurture in the period 2001-2006. The story of a single deputy ministry that for a brief period at the beginning of the 21st century became one of the most controversial issues not only in schooling, but within Iranian politics writ-large, provides an excellent example of how ongoing conflicts around schooling in the postrevolutionary period stem from the nature of the educational program itself. I show how efforts to revive parvaresh during the second Khatami
administration came under attack by opponents who interpreted the Ministry of Education’s reforms as a project to eliminate the role of Islam and morality from the curriculum. I will also demonstrate that although the particular incident that triggered the controversy was contingent and beyond prediction, underlying the controversy were long-term and deep-rooted processes of contention that made conflict a highly likely, if not inevitable, outcome.509

The *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*, I might add, is a topic that has received only the most perfunctory attention in the literature. Those who have mentioned it, do so only in passing, and rarely deal with the *Mauvinat* itself. Rather, authors discuss the founding of the *Omoor-e tarbiati* shortly after the Revolution and its role as a coercive agent of the state. The *Omoor-e tarbiati* as a subject of politics, or a “dependent variable,” is completely absent in both the Farsi and English language literature on postrevolutionary schooling in Iran.510 Likewise, media accounts tend to unproblematically treat the presence of “cultural warriors” on campus as state agents of Islamic and political socialization.511 I break from this framework in hopes of sparking debate and further research on this completely ignored topic.

I conclude the chapter by exploring the contradiction effected by the universal insistence that schooling be based on a politically neutral foundation---even as the ultimate aim of that same schooling is to produce a politically active Islamic citizenry. The possibility that Iran’s educational system has become politicized because it is at root political is not a topic seriously

considered or discussed amongst academics or political elites, a lacuna that plays a critical role in perpetuating the corrosive cycle of politicization of schooling.

**What is Parvaresh?**

There exists an interesting parallel between the development of the concept of *parvaresh* and its English variant, “culture.” Like culture, a word adopted from the Latin *colere*, or “to tend, or cultivate,” *parvaresh* in its earliest usage began as a term of art for farming and the cultivation of crops and livestock. Over time this pastoral meaning expanded to include “the fostering and cherishing of habits, ideas, and values,” particularly in young people. Well before the introduction of modern schooling to Iran, *parvaresh* was seen as the responsibility of the household as well as the local community that the household was a part of. Its function was to act as a kind of social transmitter, one designed “to pass on the country’s cultural heritage from one generation to the next.” Such dissemination was viewed as indispensable to the fostering of healthy communities, a social compact of sorts between local societies and future generations. Without the proper *parvaresh*, a child would become an adult who was “without culture” or *bi-farhang*, an expression that in the Iranian context suggests an individual unmoored and without discernible identity.

Following the introduction of mass schooling in Iran, parties to the compact shifted: the state as the representative and agent of society took on the responsibility of guiding children to adulthood, a responsibility previously handled exclusively by neighbors, parents, extended

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512 In Europe “culture” took on its contemporary, anthropological meaning around the end of the 18th century. Partly as a response to the universalist ideas of the Enlightenment, Romantic thinkers began to use the term to refer to the customs, values, and shared meanings of a “people” bounded in time and space to a particular piece of territory, the “crop” or “product” as it were of a historically unique and bounded nation.


514 In the same way the phrase *bitarbiat*, which loosely translates as “rude,” indicates a not wholly complete person, one who lacks important qualities because of, literally, they are “without nurture.” Latin Americans have a similar expression, *sin educacion* or *mal educado*, which mean “without education” and “poorly educated,” respectively.
family, and the local mosque. Gregory Starrett notes that educational planners in the Muslim states of the Middle East took a different path to modernity than their western peers, articulating imported technologies of schooling to local circumstances. Modernizing elites in the region believed that “progress requires a centrally administered emphasis upon moral as well as economic development.”

Alongside the usual coterie of classes dealing with academic and scientific knowledge---math, physics, chemistry, and so forth, students were expected to learn manners (adabiat), social skills (parvaresh-e ejtemai), and morality (parvaresh-e akhlaqi), latter categories directly and indirectly informed by Islam.

Thus the acquisition of knowledge and morality through schooling is integrated in Iran and the larger Muslim world in ways that render parvaresh a challenging concept to explain to an American or non-Muslim audience. Instruction in values exists in the American educational experience, certainly, most notably in the work being done at the elementary and pre-elementary levels of schooling. Nonetheless, in the American encounter with formal schooling, science, the humanities, and morality, are for the most part treated as separate spheres of knowledge, with their own rules and standards.

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515 For a historical account of the “new school” movement in Qajar Iran, see Chapter Five of Monica Ringer’s book Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001).


517 Starrett rails against the inaccurate but widely held belief that Egypt’s government is “secular.” One need look no further than modern Egyptian schooling to see evidence of a state deeply implicated in the practice of religion. Islam is instrumentally promoted by the Egyptian state as a means of pre-empting domestic Islamist groups. Starrett’s research shows that this attempt to beat the Islamists at their own game backfires, as those same groups are now promoting their ideas within the school system.

518 Driven by the so-called culture wars, recent years has seen regular eruptions of so-called “cultural wars” between groups who are those in the United States who blame many if not all of that country’s ills on the supposed decline of values education in school, the prescribed remedies similar in form if not substance to those found in the Islamic Republic including the restoration of daily prayer at school. See for instance William Bennett, The Book of Virtues (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) and E. D. Hirsch, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
By contrast, in the popular and political imaginations of many Iranians *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* are inseparable. Education and learning---*improvement*---is a phenomenon that involves the acquisition of knowledge and skill *as well as* the deepening of one’s character and moral integrity; one cannot be had without the other. *Parvaresh* is an outcome of conventional education; likewise, virtues developed through *parvaresh* aids the student not only in his or her academic work, but also makes acquired knowledge meaningful.

The conceit that schooling is supposed to make one a better person will perhaps strike some readers as a novel idea. My own childhood encounters with this notion is illuminating. Born in Tehran, I was raised from an early age in the United States by Iranian parents. Growing up I was, as the euphemism would have it, quite “active” as a child, a real terror. This was a quality that inexorably resulted in my being in constant trouble at school and in the home. Exasperated at my naughty behavior, my mother would often ask me, “Don’t you go to school?” I remember being dumbstruck, even amused by her question. What, I wanted to know, did my bad behavior have to do with going to school? I now understand that for my parents schools were where children obtained the manners and virtues necessary for life as a member of society. Acquiring knowledge and improving one’s character was part and parcel of the same process, often referred to in the Farsi as *adam shodan*, literally “becoming humans.”

Of course this does not meant that Iranian families expect schools to do all of the work. Formally, in Iran the school complements the household but does not replace it. One of the major tenets of postrevolutionary political discourse is that the family is the nucleus (*haste*) of Iranian society. School, mosque, and later during adulthood, the workplace, are merely

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519 The *parvaresh* instructor of Entezar, a private boys high school in Tehran and one of my research sites discussed in the following chapter, offered a story similar to mine. Traveling on a city bus with a group of his friends, their boisterous behavior soon drew the attention of an elderly passenger who, upset at the children’s lack of public decorum asked, “Don’t you have a teacher? Don’t you go to school?”
extensions of the student’s household, captured well by the popular slogan, still seen on schoolwalls around the country. And as we’ll see in Chapter Six, the idea that *parvaresh* begins at home and is reinforced at the school rests on the problematic assumption that the two are in harmony.

*Amoozesh ya Parvaresh?*  

Schooling in Iran has generally been treated by the state as a social endeavor with collectivist ends and not as a service or good administered for the private benefit of students or their families. Educated individuals are expected to apply the knowledge that they acquire from their formal education to the improvement of society and their country.

While there has long been consensus that the terminus of education is the greater good, disagreement within elite ranks has historically been over the manner in which that greater good ought to be defined. According to Menashri, both shahs of the Pahlavi dynasty believed that through *parvaresh* the school system was “to impart to the citizen attitudes likely to be useful to the regime, to convince them of the wisdom and justice of the existing leadership and render them willing to sacrifice their lives for its cause.”

Intellectuals held a quite different view of *parvaresh*’s true merit. Though they mostly shared with their rulers the belief that the moral nurturing of the child ought to be the chief goal of education, academics tended to adopt the conventional liberal/functionalist belief that the purpose of schooling was to nurture the autonomous individual. The democratic man (or woman) was to be the basic unit of society, a person whose well-reasoned choices would aggregate with those of his or her fellow citizens to produce the righteous society.

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520 Here I play on the phrase *amoozesh va parvaresh*. Instead of “va,” meaning “and,” I substitute “ya” which translates as “or.”


Parvaresh was neither a program of inculcation in service to a paternalistic authority (the Shah), nor a state-driven imposition of rigid beliefs upon students under this perspective. Instead, schools benefit Iranian society most when they “convey the skills to cope with constant change” through the fostering of “logical understanding and free choice by the individual.”\footnote{Menashri, *Education and the Making*, 112.}

Naturally, belief in the empowerment of the individual set many of these intellectuals at odds with the “utilitarian-totalitarian” attitude of the two Shahs, who not only sought to preserve their own power but also were more generally convinced that an immature Iranian society required the guiding hand of a strong state for its development and modernization.\footnote{Menashri observes that many of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s own educational planners privately opposed his ideas regarding the role of education. Public opposition was not tolerated. Afshin Marashi provides an account of how an article critical of the Shah’s efforts to dictate the content of the cultural nation of Iran written by Hasan Taqizadeh, one of the most important educational reformers of the early twentieth century, led to Taqizadeh’s forced exile. See Chapter 3 of Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2008).}

**Parvaresh since the Revolution**

As might be expected, *parvaresh* retained its place of privilege following the 1979 Revolution, though it takes on a more complex form under IRI rule than it ever did under the Pahlavi shahs. *Parvaresh*, as I’ll soon explain, commands that students become obedient and politically aware Muslim members of the Iranian nation, as well as self-confident citizens equipped with the emotional and cognitive ability to shape their lives in correspondence with their personal talents and skills.

Readers would be hard-pressed to discern this dual-usage by looking only at the current literature on postrevolutionary schooling. There a simple story of indoctrination is presented, with the school system committed mainly to creating individuals with an absolute political and ideological commitment to the Islamic Republic, a goal achieved through the restoration of a putatively primordial Muslim identity. Most scholars treat *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* as
irreconcilable concepts, rival components in a zero-sum game of education. Schools represent instruments of state power that promote religious and moral training (parvaresh-e dini va akhlaqi), even at the expense of academic and technical instruction of students. Overall, authors place such an outsized emphasis on parvaresh as the principal element of Iran’s postrevolutionary school system that it becomes interchangeable with “education” itself.\footnote{525}{Haggay Ram, “The Immemorial Nation? School Textbooks and Historical Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran.” Nations and Nationalism 6, no. 1 (2000): 68-69; Patricia J. Higgins and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari, “Women’s Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran, eds. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 20.}

Haggay Ram observes that the tendency to see postrevolutionary education only through the monochromatic lens of politicized Islam stems from the general failure of scholars to engage in comparative analyses of pre- and postrevolutionary schooling. By treating each period as “before” and “after” versions of education in Iran, i.e., as two discrete and coherent wholes representing “secular” and “Islamic” education, separated by the 1979 Revolution, academics end up “affirming the essentialism so inherent in traditional Orientalism, that is, reiterating the conventional wisdom of Iran’s monolithic ‘return to Islam.’”\footnote{526}{Ram, “The Immemorial Nation,” 68.}

A survey of the literature affirms Ram’s analysis, though I would add that even in instances where scholars compare the curriculum of the IRI to that of the Pahlavi regime, there is an ineluctable temptation to describe post-1979 schooling in terms of religious and political parvaresh. This tendency can clearly be seen in the work of Patricia J. Higgins and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari, whose research Ram cites as a rare exception to the essentialism found in the literature.\footnote{527}{Ram refers specifically to their 1995 article, published a year after Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari, “Women’s Education,” cited immediately above. See Patricia J. Higgins and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari, “Changing Perceptions of Iranian Identity in Elementary Textbooks,” in Children in the Muslim Middle East, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 337-363.} Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari claim that “All who have written about education in Iran agree that its chief aim is the creation of an Islamic person” and that a rigid hierarchy of
educational needs comprises the formal ends of the school system, beginning with “religious and spiritual ones first, followed by scientific and cultural, social, political, and finally economic goals.” According to the authors, IRI educational planners embrace “the principles that purification and commitment take precedence over knowledge and skills and that specialization without piety is more dangerous than piety without specialization.”

Similarly, Golnar Mehran describes a postrevolutionary school system whose main agenda is to socialize a new generation of individuals “loyal to the regime, believing in its ideals and values, and faithful to its official ideology.” Drawing linkages between the Iranian and Chinese encounters with postrevolutionary education, Mehran argues that IRI schools first seek commitment and adherence to Islamic principles from their students and staff, the “training of a skilled labor force will come later, similar to the priority accorded to redness over expertise during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.”

Menashri makes a similar distinction between knowledge and faith. He cites several examples of postrevolutionary leaders and educationalists making the claim that parvaresh is more important than amoozesh, including the following report on Khomeini’s address to a group of teachers at the beginning of the school year not long after the Revolution:

In a meeting with educators in September 1982, he asserted that [amoozesh and parvaresh] were inseparable. But if compelled to choose between the two, a Muslim educator must hold it “more important to acquire values than science.” After all, the aim of education was not to provide the students with a livelihood, but rather to elevate their cultural level so that they would attain the goals of the revolution.

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Education as Menashri presents it here is a Hobson’s choice between morality and knowledge, the latter a lesser form of education that “on its own, if not detrimental, is at least useless.”

The accounts cited above present an accurate but ultimately incomplete picture of the relationship between parvaresh and amoozesh as imagined by the leadership of the IRI. To be sure, there is considerable truth to the claim that the Islamic state prioritizes the spiritual and moral cleansing (payksazi-ye arzeshti) through parvaresh. Where most analyses of the Iranian educational system falter, however, is in treating amoozesh and parvaresh as separate endeavors, rather than drawing connections between the two. Tazkieh or purification is education’s “most important” task, but only as a preliminary step in the education of the child, not as its end. Parvaresh, in other words, has a constitutive effect on amoozesh.

The reality is that planners since 1979 have consistently promoted a vision of schooling in which there is balance between religious training and academic instruction----even as the actual practice of schooling produces an outcome that, ironically, favors amoozesh. Within the educational framework laid out by the IRI the connection between the two halves of education is inexorable: The young must be taught virtue to learn new knowledge, and as they learn this knowledge, they become more virtuous. The singularity of amoozesh and parvaresh is perhaps best captured in a popular slogan attributed to Morteza Motahhari and featured on school murals across Iran: “Amoozesh and parvaresh, two wings, one flight” (“Amoozesh va parvaresh, do bal, yek parvaz.”).

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533 Some border on caricature. For a particularly egregious example, see Arnon Groiss, “Iranian Textbooks: Preparing Iran’s Children for Global Jihad” (Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, 2007).
534 Mehran for instance acknowledges that the creation of the devout Muslim is not the only goal of the Iranian school system. IRI leaders also seek to secure the country’s independence through self-reliance in the economic and scientific fields, an ambitious project that by necessity require the existence of a modern school system capable of producing the necessary engineers, doctors, scientists, and other required for Iran’s development. She treats development as being a contradiction to moral transformation, rather than its complement.
535 A phenomenon I discuss at length in Chapter Four.
The idea that the Islamic Republic of Iran is somehow hostile to science, or that the regime treats modernization and development as a choice, rather than a desired outcome, ignores the practical importance that the regime ascribes to technological self-sufficiency. As I discussed in Chapter One, it cannot be forgotten that the original impetus for bringing modern schooling to Iran, as Monica Ringer conclusively demonstrates, was the trauma caused by the series of devastating losses experienced at the hands of the Russians in the first half of the 19th Century. Schools then and now act as resources for future defense of the country. Stretching back to the founding of the modern school system, Iranian leaders have never shied away from importing foreign scientific and technical knowledge for the purposes of preserving national sovereignty. Of course the preference is to develop this knowledge through indigenous sources and institutions, as seen in the following statement, first seen in Chapter One:

We are not ashamed to learn from westerner and non-westerner and foreigners. Meaning we will relearn without embarrassment from other countries an administrative procedure, a method of teaching, a piece of knowledge, an invention… But there are two points that come along with this apprenticeship which unfortunately [during the Pahlavi era] they did not comply. They closed their eyes closed, and opened their arms in an embrace. Everyone who came, whatever they gave, they took [without question]. One of the two points is that that which we take, we must first assess, we must see if it is worth it or not. If it is one hundred percent useful for us, then one hundred percent we will accept it. If it is one hundred percent not useful for us, then one hundred percent we shall reject it… The second point is that this relationship of “student, professor” must not last forever. Yes, we are prepared to take our apprenticeship before anyone who knows that which we do not know. However, one must not forever remain the student. We must ourselves become the professor.

See for example the report “Technology, Science Make Countries Powerful” in which Khatami emphasized the need for Iran to gain access to science and knowledge: “If we are not powerful, we won’t be able to defend our values, revolution, and sovereignty.” “Technology, Science Make Countries Powerful,” Iran Daily, July 25, 2005, http://www.nite.co.ir/iran-daily/1384/2332/html-national.htm (last accessed August 30, 2010).

Discoveries and inventions made by local scientists in turn serve to further the glory of the Revolution, and it is common for the state to showcase the accomplishments of Iranian scientists in order to validate Islam as an alternative and more righteous path to modernity.\textsuperscript{538}

Although sacral fidelity takes precedence over knowledge, the two act in dialectic to achieve schooling’s ultimate goal, namely the flourishing of individual talent and skill. 

*Amoozesh* and *parvaresh* comprise a sequence of learning, as evidenced in the following passage written by Mohammad Javad Bahonar, a founding father of Iran’s postrevolutionary school system and one of the IRI’s earliest Education Ministers:

> Within the Koran tazkieh comes before talim; in other words, *parvaresh* comes before *talim* and *amoozesh*. In contradiction to the phrase *amoozesh va parvaresh* that we Farsi-speakers use, a phrase that places *amoozesh* before *parvaresh*, in Islam and in the exegesis of the Koran, tazkieh and tarbiat comes before the issue of talim; meaning we must first work on the social mores and the cleansing of moral pollution and deviation. After this adornment, the student becomes ready until he is able to achieve perfection and growth.\textsuperscript{539}

In the same source Bahonar extols the importance of an educational system that gently guides students towards the pursuit and enjoyment of science:

> As a first principle, Islamic education emphasizes the necessity of appreciating and seeking knowledge (*elm doosti va elm talabi*). That individual or group or society whose *tarbiat* we are responsible for must be raised in such a way that he or she desires to become learned and a lover of science.\textsuperscript{540}

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\textsuperscript{538} Self-defense, the reader will recall from the discussion on postrevolutionary textbooks in Chapter Three, is an expression of the regime’s righteousness. An excellent example of the intersection of religion, science, and national defense in the IRI is the recent announcement by Iran of its latest, indigenously produced long-range unmanned bomber. “‘This is just the beginning,’ Mr. Ahmadinejad told military officials. ‘Today the defense of Iran is identical with the defense of the existence of humanity.’” William Yong and Robert F. Worth, “Iran’s President Unveils New Long-Range Drone Aircraft,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html (last accessed April 29, 2011). The full quote by Ahmadinejad, provided to me by one of the article’s authors, reads: “Today, the defense of Iran is the defense of the values of all the holy prophets of history. Today, defending Iran is the defense of holy values. Today, defending Iran is standing by the flag of justice, monotheism, purity and love. Today the defense of Iran means the effort to establish security and lasting peace in the whole world.”

\textsuperscript{539} “*Honar-e tarbiat: Moroori bar didgah-ye tarbiati-e shahid mohammad javad bahonar*” [“The Art of Tarbiat: A Review of the Martyr Mohammad Javad Bahonar’s Views on Tarbiat”] Moallem, Aban 1386/2007, 10. The title of the article is a play on Bahonar’s name.

\textsuperscript{540} “*Honar-e tarbiat.***” 11.
Bahonar insists that the schools must provide an environment that is conducive for the development of an indigenous scientific community. To that end he calls on teachers and principals to actively encourage their pupils to pursue achievement in technology and research, hardly the ideas of a person obsessed solely with moral and ideological parvaresh in Iranian education.

Khomeini offers an even more radical interpretation of the relationship between learning and worship in his famous work, *Forty Hadiths*. In the chapter entitled “Twenty-Sixth Hadith: On the Pursuit of Knowledge” he equates knowledge—*elm*, or *danesh* in its Farsi variant—with righteousness, one that inspires the very angels of Paradise to “spread their wings for the seekers of knowledge out of delight.” The full passage of the cited *hadith* is as follows:

The Messenger of Allah—may God’s benediction be upon him and his Family—said: “One who proceeds on a path in the pursuit of knowledge, God makes him proceed therewith on a path to Paradise. And, verily, the angels spread their wings for the seekers of knowledge out of delight. Verily, every creature of the heaven and the earth asks forgiveness for the seeker of knowledge, even the fish in the sea. The merit of the *`alim* (the learned) over the *`abid* (the devout) is like the merit of the moon over the stars on a full-moon night. The learned are the heirs of the prophets, for the prophets did not leave behind a legacy of wealth but that of knowledge. So whoever partakes of it derives a plenteous benefit.”

If Islam is in the final instance a religion of received prophecy, transmitted by and through a series of prophets, then it follows that the generation of a light (i.e., knowledge) that is shared has more value than a light that remains with the individual. Khomeini makes clear in the accompanying exegesis to the *hadith* that Islam rewards the individual whose actions serve—literally “illuminate”—others:

…the essence of faith in God and worship of Him are light, with the difference that the *`abid's* [the devout’s] light is confined to himself; it illuminates the path beneath his feet, but does not give light to others. Therefore, their likeness is that of stars on a full-moon night wherein their

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541 Amoozesh derives from *danesh*.
With this context, then, Khomeini’s instructions to the “Muslim educator” to always choose *parvaresh* over *amoozesh* must be seen (so to speak) in a different light. The selection of *parvaresh* over *amoozesh* becomes a difference without distinction, since for Khomeini the transmission of knowledge, whether divine or earthly, is what constitutes nurture, i.e., *parvaresh*. In other words, specialization without piety may be dangerous, but piety without specialization is worthless. Religion must not remain confined to the private lives of individuals; *parvaresh*, cannot be the final or only action of schools. Likewise, good behavior (*adabiat*), devotion, and piety provide a platform from which the greater society can be improved. The knowledge and skills provided to the individual through schooling are to be primarily for this purpose.  

For Morteza Motahhari, the absence of *parvaresh* in education made it more likely that children would fall into the abyss of a wholly materialistic existence. On the other hand, an excessive focus on *parvaresh* was a sure path to spiritual corruption.  

544 Menashri, seeking to establish continuity between the previous and current regimes, encourages the reader to confuse a hypothetical (“if forced to choose”) with actual practice. Contradiction dissolves if we understand, as Khomeini does, that there is no difference between the two. Knowledge (*elm*) to be intrinsically part of worship (*ebadat*) and virtue to be the use of knowledge for the betterment of the world. A feature produced by state media claims that Khomeini studied and incorporated the research and ideas of experts, in including those derived from anthropological and sociological sources, in his leadership of the Revolution and of the Iranian people, the point being that the founder of the Islamic Republic followed scientific principles throughout his public life. “Science and the Scientific in Imam Khomeini’s Views,” Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting,  
545 Motahhari did not live to see the new Iran that he had helped to create. Assassinated on May 1, 1979 by a member of the *Furqan* Group, the date of Motahhari’s martyrdom is today officially celebrated as Teacher’s Day.
Islam and science were incompatible, Motahhari called for a balance between education’s two elements: “Islam joins faith and science, and in history the effects of distancing them had been shown in fanaticism as a result of the absence of science, and in exploitation as the result of the lack of faith.”

Like Bahonar and Khomeini, Motahhari viewed schooling as a collectivist project. Through *parvaresh*, Islamic schooling aimed to nurture students’ talents and skills, which in turn would enable them to secure the spiritual and material needs of society:

In the ‘*irfan* tradition taught to him by Khomeini, Motahhari explains that elevation came from ownership of oneself, release from the carnal soul, and the eventual ability to discern the meaning and value of social and ethical sanctities. Man, however, is subject to constraints, among which are the set of conditions that ensure (according to the *shari’a*) the correctness of performance necessary for their proper fulfillment; he cannot devise a path entirely of his own choosing. The choice lies in whether to follow the path of self-empowerment or not. To Motahhari the individual is thus a believer who promotes the system—a view which may be contrasted with the cornerstone of liberalism, the individual pure and simple.

Motahhari’s educational stance, rather ironically, puts him much closer to the educational philosophy of many of the former Shah’s courtiers than one might expect from such a committed revolutionary. In fact, pre- and postrevolutionary conceptions of *parvaresh* largely intersect, providing us with further proof of the abiding continuity of the Iranian school system across regime types.

Specifically, the IRI’s formal project is to produce the ideal society by unleashing students’ creativity and fostering critical thought, albeit within a bounded political sphere. Here is Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei discussing his expectations for *parvaresh*:

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546 Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co Ltd., 2003), 83. Motahhari’s popularity can in large part be traced on the widespread consensus amongst Iranians of all political and religious backgrounds that there must be both faith and science, and none of the fanaticism that Iranians associate with groups like the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The idea that religion divorced from the world of science and reason leads to fanaticism was a common sentiment amongst my interview subjects, detailed further in the next chapter.

547 Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, 88.
The most important task before us today that we focus our energies on *parvaresh* regardless of the cost or sacrifice, not because we are Muslims; this is not the only reason. Today in the western world, *parvaresh* is an essential part of science and technology in many [non-Muslim] countries. *Parvaresh* is not just about becoming religious. We are not only seeking to deepen faith. *Parvaresh* shows its influence on the behaviors, interactions, personal growth, the strengthening of self-confidence, and the bubbling spring of talents.  

This approach to education is practically identical to the ideal advocated by prerevolutionary intellectuals and educationalists, discussed earlier in this chapter. It can be said that the latter faced considerably greater political restriction than their postrevolutionary peers, as the two shahs of the Pahlavi era were hardly interested in producing a society capable of questioning the country’s system of rule.

Khamanei’s comments on *parvaresh* raise important questions as to the true aim and nature of schooling in Iran. How does the state reconcile drawing from “the bubbling spring of talents” with what is an undisguised program of inculcation, one whose aim is the production of generations committed to the formal ideology of the Islamic state? *Parvaresh* as a path to self-empowerment does not mean that the IRI eschews *parvaresh* as a means of fostering quiescence and obedience to state authority. Data drawn from the school site, discussed at greater length in the following chapter, suggests that this contradiction remains unresolved.

Theoretical debates over the relationship of *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* are for the most part moot, as the more pressing challenge for Iranian planners is the fact that even after nearly a century of development, modern education in Iran continues to retain structural qualities that are not conducive for producing *parvaresh* of any variety, much less the version described by Khamanei, or for that matter, once sought by the Pahlavi regime. State schooling in Iran remains addled by a pedagogy that in the main rewards the mechanical pursuit of correct answers,

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obtained principally through rote memorization. Pressed in by the demands of having to pass the standardized tests administered by the state, and of course, above all the konkooor, there is little time or interest on the part of either students or their teachers to engage in the pursuit of personal growth or the fostering of critical thinking skills, whether it be for their own betterment or in service to an imagined Islamic ideal.\textsuperscript{549}

**From Omoor to Mauvinat: Institutionalizing Parvaresh in the Revolution’s First Decade**

For nearly three decades the royal school system served as an unlikely refuge and staging ground for the Shah’s enemies. The infiltration of the schools began shortly after the 1953 coup d'état, where, hidden in plain sight, and with direct access to future generations of Iranians, the opposition to the Pahlavi state was able to disseminate their ideas, be it through the classroom or through influential positions at the central administrative level, most notably in the development of religious curriculum.\textsuperscript{550}

The prevalence of maktabi (committed and doctrinaire) teachers already in the Ministry at the time of the 1979 Revolution has been cited as the principal reason why the pre-university school system was able to reopen so quickly following the Revolution, and to remain open throughout the Cultural Revolution, despite the closure of the university system.\textsuperscript{551} The ranks of seditious teachers operating under the Shah’s regime were not limited to the followers of

\textsuperscript{549} State planners are well aware of this challenge, but seem unable to correct it. In a section simply titled “Challenges,” the MOE-produced *A General Overview of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran* includes the entry “Inadequacy and lack of flexibility in the contents and methods of teaching, resulting in the absence of creativity, order, responsibility, respect for others, and group activity.” Abdolazim Hakimi, *A General Overview of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Tehran: Institute for Educational Research, 2004), 163.


\textsuperscript{551} Golnar Mehran interview with Gholam Haddad Adel, the latter and important figure in Iran’s educational and political scene. I return to Haddad Adel’s role in Iranian politics later in this chapter. Mehran, PhD, 385.
Khomeini, but contained elements from every corner of the revolutionary coalition, including members of the various Islamic and leftists organizations that were then active in the Iran. The political activities of these various groups did not end with the success of the Revolution but only escalated without restraint in the days and weeks after the Shah’s overthrow.

Just before and immediately after the Revolution, without a common enemy and the collapse of a clear central authority, different factions daily proselytized young students in open and head-to-head competition for hearts and minds. Schools had become an important forum for passionate debate as former allies in the revolutionary coalition challenged each other over the direction of Iran’s postrevolutionary politics. Throughout the first year of the new regime (1979-1980) it was common to find school walls completely plastered with dueling propaganda posted by various political factions. There were even daily marches marked by the chanting of slogans, before, between, and after classes in the school courtyard.

Naturally, the political turmoil gripping the country’s schools attracted the attention of the still nascent Islamic regime’s authorities. Having participated themselves in an internal campaign of subversion through the school system, the alarmed leadership knew full well that securing control over the classroom and the curriculum was indispensable to their future success and possibly even survival.

Consequently, a mere two weeks after the fall of the ancien regime, on February 27, 1979 and concurrent with the reopening of the schools, the Omoor-e tarbiati was introduced to

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552 While there were many groups active at the time, the opposition roughly were divided between Islamic or quasi-Islamist groups (such as the Mojahedin-e khalq) and leftist parties.
553 “In Alborz High School where I was working at the time, the 36 classes that existed in the school were controlled by 36 (different) political groups!” Cited in “Khaterati az yek moallem-e moaser” [“Memories of an Inspiring Teacher”], Gam, Fall 2008, 28.
campuses across the country. Roughly translated as “The Department of Nurturing Affairs,” the Omoor-e tarbiati represented the first major step towards the Islamicization of Iranian schools, predating the Cultural Revolution by more than a year. Founded by Mohammad Ali Rajai and Mohammad Javad Bahonar, and staffed by the morabian-e omoor-e tarbiati—a title that distinguished them from the regular teaching staff or moalleman—the Omoor-e tarbiati’s mission in Bahonar’s words was to “fill the contents of talim with tazkieh, and the contents of amoozesh with the spirit of parvaresh.”

Like so many of the “reforms” carried out by the revolutionaries in the early years of the IRI, the Omoor-e tarbiati was an old idea made new again. The department was originally formed in 1971 under Pahlavi rule. In the years before the Revolution its staff had served in a strictly non-political capacity, and were placed in charge of leading children on field trips or in sports, as well as providing academic and psychological counseling services, activities that continued under the new, Islamic version of the Omoor-e tarbiati.

At first, the goal of spreading the spirit of parvaresh through extra-curricular

554 The state celebrates February 27 as the anniversary of the founding of the Omoor-e tarbiati, thus fusing the historical reopening of schools under the Islamic banner with parvaresh education. February 27 also serves as the occasion for formal remembrances of the legacies of Rajai and Bahonar. The use of this date, rather than the date of both men’s assassination (August 30, 1981) speaks volumes, particularly given the importance that martyrdom plays in the official ideology and mythology of the regime.
555 One of Rajai’s companions from that time recalled that the martyred president and former Minister of Education viewed the Omoor as an important opportunity to replicate on a national scale his own efforts to build that had been done. “Remember how families used to sell their homes in order to buy homes next to our school so that their children could go there? Well now we have the chance to make every school Islamic.” GAM?
557 In general, old problems seemed to invite old solutions. Examples include the Literacy Movement Organization (Nehzat-e savad amoozi), whose precursor was the Shah’s Literacy Corps (Sepah-e danesh), and the Open University (Daneshgah-yeye azad), first proposed under the monarchy. For more on the literacy campaigns see Faria Sabahi, The Literacy Corps in Pahlavi Iran (1963-1979): Political, Social, and Literary Implications (Lugano, Italy: Editrice Sapiens, 2002) and Golnar Mehran, “Lifelong Learning: New Opportunities for Women in a Muslim Country (Iran),” Comparative Education 35, no. 2 (June 1999): 201-215.
activities would have to wait. Rajai and Bahonar assigned the *Omoor-e tarbiati* staff to immediately take on the task of identifying and removing counter-revolutionary forces from within the school system. The *Omoor-e tarbiati* was, in other words, in its inception primarily an instrument of state rule, one that its founders expected to be ruthless in carrying out its mission of securing the educational system on behalf of the Islamic Republic. Here is Rajai on the origins and purpose of the *Omoor-e tarbiati*:

> In our schools we currently do not have anyone whom we can trust one hundred percent to at least tell us what is going on inside of the schools. It is necessary that we have at least one person with the title *omoor e tarbiati* in the school until we find out what is happening and then, after enough time has passed, we can have that individual play a cultural role and participate in founding an Islamic identity amongst the students.\(^{558}\)

“Finding out” what was going on inside of the schools was Rajai’s euphemism for singling out (*shenasai kardan*) internal enemies prior to eliminating them from the school system. The *morabian* were to be the state’s eyes, ears, and enforcers within the school sites, their role not unlike that of the *commissaire politique* or the Soviet-era *zampolit*.

Rajai and Bahonar had little difficulty in recruiting volunteers to carry out this task. A flood of young men and women volunteered to become members of the first generation of the *morabi* corps.\(^{559}\) They were the proverbial ragtag bunch, more committed than qualified. Most lacked the necessary skills needed to be instructors, but what the early *morabian* lacked in training or experience, they more than made up for with their enthusiasm. In the mythology of the early years of the Islamic Republic, the *parvaresh* teacher emerges as an Islamic warrior, with a lack of self-regard and a willingness to sacrifice for the Revolution that over time became legendary. The schools were regarding as cultural battlegrounds, and it is not uncommon to find


\(^{559}\) Some 30,000 to 35000 signed up to serve as *morabi* teachers, aged on average 22 to 23 years.
treatments of that initial period of postrevolutionary schooling incorporating martial language and terminology: “In those days we needed some of our country’s most promising Muslim youth to go to the front lines of the war, and others to battle at the front lines of the schools.”

Only the army and the Sepah, fighting in the war against Iraq, surpassed the sacrifice and service of the morabian.

There came an initial assault and the gaining of a beachhead against what were seen as revanchist and counter-revolutionary elements. The Omoor-e tarbiati’s next assignment was to take and hold the high ground against the taghoot, literally the “idolaters.” These included former coalition partners in the revolutionary movement, most notably the Marxist-Islamist group the Mojahedin-e khalq. By the spring of 1981, as internecine warfare escalated in the streets and alleys outside of the schoolhouse, the battles that had been raging inside of the schools were for all intents and purposes over. The Mojahedin-khalq, forced underground by the growing violence, moved their operations outside of the schools. Persuasion combined with outright intimidation had worked, and of the multitude of organizations that had once been active on school campuses across the country, only the Association of Islamic Students and Teachers and basiji groups were left on Iranian campuses, both of which were close allies of the regime and the morabian. A strict screening process for the hiring of new instructors, along with the purging of teaching staff deemed to be insufficiently committed to Islam and the Revolution had rendered the country’s schoolteachers more or less uniform, in political outlook as well as dress. With many male teachers sporting beards, and choosing their shirts outside of their pants

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560 After the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980, many morabian would go on to fight as volunteers at the front lines.
561 Mehran reports that as many as 30,000 teachers were forcibly removed from the teaching ranks. Golnar Mehran, *Female Education and Identity Formation in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Los Angeles: The G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, 1992), 12.
in the “Asian” style, there was for a brief period little to distinguish the regular teaching staff from the morabian.\footnote{Early revolutionaries eschewed ties and even jackets as being western in origin, choosing to wear shirt outside of pants, a style that remains visible in the military uniform of the Sepah. Zaher, or appearance, continues to be an important means of signaling one’s political allegiance (or lack thereof). Of course, external appearance can also provides a convenient means for dissembling, as many Iranians choose to don the chador or hezbollahi look for practical purposes.}

With the war against the regime’s internal enemies over, the long-term task of spreading the values of the Revolution amongst the student population could finally begin in earnest. The *Omoor-e tarbiati* continued its operations as an affiliated group outside of the formal organizational structure of the Ministry of Education until 1985. In that year the Ministry of Education elevated the *omoor-e tarbiati* to deputy ministerial status (*Mauvinat-e omoor-e parvaresh*), a promotion that brought the organization’s activities, budget, and planning within the fold of the Ministry’s structure. More significantly, values instruction became a part of the regular curriculum. Now there was a *parvaresh* class that students were obliged to attend during the week. In addition to its existing slate of extra-curricular activities, the new post in the Ministry took over the administration of physical education, art instruction, and social counseling services.

Thus in just a few short years the *morabi* teacher went from being an *ad hoc* position in the schools, comprised of idealists and tailor-made by Rajai and Bahonar to meet a very specific political need, to becoming a profession within the architecture of schooling in Iran. This period marked the institutional high point of the *Omoor-e tarbiati* and its greatest success, and would in later years be seen as the peak of *parvaresh* in the Islamic Republic.

Today there are those who remember those earliest days in benign, even apolitical terms. According to this revisionist narrative, the early *morabian* had sought only to deliver the “good
news” of the Revolution to the children. The goal of bringing a robust message of Islam into the schools was a necessary and good idea ruined by politics, politics never being directly the fault of the *morabian* or the *Omoor-e tarbiati*. If the *Omoor-e tarbiati* had become embroiled in the infelicitous business of politics it was because circumstances had forced that burden upon them. Faced with the troubled environment of the schools, *morabian* reluctantly abandoned their religious and community-building aspirations for a harsher, more political role on campus, which unfortunately alienated the *morabi* from large sections of the student and teaching populations.\(^{563}\)

This image of the *morabian* as political greenhorns or the unsuspecting victims of historical circumstance, as opposed to highly motivated agents of political change, is not entirely accurate. Though the mission of the *Omoor-e tarbiati* as envisioned by Bahonar and Rajai did include the training children in the values of Islam, for a number of years the organization’s primary purpose was to stand as the state’s praetorian guard within the school system. There were no illusions in those early days:

> This matter that later came to be associated with the *Omoor-e tarbiati* [i.e., that the *Omoor-e tarbiati* has always and exclusively been about the nurture of students], played no role in its founding. The *Omoor-e tarbiati* was a political institution that took shape in the heart of the school system…\(^{564}\)

Compare the earlier claim of “innocence lost” to the account provided in a popular children’s biography of the life and death of Bahonar. Though aimed at a young audience, the narrative is unflinching and without any expression of dissemblance as it relates how Bahonar and his friend Rajai had become aware of

> the political and cultural activities of hundreds of groups covering a wide range of beliefs that, as a result of the free and open environment following the revolutionary triumph, were operating within the schools. These groups’ heated revolutionary slogans...had drawn children to their cause. Bahonar and Rajai strongly felt that there was a need to mount a cultural and propaganda campaign in order to counter these groups and to introduce the children to the message (*khat*) of

\(^{563}\) Here we see the trope of the reluctant warrior, who only fights as a last resort.\(^{564}\) Qasem Karimi, cited in Abdollahi, “*Baytarin kar enhalal*.”
the revolution’s leader…They wanted to attract the most talented and competent teachers to work in the Omoor-e tarbiati, individuals who would become friends with the children and organize all of the extracurricular activities of the school, as well as instructors who were religious and accepted the “Imam’s line.” The Omoor-e tarbiati was established and slowly, with the weakening of the other [political] groups, it was able to take control of school activities.\textsuperscript{565}

Many students remained oblivious to the machinations taking place between the regular staff and the parvareshi teachers.\textsuperscript{566} Years later a number of the children who grew up during the 1980s would nostalgically recall the many non-academic and extracurricular activities that they had shared with their parvaresh instructor. The morabi represented fun, the person who led the children on field trips or ran the school library. Sport skills were prized above all: Morabian who were good footballistas could count on the respect and admiration of their students.\textsuperscript{567}

For the grown-ups, however, the reputation of the morabi as an internal spy, the regime’s looloo (literally “monster”) in the classroom, would for years remain undiminished.\textsuperscript{568} The Omoor-e tarbiati’s early history as a coercive arm of the nascent Islamic state had long-term implications; it would be the reputation of the looloo that persisted in later years, not the “hero” of the Revolution. The stain of politics has proven difficult to remove, and has effectively isolated the morabi from the rest of the teaching staff in the country’s schools. Moalleman simply do not wish to get involved in politics at schools, particularly as there is already a morabi for whom politics is his or her primary task.

“A Dry Tree”: Parvaresh Enters its Second Decade

Even as the morabi corps was coming into its own, Iranian society began to change in


\textsuperscript{566} The regular visits by inspectors from the local district office were much more notable and the source of visible anxiety on the part of the teaching and administrative staff.


\textsuperscript{568} The term looloo was used by one of my sources, a parvaresh instructor in a private Islamic school who explained to me that the disrepute of the morabi was self-inflicted, the result of poor implementation on the part of the Omoor-e tarbiati. Not all of my interview subjects agreed with this characterization of the morabian.
ways that would call into question the future of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*. The termination of the war with Iraq (August 1988) and the death of Khomeini shortly thereafter (June 1989) effectively marked the end of the first phase of Iran’s revolutionary experiment. A population exhausted by an almost unbroken decade of revolution, virtual civil war, and an eight-year foreign war, had little interest in further mobilization. Ordinary Iranians sought normalcy and above all a chance to escape the austerity of wartime, mainly by improving their private financial situations.

For a time, the country’s leadership actively encouraged its citizens to pursue their self-interests in the marketplace. It did so by fostering policies geared towards the encouragement of private investment to replace the presence of the state sector in the economy state. Following his election in 1989, and just weeks after the death of Khomeini, Akbar Rafsanjani made it clear that his administration’s top priority would be the restoration of Iran’s war-devastated economy. Development and reconstruction became the new watchwords as, for now, the incoming administration set aside the goal of expanding the Revolution in favor of a more pragmatic social and political agenda.

In the wake of these macrostructural changes, the clarity of purpose that had animated the *Omoor-e tarbiati* in early 1980s and which had drawn so many young people to serve as a *morabi* faded. In some ways, the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* was a victim of its own success, having successfully removed enemies of the state from the classrooms and aided Islamic forces to consolidate their control over the levers of government. The *morabian* who had fought so

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569 By the Iranian calendar the first decade (the 1360s) were already over at the time of Khomeini’s passing, which occurred on 14 Khordad 1370.


valiantly on behalf of the Revolution had become warriors without a war and unlike their brethren in the Sepah and the army, there were no barracks to return to, nor any peacetime mission for them to accomplish. The corps had begun to drift.

Seeing the writing on the wall, a great number of the Omoor-e tarbiati’s founding generation moved on, with many taking on leadership positions in other departments and ministries. A significant number of former morabian simply crossed over to the Ministry’s academic wing, trading in their jobs as values instructors for more traditional classroom roles as math, science, and language instructors.572

For the morabian that chose to remain behind, as well as new generations of corps members who entered the ranks of the Omoor-e tarbiati in the 1990s, life on campus to be an increasingly isolating and challenging experience. Gone were parvaresh’s halcyon early days, when the morabian received public accolade and respect for the part that they had played in founding the Islamic Republic. Parvaresh teachers were now often considered by the administration and other teachers to be redundant, and were accordingly consigned to mundane and ordinary duties and rituals at the school.

The message being sent by the top of the school system was clear: Iran needed to produce doctors, technicians, and engineers more than it needed committed revolutionaries, a goal shared by many Iranian households. With principals, teachers, and families focused on teaching and grades---in other words, amoozesh---morabian became the odd men (and women) out in Iran’s educational system.

There even began to be heard voices asking whether the outfit created years earlier by

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572 One account claimed that 90 percent of all parvaresh teachers sought transfers to amoozesh in 1989. In 2001, the Deputy Minister of Planning and Human Resources Training cited a similar figure, saying, without offering documentation, that some 80 percent of all morabian sought to transfer to a moallem position, with the reverse being approximately zero percent. CITATION?
Bahonar and Rajai had outlived its utility. Qasem Karimi, speaking in 1998 at the Seventh Convention on the Scientific Role of Tarbiat reminded his audience: “It must not be forgotten that the prescription [the Omoor-e tarbiati] written for an infirm school system was in response to those complex times. Today it must be asked if there remains a need for that first aid.”

Karimi’s message, delivered three years before the Deputy Ministry of Nurture was eliminated under Morteza Haji’s leadership, was that for all of its early triumphs the continued existence of the old Omoor-e tarbiati had not prevented the decline of parvaresh.

Not everyone saw the elimination of the Mauvinat as a necessary measure for the restoration of parvaresh in the schools. Hossein Mozaffar, President Mohammad Khatami’s first Minister of Education, recalled a meeting between himself and the Supreme Leader just days after Mozaffar’s confirmation by the Parliament. Khamanei insisted that the revitalization of parvaresh be a central part of Mozaffar’s agenda. “Unfortunately the Omoor-e tarbiati, our monument to the contributions to education made by the Martyrs Rajai and Bahonar, had been allowed by the previous administration to become a dry tree. You must revive that tree.”

This use of the metaphor of the “dying tree” appears again in the recollections of Morteza Haji, Mozaffar’s successor and Khatami’s second and final Minister of Education.

573 Cited in Abdollahi, “Baytarin kar enhalal.”
574 Abdollahi, “Baytarin kar enhalal.” Not everyone viewed reasons for the failure to produce the Islamic society as being domestic in origin. Foreign machinations and the so-called cultural invasion were often cited as important obstacles to the transformation of Iranian society. One article asks, “What is the principal accomplishment of the Revolution, and why haven’t we had very much success in producing an appropriate Islamic society?” The response lays the blame directly on “the foreign powers.” See “Porseshhai darbab-e engelab” [“Questions About the Revolution”], Moallem, Bahman 1380/2002, 21.
575 The Farsi term used in the passage is “nahal,” literally a “sapling.”
Others blamed the decline of *parvaresh* on the changes taking place within Iranian social life, and thus saw structural reforms to the Ministry of Education to be a waste of time. Attempts to improve the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* or to revive values instruction in the classroom would have little effect in a social environment in which public morality had been subordinated to private gain. The “tree of *parvaresh*” was dying because not because of the school system, but because it had been abandoned, forgotten by a country obsessed only with grading, assessment, and the market. When asked during a roundtable discussion of teachers whether there was any way for the state to assess non-*parvaresh* teachers’ contributions to the areas of *parvaresh*, Khadijeh Sharifnia wondered why the Ministry would bother:

> Right now in our society a good teacher is one that only teaches [facts]. It’s not important if she behaves badly, she only has to teach well. Parents and students will tolerate bad language (*baddahani*) or rudeness (*raftarha-ye gheir-e tarbiati*), so long as the teacher teaches well. Why? Because of the promise of the *konkoor*!\(^{578}\)

Grading teachers on their *parvaresh* skills might improve the delivery of *parvaresh* in the classroom, but these gains would not change social and political conditions that made is so that “*parvaresh* only exists in the Ministry’s name…*amoozesh* is everything,” a common sentiment since at least the end of the war.\(^{579}\)

In addition to a generalized apathy or even hostility to the perpetuation of Islamic ideology in school, persistent constraints on manpower and budgetary resources severely hampered the capacity of the *omoor-e tarbiati* to effectively carry out what was, even in under the best of circumstances, the difficult assignment of producing a uniform national culture. Nonetheless, neither structural constraints nor the shifting preferences of state and society

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\(^{579}\) Adequately measuring progress in the areas covered by *parvaresh*, including political, social, moral, and religious developments presents the leadership with a rather difficult challenge. Inner states are notoriously hard to assess, and efforts to do so are easily upset by students who perform or pretend to be “good” in order to get by. I tackle this issue directly in the next chapter.
prevented critics from holding this single corner of the educational system responsible for the Ministry’s failings. The *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* came under increasing scrutiny as state leaders cast about for solutions to the perceived waywardness of Iranian youth population. *Parvaresh* instruction needed to be fixed. The manner of its repair and the resulting fallout are the subjects of the next section.

**Tahr-e Edqam-e Mauvinat**

On June 15, 2000 during its 649th session, Iran’s Supreme Council of Education ratified two historical pieces of legislation, “The Strategy for a *Tarbiat Society*” (*Tarh-e jame-ye tarbiat*) and “The Partnership of *Moalleman* in *Parvaresh* Activities” (*Mosharekat-e moalleman dar faliatha-ye parvareshi*). Together these two measures laid the groundwork for what would be the most significant and controversial restructuring of the school system since the reforms of 1991.

With a mandate to conduct “a comprehensive review of all of the activities of the educational system and [to strengthen] those departments responsible for *tarbiat*” so that it might become a part of “all aspects of education,” Morteza Haji led implementation of the “Strategy for the Reconciliation of *Amoozesh* and *Parvaresh* Activities” (*Tahr-e talfiq-e faaliatha-ye amoozesh va parvaresh*) in September 2000. This reform folded the Deputy Ministry of Nurturing Affairs and Physical Education (*Mauvinat-e omoor-e parvareshi va tarbiat badani*) into the Deputy Ministry of Academics (*Mauvinat-e amuzeshi*). The new administrative department encompassing both academic and moral instruction was named the Deputy Ministry of General Education and Nurturing Affairs (*Mauvinat-e amoozesh-e oomoomi va omoor-e*
Although *parvaresh* would continue to be administered as a separate administrative unit at the provincial, district, city, and school levels, the *Tahr-e talfiq* effectively brought an end to the old *Omoor-e tarbiati*, founded some 20 years earlier by Bahonar and Rajai.

This was to be a structural remedy to the problem of *parvaresh*. Haji and his team had come to the conclusion that formal separation of *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* within the national ministry was interfering with the implementation of *parvaresh* at the local school site. Haji would later describe the separation as an imposed and artificial, and one of the major reasons for the failure of schools. The two departments had become rivals, competing against each other even as they operated in splendid isolation at central headquarters. By forcing *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* together into the same administrative box, coordination and planning between the deputy ministries would improve, thus nourishing the starving roots of *parvaresh*, as well as enabling cross-pollination with *amoozesh*.

Planners designed and implemented the reform with not only the *morabian* in mind, but also the *moallem*, i.e., the math, physics, and chemistry teachers who for years had doggedly refused to incorporate *parvaresh* into their daily routines. Accountability to a single deputy minister, whose portfolio encompassed *amoozesh* and *parvaresh*, would make it so that no

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580 The reform separated Physical Education into its own deputy ministry, leading some to point out that it made little sense to argue that *parvaresh* should not be separate from *amoozesh*, but to then split *parvaresh* itself into separate categories.

581 Provincial and local administrators were not affected by the *Tahr-e talfiq*, nor were the approximately 35,000 *morabi* instructors put at risk of losing their job.

582 Leila Janghorban, “6 Vazir, 6 ideh, 6 taqir-e bonyadi” [“6 Ministers, 6 Ideas, 6 Fundamental Changes”], *Vizhenameh-yeye rooznameh-ye khorasan be monasebat-e norooz* 87, Spring 1387/2008, 15.

583 There had been some basis for the demurral of regular homeroom teachers in matters of *parvaresh*. The organizational structure at the school site, in particular the insertion of *parvaresh* into the formal curriculum during the mid-1980s, had led to role specialization and an informal division of labor on campus between the *moalleman* and the *morabian*. Ironically, the improvement of *parvaresh* through the professionalization of the *morabi* corps had reduced ideological and religious instruction.
member of its teaching staff could hide from the responsibility to produce a classroom experience that incorporated both of education’s “wings.”

The *Tahr-e talfiq* did not signal the end of either *amoozesh* or *parvaresh*, nor did the Ministry of Education remove either term from its official title, *Vezarat-e amoozesh va parvaresh*. Specialized activities related to the particular areas of *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* would continue in the classroom. What changed was the planning and coordination that went into *amoozesh* and *parvaresh*, which previously had occurred in separate and uncoordinated departments at the MOE:

> It must not be said that in one place a textbook for *tarbiat* is written and in another place a textbook for *amoozesh*. It must not be said that in one place research carried out for *tarbiat* and in another place research for *amoozesh*. Whatever [we have] must occur in one place. By this I mean that the messages of *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* have to reach the schools through one book and one program. Of course, the situation is different within the schools themselves; there the work has to be divided accordingly. Some must teach physics and chemistry and others must teach religion and the Koran. This division of labor will be in coordination with a singular and univalent curriculum, not with a curriculum that is binary in origin.

**The Response**

Haji sought to save *parvaresh* by effectively getting rid of it, if only as a separate department in the central headquarters of the Ministry. His critics for the most part failed to see the distinction. The elimination of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* unleashed a torrent of criticism. Using the opposition press groups and individuals attacked Haji and his reforms with a singular ferocity, relentlessly accusing him of turning the Ministry into a personal instrument for the advancement of his own faction’s political agenda, an agenda which included the “elimination of

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584 Structural conditions were not the only factors discouraging teachers from engaging in values instruction. One long-time elementary school teacher explained to me that she refrained from engaging too directly with *parvaresh* because of the ideological implications of the term. She limited her *parvaresh* instruction to basic ethics and manners, and left the political and religious work to her colleague the *morabi*. In the next chapter we shall see how an increasingly charged and dysfunctional political environment outside of the school discourages regular teachers from participating in *parvaresh*.

585 Rezaei, *Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari*, 16.
cultural and moral education” and an assault against the memory of the martyrs Bahonar and Rajai.

As proof of Haji’s bad faith opponents pointed to what they claimed was the ad hoc nature of the reform. The elimination of the Deputy Ministry had simply happened too suddenly for any thorough and systematic evaluation of the plan’s merit to have taken place, prima facie evidence that considerations of partisan interests, above all the reformists’ enduring hostility towards the nezam-e islami, were the primary motivating factor behind the decision to end the Mauvinat-e parvareshi.586

As a variation on this line of attack, critics sought to emasculate Haji’s authority by questioning his professional qualifications. This allowed them to malign the Minister’s motivations since without necessary experience, competence, or aptitude for the post, there could be no legitimate basis for him to serve as the head of schools. Haji simply did not “get” how the Ministry of Education worked, and it was this ignorance and lack of experience that led him to seek the elimination of such a vital component of the educational system.

Mostly, however, critics cast him as a political hack, unsuited for the post and loyal only to President Khatami’s agenda. Conservatives rarely limited their criticisms to the Khatami administration. Many traced the roots of Iran’s moral and cultural decline back to the political and economic changes launched following the end of the war. These critics felt that the combined presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami had pushed the country in an un-Islamic direction, resulting in the abandonment of the culture of heroic sacrifice and resistance in favor of greater political, economic, and cultural liberalization. Longing for a return to an era in which

586 MPs claimed that there were only 10 days between the MOE’s announcement of the Tahr-e talfiq to the Majles and the reform’s implementation. “Hame narazi az in eqdam-e shetabazdeh: Baztab-e gerayesh-e kayhan dar bareh-ye hazy-e mauvinat-e parvareshi” [“Everybody is Unhappy with this Hasty Consolidation: A Collection of Reports by Keyhan Regarding the Elimination of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi”], Keyhan, 6 Azar 1380.
"values" are prized over "reconstruction," conservatives see post-war "reconstruction" as the source of today's political, economic, and diplomatic ills. Set against this context, we can better understand the sudden outrage that the “elimination” of *parvaresh* sparked. Just as reformists had for years put improving the economy over strengthening Iranian culture, conservatives interpreted the elimination of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* as an attempt to replace *parvaresh* with *amoozesh*.

Euphemistically referring to the management of “recent years,” commentators drew causal links between anemic funding and poor supervision of what had once been one of the IRI’s most celebrated institutions with the ongoing woes of *parvaresh*: “Unfortunately the performance of those in charge at the planning level, especially during the recent decade, was not sufficient to ensure that the *Omoor-e tarbiati* would be successful in terms of intellect, finances, and morale.”

To a certain extent, these were valid criticisms. Shortages in budgeting and staffing have in fact been perennial, even default conditions of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*. Persistent constraints on manpower and budgetary resources had for years hampered the capacity of the *Omoor-e tarbiati* to carry out its assignment. Perennially understaffed, budgetary woes are compounded by an ongoing struggle to attract qualified or interested candidates to serve as *morabian*. A 1997 interview with then-Minister of Education, Ali Najafi, gives us some sense of how expansive and durable these structural challenges were:

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588 It is unclear if this confusion was willful or not, but it was not uncommon for conservative MPs to claim that the MOE under Haji was seeking to mount a system of schooling on *amoozesh* alone. “*Mauvinat-e parvareshi; az hazf ta ehyai mojadad*” [“The Deputy Ministry of Nurture; From Elimination to Subsequent Restoration”].

**Negah:** In regards to the number of teachers currently in the Ministry of Education, how many students does each values teacher cover? In your opinion, aren’t there too few values teachers and what must be done to correct this problem?

**Dr. Najafi:** Currently there the ratio of values teacher to students is anywhere from a 1:235 to 1:400, meaning that we have one values teacher responsible for/assigned to anywhere from 235 to 400 students in one school. We accept that the workforce of values teacher is numerically quite low, and that for one person to carry out values training (faaliathaye tarbiati) with 235 to 400 students is, if not impossible, very difficult...

Najafi goes on to note that his ministry, like all government agencies, was under constant considerable pressure to reduce staff. Given the vagaries of Iran’s budgetary process, the Ministry would have been hard-pressed to fully fund the ranks had an adequate number of candidates been found. Even if the numbers of the *morabian* were improved, wages for the *moallem* would have to be increased in order to balance the ledgers, an unwanted outcome rife with political hazard.

It is however misleading to associate budget shortfall with an ingrained hostility towards *parvaresh* by reformists. Well into the latest conservative era of rule, funding for *parvaresh* languished at historical levels. It was only in late 2009, in Ahmadinejad’s *second* term, that the Majles finally improved a budget increase, raising *parvaresh* funding from approximately $500-$1000 per student to an incredible $18000 per student. If there was a failure of budgeting for *parvaresh*, or to adopt Khamanei’s metaphor, its “nourishment,” then it was a generalized failure born by the state (*hookoomat*) and not any particular government (*dolat*).

**The Defense**

Haji, not surprisingly, rejected the premise upon which most of the accusations against him had been based, stating in an interview with the Office of the Supreme Leader that his administration had not eliminated the Deputy Ministry of Nurturing Affairs but had instead taken

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two departments that dealt separately with amoozesh and parvaresh and consolidated them into one.\textsuperscript{592}

The Minister and his staff adopted the language of his accusers in order to defend themselves against accusations that their reform efforts were an expression of partisan politics. That is, they accepted the premise that to be apolitical (and therefore, moral) educational policy must be fully based on objective and well-researched science, in line with the discourse of science and expertise. To demonstrate their accordance with these conventions, Haji and his interlocutors pointed to the fact that the \textit{Tahr-e edqam} did not originate with the current administration, but had in fact been first conceived many years earlier. The decision to remove the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi} had roots in both the Najafi and Mozaffar periods, rendering impossible the notion that the \textit{Tahr-e talfiq} was an impromptu plot, hatched by Haji alone: The investigative work that went into consolidating the Deputy Ministry had begun as early as 1985. State experts and planners, after a thorough study, had reached the conclusion that the work of parvaresh needed to be better planned and regulated.\textsuperscript{593} Delayed by the usual reasons of war and the economic crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s, the \textit{Tahr-e talfiq} was an action with a considerable historical and scientific pedigree: “The elimination of the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi} was based on more than ten investigative reports which are documented within the Ministry of Education. In truth, I [only] implemented the conclusions [reached by these studies]…previously determined but never implemented.”\textsuperscript{594}

\textsuperscript{592} “\textit{Tahavol: Zaroorat tahqeq chesmandaz}.”\textsuperscript{593} “\textit{Mauvin-e barnameh rizi vezarat-e amoozesh va parvaresh: Edqam-e do bakhsh-e ’amoozesh’ va ’parvaresh’ ejtenab napazir ast}” [“Deputy Minister of Planning: The Consolidation of ‘Amoozesh’ and ‘Parvaresh’ was Unavoidable”], Iran, 5 Azar 1380, \url{http://www.iran-newspaper.com/1380/800905/html/social.htm#s67563} (last accessed April 29, 2011).

\textsuperscript{594} “\textit{2 Mauvinat baraye chhai-ye omoor-e parvareshi dar amoozesh va parvaresh edqam mishavad}” [“Two Deputy Ministries Will be Created by the Restoration of the Department of Nurturing Affairs within the Ministry of
The question of when the reform was conceived, and by whom, became a critical point of contention, the fulcrum upon which the matter of the Ministry’s motivations was to be judged. Opponents sought to discredit the chronology laid out by Haji, very nearly calling him a liar, a not inconsiderable charge in the Iranian context especially given Islamic proscriptions on prevarication.\footnote{The suggestion that Haji was telling less than the truth is a rather serious accusation in the Iranian context. Regarding the gravity of lying, an electrifying moment in the buildup up to the June 12, 2009 presidential elections was when, during a live television debate, Mehdi Karoubi accused Ahmadinejad of being a liar, reminding him that “lying is the worst sin in Islam.” I personally witnessed how this single comment became the most important theme of the anti-Ahmadinejad protestors during the rallies of the next several days. Although mostly unnoticed by the Western media, there were some who noted the import both of the debates and the taboo-breaking accusation by Karoubi. See Colin Freeman, “US-Style Electioneering Shines a Harsh Light on Iran’s Ruling Class,” Telegraph.co.uk, June 9, 2009, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/5488152/US-style-electioneering-shines-a-harsh-light-on-Irans-ruling-class.html (last accessed August 28, 2010).} One unnamed critic and long-serving member of the Ministry of Education claimed that he had sat in on discussions in which then-Minister Nafaji announced his desire to expand the activities of the Deputy Ministry, not reduce or eliminate the department all together, as Haji and his staff were claiming.\footnote{“Raveshi keh vazir dar pish gereft tazaif-e tarbiat ast: Melki karshenas-e mauvinat-e parvaresh-e vezarat-e amoozesh va parvaresh”” [“The Path that the Minister is Taking Will Weaken Tarbiat: Expert Property of the Deputy Ministry of Nurture of the Ministry of Education”], Resalat, 26 Azar 1380.} Haji offered additional proof of the plan’s authenticity and technical pedigree by repeatedly pointing to the \textit{Tahr-e talfiq}’s credentialed status as a program twice vetted and approved, first by the Supreme Council of Education and later (and most importantly) the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution.\footnote{“Haji: Nazar-e moraje tasmimgir darbareh-ye mauvinat-e parvareshi ra mipaziram” [“Haji: I will accept the decision of the authorities regarding the Deputy Ministry of Nurture”], Rah-e mardam, 20 Mordad 1381/2002.} From a legal perspective, there had been nothing amiss in the process by which the Ministry folded the activities of the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi amoozesh}
into a single unit covering amoozesh and parvaresh. The Supreme Council of Education as well as the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, following thorough reviews, granted permission for the reform to go forward. 598 The suggestion that Haji should have put his reform package to a vote in the Majles, or alternatively, that it ought to have been the Majles who initiated the action are ultimately of little relevance, with no supporting legal foundation. While it may have been politically wiser for Haji worked in closer consultation with the legislative branch, he was not legally obligated to do so. As the sole governing body with juridical authority over the state school system, the SCE did not need the approval of the Majles to carry out its restructuring of central headquarters. Under Iran’s constitution poor communication is not an impeachable offense. 599

The Ministry also counted on the widespread support of Iran’s academics and educational experts. For many of these professionals, the elimination of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi was an important first step in reversing the decline of parvaresh education. They agreed with the Ministry that the artificial and unnecessary separation at the central headquarters of the school system between amoozesh and parvaresh had led directly to their separation at the end of the educational line, the classroom. They were especially incredulous at what they saw as an untenable contradiction in the opposition’s position, i.e., the proposition that although amoozesh and parvaresh are indivisible halves of a single whole (“two wings, one flight”), parvaresh nonetheless required its own special administrator within the Ministry of Education: “Within the home are there boundaries drawn between the amoozesh and parvaresh of your children? Is it

598 Haji reminded interviewers of the obvious fact that although there may have been dissenters in the councils governing the school system, their numbers did not constitute a majority. It is true, however, that Haji had acted against the wishes of the Supreme Leader, something that Haji himself willingly admitted.
599 Again, it can be said that the SCE is a politicized extension of the administration, a consequence of the 2001 reform making the President of the Republic the body’s official head. Nonetheless, there is no denying that a majority of the body with ultimate authority over matters of education, the SCCR, did approve the restructuring of the MOE.
possible to have just the father participate in the *amoozesh* of the child, and the mother made solely responsible for *parvaresh*?

A prominent commentator and educational expert, Abdollahi has also been one of the most unrelenting critics of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*, particularly the institution’s continuing application of *parvaresh* in the service of ideological ends. Given the rigorous screening of teaching candidates that takes place during the hiring process, the purges that the *morabian* assisted in during the earliest years of the Republic---purges which Abdollahi applauds as necessary and even heroic---as well as the obvious changes in the needs of ordinary Iranians, especially young Iranians, Abdollahi argues that the school system no longer has a need for either a Deputy Ministry of Nurture or the *morabi* itself. Separate instruction in *parvaresh* should have been eliminated after the war. Turning around the by now familiar claim that *parvaresh* instruction declined because of poor management under Rafsanjani and Khatami, Abdollahi observes that *parvaresh*’s woes cannot be solved by money or attention alone. The problem of *parvaresh* is not the quality of the institution that houses it, but the fact that it exists at all.

Not all of the problems with *parvaresh* stems from the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*. In a provocative and highly original line of argument, Abdollahi notes that the historical style of teaching *amoozesh* in Iran contributes directly to the subsequent failure of *parvaresh*, and in particular of the emphasis on rote memorization. Countries---Japan is a popular example---

600 Shirzad Abdollahi, “Baytarin kar enhalal.”
601 “Negahi be sistem-e amoozesh va parvaresh dar eretqa-ye savad-e farhangi-ye danesh amuzan” [“A Look at the System of Education In Terms of Improving the Cultural Literacy of Students”], *Iran*, 27 Tir 1383.
602 Withering in his criticism, even mocking in tone, Abdollahi wonders if increasing the budget available to the *morabian* will result in the increased presence of posters and other propaganda on Iran’s campuses.
where there is no designated *parvaresh* teachers actually perform better at *parvaresh*.  

This sentiment appealed to leaders from across the political spectrum. No less a figure than Farshidi has been quoted as saying that “Our schools today must respond to all of our students’ talents. However, presently much more of the focus is on *amoozesh*, with an inordinate emphasis on rote memorization, a system that is sure to drive creativity out of the schools.”

These arguments did little to convince those who viewed the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* as an essential, structural component of *parvaresh* education. They continued to see its removal, even if only at the central level, as being tantamount to the elimination of *parvaresh* itself. Close inspection reveals a strong current of Iranian exceptionalism animating this line of thinking, particularly around the special status that schooling takes in a revolutionary country such as Iran:

> In our country, given that our political system is revolutionary and the overriding influence that this status on all of the country’s affairs, we become different from other countries in the world. We are seeking a humanitarian and holy [national] identity and for this reason, education within our country is distinct from that of the rest of the world.

At the very least, a separate Deputy Ministry was needed to provide the necessary training and oversight of *parvaresh*. Opponents argued that ordinary classroom teachers could not replicate the work of the *morabian*. Not everyone was qualified to teach *parvaresh* and just as math and science teachers were expected to have specialized knowledge in their respective fields, so too was there a need for specialists in *parvaresh*, instructors who possessed the appropriate training and educational background for the job.

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603 Some of Tehran’s most religious private schools had long ago come to just such a conclusion, including the schools *Omid and Entezar*, the two cases highlighted in the next chapter.  
604 Janghorban, “*6 Vazir,*” 15.  
605 The author argues that not only was *parvaresh* not incorporated into the regular classroom (“the math teacher continued to only teach math”), but by removing the one person with oversight over *parvaresh* at the administrative level, the minimal attention that had until then been given to *parvaresh* was also lost.  
606 “*Hame narazi az in eqdam.*”  
607 “*Hame narazi az in eqdam.*” The typical education background of the *parvaresh* teacher is in the areas of psychology and “Islamic guidance.”
No amount of scientific data or research seemed capable of convincing the critics that the reforms were not part of a reformist plot to harm the Revolution. Critics claimed that the Minister had purposefully sought out intellectuals with a history of hostility to the Islamic system of government and religion education in schools to validate what was already, in the Minister’s mind, to be a fait accompli.\textsuperscript{608} The Tahr-e talfiq was an act of willful self-corruption, its immoral and unscientific nature (the two going hand in hand) proven by the unhidden biases of the Ministry’s so-called “experts.”

**The (Near) Impeachment of Haji**

Little was done to formally challenge the Tahr-e talfiq as political battle over the administration and teaching of parvaresh remained confined to the realm of opposition press editorials. Three years after its passage, however, the Tahr-e talfiq was finally pulled into the formal political arena. Parliamentary elections in June 2004 put Iran’s conservatives back in control of the Majles, reversing what had been almost ten years of reformist ascendancy.\textsuperscript{609} It quickly became evident that a reinvigorated opposition would use its newly acquired legislative authority to challenge the Khatami administration on multiple fronts, including in the area of education.

The restoration of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi was a top item in the agenda of the new Majles. Led by a group of parliamentarians known as “The Culturalists” (Fraksion-e farhangian), an effort was launched with the Parliament to impeach and remove Haji from his

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{608} “Baresi-ye amalkard-e vezarat-e amoozesh va parvaresh: Nameh-ye goshadeh ye jamei az moalleman be fraksion-e farhangian-e majles” [“An Investigation into the Operations of the Ministry of Education: A Letter from a Group of Teachers to the Culturalist’s Fraction of the Parliament”], \textit{Mashq} 23.

\textsuperscript{609} Though still in possession of the presidency, the reformists had lost control of the Majles after only term following the disqualification of many reformist MPs and candidates by the Guardian Council. Masoud Kazemzadeh, “Intra-Elite Factionalism and the 2004 Majles Elections in Iran,” \textit{Middle Eastern Studies} 44, no. 2 (March 2008): 189-214.

\textsuperscript{610} “Culturalists” is a literal translation of farhangian. It is a synonym for “teacher,” based on the special connection between culture and education in Iran, discussed earlier.
\end{flushright}
post as Minister.\textsuperscript{611} An eleven-member committee drew up articles of impeachment that were then sent on to the Majles Presiding Board (\textit{Heyat-e reis}), with the goal of launching impeachment proceedings immediately after students returned from summer vacation in late September.

In their way stood Gholam Haddad-Adel and Mohammad Reza Bahonar, Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Parliament, respectively. Although sympathetic to the group’s desire that the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi} be restored as soon as possible, Haddad-Adel and Bahonar objected to the use of impeachment for this purpose. Using their authority as agenda-setters, the two announced on October 9, 2004 that impeachment of the Education Minister would not be on the legislative agenda of the Majles, effectively tabling the motion.

The Culturalist Fraction persisted in their efforts to reconstitute the \textit{Mauvinat}. In late December \textit{Fraksion} chief Haji Babai advised the Ministry of Education that it had exactly one week to bring back the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi}.\textsuperscript{612} If the MOE did not do this on its own, then the Majles would pass the legislation that would oblige the Ministry to do so.

It was by design an impossible demand, and one made on dubious legal grounds.\textsuperscript{613} The deadline having passed, on December 26, 2004, 76 MPs signed the Plan to Restore the Deputy Minister of Nurturing Affairs and forwarded the bill to the Majles Presiding Board where, like their earlier impeachment measure against Haji, the legislation was allowed to languish.

The stalled impeachment drive against Haji received an unexpected boost in October of 2004. In that month, the Majles successfully removed President Khatami’s Minister of

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item Final results were 75\% for unconditional impeachment, 16\% in favor of conditional impeachment, i.e., giving Haji a grace period to restore the \textit{Mauvinat}, and 9\% against impeachment of the Minister.
  \item Haji Babai played a Javert-like role throughout the period in which Haji was Minister. The episode over the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi} was but the latest in Haji Babai’s relentless, four-year pursuit to have Haji removed from office.
  \item The SCE has legislative authority over matters of schooling, not the \textit{Majles}.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Transportation, Ahmad Khorram. With blood in the water, conservative MPs became more aggressive and began to openly threaten to take down other members of Khatami’s cabinet, including his Minister of Education.

With a looming cascade of impeachments threatening to cripple Khatami’s final year in office, and worried that the ongoing conflict between executive and legislative branches posed a threat to the sanctity of the system (nezam), the Supreme Leader intervened to prevent any further impeachments to occur. Khamanei insisted in a letter sent to Haddad-Adel that the impeachment drive against Haji be halted out of consideration for the disruptive effect it would have on the country. The Leader’s intercession on Haji’s behalf was notable because of his own opposition to the Tahr-e talfiq. Nonetheless, Khamanei felt that removal of the Minister was not called for, and in any case, unnecessary as there were only a few months left in President Khatami’s final term of office.

With impeachment effectively removed as a viable option, a group of MPs began to lay the groundwork for legislative action to restore the Mauvinat to the structure of the Ministry of Education. On February 21, 2005 the Committee for the Restoration of the Omoor-e tarbiati

614 The reasons given for Khorram’s removal were his failure to improve Iran’s air, rail, and road safety record and, more dubiously, the violation of Iran’s sovereignty that occurred when a Turkish consortium was allowed to operate the new Imam Khomeini International Airport. A more likely explanation for lawmakers’ hostility towards Turkish involvement was the Revolutionary Guard’s interest in retaining control over the security, and profit, of the airport for themselves.
616 This turned out to be a judicious decision as it was later reported that the lawmakers who had p TEHRAN, January 25--MP from Tehran Majid Ansari said lawmakers who had prepared the impeachment motion against Education Minister Mostafa Haji wanted to get rid of more than 50 officials and staff of the ministry, including top- and mid-level managers.
617 The ongoing confrontation between the 8th Majles and Haji’s Ministry of Education centered in large part on questions of authority. MPs sought to assert their authority over the school system based on its provision of the MOE’s budget. Haji did not dispute that the holding of purse-strings gave the Majles certain rights and obligations, including the power to investigate and assess how budgetary outlays were being used. The situation is muddled by the unique qualities that adhere to the Supreme Council of Education. Readers will recall from Chapter Two that the Supreme Council of Education has both legislative and executive authority over the pre-university school system, its
was formed under the auspices of the Parliamentary Commission for Educational Research. The opposition movement against the MOE under Khatami was further bolstered by the elections for the ninth president of the Islamic Republic, held in the summer of that same year. The election of Mahmood Ahmadinejad, an individual committed to restoring the “lost” fervor and principles of the Revolution, meant that the Majles would not force the issue while Khatami remained president. The assumption---mistaken it would later turn out---was that whomever Ahmadinejad appointed Education Minister would prove to be a partner and ally.

Another year passed before MPs consummated their efforts to bring back the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*. On June 28, 2006, the Parliament passed “The Restoration of the Deputy Ministry of Nurturing Affairs and Physical Education,” approved several days later on July 12, 2006 by the Guardian Council, citing months of debate and “expert investigation.”

For those in the reformist camp, the return of the Deputy Ministry was a fait accompli, ensured once the conservatives had regained control of the levers of government. Many soon happily adopted the same stratagems previously used by their opponents to frame the legislation as being infected with the “color and smell of politics.”

Haji, now more than a year out of office and no longer able to shape events within the Ministry, was dismayed at what he felt was the unraveling of *parvareshi’s* only hope for salvation. Following passage of the law to restore the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*, the former Minister put in his final word on the long running drama by penning a blistering attack. In a letter addressed to Speaker Haddad-Adel, Haji reminded the Speaker of his long and reputable experience as a teacher and textbook author, member of the Supreme Council of Cultural

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decrees possessing the power of law. This griffin-like quality, the blend of the parliamentary and the presidential, makes it difficult to clearly demarcate the Majles’ power.
Revolution, and former head of the Office of Research and Educational Planning. Haddad-Adel, Haji noted, knew better than most that although the Omoor-e tarbiati, later the Mauvinat-e omoor-e parvareshi va tarbiat badani, had performed admirably in bringing energy and “new blood” into the postrevolutionary school system during the early years of the Republic, flaws in the organizational structure of the MOE had led to a situation in which teachers and principals abandoned their responsibilities in the area of parvaresh. This was the primary impetus behind the Tahr-e talfiq, a measure that Haddad-Adel himself had supported in his capacity as a member of the SCCR.

With the context established, Haji went in for the rhetorical kill:

…do you really mean to say that [this recent legislation] is a restoration of parvaresh and the well-being of the students? Is it the opinion of the esteemed gentleman and the members of the honorable Commission of Education and Research, several of whom were once teachers or morabian and who are well aware of the structural weaknesses produced by the separation of amoozesh and parvaresh from one another, and whom in several sessions of the Commission announced these problems themselves, with this law will the activities of parvaresh renew…that dry tree…which you and the members of the honorable Commission also are familiar with…?

Haji went on to detail the lengthy process of research and investigation that went into his Ministry’s consolidation of amoozesh and parvaresh, and used this history to directly ask Haddad-Adel what investigations he had carried out, and which university or research institute had authorized the passage of such a law? What Haji seeks to do with this line of questioning is quite clear: The former Minister is founding the legitimacy and authority of his position vis a vis his opposition on the basis of objective, apolitical scientific research. His implicit claim that

618 Haddad-Adel is the author of a number of textbooks, perhaps the most famous being the Third Grade Social Studies textbook first published in the 1980s and still in use, with minor revisions, to this day.
619 “Morteza haji dar nameh-ye khetab be haddad adel: Aya yafehha-ye elmi ham ehy-e mauvinat-e parvareshi ra taiid mikonad?” [“Morteza Haji in a Letter Addressed to Haddad-Adel: Will the Restoration of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi also Have Scientific Results?”].
620 “Morteza haji dar nameh”
none such research exists on the other side of this issue, from Haji’s perspective, proves that the restoration of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* was driven exclusively by politics.

As for the politics, it would turn out that Haji was not the last Minister of Education to be threatened with forceful and premature exit from office. One unexpected outcome of this entire episode has been apparent normalization of impeachment, previously often threatened but rarely used, as a political instrument against a sitting Education Minister. Today, the taboo of impeachment no longer exists. Since Haji’s exit, three different individuals became Minister in a period of four years. To date, none has survived more than two years.

The first of these, Farshidi, was impeached after only a year, but survived thanks in large part to a vigorous defense before the Parliament delivered in person by Ahmadinejad. Farshidi did not last long afterwards, and was forced out just months later. Ahmadinejad then appointed Ali Ahmadi, first as a caretaker and then Minister.

In short order the Parliament found cause to reverse their decision. A motion for Ahmadi’s removal, signed by eighty-two of the Parliaments 290 MPs---nearly a third of a Majles controlled by the president’s erstwhile allies---took Ahmadi right up to the edge of impeachment. Like Haji, Ahmadi found rescue in the approaching presidential elections. Once again leaders determined that it would be unnecessarily disruptive to remove a cabinet member with so little time left in the first term.

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621 Haji himself stands on both sides of this historical development. There had in fact been an earlier attempt to remove him from his post as Minister for reasons related to teachers’ salaries and job security. That effort never took serious form and became at some point something of a joke. Haji’s second encounter with possible impeachment, as we just saw, was by contrast quite serious.

622 Candidates are regularly given votes of no confidence. Three of Ahmadinejad’s candidates for the Ministry have been rejected outright by the Parliament.
Ahmadi eventually stepped down and was replaced by the current Minister, Hamid Reza Hajibabai. Events had come full circle: Hajibabai, who had spent so many years pursuing the removal of Morteza Haji from the Ministry of Education, now occupied Haji’s former chair.\textsuperscript{623}

**An Evaluation of the Tahr-e Talfiq**

Was the elimination of the Mauvinat a legitimate and necessary reform or was it in fact an act of factional politics, as so many of its opponents claimed? Ascertaining the inner states or true intentions of policy elites is not my goal here. I am not concerned with whether or not Haji sincerely wished to restore parvaresh or was in fact bent on its elimination. Perhaps a better way of addressing this issue is to frame the question in a technical, non-political manner: Did the presence and efficacy of parvaresh instruction increase or decrease as a result of the Tahr-e talfiq? Put another way, did the restoration of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi in 2006 also restore parvaresh?

Answers to these questions are difficult to ascertain for two reasons. One, the Tahr-e talfiq was never fully implemented by the Haji MOE, and remained limited to only what turned out to be the temporary changes made in the organizational chart of the Ministry. Plans to coordinate and synchronize planning and curriculum development at central headquarters never fully materialized, in part because of the ensuing furor that the reforms caused, and so the most important element of the plan and the main reason behind its passage never materialized. Of course, implementation of the Tahr-e talfiq stopped altogether in 2005 with the arrival of Ahmadinejad, and was effectively repealed in 2006 with the restoration of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi.

\textsuperscript{623} Getting him into office followed a circuitous route. Two women were nominated, and rejected, for the post before the Majles finally settled on Hajibabai.
The second barrier preventing us from producing an assessment of the *Tahr-e talfiq*’s efficacy is the rarefied political climate from that period. It was very difficult for me to find much in the way of dispassionate analysis in the media archives or other primary source materials. What impresses this investigator is the dissonance between the accusations leveled at the Minister and what were the demonstrably limited goals of the *Tahr-e talfiq*---the elimination of *parvaresh* exclusively at the central administrative level, and then only as a discrete department within the Ministry. The stark imbalance between the empirical reality of the actual reform and the response that the reform prompted is on its own a strong indicator of how politicized the school system has become.

What is striking is that all of the participants in the debate over the future of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* shared the singular, normative belief that *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* must be taught together in the classroom, in other words, Motahhari’s ideal of education being “two wings, one flight.” From this mutual starting point, however, actors separated into two groups. Stepping away from normative to non-normative assessments of schooling, on one side stood those who believed that the existence of a formal division of *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* at the administrative level led to their mutual abandonment by *moalleman* and *morabian* at the school site. On the other side were those who felt that, for all of its faults, the preservation of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* meant that there would be at least one organization standing vigilant over *parvaresh*.

One of the more idiosyncratic assessments that I encountered in my investigations came from Mortezi Zahedi. Zahedi, who on his own had managed day-to-day operations of the *Omoor-e tarbiati* in the first three years of its existence, at a ceremony honoring the legacy of Rajai and Bahonar recalled how the *morabian*, working in conjunction with the principals and
the regular teaching staff, had helped to raise the level of instruction in the humanities and social sciences. Although he was a staunch supporter of the conservative Ahmadinejad, Zahedi nonetheless emphasized that “neither the individual who attacks the *Omoor-e tarbiati*, nor the person who defends, has correctly understood what the *Omoor-e tarbiati* stands for”:

> Anyone who defends the *Omoor-e tarbiati* against the regular academic system (*nezam-e amoozeshi*), has not understood the *Omoor-e tarbiati*. Other than *amoozesh*, we have nothing. The only path for achieving *tarbiat* is *amoozesh*. If we do *amoozesh* correctly, then the result will be *tarbiat*.\(^{624}\)

Drawing upon the martial imagery of battle and war, Zahedi warned his audience not to think of the *Omoor-e tarbiati* as the *Sepah*, or the teachers as members of the army (*artesh*). There was no competition between the two outfits, and there was no reason to prevent ordinary teachers, if they wanted, to engage in the work of *tarbiati*.\(^{625}\)

In other words, the *morabian* were not the select, specialized group that some defenders of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* had made them out to be. The work of the schools is one of partnership and cooperation between the different kinds of teachers on campus. According to Zahedi *parvaresh* provided the means by which the schools could teach students both academic knowledge and values using ideas that were authentically Iranian, as opposed to relying on alien, western methods of schooling that were suffused with “positivism,” the latter being incompatible with the psychology and culture of the country.

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\(^{624}\) Shirzad Abdollahi, “*Vazir-e amoozesh va parvaresh: Omoor-e tarbiati be madreseh baz migardad*” [“The Minister of Education: *Omoor-e Tarbiati* is Once Again Returning to the School”], *Sharq*, 9 Esfand 1384/2006. Not all of Zahedi’s ideas were as enlightened as his views on the mutually constitutive relationship of *amoozesh* with *parvaresh*. He goes on in the same address to decry the “feminism” that had led Iranian women and young girls to participate in “immoral” (*biarzeshi*) activities such as skydiving, horseback riding, bicycle riding.

\(^{625}\) Especially during the early years of the Iran-Iraq War, the army viewed the volunteer and non-hierarchical *Sepah* with tremendous suspicion. In recent years, with the consolidation of Iran’s military forces under a unitary command, this rivalry has diminished considerably.
Unable to find a clear answer in the documentary evidence, I made a point of raising the matter of the Tahr-e talfiq to my interview subjects, many of whom feature prominently in the following chapter. By way of providing context, I note that all of my interviewees work at private Islamic schools, places where the fusion of amoozesh and parvaresh---Motahhari’s ideal of two wings, one flight---exists as a bedrock principle and not as a choice. I selected individuals whose daily work at their respective school sites brings them into direct contact with matters of parvaresh.

Despite having similar professional backgrounds, my subjects’ assessment of Haji varied. One interviewee agreed that there was no need for a separate Deputy Ministry at the central level of the MOE. He expressed approval of its elimination under Haji, but considered the manner in which the reform had been carried out to be self-defeating. A different instructor insisted that the parvaresh teacher was all that the school system had standing between there being at least a minimal amount of moral instruction, and none at all. As he put it, ”Between bad and worse, we pick bad.” All agreed with the basic principle that amoozesh and parvaresh in theory and in practice ought to occur together in the classroom, regardless of what the class is or who is standing at the chalkboard. And despite their differences, and perhaps because they had all chosen to work at private Islamic high schools, to a person all of my subjects agreed that the situation in state schools was hopeless. Reform or no reform, they felt that parvaresh had long ago died in Iran’s public school system.

The Restoration of the Mauvinat

Each year, near the end of winter, the Islamic Republic formally celebrates the legacy of Mohammad Ali Rajai and Mohammad Javad Bahonar, the “fathers” of the Islamic school system. Held on the same date that the Omoor-e tarbiati was introduced to the country’s
schools, during the 27th anniversary celebration Ali Abbaspour Tehrani, Head of the Education and Research Commission in the Majles, took to the lectern to announce the pending ratification of legislation that would, after a six-year absence, restore the Deputy Ministry of Nurture, the Mauvinat-e parvareshi. Tehrani cautioned educational functionaries of the new administration gathered there that night to not permit old disputes, party politics or partisan interest to entangle the future operation of the school system. Perhaps eager to set aside lingering bitterness remaining from the conflict of the past years, Tehrani expressed his hope that this most recent change to the structure of the Ministry would mark the end of the “political shocks” that too long had upset the governance of the country’s schools.  

The evening’s guest of honor took to the lectern intent on introducing a very different agenda to his audience. Mahmood Farshidi, Ahmadinejad’s first Minister of Education, used his prepared remarks to draw clear distinctions between the new administration and past stewards of Iran’s educational system, doing so through a series of thinly-veiled partisan jibes.  

He began by listing three historical groups, each with different approaches to postrevolutionary schooling. The first of these, according to Farshidi, believed that formal education was a universal and modular phenomenon. In this fully globalized vision, schooling had little to no responsibility for the moral and ethical education of children. “This way of thinking,” observed Farshidi, “is reinforced by [our] current educational system, and within the system some willingly and unwilling find themselves drawn to it.”  

The new Minister then drew connections between the secular liberalism of the first group to the ideas of a second group, whom Farshidi explained possessed an educational philosophy that called for a minimal presence of Islam and moral education. He damned this second

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626 Abdollahi, “Vazir-e amoozesh va parvaresh.”  
627 Abdollahi, “Vazir-e amoozesh va parvaresh.”
approach to schooling with faint praise by acknowledging that although its proponents were committed Muslims in their private lives, the consequences of their ideas made them indistinguishable from secular liberals or worse, the previous regime: “We had [the minimalist version of Islam] before the Revolution. There were religious and jurisprudential (fiq̄h) textbooks before the Revolution.” The first and second visions of education would put Iran on a path to becoming victims of “world domination,” in other words, the western powers with the English and the Americans foremost among them.

Finally, the new Minister laid out a third approach to schooling, one that matched his own theory of education. This approach advanced a program in which there was to be a maximum presence for Islam and politics in the schools. Farshidi dismissed criticisms that the new administration was bent on reintroducing stridency in the areas of political Islam. These critics dressed themselves up in a guise of tolerance that in addition to being fanciful, was un-Iranian and dangerous to the Revolution: “There are those who see Switzerland as a role model, even heaven. They say that over there, even the pigeons live peacefully together. These people want to harm our children. This way of thinking has now been retired [by us].”

Farshidi structured his criticisms in such a way as to draw linkages between Khatami and Rafsanjani, a strategy that we have already seen in this chapter. In case anyone missed the connection, in his remarks Farshidi emphasized the shortcomings of the New High School (Nezam-e jadid). He strongly condemned the Rafsanjani MOE, then led by Najafi, for limiting reform to just the vocational and academic sectors of the school system. This failure, produced

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628 Abdollahi, “Vazir-e amoozesh va parvaresh.”
629 Abdollahi, “Vazir-e amoozesh va parvaresh.”
630 As well as in the weeks leading up to the 2009 presidential election, for which the author was a witness and participant. It became difficult to determine whether Ahmadinejad was running against Mousavi, or whether he was treating Mousavi as a stalking horse for his old nemesis Rafsanjani. Since Mousavi’s public reputation was unimpeachable, the Ahmadinejad campaign sought to tar the former Prime Minister through his connection with Rafsanjani, the latter cast as Mousavi’s “kingmaker.”
by the Rafsanjani administration and continued under the Khatami presidency, had left the current MOE, under Farshidi’s direction, with little choice but to launch another round of “fundamental change.”

Farshidi’s stridency at the lectern was in line with the general tone of the new administration. Ahmadinejad had come into office openly committed to fundamental change not only in schooling but also across the full range of human experience, be it in the social, religious, or political spheres. He and his supporters in the Parliament judged the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations to be failures of moral leadership. The country had lost its way. The new administration therefore took it upon itself to return Iranian society to the “Imam’s line” (khat-e imam).

Ahmadinejad’s historical ideal and model for emulation was the imagined political and social climate of postrevolutionary Iran’s first decade. It is no exaggeration to say that the Ahmadinejad administration seeks to reproduce the zeitgeist of the early 1980s, made evident in Ahmadinejad’s self-conscious emulation of the persona of the ascetic Rajai, down to the former’s sartorial choices.

The administration mandated that there be a “cultural-tarbiati approach” in all matters related to education. Culture as it is used here refers to the ethics and morality that constitute an individual’s character or identity, directly informed by Islam. And as I explained at the beginning of the chapter, education writ-large (meaning in school and at home)---parvaresh/tarbiat---provides children access to this culture:

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631 The failure to carry out the Tahr-e nezam-e jadid is a particularly strong fixation amongst conservatives in Iran. Najafi, a figure for whom there is a special loathing on the right, is often directly blamed.
632 Imam is the most commonly used honorific in Iran for Khomeini.
All elements of education take on a cultural-tarbiati perspective, not just the Deputy Minister of Nurture, but also the regular teachers, the school principals, the textbooks, the technology used in academic instruction, school provisions, building construction, school construction… everyone, and I mean everyone, must work under a cultural-tarbiati perspective. Even the school custodian must apply this approach in his work.\footnote{Seyyed Morteza Mofidnejad, “Ba yek gol bahar nemishavad: Goftegoo ba Alireza Ahmadi” [“One Flower Does Not a Spring Make: Interview with Alireza Ahmadi”], Khamanei.ir, 18 Ordibehesht 1389/2010, http://farsi.khamenei.ir/print-content?id=8190 (last accessed December 23, 2010).}

Changes to the school system were to extend beyond the restoration of a particular structural component. In his prepared remarks, Ahmadi exclaimed “Therefore if we wish to restore parvaresh to our school educational system, we must take on a character and universal vision that is cultural. From the teacher to the school building to the textbooks [all] must be involved in this effort.”\footnote{The Minister’s enthusiasm for parvaresh sometimes led him to suggest unpragmatic policies. Ahmadi suggested that morabian could for a time show their devotion by giving up a portion of their weekend (Thursday and Friday) to organize extracurricular activities for the students.}

For all of its bombast and full-throated defense of the “return to basics,” the new administration was, in places, pragmatic in its approach to reform, and remained opened to incorporating ideas that had been proposed during the reformist period. Shortly after its restoration the office of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi va tarbiat badani issued a conciliatory statement. Judiciously avoiding any mention of the recent battles over the Mauvinat-e parvareshi, the article began by explaining how the previous administration had acted out of the conviction that all teachers, morabi and classroom, must be engaged in the parvaresh of Iran’s students. The goal behind the elimination of the Deputy Ministry had been an admirable effort to increase the presence of morality education at all levels of academic instruction. Nonetheless, despite the sincerity of its supporters, the reforms had been misguided and met only with failure: “However, it would appear that this effort, in practice did not expand parvaresh but instead
eliminated it completely.” The authors did not dispute the notion that, ideally, *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* ought to be incorporated simultaneously during classroom instruction. However, they argued that the best way to ensure their unity was by separating the two at the administrative level: “[*Amoozesh va parvaresh*] is “two wings, one flight” but no program for the development and deepening of *tarbiat* can work without a clearly designated administration…”

Despite the new government’s expressed hostility to all things reformist, there are indications that the current leadership is willing to incorporate at least some of their opponents’ ideas. The latest manifestation of the old *Omoor-e tarbiat* is not just a retread of what existed before Haji. Planners seek to return *parvaresh* to the classroom as a softer, more passive program of socialization, and not the direct inculcation of the past. The curriculum itself remains “unhidden,” but the methods of delivering the state’s message are to take on a lighter touch:

Forced *parvaresh* does not have a positive effect; rather, *parvaresh* activities must be carried out during unofficial school hours and in an indirect manner with the students; the message has to be conveyed not just through words and speaking but also through deed and the comportment of oneself [at school]…

Seyyed Baqer Pishnamazi, the first Deputy Minister assigned to head the reconstituted *Mauvinat-e parvareshi va tarbiat badani*, expressed the administration’s recognition that for all of its “retro” political ideas, the old way of doing things in the area of *parvaresh* did not work. The MOE had made the mistake of turning its greatest strength---the potential for creativity and flexibility, qualities long recognized as being the most effective means for schooling children---into a weakness. An example of this is the annual “cultural games,” yearly competitions that are designed to provide students with enjoyment even as they instill them with desired values.

Instead of ensuring that the cultural games to be a carefree and fun event, the MOE had in the

637 “Zang-e parvareshi,” 2.
past allowed them to become yet another way for students to compete against each other through rote memorization, in this case the Koran. Planners today are more apt to recognize that developing students’ capacity to memorize religious facts does not necessarily make for a religious student.

An improved perspective on students’ educational needs has not been enough for the government to become successful in meeting its goals. The usual disruptions have prevented the Ahmadinejad administration from moving forward with their plans for the revival of parvaresh. Foremost among these the government faces the challenge of finding enough qualified individuals to fill the post of morabian. Given the MOE’s rigorous attention to the academic merits of its personnel, any replication of the hiring practices of the early years of the Revolution, in which commitment to Islam and the Revolution were enough to qualify a candidate for the job, is today impossible to imagine. Deputy Minister Pishnamazi told a group of reporters in 2006 that he anticipated that some 80 percent of the existing teaching force in his department would retire within the next couple of years. 639 This figure, combined with data showing that only 10 or 20 percent of regular teachers had expressed interest in crossing over to parvaresh instruction, are strong indicators that over the years and up to the present day, few were motivated to sign up with the department. Even the lowering of standards has had little positive effect in producing the desired number of new recruits—a far cry from the days in which the MOE put potential hires through a rigorous screening process to ensure their ideological bona fides. 640

640 Desired degrees for the morabi corps included psychology and oloom-e tarbiati, or “tarbiat studies.” Given perennial shortages in the pool of candidates, Pishnamazi permitted the hire of personnel outside of these two areas.
Shortages in the staffing are compounded by the paucity of the national educational budget designated for religious and political instruction in schools. *Parvaresh* remains one of the most poorly funded components of the Ministry, a problem I discussed briefly earlier in this chapter. This reputation surely affects the state’s ability to draw in the “best and the brightest” to this line of work. The Majles has recently moved to rectify this situation, and although today’s budget levels---a reported $18,000 will be spent on each student just for *parvaresh*---are a vast improvement on the previous outlay of $500-$1000 per student, it cannot have escaped the attention of principals and their teaching staff that, measured in *tomans* and *rials*, *parvaresh* has historically been a lower priority than *amoozesh*.

Beyond staff and budgeting shortfalls, regular and constant turnover in staff---what is sardonically referred to in Iran as “management by bus” (*moodiriyat-e ootooboosi*)---has led to significant disruption at all levels of schooling. Since the restoration of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*, there has been on average a new Minister of Education as well as new Deputy Minister every year. Troubled by constant turnover in its Ministry of Education, the administration finds itself unable to mount a program of *parvaresh* that meets its own professed high expectations. As a consequence, the Ahmadinejad government finds itself replicating outcomes---and facing the same criticisms---of their predecessors. The conservative daily *Javan* reported in February of 2010 that administration allies were at a loss as to why, four years after the restoration of the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi va tarbiat badani*, the Ministry had not yet published a set of standards or rubrics for use in the classroom: “Even today we are witness to an administrative style of personal tastes (*saliqeh-ha*) instead of administration by [science]…We see that that the *Omoor-e tarbiati* is today run according to [personal] “taste”

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641 Literally, the changes in staff are so great that it requires a bus to bring them into the Ministry. If the changes in personnel are especially spectacular, it’s known as “management by train” (*moodiriyat-e qatar*).
instead of scientific or regulatory principles.”\textsuperscript{642} Moreover, efforts to unite \textit{amoozesh} and \textit{parvaresh} in the classroom had stalled, leaving \textit{parvaresh} as an isolated part of campus life, studiously avoided by \textit{moalleman} who continue to work only within their academic bailiwicks.

Faced with interminable setbacks, there have emerged hints of state surrender. Only two days on the job, Ahmadinejad’s latest Deputy Minister of Nurture, Ali Asqar Yazdani in early 2009 faced a bevy of skeptical and hostile reporters regarding the government’s slow pace in restoring the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi}, a project now nearly three years old. One reporter suggested to Yazdani that the tone of his answers indicated that the government no longer saw the \textit{tarbiat} of students to be a state responsibility. Yazdani replied that \textit{parvaresh} is in fact not the goal of the school system: “We are entrusted with the official \textit{talim} and \textit{tarbiat} [of students], which must legal and orderly. Families are the most important source of the \textit{tarbiat} of the individual.”\textsuperscript{643} This narrow and legalistic response is a tacit recognition that there are limits to what the state can accomplish in the area of \textit{parvaresh}, and represents a major shift since the days of Rajai and Bahonar. Yazadani’s comments speak to the erosion of the state’s project of \textit{parvaresh}. Iranian students and their families have their own ideas as to what role and shape \textit{parvaresh} ought to take in the schools. Their story, unmentioned until now, is a topic that I take up in the next chapter.

\textbf{The Discourse of Science and Expertise, The Perpetual Crisis of Fundamental Change}

Over the years, the ongoing depiction of \textit{parvaresh} as being in crisis has been a way for political elites to make themselves relevant (and to distinguish themselves from their rivals).

\textsuperscript{642} Ahmad Taleqani, “\textit{Sarfaslha-ye tarbiati ba gozasht-e char sal hanooz tadvin nashodeh ast}” [“With Four Years Gone By No Rubric has yet been Approved for \textit{Tarbiat}”], \textit{Javan Online}, 7 Esfand 1388/2010.

Crises of schooling are, in other words, manufactured to serve narrow political interests and do not necessarily reflect objective conditions. The politics of perpetual crisis commands that leaders do something about it; the crisis, once diagnosed, cannot then be allowed to continue unresolved.

An important practitioner of the politics of perpetual crisis has been the current Supreme Leader himself. His long-term concern that Iran’s school system is not “right” compels him to regularly acknowledge and address education’s failures. For example, speaking at a gathering of teachers in 2006, Khamanei addressed criticisms that the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi* had for years become flaccid in its activities, the repertoire of *parvaresh* activities lacking the kind of inspiration needed to draw in today’s children. The Supreme Leader stated that the “superficial activities” that constituted today’s *parvaresh*, which in the main were limited to propaganda activities, were a far cry from the true goals of *parvaresh*, which included “the growth of students’ personal character, the reinforcement of self-confidence, and the bubbling of talents.” 644

Factional politics in postrevolutionary Iran is of course nothing new, and have existed since the IRI’s earliest days. 645 Still, the crisis over the *Tahr-e talfiq* went beyond the usual

644 Speech made on the occasion of Teacher’s Day, May 2, 2006. Although I am suggesting here that Khamanei is making instrumental use of “change,” this does not mean that problems do not exist within the *Mauvinat-e parvareshi*. While Khamanei is never as blunt, both he and Abdollahi correctly note that much of what passes for *parvaresh* nowadays is cosmetic and include practices like the hanging up of posters or putting on ritualized courtyard protests against Iran’s enemies. From my Grandmother’s apartment where I was staying in Tehran I would hear twice-daily chants excoriating Israel, the English, and America, coming over the wall of the two-shift girls elementary school located just across from my building.

“politics of exclusion”\textsuperscript{646} to constitute what I consider to be a critical juncture in the development of Iran’s postrevolutionary school system. The controversy quickly devolved into a kind of tribalism, with the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi} transformed into a totem, a means for groups opposed to the administration to separate enemies from allies based on their fidelity to this particular institution.\textsuperscript{647} Under these circumstances, achieving balance between \textit{amoozesh} and \textit{parvaresh}, or preserving the memory of the martyrs Rajai and Bahonar became incidental to the real issue: Separating the true-believer from the apostate.

Although the specific drama surrounding Haji and the elimination of the \textit{Mauvinat-e parvareshi} was historically contingent, it was not \textit{sui generis} or entirely random. To a certain extent, the occurrence of \textit{some} crisis was foreseeable, even if the form that that crisis ultimately took, and moment when it happened, was not. The seemingly idiosyncratic decision by a single government functionary, taken at the turn of the new century, to eliminate a bureau in the Ministry of Education was, to paraphrase Alexander George and Andy Bennett, the straw that broke the camel’s back---but a straw that did not “contribute as much to the outcome as the bales of straw that preceded it.”\textsuperscript{648} If not the Deputy Ministry of \textit{Parvaresh}, then some other emotive and “indispensable” institution of schooling would undoubtedly have produced a similar crisis.\textsuperscript{649}

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\textsuperscript{646} Bakhtiari, \textit{Parliamentary Politics}.

\textsuperscript{647} Abdollahi, clearly an advocate of the pro-elimination side, protests that those calling for the preservation of the \textit{Omoor-e tarbiati} have equated their position with the defense of religious and revolutionary values. Using the same logic, these same critics are convinced that anyone against the \textit{Omoor-e tarbiati} is also against “religion and the sacred, Rajai and Bahonar,” and are accused of being “weststruck” (\textit{gharbzadeh}).

\textsuperscript{648} Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, \textit{Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 27.

Based on this analysis, we can now revise the phenomenon of “fundamental change” introduced earlier in this dissertation. Chapter Two explained how Iran’s postrevolutionary state did not fundamentally alter the school system, inherited from the previous regime, until the early 1990s due to a number of material challenges, including a youth population boom, war (both foreign and for a brief time, civil), international sanctions, collapsing oil prices, and a devastated economy. The absence of change and the failure to consolidate schooling prior to the death of Khomeini led to the phenomenon of constant and recurring bouts of “fundamental change,” as rotating governments struggled to “finally get education done right.” This cycle of change in turn impedes the consolidation of the school system, leaving the Ministry of Education, Iran’s largest ministry, further vulnerable to the machinations and political appropriations of rival elites. Adopting a common expression used by Iranians to describe the country’s politics, I referred to this situation as a school system with a “structure but no system.”

Modifying this earlier analysis based on the evidence presented in this chapter, I now argue that so long an unhidden, ideological agenda remains the central feature of formal education in Iran, the final consolidation of the postrevolutionary school system is likely to never occur. Institutional consolidation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the elimination of partisan politics from the Iranian school system—-at least to a level such that formal education acquires some semblance of an ordered system, free from the incessant partisan interference of elites out to make a name for themselves. All of the factors that had for years hindered structural change as the state transitioned from Pahlavi to Islamic rule, most notably war and a calamitous overcrowding of classrooms as a result of the population boom of the early 1980s, had merely exacerbated what was destined to be a chronic condition, the politicization of schooling.
In retrospect, the optimal time to consolidate postrevolutionary schooling and to establish the content, purpose, and means of parvaresh, had been during the brief window of opportunity that emerged between the defeat of the Islamic regime’s internal enemies and Khomeini’s death. There was in Iran during that short interregnum a unity of purpose, fueled by the war with Iraq and relative proximity to the revolutionary moment, as well as the unassailable moral authority of Khomeini. As we already know, the first attempt to enact a program of “fundamental change” began in the mid-1980s under Akrami and was implemented in the early 1990s, but only in a piecemeal and hardly “fundamental” fashion. By the mid-1990s, the window of opportunity had closed, perhaps forever.

By way of comparison, for the most part Pahlavi schools were troubled by the more mundane challenges of material shortfalls and a constant turnover of staff at central headquarters which cause considerable disruption in the long-term planning and provision of the educational system. Struggles over ideology or the political content of schooling appear to have been less of an issue than it would be for the regime’s successor. During my research in Iran I encountered many who reckoned that Shah had led a wholly non-ideological regime, one whose primary purpose was to ensure the perpetuation of the power and wealth of the royal family. Mohammad Rezaei, whose work on postrevolutionary schooling figures prominently in this dissertation, argues without qualification that Pahlavi-era schooling was not ideological. According to Rezaei, the use of schools as instruments of inculcation begins only with the founding of the Islamic Republic.

David Menashri provides a slightly different perspective on the royal school system, arguing that prerevolutionary schooling under the two Shahs purposefully deployed the language of modernization and patriotism as a way to instill in children a sense of loyalty to the Shah and
his family. The content of state ideology was highly personalized, embodied in the famous hierarchy of authority, “God, Shah, Homeland” (*Khoda, Shah, Mihan*), but an ideology nonetheless.650

My own assessment is that although neither Shah led an especially ideological regime or government---certainly ideology was never a central feature of the educational system in the manner it has been under the Islamic Republic---it cannot be said that ideology was not a feature of prerevolutionary schooling in Iran.

*Consensus over the content and instruction of parvaresh has not occurred because it is not in any one’s interest.* Various attempts to expunge politics from schooling over the years do not come unattended by political considerations. If anything, leaders seek to distinguish themselves from their predecessors who, it is implied, were unsuccessful in their efforts to school future generations because of the absence of rigor and scientific methods. For example, the introduction of the 2009 report *The Philosophy of Tarbiat* (*Falsafeh-ye tarbiat*), issued as a component of the National Curriculum, explains that an “Islamic philosophy of education” fills an intellectual void in the structure of schooling

> Our country’s modern system of tarbiat during its founding, expansion, and even in the efforts to produce “fundamental change,” to this day has never been consistent with a clear theoretical foundation, benefited from authoritative scientific direction, nor been based on a system of Islamic thought and values [that are] compatible with the specific cultural, social, and indigenous features of our country.651

Note the dual-action being described here. The systematic and rigorous approach to education allows leaders to connect schooling not only to the universal truth that the scientific method presumably provides, but also makes it so that Iranian schooling can (finally) become “compatible” with the particularistic, but no less timeless, needs of the country.

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Again, what matters here is that the backers of the National Curriculum, as well as the 20 Year Vision Plan, derive their authority from their pretensions to science and research-driven change. School knowledge that consists of “self-evident, disinterested facts” is legitimate because it transcends opinion. Any opposition to such facts is, therefore, by definition irrational. Management according to the personal tastes of individual administrators (saliqeha-ye moodiran) is what has wrecked reforms up to the present, and it is what the National Curriculum seeks to end once and for all.

In reality, under the color of scientific neutrality and objectivity leaders are inserting their own biases into the educational system. The National Curriculum is, after all, not the first national reform of schooling to be based on scientific principles, nor the first to discredit previous reform efforts because of their un-scientific quality. The Khatami-era MOE saw fit to criticize the first post-revolutionary reform under the stewardship of Akrami and Najafi as being “based on traditional, non-scientific and ineffective methods [in which] the reality of the Iranian educational situation was ignored [education was] overemphasizing theoretical and abstract knowledge [and] the actual usage of education in the real life was neglected.” Arjmand observes that throughout the reports and policy documents produced by the Khatami administration in support of its reform agenda,

references were made to the previous post-revolutionary educational reform as the one in which the theoretical grounds were absent. To prove that the new reform was in line with scientific and pedagogic principles, the policy documents of the new reform devoted a section to theoretical foundations of the reform…The documents utilized a theoretical framework and unlike the first reform which was entirely based on ideological commitments, attempted to base the reform on scientific principles, though the theories have been modified in order to “adjust them to the cultural, social and religious requirements of the Iranian Islamic society.”

652 Kaplan, The Pedagogical State, xvii.
654 Arjmand, Inscription on Stone, 130.
The symmetry of language used by both the Khatami and Ahmadinejad era reforms is impressive. The National Curriculum publication on the Philosophy of Tarbiat, cited earlier in this section, reproduces almost verbatim the final sentence of the above passage (“based on a system of Islamic thought and values [that are] compatible with the specific cultural, social, and indigenous features of our country”). For all of their differences, pace Marashi, education planners since the Revolution have shared the goal of manufacturing a common cultural nation that represents the “timeless” Iran.

More often it is the temporal demands of politics, and not the timeless attributes of science and national culture that determine the course of reform. Khatami’s Education Ministers sought to distinguish themselves from their predecessors in the Rafsanjani administration, and in the same manner planners in the Ahmadinejad administration put distance between themselves and the “failures” of the past by conflating the Khatami and Rafsanjani MOEs.655

In Iran, one faction’s science is another faction’s politicized agenda. It is fair to assume that there is no foreseeable end to the cycle of legitimization/delegitimization through science. The volumes of research and scientific substantiation now being churned out in support of the National Curriculum will do little to prevent the next set of school administrators from introducing another “first ever” theory of education. Programs like the National Curriculum will not be the end of politics in education, as advertised by its authors, but another in an already long line of “new beginnings.” So long as the purpose of schooling remains an overtly political effort

655 Recent reports on the ongoing fundamental changes being made to the Mauvinat-e parvareshi regularly allege that one of the problems in the field of parvaresh throughout the entirety of these past years has been that analysts and planners analyzed the problems of parvaresh problems according to their own personal approaches and styles. Since neither the Rafsanjani nor Khatami administrations were capable of removing their personal interests and perspectives---assumed to be naturally corrupted by partisan interest---it is therefore not surprising that parvaresh instruction did not improve during the period in which the two men were in charge of the government.
to preserve and expand the ideology of the Islamic Republic, then the temptation and incentives for elites to intercede in the educational system will remain too great to resist.

The historical evidence demonstrates that the pretense that politics stops at the Ministry’s edge, so to speak, is little more than a chimera, an act of collective self-delusion. The great irony is that “eternal Truth” in the Islamic Republic---a regime founded on the conviction that there exists a single, righteous path to the future---has proven to be fickle, highly contentious, and given to competing interpretations. Khatami expresses well the potency of the tension between the ideal of the Revolution, and the reality of living in an increasingly diverse society:

One of the dangers that may threaten Islam and our society now is that one point of view, one tendency, should consider itself the definition of Islam and jurisprudence and *velayat-e faqih*, the definition of revolution and the Imam’s path and religion and religiousness and our faith, and whoever thinks differently be accused of all sorts of accusations, and after some time it may be found out that there is something wrong with this tendency too. In this case, if we have used the leadership and *velayat-e faqih* and Islam along the lines of this tendency, then that means that God forbid, we have damaged Islam and *feqh* and *velayat-e faqih*, and this is a grave danger that threatens us and our society.656

**Alternative Explanations**

Are there alternative explanations for what I have called the “pathology of politics?” One possible source for the politicization of Iran’s school system is the natural rivalry that exists between the country’s legislative and executive branches. Periodic outbreaks of conflict over the content and direction of the educational system may be the result of changes to the composition of the Parliament, such as occurred in 2004. There we saw how the switch from a reformist-led Majles to a more conservative legislature instantly produced a volatile situation. On the theory that like-minded politicians will tend to support each other, we would expect for conflict to diminish following the election of a conservative president, as occurred in 2005. The reduction

of hostility between the MOE and the Majles ought to have continued with parliamentary election of 2008, in which large numbers of reformist candidates once again found themselves shut out of the political game in favor of conservative groups and coalitions.

In reality, both the Seventh (2004-2008) and Eighth (2008-2012) Majles have proven to be surprisingly obstreperous. Hardly a natural ally to Ahmadinejad’s government, the Seventh Parliament impeached Farshidi in May 2007. Farshidi’s replacement, Ali Ahmadi, very nearly met the same fate in 2009, again at the hands of a Parliament dominated by conservatives.

Perhaps the immobilization of the educational system can be traced to the polarized political climate that already exists in Iran, not just in the area of education or between the MOE and the Majles. Though factional politics have been an endemic feature of Iranian politics since the founding of the Islamic Republic, starting with Khatami’s victory in 1997 tensions between rival groups have steadily escalated, reaching their nadir with the 2009 presidential election. The Ministry of Education under this reading is but a microcosm of the elite cleavages that exist outside of its walls. Factional politics are, by this reading, sublimated through educational policy.

A more cynical reading, difficult to prove, is that fundamental change has become an end in its own right. The desire to transform the school system is driven more by the exigencies of a political system whose primary characteristic is that of perpetual crisis. Even when there is no real need for change, or that need is questionable, those in charge of the school system will ineluctably be drawn to finding—or manufacturing—such a need.

This is perhaps due to the fact that rhetoric in Iran treats the Revolution not as a moment or an event in the past, but as a living process, a way of being. Endless revolution means endless opportunity to have a hand in shaping the future of Iran. Against this context, it becomes less
surprising to hear of the Supreme Leader denouncing the school system as fundamentally unchanged and still “the old system” (nezam-e ghadim), as we saw in the chapter on textbooks. Frequent bouts of “fundamental change” are not just symptoms of a state in formation, or the consequences of the need to bring schools up to date, but a habit.

While there is undoubtedly a good amount of truth to the proposition that the politics of schooling, including the recent spate of near and actual impeachments, are the precipitates of a greater factional politics or a context of eternal revolution, it ultimately places the causal arrows exactly backwards. Fractional politics in the schools is not the cause of the immobilization of postrevolutionary schooling, but rather is driven by the content and purpose of schooling itself. The education of future generations, after all, is not incidental to the revolutionary project but in many ways constitutes the identity of the regime. The educational system is an attractive vehicle for the expression of factional beliefs because of its elevated status in the infrastructure of the school system, and not just a forum for “partisan politics by other means.”

Another explanation, not incompatible with the thesis of this chapter, is that Mahmood Ahmadinejad is a uniquely polarizing figure. The legislature’s hostility to his Ministers of Education is an extension of the frustration that many political leaders, even within the ranks of Iran’s conservatives, feel towards Ahmadinejad’s style and management of the government. The contentious politics of recent years, including the surfeit of impeachment drives, can be traced to this frustration. While there is considerable merit to the argument that Ahmadinejad is an especially divisive leader, it is too early to know whether his idiosyncratic leadership style is the cause of the MOE’s politicization. There is no way to control for the “Ahmadinejad effect” until he leaves office.
Individual personalities undoubtedly play a part in driving the idea of Iranian schools being in crisis. There is considerable evidence that no less a figure than Iran’s head of state, Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei, has for many years considered schooling to constitute a drawn out and long-term battle, a kind of domestic “long march.” As early as June 1985, Khamanei is on record as stating that although the regime, acting through the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, had made great strides in resolving the cultural crisis that decades of decadent Pahlavi rule had inflicted upon the country, much remained to be done in this area. The future Supreme Leader (Khamanei was then President) singled out the Ministry of Education as an institution where not enough attention had been paid: “The pace of the movement in the path we have started go through has been good but the perpetuation of this movement for some longer time is undoubtedly necessary.”657 Seyyid Mortazi Mofidnejad, one of the principal planners for the planned National Curriculum, recalled how Khamanei had made a similar expression of schooling being a job not yet done:

…the Supreme Leader always placed special attention and emphasis on education going back to his days as President. I remember making a very interesting and important observation during the period of the Imposed War [the Iran-Iraq War] and he was President. [Khamanei] noted that while it was true that the war was the most important challenge facing us then, the war was an immediate problem. However, the issue that was more fundamental and lasting was the issue of culture and tarbiat.658

Mofidnejad goes on to express his appreciation for the Supreme Leader’s decision to call for a “fundamental change” to the school system, one that, according to Khamanei, might take 10 to 15 years to complete.659

659 “Talim va tarbiat-ye vitrini.”
The impact that individual personalities, even that of the Supreme Leader, can have on
education in Iran are limited, constrained by the complexity of governance in the IRI. To take
but a single example, Haji had proceeded with the plan to remove the Deputy Ministry of
Nurture despite Khamenei’s expressed disapproval of such a move. Though the intercession of
the Supreme Leader is final (as it was during the impeachment drive against Haji), it is not
constant.

Nor is it likely. The Supreme Council of Education and the Supreme Council of Cultural
Revolution handle most matters related to the course and planning of education. For Khamenei
to constantly reach through the thicket of the state apparatus would be impractical. Personality,
therefore, is at best a contributing factor for the contentious politics of schooling in Iran, not its
primary reason.

Past as Prelude
In any case, processes of politicization were already evident years before the current
parliament, president, or supreme leader appeared on the scene. It has been one of this chapter’s
central arguments that the politicization and paralysis that today exists in Iran’s school system
have origins in the founding of the postrevolutionary educational system. *From its inception,
postrevolutionary schooling in Iran had begun its inexorable glide towards conflict and
politicization.* To take but one example, during the Revolution’s heavily romanticized earliest
years, a period in which war and the residual passion of revolution had created an unprecedented
level of unity in Iranian society, through its agents in the *Ommor-e tarbiati* the Ministry of
Education was busy purging from its ranks teachers that had been designated as being politically
suspect.
There is a certain naïve quality to the insistence of state leaders that politics must be left out of the school system---even as those same leaders pursue an educational agenda that is completely political in nature. The leadership of the IRI goes to great lengths to conceal this tension from itself. Speaking in May of 2005 to a group of teachers in the province of Kerman, Khamenei reassured his audience that the Islamic Republic would not stand for politicians who sought to manipulate the country’s teachers for their own short-term, political needs. No doubt making reference to the Khatami Ministry of Education as well as the approaching presidential elections, Khamenei drew a sharp distinction between the temporality of the dolat (‘government’) and the permanence of the nezam (‘political system’), the latter never casting a politicized eye onto Iran’s “society of teachers.”

At times the dissonance between elite expressions of an idealized, de-politicized school system and the obviously political agenda that animates schooling in Iran is rather breathtaking. One functionary opposed to the elimination of the Mauvinat-e parvareshi explained to a reporter that all countries of the world, in one form or another, had their own version of the Omoor-e tarbiati, and that most existed to deliver political goals particular to that country. Iran’s Omoor-e tarbiati was in this regard completely unique: “In our country the goal [of parvaresh] is not political. It was the politicization of the Omoor-e tarbiati [presumably by Haji] that has harmed the performance of this institution.”

Not everyone sees the situation in such narrow fashion. Others have spoken with lucidity on the basic contradiction of postrevolutionary schooling in Iran, expressing regret that the rivalries of grown-ups were ever introduced into an institution ostensibly in the service of

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\#Ref\# Rahbar-e enqelab: Tasmimgiri-ye saliqeyi va fardi dar nezam-e amoozesh va parvaresh moaizer ast” [“The Supreme Leader: Decision Making Based in Personal Taste Within the Ministry of Education is Detrimental”], Iran, 14 Ordibehesht 1384/2005.
children and their families.

"At that time [just after the Revolution], all the various political trends were interested in the schools from a political and ideological point of view," recalled Amin Ooghani, who teaches at a school on the outskirts of Tehran. "It occurred to no one that schools should be kept immune from the day-to-day strife of politics. Fundamentally, all the political parties viewed students and teachers merely as instruments."\(^{661}\)

Amin Ooghani’s comments capture well the notion that politics, having been introduced into Iran’s postrevolutionary educational system from its very first days, has years later proven difficult to remove. Looking over the development of postrevolutionary education in Iran, one is reminded of Tocqueville’s famous observation that nations, or in this case, an institution, “always bear some marks of their origin. Circumstances of birth and growth affect all the rest of their careers.”\(^{662}\)

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And you must realize that these children who are being educated by you, are trained in religion, and nurtured in morality. If you deliver even one pious child to society, you shall one day see that this same child of faith will reform society [by himself]…however if, God forbid, if this child should turn out badly after being in your care, you who are his teacher, it is possible that this one child will corrupt society…

Ayatollah Khomeini

Chapter Six, “Parvaresh: Case Study of a Concept, Part Two”

The previous chapter provided evidence of the contentious politics surrounding the institutionalization of parvaresh in Iran. I explained how, in addition to the material constraints of war and overcrowding, and the general failure of state planners to consolidate Islamic schooling in a timely manner discussed in Chapter Two, the troubled implementation of an effective curriculum for parvaresh stems from the place of privilege that ideology holds within the current Iranian educational system. By raising the stakes, by making it indispensable that parvaresh “gets done right,” state leaders inadvertently encourage the ruination of elite consensus and mutual cooperation around the production and dissemination of an authentic Islamic-Iranian identity and morality. The outcome is a school system characterized by endemic politicization and paralysis. The program to produce the New Islamic Citizen stalls.

In this, the final empirical chapter of the dissertation, I examine parvaresh at the point of implementation, or put more directly, I look at parvaresh in action. I do so using case study examples of private school engagements with parvaresh. Private Islamic schooling represents an ideal-type in Iran’s educational system, as these schools come closest to meeting the standards of scientific and religious achievement established by the intellectual founders of Islamic schooling in Iran.663

The success of private schooling, I will argue, is unique and manifestly difficult to replicate in the public school setting due to the set of idiosyncratic features associated with

663 See pp. 349-355 of the previous chapter.
private schooling generally. These features include the ability to control for student population, to select a teaching staff whose priorities and educational approaches accord with that of the school, and most importantly of all, the freedom---measured in the variable of time---to design and implement programs of extra-curricular activities throughout the school day. It is mainly through these extra-curricular activities that the private Islamic school does its parvaresh work. Parvaresh is taught through indirection, play, and fun, techniques, recognized by the Ministry of Education and advocated by no less than the founders of the Omoor-e tarbiati as being the most effective means of inculcating values in the student.\footnote{A consistent feature of the educational debates in Iran is the lack of contention regarding the particular needs and weaknesses of the school system. Though the flaws of schooling in Iran are widely recognized across the political spectrum, the question of how to remedy those flaws is the source of considerable strife and politics.}

I will show how by reducing difference. It is the lack of diversity that allows for… critical baseline for success in parvaresh. Public schools in Iran cannot and must teach all, a situation universally Structurally committed to meeting the needs of diversity in Iranian society, Programs of standardized testing and routinized instructional materials, absolute necessities for a school system overcrowded, are effective for achieving goals in amoozesh, but provide little than in parvaresh.\footnote{Albeit an amoozesh understood in the narrow terms of rote memorization and achievement on standardized testing, detailed in the previous chapter and Chapter Three.}

Parvaresh, by contrast, is difficult to quantify and evaluate in any sort of standardized way. Ironically, attempts to measure can produce unintended, even opposite results than those desired by the state. Rather than internalizing values, testing encourages students to instead externalize their religious and political beliefs---to put on a performance---so that they can “get the grade.”
I conclude the chapter by considering the relationship of private schooling to the state. I will argue that private Islamic schools generate pedagogies of subversion. Although committed to the general goals as the Ministry of Education, and limited by a highly centralized curriculum to teach to the text, I found considerable evidence that in research that they were but achieved through different and, it is argued, better means. These schools, despite their appearance as ideal-types, often work against the state’s political and religious agenda.

Before proceeding with discussion of the empirical data of the fieldwork, I offer a few words on the general scope and methods of the chapter. My aim here is to put the sociological and historical evidence presented in Chapter Five into conversation with data derived from a limited study of “parvaresh at work.” Up to this point in the dissertation, I have drawn almost exclusively upon documentary evidence found in state archives and in the public domain in Iran to support my analysis. Here I finally turn to the remaining two components of my ethnography, participant-observation and semi-structured interviews of local school sites.

For reasons already detailed in the dissertation’s preface, my data is limited to evidence drawn from two private boys schools in Tehran, which I will refer to by the pseudonyms Omid and Entezar. In order to further protect the identity of my subjects, reference to interviews and observations will remain anonymous. The only identifying markers that I allow to be used in my narrative are descriptions of respondents’ formal titles. Given the qualitative nature of this study, I used a method of strategic sampling, with research subjects selected based on their ability to provide empirical data on the role, production, and implementation of parvaresh at their particular school site. Given the constraints on research, I supplemented my investigation of the private school with interviews with an array of actors associated with education in Iran, including former and current public school teachers, educational experts in the Organization for
Educational Research and Planning, textbook authors, and a number of academics working on schooling in Iran.

My two research sites, Omid and Entezar, fall under a subset of schooling known as “religious-scientific,” or *mazhabi-elmi*. Private Islamic schools have not yet been the subject of systematic research by non-Iranian scholars. Such schools constitute a very small percentage of the total educational system, and due to the lack of literature on this type of schooling, were not a part of my original research design. The goal here is not to make universal claims or to generalize about Iran’s school system based on the thin reed of two cases. However, case-study of private Islamic schools, particularly their successes in the area of *parvaresh*, provides an empirical basis for insights into the challenges face by the much larger public school system in Iran. As I have already indicated with diversity, compare and contrast…

Prior research on schooling in Iran and in the Middle East more generally, due to lack of access to classrooms and teachers, has mostly relied on documentary evidence produced by the state, typically textbooks drawn from a narrow period of publication. Snapshots of the material are taken, and from these, conclusions are derived based on the assumption that the analysis of formal inputs into the school system will correlate with the outcomes of schooling.

Textbooks and other state-produced materials, while critical to any analysis of schooling, when used as the sole source of data will likely to lead to incomplete and misleading conclusions. Formal documents are useful for capturing state intentions at a particular point in time, and I have no problem with treating textbooks as moral documents. However, without the addition of ethnographic research, documentary materials on their own cannot demonstrate potential contradictions that emerge as a result of the production and implementation of the formal curriculum in educational settings. Given that there does not ever exist a singular,
coherent state, imposing its will in linear fashion upon society, research must seek out not the state’s version of events but its many versions, both at the level of production and at the level of reception.

Ethnographic research allows us to look beyond the official state script found in both in the textbooks and in the formal discussion around textbooks as coherent and state as being coherent and effective, and to access the multiple and previously unrecorded “scripts” found within a particular society.666 My goal has been to produce an ethnography that better captures the multivocality of elites and ordinary actors alike, whether it be at the institutional, planning level or the realm of the ordinary, day-to-day interactions between agents of the state and members of society.

Minimum Resources, Maximum Expectations: A Recapitulation of the Evidence So Far

Ethnographic research on parvaresh, though quite limited, does exist, and is mostly limited to the public schools.667 The existing data paints a bleak picture of parvaresh instruction, both in terms of effort and outcomes.668 Although state rhetoric exalts the inculcation of Islamic and political values as a top priority of the educational system, funding for political and religious

668 The use of a single source of data is less than ideal but given the challenges faced by local researchers, not to mention Iranian-American researchers such as myself, Rezaei’s research is quite unique, and represents the only research of its kind. Rezaei, despite being a former school teacher with years of experience “in the system,” obtained clearance for his research with great difficulty. Even with his credibility as a former employee of the Ministry of Education, Rezaei spent more than a year securing formal permission to enter the public schools as an investigator.
parvaresh is quite limited. The lack of resources and attention by the Ministry of Education creates a situation at the school site in which teachers and administrators must contend with the dilemma of “minimum resources and maximum expectations.”669 Relegated to forgotten corners of the school day, parvaresh manifests on campus through the ubiquitous posters and other forms of signage draped across school walls, the daily morning session, and the stand-alone classes of the onsite morabi teacher (morabi-e parvaresh). In general, members of the regular teaching staff in the public schools avoid politics and even religion in the classroom, treating them instead as topics best handled by the designated “values teacher.”

Direct resistance against the formal ideology being taught in the classroom is less of a problem than a generalized apathy towards politics, if not a willful ignorance of the formal ideology and history of the Revolution. Not surprisingly, many students are woefully unversed in even the most basic facts of the state and the revolutionary regime, much less in possession of any heartfelt commitment to the values of the Revolution and political Islam. In interviews with high school students, Mohammad Rezaei found that some of his respondents did not even know what the concept of “political system” (nezam-e siasi) signified, much less demonstrate knowledge of basic facts about that system.670

Students are less likely to be openly hostile against the school than to be subtly subversive, either in the classroom or out on the courtyard. Disruption by students in the classroom tend to be limited to “grade grubbing,” or the creation of havoc, done because of boredom, for self-amusement, or simply to wear teachers down, again in the interests of improving graded performance on tests or homework. Resistance almost never occurs at what

669 Rezaei, “Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari.”
670 Rezaei, “Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari,” 221. Rezaei notes that all of his respondents had taken Social Studies, whose final lesson is entitled “The Political System.”
might seem like obvious points of conflict, including lessons on religion, history, or the politics of the Islamic Republic.

In Chapter Five I described how an overly politicized Ministry of Education creates serious challenges for state planners seeking to produce a coherent and consistent program of *parvaresh*. The politicization seen at the elite level does not appear to be reproduced in any significant way at the local school sites. Teachers and students alike assiduously avoid political discussions, in particular debates about current affairs, as these are seen as having the potential for unwanted and highly contentious confrontations in the classroom. Politics is an unwanted distraction from what is for most students the primary task at hand, the drawing out of homework and test answers from teachers.\(^{671}\)

Limited in their ability to measure or ensure student’s internalization of the state’s message, *parvaresh* tends to be focused on the external, the *zaher* (appearance) of the student. Conflict therefore tends to occur around banal and superficial matters of dress, hair, and classroom behavior. Though most teachers at the school avoid the teaching of political *parvaresh*, *parvaresh* is often *made political* due to efforts by grownups to keep children’s behavior in line with the rules and regulations of the school.\(^{672}\)

Chapters Three and Five provide a detailed account of the budgetary shortfalls and material deficiencies of Iran’s school system. Their effects on *parvaresh* merit repeating here. Though state leaders routinely proclaim the Ministry of Education to be the most important institution for the preservation of Islam and the revolution, little can be done to remove or

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\(^{671}\) Instructors do speak politically, though often to complain about the status of teachers in Iran and the woeful state of compensation and back pay.

\(^{672}\) Rezaei gives the wonderful example of students who, not having permission to apply gel to their hair in order to create the irregular spiking (*moo sikh-sikhi*) that is currently the fashion among young men in Iran, wait until the end of the school day to rush to the communal water fountains to wet their hair long enough to impress the young ladies they are sure to encounter outside of the school gates. Rezaei, “*Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari.*”
ameliorate the long-term structural constraints standing in its way, including a student population which, at its peak in 1998-1999, numbered 18 million in a country of around 70 million people, a rigidly centralized school system that denies teachers the means to bring a much-needed creativity to the classroom, creativity that the state itself admits is needed, and a salary structure that cannot draw a motivated and committed workforce to teach in the classroom. Some 92% of the budget allocated for education goes towards teachers’ salaries, yet many teachers continue to live at or below poverty levels. Little can be done with the remaining 8% of the budget, less than 1% of which is spent directly on parvaresh. 673

Private Islamic Schooling in Iran: A Class Onto Its Own
Towards the middle of the 1970s, plans were announced for the abolition of all private education and the eventual absorption of private schools into the state-run school system. 674 Private schooling was eventually eliminated, although not by the Shah’s government. Following the Revolution, the new regime launched a nationalization program designed to secure Iranian independence against the encroachment of enemies, foreign and domestic, in the educational and cultural realms. 675 Private schools, known at the time as madreseha-ye melli, or “national schools,” overnight became dolati, or state schools.

Nationalization of the schools produced a bit of a quandary for Iran’s revolutionaries. Many of the most important members of the Islamic opposition to the Shah, including Bahonar, Rajai, and Beheshti, had taught and studied at a particular (khas) class of private schooling, commonly referred to as madreseha-ye mazhabi-elmi, translated in English as religious-scientific

675 The two terms are often indistinguishable in the Iranian context. See the discussion of being “with culture/without culture” (bafarhang/bifarhang) in Chapter Five.
schools. These private Islamic schools had been established years before the Revolution, beginning with Alavi High School, founded by Alie Asghar Karbaschian in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{676} From Alavi a number of other private Islamic schools have emerged over the years, including Mofid, Nikan, Refah, and more recently, Mizan. Most of these played an important role in the mobilization against the Shah in the years leading up to the 1979 Revolution.\textsuperscript{677} Immediately upon returning to Iran after 15 years of exile, Khomeini set up temporary quarters at Alavi and Refah Boys High Schools in central Iran. Alavi and Refah served as Revolutionary Headquarters during the ten-day period between Khomeini’s return and the collapse of the interim government put into place by the Shah before his own self-imposed exile. For a time these two campuses became the center of politics in Iran as various military, religious, and royal authorities from the Shah’s dying regime came to visit with Khomeini and his compatriots.

Following the Revolution the new regime nationalized all of Iran’s schools, including private Islamic schools, in an effort to eliminate the long-standing presence of foreign-run schools on Iranian soil.\textsuperscript{678}


\textsuperscript{677} One of my interview subjects recalled how, prior to the Revolution as a young elementary and junior high school student at a \textit{melli} school, he and his classmates would receive fruit as part of their morning, school-provided breakfast, instead of the condensed milk given out for years by the state. Only later would he realize that the school staff did this so that the children would not in any way feel indebted to the monarchy. Whereas condensed milk was a state “goody,” the children’s parents paid for the fruit. Personal Interview. See also \textit{Masir-e sabz} [“The Green Path”], \textit{Hamshari-ye javan}, 19 Bahman 1387/2009, 56; Mohammad Sahimi, \textit{“The Man in the Shadow: Mojtaba Khamanei,”} Tehran Bureau, June 16, 2009, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/07/the-man-in-the-shadow-mojtaba-khamenei.html (last accessed December 15, 2010); Muhammad Sahimi, \textit{“The Ten Days that Changed Iran,”} Tehran Bureau, February 3, 2010, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/02/fajr-10-days-that-changed-iran.html (last accessed December 15, 2010).

\textsuperscript{678} Ironically, the Shah himself had planned to do the same. Keith Watson, \textit{“The Shah’s White Revolution---Education and Reform in Iran,”} \textit{Comparative Education} 12, no. 1 (March 1976). For the history of foreign schools in Iran and their influence, see Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi, \textit{“From Evangelizing to Modern Iranians: The American Presbyterian Mission and its Iranian Students,”} \textit{Iranian Studies} 41, no. 2: 213-240, and Chapter 3 of Marashi, \textit{Nationalizing Iran}. Mohammad Hossein Rafaii Tari, former principal of Mofid, describes in a special edition of Mofid High School’s in-house magazine, recalls how Mohammad Ali Rajai, the martyred second president of the Islamic Republic and former teacher at Alavi High School, was against forcing schools like Mofid and Alavi to
State planners soon began to reassess this policy decision. Faced with an ever-increasing population of children, and coupled with the burdens of war and foreign sanctions, the political imperative to nationalize the educational sector collided with the reality that the state needed to reduce its teaching burden.679 In the middle of the 1980s a decision was made to once again allow private schools to operate in Iran, albeit under the direct authority of the Ministry of Education. Approved by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution in 1986, the first private “nonprofit” (gheir-e entefai) schools appeared two years later in 1988.680

The Ministry of Education has in recent years actively encouraged the formation of private schools, primarily as a way to relieve the enormous financial and demographic pressures faced by the public school system. Known as “non-state” (gheir-e dolati) schools, the label is a misnomer due to the fact that private schools are obligated to use the formal state curriculum during instruction. The major difference between the public and private, non-state system is that the latter receives absolutely no funding from state sources. In return, the Ministry of Education grants private schools greater latitude in the hiring and firing of administration and staff. Private schools typically run a much longer school day than the public schools, and feature a wider range of extra-curricular activities.

Private schools receive absolutely no financial or other material support from the state. In exchange, they are given near-autonomy in the hiring and firing of staff.681 The same applies

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679 The student population would reach some 18 million students by the next decade. See Chapter Three.
680 Non-state schools were formerly known as “non-profit” (gheir-e entefai) schools, a title no less a misnomer than the designation of “non-state.” Many private schools are run for profit by their proprietors, although the state limits the amount of tuition that gheir-e entefai schools may charge. During the period of my research, tuition was around $2000 a year, a sum that makes most of these schools accessible to the middle-class and above.
681 I say near-autonomy because teachers hired at private schools must first be “official” hires of the Ministry of Education, meaning that they have successfully passed the battery of professional and ideological tests required of
to the registration of new students. *Gheir-e dolati* schools have carte blanche freedom to select (*gozinesh*), and if necessary, remove (*ekhraj kardan*) students. It is in fact better to say that the schools are able to select and remove families, as it is common practice to interview parents as well as students before granting admission. This is done under the assumption that the *parvaresh* and *tarbiat* (nurture) that the student receives at home is strongly correlated to that child’s likely future demeanor and quality as a member of the school’s community.\textsuperscript{682}

Despite these barriers to entry private schools are an increasingly popular option for families, particularly amongst Iranians hailing from the middle and upper classes. Today 92% of all schools in Iran are public but there has been phenomenal growth in the private market as private schools have become an increasingly popular option for families with means. This can be seen in school construction rates during the past 20 years. From 1993 to 2003, the number of public schools grew by approximately 30%. During that same period private schools saw a five-fold increase.\textsuperscript{683}

Classroom instruction comprises only a portion of the total educational program at these schools, as a great emphasis is placed on student participation in activities such as daily group prayer (*namaz jamayat*), Ashura mourning rites (*ziarat-e ashura*), morning activities typically centered on prayer, athletic competition, competition in memorizing and reading the Koran, and service trips (*ordooha*). Students of private religious-scientific schools were much more

\textsuperscript{682} A common assumption in Iran is that there is a correlation between how a child is raised and that child’s quality as an individual is widely assumed to be correlated in Iran. I briefly addressed this issue in the previous chapter.\textsuperscript{683} Abdolazim Hakimi, *A General Overview of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Tehran: Institute for Educational Research, Ministry of Education, 2004), 53.
committed to participating in the extra-curricular activities offered at their school than their public school peers. 684

The student population of private Islamic schools consists young boys who have been screened for their proficiency in academic skills as well as their religious backgrounds. 685 Not only the students but also their parents are interviewed and ultimately selected based on whether or not they demonstrate a commitment to the Islamic practices and values of the schools. Families must demonstrate that they are momen, literally “believers,” indicators of which include performing daily prayers, observance of the religious calendar, and strict adherence to a particular form of dress, including the wearing of the chador. Likewise, teachers and administrative staff at both sites are hired based not only their qualifications as an educator, but also personal biographies. Teachers are expected to be practicing Muslims, committed to their faith and observant of prayer and other practices associated with their religion.

**Background Information on Omid and Entezar**

Although quite similar in organization and mission, there exist important if mostly subtle differences between the two campuses where I carried out my investigations. Among the original private Islamic schools set up before the Revolution, Omid is a much more established and larger complex than Entezar. Nearly all of its teaching and administrative staff were once students at the school, and their presence contributes to a strong sense of connection between the present and the past at Omid.

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684 Rezaei, “Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari,” 208. During the course of my research, I never found myself on an empty campus at either Omid or Entezar, regardless of the hour. Many of my interviews took place in the later afternoon, a time of the day when most single-shift public school campuses are empty. At Omid and Entezar, however, activities continued until well into the evening, with a large number of students staying on into the evening. Students regularly extended their school day well beyond the time of instruction, and on more than one occasion I observed students forced to leave because the school itself was closing.

685 Admittance rates are low. At Omid, for example, ten times as many students applied for admission as there were available slots.

686 Momen will be used to mean “devout.”
At no time is this more evident than during the central event of the school year, the Hafteh-yé shohada, or Martyr’s Week. Some 66 students from Mofid perished during the Revolution and the Holy Defense (Defah-yé moqades), or Iran-Iraq War. These young men are remembered every year during Hafteh-yé shohada, or Martyr’s Week, in a series of talks, events, and plays that mark the high point of the academic calendar, and together serve as the centerpiece of Omid’s program of parvaresh.

Entezar emerged out of Omid, having been established by a number of teachers and administrators who left Omid in the 1990s to found their own school. Entezar consists of an elementary, intermediate, and high school located on a single complex. The population of its high school is considerably smaller than that of Omid’s, with some 80-100 students in attendance.

Like Omid, Entezar’s reputation is built around a rigorous academic program. It is also considerably more pious than…For the students and staff at Entezar, the annual Ashura mourning rites, held in remembrance of the martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet, Imam Hussein, at the Battle of Karbala in 680.

My characterization of Entezar as a more pious environment than Omid is of course relative. One of the central arguments of this chapter is that private Islamic schools in general devote greater attention to Islamic teaching and religious practice than the public schools. The atmosphere at Omid and Entezar is notably. What one notices upon stepping onto their campuses is this and upon stepping entering the campus one notices students dress in a manner that immediately signals their commitment to Islam and the maktabi or “devout” life. Shirts are worn in the “eastern” manner, neat but untucked. Most of the young men sported the tahrish,

687 Here I am only interested in external appearance. As we will soon see, even at Omid and Entezar not all students are actually or fully religious.
or shortly cropped beard. None of the students, at least while at school, styled their hair in the popular fashion (spiked and irregular, with plenty of gel) or openly displayed electronic devices such as MP3 players or cell phones, commonly seen being used by young adults in the capital.

The adults are also dressed in the *momen* manner. Short, neat hair, closely cropped beards are de rigueur for the men. There are no women members of the staff, but mothers do come on campus. Without exception they are expected to wear the chador when on campus.

I was surprised to learn that there exists some question as to whether all of these women are *chadori* or *hejabi* (those who wear the less formal headscarf) in their private lives. Omid and Entezar, like all such schools, naturally draws families who are willing to abide by the schools’ adherence to rigorous academic and religious standards. This does not mean, however, that the families who attend such schools are similarly religious in their personal lives. Naturally, this raised the question of why a not particularly pious family would submit to the rules and expectations associated with private Islamic schools.

The answer lies in the emphasis that families place on their child’s academic achievement. Rezaei describes how at public schools families are concerned with *parvaresh* insofar as it ensures a safe and “pure” (*payk*) environment amenable to studying, free from the corrupting distractions of sex, drugs, or other teenage vices.\(^{688}\) The families of Omid and Entezar have a more maximal expectation of *parvaresh* instruction, but nonetheless exhibit many of the same tendencies and attitudes towards the importance, even preeminence, of *amoozesh* over *parvaresh*.

External appearance at Omid and Entezar is matched by observed behavior that strongly suggests the internalization of proper behavior. The inner states of students was impossible to

\(^{688}\) Rezaei, “Tahlili az zendegi-ye roozmari,” 204.
access or ascertain given the methods used in this research. Nonetheless the environment at these schools is very calm and the students demonstrate impeccable manners, greeting and addressing visitors to their campus with great respect and attention. These are well-behaved students, and I observed little evidence that the adults in charge needed to exert much effort to achieve discipline on campus.

While religious life at the school played a visible and important role, political commitments were less apparent. Politics in terms of factional affiliation appeared to have little influence on the selection of either families or the staff. While it is not unheard of specific private schools to be associated with a particular government (dolat), the staff at my two research sites did not demonstrate overt affiliation with a particular faction or party.

Omid and Entezar did exhibit strong commitment to the Revolution and the Islamic “system,” or nezam, as it is commonly referred to in Iran. A large number of the staff served as teenage basij volunteers during the Iran-Iraq War, often before completing their high school studies. The figure of Ayatollah Khomeini loomed large at both sites, and not just figuratively. Portraits of Khomeini were on prominent display in the hallways and classroom, and the main office at Entezar featured an oversized framed portrait of the late founder.

Still, devotion to the Revolution and the IRI is for the most part of a subdued sort. Not once in the course of my investigation, spread out over two academic years and involving dozens of hours of on-site visitation and observation, did I observe sloganeering or political agitation

689 It is questionable that inner states are accessible to any researcher, even under the most ideal of circumstances. Several of my informants indicated their skepticism that all or even the vast majority of their students were truly momen or would remain so upon graduating.

690 Save for the period just before the 2009 presidential elections, I saw no evidence of specific political agenda. By reputation Omid and Entezar were known at minimum to be opposed to the policies and political culture behavior of the Ahmadinejad government.

691 Interestingly, a number of informants related to me that some private Islamic schools were known for their active opposition to the state, their objections rooted in a notion that the Islamic Republic was not Islamic enough. Despite this hostility, these schools continued to receive students from the families of the ruling elites.
commonly featured at public schools. Only on one instance did I see reference made to either
the dominant domestic or foreign policy of the state.

**Methods Used in Research**

On-site research began in late spring 2008 in the final weeks of the 2007-2008 school
year. Interviews and observations were carried out in earnest later that fall just prior to the start
of the school year. At each school I interviewed the principal, the *morabi* (*parvaresh* instructor),
history teachers, and selected vice-principals. Isolating staff members whose work was primarily
associated with *parvaresh* instruction presented an interesting challenge. Unlike at a typical
public school, *parvaresh* instruction at Omid and Entezar is not contained, as it were, to a single
class or instructor, but suffuses the entire curriculum and school day. Just as every U.S. Marine
is expected to a rifleman, at these two schools every member of the teaching staff is expected to
be a *morabi*. A conscious effort is made to model and teach *parvaresh* alongside the regular
curriculum.

To ensure that my research remained rigorous and that data was being drawn from the
two school sites in systematic fashion, I prepared a list of questions specifically on the topic of
*parvaresh*. I organized my questions into three general areas: *Parvaresh* as a definable concept,
the “rules and resources” for *parvaresh* instruction found inside of the school context, and
finally, the “rules and resources” for *parvaresh* found in the world outside of the school. For the
last category I focused on the influence that peer groups, media (domestic and foreign) and

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692 All but one of my four residences in Tehran (I stayed with family during my research) were located across from a
school. Without fail, morning sessions, typically led by students and either the principal or vice-principal speaking
into a microphone, included the shouting of political and religious slogans.
693 As part of an exhibit put up for the annual observance of Martyr’s Week at Mofid, one section was dedicated to
the situation of Gaza, the goal being to draw a correlation between the sacrifices made by Iranians during the war
with the sacrifices being made today by the Muslim and Arab populations of Palestine.
Combining the inductive with the deductive, I refined my questions with each successive interview. In this way I was able to combine a deductive approach to research, embodied by the focus on “rules and resources” found in my questionnaire, with an inductive approach based on the data that I was daily gathering.

Parvaresh

What does parvaresh mean? What is the difference between amoozesh and parvaresh? What relationship, if any, do the two concepts have?
What relationship, if any, does parvaresh have with politics and political training?
In this school, what are your goals for parvaresh instruction? Are they in accordance with that of the Ministry?
As an instructor, what is your primary responsibility? Amoozesh or parvaresh?
What do expect from your students at the end of their course of education? How do you know that you have reached your goals?

Rules and Resources Found Inside of the School

What resources do you have for parvaresh instruction here at the school?
What limitations, if any, exist in teaching parvaresh?
What resources does a teacher need for “getting the job done” where parvaresh is concerned?
Do teachers have the freedom to run their classrooms as they see fit?
What limitations, if any, exist on students’ participation in the classroom?

Rules and Resources Found Outside of the School

What changes have you witnessed to the country’s school system? What has been the impact, if any, of these changes?
What is the background of the students at this school? What expectations do their parents have? How do they demonstrate or signal these expectations?
Do parents enable or inhibit the instruction of parvaresh?
What is the relationship between the school’s environment and context with the social context outside of the school?
Do they match or conflict?

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694 Anthony Giddens, “Agency, Structure [1979],” in Contemporary Sociological Theory, Second Edition, eds. Craig Calhoun et al. (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 231-242. Giddens describes institutions as rule-bound arenas—they regulate and control human behavior. Institutions also enable human behavior by providing resources not found elsewhere in social or political life. In other words, institutions do not solely have a regulatory function but are frequently put to instrumental use by actors in unexpected ways. In the case of Iran, it can be said that the state builds a school system to inculcate ideology and to produce a workforce capable of modernizing the country. Parents and students then use those same schools as a vehicle or mechanism to get that child into college and on the path to making a lot of money as an engineer, physician, etc.. The ideological project, from the perspective of the parents, is secondary, at best. Moreover, whereas the state conceives of tarbiat (culture) in multiple dimensions (including political training, social training, values education, and religious education), for parents tarbiat typically contains one dimension only—the discipline practiced at school necessary for securing a safe, drug- and opposite-gender free environment that will allow their children to see to their studies.
The decision to use the frame of “rules and resources” ties directly to the theoretical framework of education’s emancipatory and disciplinary effects explained earlier in Chapter One. I adapted the concept in order to trace how formal education simultaneously provided children with opportunities for agency and the self-directed development of subjectivity not found in other spheres of social life, as well as to explain how those opportunities were necessarily tied to the structural constraints that formal schooling imposed on students. Regardless of how students respond to their educational experience, they must submit to an array of institutionalized rules and procedures if they wish to proceed through the system, in particular if they want to gain entry into the fourth year of secondary school known as pre-university (pish daneshgah)—a prerequisite for taking the konkoor.

**Research Data**

Entering the interview process, I initially focused on state efforts to import western technology but keep out western culture, in other words, the modernization dilemma discussed earlier in Chapter One. According to David Menashri, it was unlikely that the Islamic state would be able to successfully draw a distinction between culture and technology:

> But imitating the western school system could not be divorced from the overall tension between the powers of tradition and change, a tension which characterized the entire period discussed in this book. As in other fields, westernization reached its peak under Mohammad Reza Shah, to be utterly and totally reversed under the Islamic Republic. And yet Iran again tried to separate western culture, which it totally rejects, from western science and technology, which it is willing to absorb. The thought that one may not be had without the other is not allowed to penetrate public consciousness.695

Western culture, in other words, is a prerequisite for progress, and not a dangerous contaminant that can easily be filtered out by a modernizing state.

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The notion that the Islamic Republic needed to choose between development and cultural conservation simply did not register in the field. When asked, “Which is more important then, *amoozesh* or *parvaresh*? Can you have western technology without western values?” interview subjects frequently hesitated or had a difficult time understanding what I mean by this question. I soon dropped the question altogether from my interviews, and focused solely on the concept of *parvaresh*.

Rather than design my own rubric for *parvaresh*, I drew from the existing set of goals produced by the Iranian Ministry of Education. The MOE breaks *parvaresh* down into four categories. During their 12 years of schooling, children are expected to be nurtured religiously (*parvaresh-e eteqadi*), morally (*parvaresh-e aqlaqi*), socially (*parvaresh e-ejtemai*), and politically (*parvaresh e siasi*). After asking for a general definition of *parvaresh*, I followed up by introducing these four categories or components. Without directly saying so, my goal was to draw out examples of *parvaresh* being used for purposes of political indoctrination. Was, in other words, *parvaresh* ever explicitly and directly linked to ideological training?

Theoretical distinctions between varieties of *parvaresh*, though generally recognized, were in every instance folded by my subjects into a singular educational project. A cohesive program of parvaresh made a particular program of politics unnecessary. Respondents instead viewed their primary task to be the training (*tarbiat*) of the multi-dimensional person, an individual who would be successful in the range of life experiences, and whose private and public personas were useful (*mofid*) for their families (*khanevadeh*) and society (*jameh*), respectively. Once this goal was accomplished, social and political considerations would necessarily fall into place.

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696 At Omid, the formal goals of the state were deemed insufficient. As a consequence, working with its in-house research center, over several years Omid developed its own set of *parvaresh* standards and benchmarks.
The staff at Omid and Entezar treated religious *parvaresh* as the cornerstone of their efforts. Rather than isolate religious instruction, instructors generally took an approach that embedded Islam in the social:

The aim is to nurture the student in such a way that he will be “useful to himself in his private life, and be useful for others. We put great emphasis on our students not being focused on their own lives. The goal is to nurture them in such a way that the social lives that they lead will be beneficial to others.”

The shared sentiment on campus was that too much attention to religion would produce an Islam that was “*khoshk*” or “dry,” with the Taliban frequently used as an example of such an outcome. Done in isolation, religious *parvaresh* presented a risk that the child would become corrupted or what one individual referred to as *shargzadeh*, “eaststruck.”

The relationship of religion to technology was a frequent topic of discussion. One of the major themes to emerge out of my interviews was the notion that Islam must always be presented in such a way that students would feel that religion was relevant to their lives. This meant avoiding unnecessary prohibitions on the use of technology. One respondent observed that even if adults steadfastly refuse to watch or use technology, it was highly unlike that children would follow suit. In the end, the prohibition on so-called “bad” technology results in a double failure, since the child will continue to use it and will at the same time put his religion aside.

That thing which the Prophet established was that we must make our religion up-to-date (*berooz*)…You see, during the Prophet’s time there wasn’t internet, after all. At the time of the Prophet there weren’t satellite dishes. Now that the internet has come, are we to banish it? The attraction of [the internet] is so great that if you go and tell someone that I’ll give you a million toman, all you have to do is pray, but not look at the internet, he’ll say “I don’t want to. I don’t want to.” Therefore we must make [our religion] current. If we don’t do this, it will be the same as what they have in Saudi Arabia, or the other Islamic countries that are near us…We have to make our answers up-to-date. If a young person comes and tells us that he wants to look at internet, and wants guidance, we cannot simply tell him to not look. No. We have to go [and learn about] the internet ourselves so that we can provide that young person answers…We have to learn this technology so that we can guide the children to use the good that such technology has to offer…If I don’t watch, that technology is so exciting that I’ll be forgotten [by the student]. The religion of Islam will be put aside. [The student will say] “What is this religion of Islam? This is

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697 Personal Interview, February 21, 2009.
698 Personal Interview, February 11, 2009.
better. Whatever I have a question about or want, the internet answers immediately…When has Islam done this for me? I want this and Islam says that I must pray…What has prayer ever done for me? Islam ought not be interpreted (taksir kardan) in the same way that it was 1,400 years ago.

Instead, as a way to reach and influence the child, teachers should draw upon the resources that are available to him in today’s society. Almost anything can be used for bringing the individual to religion, and a good teacher will find creative ways to use film, music, and even clothing to draw others closer to Islam:

Our religion is good, and we accept it. However, our instruments for making people religious have changed. Today we have to use film, as an instrument for religion, and use it well…in order to make children religious. Film exists. We cannot distance ourselves from film. We cannot distance ourselves from internet. We cannot distance ourselves from music. We have to instead institutionalize (nahadi) film in our society in such a way to bring about religious values.  

At the same time that the teacher draws his students to religion by appealing to popular culture, he must try to reduce children’s interest in the moral corruptions that accompany cultural phenomena such as the internet or cinema:

Before the Revolution, religious people didn’t have television, as it was seen as being haram. Now your children have to know the internet, in order to be a developed (pishraft) society…When you do a search on Yahoo, inappropriate pictures come up…I don’t open the pictures, but a kid who is 16 or 18 sees this also.

By engaging technology directly, moral outcomes will be better: “If someone isn’t tempted (tanesh nakhare) [by such things], he’ll be at peace (rahat)…” Private schools seek to be berooz, of being “current’ and up-to-date. Gregory Starrett writes that cultural conservation and cultural innovation are contradictory ideals. I have found this to not be the case. Omid and Entezar use cultural innovation—adapting Islam, for instance, to the realities of Yahoo,

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609 Personal Interview, February 11, 2009.
700 Personal Interview, February 11, 2009.
701 Personal Interview, November 22, 2008.
702 Personal Interview, November 22, 2008.
satellite programming, changes in the relationship of adults to children, girls to boys, and so forth---in order to achieve the conservation of Islamic culture.

The staff at Omid and Entezar aim to create a safe environment on their campuses, a temporary refuge from the temptations of the outside world.\textsuperscript{704} The creation of a safe environment begins with the screening and selection of students. Interview subjects consistently emphasized that the screening process was not only for the benefit of the school, but a way to ensure that parents and the school were working together in the moral training and education of the students. The avoidance of conflict and division between school and household was a major priority of the school staff:

We want children whose parents are observant (\textit{namaz khoon}). If not, then two negative outcomes will occur. One, the child comes to the school and four times a day, for no good reason, bends and gets up (\textit{dole rast mishe}, i.e., performs his daily prayers). The second is a violation in the training of the student (\textit{khalaf-e tarbiat}), because the child will be acting in contradiction to the home. My comment is that you want to add to the home, not change or transform it…. The school can do nothing other than to accelerate the experience [of \textit{tarbiat}] provided by the family.\textsuperscript{705}

Bernard Crick once wrote that in order to bring an end to politics we must first seek an end to difference.\textsuperscript{706}

Children are never forced or ordered to participate in the various activities on offer at the school. \textit{Parvaresh} instruction is expected to occur indirectly and naturally, and not as a series of prohibitions:

Our goal is to place as little pressure on the students, since the children are already seeing plenty of contradictions [in their lives]. We want to reduce their contradictions…I, as a \textit{parvaresh} teacher, must not say something to a student that will add to his contradictions…Instead of helping him to lighten his load, I add to it.\textsuperscript{707}

\textsuperscript{704} At Entezar, this outside world was literally next door. There, located in full view of the young men of Entezar, was a remedial school for young women who, in appearance at least, demonstrated considerably less interest in pursuing a religious education. The staff at Entezar, though concerned with these less than ideal circumstances, found humor and irony in the juxtaposition of the two schools.

\textsuperscript{705} Personal Interview, November 22, 2008.


\textsuperscript{707} Interview March 1, 2009.
Despite efforts by the staff at Omid and Entezar to produce well-rounded and sociable citizens, successful *parvaresh* often means that their students have a difficult time dealing with the contradictions that do exist in the world outside of their schools. One of the major dilemmas facing private Islamic schools is that by producing good, Islamic citizens, they may at the same be ensuring that their students will have a difficult time integrating into a society whose commitment and attention to religion is far less intense.\(^{708}\)

To my surprise, all of my informants were openly skeptical that their efforts were entirely successful. Uncertainly lay in the belief that *parvaresh* is a formidable subject of instruction, one that can One of the reasons cited for lowered expectations was the difficulty of measuring with any sort of precision the internalization of values. If only one out of a 100 students proved to be useful for society and remained committed to their religion, then the school could be said to have been successful.\(^{709}\)

An administrator gave a simple example to explain why it is so difficult to gauge success in the area of *parvaresh*. Students may receive a 20 (the highest grade possible) on a test of their knowledge of conservation and the importance of the natural environment, but then step outside of the classroom and ignore the hose that has errantly been left running in the schoolyard.\(^{710}\) The student who did well on the test in effect “fails” the real life test and application of his knowledge.\(^{711}\)

\(^{708}\) Sports is seen by administrators at Omid and Entezar as one means of dealing with this potential disconnect. In recent years the schools had become increasingly involved with athletic competitions against public schools in their respective districts.

\(^{709}\) Personal Interview, February 11, 2009.

\(^{710}\) Personal Interview, June 18, 2008.

\(^{711}\) The gap between *amoozesh* and *parvaresh* could be seen in the memos distributed by the MOE to individual school sites. Events and activities related to *parvaresh* are generally not very detailed, consisting mainly of reminders to school administrators that they put together a commemorative program, later followed up with a memo asking principals or staff to detail what activities they performed. Partly, this is due to the fact that there is simply too much to celebrate in the IRI. The Iranian calendar is saddled with a long list of holidays. The overabundance of
The staff at Omid found the state’s standards and guidelines for *parvaresh* to be so wanting and theoretical in nature that they produced their own set of *parvaresh* goals:

We made these goals because…everyone had their own idea. Parvaresh was done according to personal taste [*saleqeh*], foundations were ambiguous [*mobham*], the goals were ambiguous, the methods of instruction were ambiguous…In other words, [*parvaresh*] wasn’t systematic [*elmi nabood*].

The most important display of the MOE’s authority over the private school system is through the production and distribution of textbooks, as well as the “shared examinations” (*emtehan-e moshtarak*) that draw directly from the curriculum found in the textbooks. Textbooks represent the embodiment of rules and resources. They offer students and teachers

At the same time, teachers, regardless of how they may feel about the material, are compelled to teach to the texts. Testing places a check on their agency in the classroom.

Teachers may add to the lessons founding the textbooks, but he cannot do less:

It is not possible for me to not teach the lessons of a section of the textbook. The *konkoor* is drawn from this lesson. Not from the thing that I taught them [i.e., the supplemental material provided by the teacher]. [The students’] futures will be affected, their parents will come and ask me why didn’t you teach them [the things that are on the text]?

The great advantage of schools like Omid and Entezar, and one of their most precious resources, is *time*. Access to time with the students, generally unavailable to the teachers at the public school, is often the difference between a situation in which administration and staff are just trying to hang on, day in and day out and an environment where the school staff is able to develop programs and relationships that will draw out the students’ enthusiasm:

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*commemorations* is due to the fact that bank holidays fall into not one or two, but three separate categories. Following the Revolution, Iran celebrates religious, Iranian, and revolutionary events.


713 Personal Interview, February 4, 2009. I noted in Chapter Five how even at private Islamic schools the pressure to succeed academically often trumps the commitment to an Islamic education. Often, an Islamic education is seen as being in service to the academic work of the student.
The difference between Entezar and the state schools is that at the state school the principal has to ring the bell at noon, and prepare the school for the next shift...Does he ever have time for creativity? He hasn’t time.  

The Ministry of Education was plagued by the same problem that plagued all of Iran’s governmental agencies, a lack of consistency produced by the lack of a system. Schools had a structure (rules) but no system (resources). This same source on a different occasion extended his earlier remarks:

The state has to run not one but two schools...The issue is not resources (emkanat). You go to a village school and find a school with better facilities [than what we have here]. [State schools] lack time (zaman). The problem is not [necessarily] money.

**Implications for the Prospects of Parvaresh in the Public School System**

This dissertation has outlined a number of obstacles, all formidable, preventing Iran’s public school system from achieving its goal of producing the ideal Islamic citizen. These include the politicization of the Ministry of Education, or what I label as the “pathology of politics,” the overcrowding of schools, and a general lack of resources, including the requisite amount of time and money for making political and religious parvaresh a serious part of instruction at the public schools.

*Parvaresh* as a part of the daily routine of school for the most part does not exist today in Iran. One of my informants bluntly stated that we can only sing “the fateheh (Muslim prayer for the deceased) for *parvaresh.*” What little ideological training that does occur on public school campuses tends to involve the ritualistic chanting of slogans and pro forma celebrations of revolutionary and religious holidays.

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714 Personal Interview, February 21, 2009.
715 Personal Interview, February 21, 2009.
716 Personal Interview, November 22, 2008.
At the private Islamic school, almost exactly the opposite is true. Parvaresh is de-politicized, and made normal as an everyday part of the school day. Modeled in every class and activity of the day, and included in the range of extracurricular activities offered at these schools, parvaresh is rendered palatable, non-controversial, and therefore more effective by a teaching staff committed to producing well-rounded students.

Of course, at schools such as Omid and Entezar, there is little need to impose religious instruction on the children. Families are already in harmony with the program. Conflict between the school and the home has been mostly obviated, and there is little refuge for the student should he be pretending to be interested in an Islamic education.

The mirror of private schooling shows us what public schooling is not, and why it will likely continue to struggle in the area of parvaresh. Omid and Entezar bring into relief the effect that the diversity of beliefs and backgrounds found across the student body has on efforts by teachers and administrators to shape outcomes in the area of parvaresh. Whereas these two private schools have full sanction to control the families may attend their institutions, state schools in Iran must accept all who enroll. At the state school, diversity of the khanevadeh, or family, is assured.

Can the Iranian state create a system of mass schooling capable of overcoming or controlling for the inevitability of difference? My informants at Omid and Entezar indicated that, even with the advantage of pre-screening, they often find themselves struggling to produce an educational experience that is harmony with the values of the home. Public schools, unable to select and remove students or staff at will, necessarily face much greater challenges.
Iran’s public schools, facing the full range of the student population, hobbled by the lack of resources and systematic programming from the MOE, have for the most part dug in. Rather than try to transform their students, the public school is content with just holding the line against minor infractions of the school code of conduct.

Public schools in Iran have shown to be adept at preparing students for the *konkoor* and other standardized tests. It is unlikely that the same success can be replicated for the *parvaresh*. As it stands now, mass schooling tends to fail in this area because of difficulties associated with the accurate measurement of the internalization of values, the “true heart” of the students.

**An Ideal Type? The Subversive Potential of Private Islamic Schooling**

Are schools like Omid and Entezar “laboratories” of national identity? Might private schools like Omid and Entezar serve as models of reform? Can it be said that religious-scientific are the twenty-first century equivalents of the New Schools and foreign missionary schools of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, schools that had once played such a critical role in laying the foundation for what would become Iran’s national school system?

Omid and Entezar, rather than embodying ideal-types, in fact seem to offer a subversive alternative to Islamic training as it is currently conceived by the state. Differences in approach have, over time, come to embody what I believe is a difference in *kind*. By this I mean that the Islam that is taught and celebrated at an Omid and an Entezar is not just procedurally distinct from the Islam of the state, religion is substantively different in purpose and effect. Omid and Entezar collectively view themselves as representing and preserving the Revolution better than the public school system, not just as the Revolution *was*, but how it *now must be*.

I emphasized in the previous chapter the negative effect that unhidden curriculums have on the efficiency and effectiveness of *parvaresh*. At the school site, the unhidden curriculum
lays bare the political agenda of the state, inviting a range of adverse (from the perspective of the pedagogical state) responses to the curriculum, ranging from apathy to outright contestation.

Coupled with the critical ability to control diversity of belief on their campuses, Omid and Entezar are successful to the extent that they do not have an unhidden agenda or curriculum. Students are not compelled to participate in sloganeering, rallies, or any other activity that is overtly politicized or obviously designed to meet an agenda unrelated to the work of teaching and learning.

As a consequence, there is considerable contempt at private Islamic schools for the state’s approach to advancing the Revolutionary cause. Staff and administration at Omid and Entezar uniformly viewed the various formal events and celebrations designed to promote the values of the regime as being meaningless routines, superficial sloganeering with hardly any effect on students’ beliefs.

I observed this disdain on a number of occasions during my fieldwork. For example, on the 13th of Aban (November 4), the anniversary of the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy and the start of the Iran hostage crisis, schools are encouraged to take their students to the gates of the old American Embassy on Taleghani Avenue and there participate in demonstrations against the United States and imperialism. I asked one of the administrators at Entezar: Do you take your students to the "Nest of Spies" (Laneh-ye jasoosha) to rally and protest? The principal, a man with impeccable revolutionary credentials, did not hesitate in his reply. "Why would we? What would be the use in that?" Instead, he said his staff would take their students to a private garden as a way to build camaraderie and spirit, a kind of Islamic field trip to celebrate the beginning of the academic year.
Similarly, on the 12th of Bahman, one of the most sacred days on the revolutionary portion of the Iranian calendar, schools across Iran are expected to strike a bell in the morning at the exact moment that Khomeini stepped onto Iranian soil after spending 15 years in exile. At Entezar, no such bell was struck, and indeed, I was the one who reminded the principal that such an observance was supposed to have taken place. This principal, who had been a volunteer fighter in the war, inspired to go to the frontlines by Khomeini, and whose admiration for the late Imam was so great that inside of his home were framed pictures of Khomeini with his family, said simply in response to my reminder: “What good does it do for me to ring the bell?”

These small acts of defiance are, I believe, the beginnings of a claim to a fundamentally different imagining of what being a good Muslim can be. Differences between the private Islamic schools remain latent but given the proper conditions, can easily become manifest. Such conditions occurred in the closing days of the spring in 2009, in the days leading up to the election, and in the weeks following the vote, and many of the students and teachers whom I had observed and interviewed became deeply involved with the Green Movement, their protests mounted on the basis of an Islam and Revolution they viewed as being under mortal assault, not by foreign enemies in London or Washington, DC., but by the current government.

A difference of form has become a difference in kind. This conclusion, as unexpected as my initial encounter with private Islamic schooling, prepares the ground for the concluding chapter of the dissertation, where I begin to explore the possibility that successful programs of schooling not only exist in the Islamic Republic, but represent the greatest potential threat to the regime continuing in its current form.

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717 There are generally speaking three categories of holidays in Iran: revolutionary, religious, and national.
718 I often describe the presence of private Islamic schools in the Islamic Republic of Iran---a country in which every school is already and ostensibly Islamic---as being analogous to a situation in which Vatican City were to set up a system of private Catholic schools within its city walls.
Conclusion

This project asks two separate but related questions. The first is how effective is Iran’s postrevolutionary school system in transmitting and reproducing the state’s ideological messages?

Based on the evidence presented in this dissertation, the simple answer is, not at all. A number of reasons were put forward to support this claim. Chapter Two demonstrated that nearly a decade passed before the revolutionary state was able to generate a set of official goals for education. Even then, these goals were generalized and not the sort of precise standards or benchmarks needed to accurately measure the progress or regress of ideological training in the schools.

The evidence collected in the course of this investigation suggests that elite consensus is not forthcoming, and is highly unlikely to ever occur. Idiosyncratic features of Iran’s postrevolutionary history have eroded the capacity of the Iranian state to carry out its hegemonic project. These features were highlighted in Chapter Three and include a weakly institutionalized educational system burdened by a range of structural constraints, especially student overcrowding and budget shortages, and a society insistent that formal education provide a path to economic success.

Chapter Four traced the development, over a 30-year period, of a specific set of themes found in textbooks and related to the production of a national identity. The evidence drawn directly from the state’s archives demonstrated conclusively that the state’s message has over the years been unstable and inconsistent, both within specific themes and lesson plans, as well as across historical periods. As part of my analysis of the data, I drew tentative links between the contradictory and incoherent nature of textbooks to the tumultuous history of the Ministry of
Education since the Revolution, in the process connecting Chapter Four to the earlier discussion in Chapter Two, as well as setting the stage for Chapter Five.

Another barrier to the effectiveness of schools as an instrument of ideological indoctrination has been the historical absence of a clear, coherent, and consistent concept of what constitutes “Islamic values” and how best to reproduce those values in the classroom.\textsuperscript{719} Chapter Five detailed how elite competition over the content of the cultural nation has produced a range of contradictory---and often irreconcilable---ideas as to what constitutes the ideal Islamic society, many of which are contradictory and irreconcilable. Although every factional group in Iran claims a commitment to Islamic cultural ideals, said commitment is to their preferred notion of the imagined cultural nation, and since the Revolution “all consensus [has] vanished when it came to the question of what these ideals were and which policies were require to achieve them.”\textsuperscript{720}

*Parvaresh* under the best of circumstances is a difficult endeavor. Given the overcrowding and myriad resource problems faced by the Iranian educational system since 1979, there has almost never been a “best circumstance” for state planners in the IRI. Faced with the challenge of, sustained programs of political or religious training are given over to the more mundane and tedious task of maintaining order and discipline on campus.

There is also a major contradiction---a poor meeting of the worlds---between schooling as an instrument of *parvaresh* and the goal. Part of the problem for the state lies in the difficult

\textsuperscript{719} Here I recapitulate James Scott’s challenge to proponents of hegemony (understood as ideational consent or “false consciousness”) to explain how cohesive hegemonic projects, whether there is in fact a single, well-defined project around which state planners have reached consensus, or are there multiple and competing versions of what postrevolutionary society “ought to be, and how cohesive projects are they when put into practice? James Scott, “Forward,” in *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution And the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994), vii-xii.

nature of *parvaresh* instruction itself. *Parvaresh* is a highly intersubjective and subtle process, requiring constant attention and cooperation between teacher and student. Mass schooling is a blunt and ineffective instrument for such a project. By necessity, the bureaucratic nature of mass schooling is ill equipped to carry out *parvaresh*, and where systems have been put into place to measure the values of children, unintended consequences are often produced. Standardized measures of *parvaresh* inadvertently transform the internalization of values into an externalized theater of performance. Most students’ experience with *parvaresh*, especially in high school, is that of rules and punishment, whether it be for violations of the dress code or the listening of CDs on campus. The focus on the external---at an age when many students are, above all, interested in fostering and expressing their individual identities---pulls students away from the development of internal values and allegiances that might bind the child to the state and the Revolution.

Chapter Five detailed how state efforts to use schooling to craft the Islamic Citizen is based on the deeply flawed functionalist belief that the success of any educational program rests on its proper design and implementation. In Iran, the conceit that schooling constitutes a scientific and values-neutral endeavor is contradicted by the basic nature of Islamic schooling. State leaders undermine their own efforts to objectively plan and implement a modern school system, because what they ultimately seek is a manifestly political program of inculcation and indoctrination.

Finally, in Chapter Six I recruited private Islamic schools as a proxy for determining the likelihood of public school success in the area of *parvaresh*. I argued that schools like Omid and Entezar are successful because they have found ways to render *parvaresh* training invisible. Through my research at Omid and Entezar, I was able to achieve my research goal of gaining
insight into how local populations are able to tailor and transform formal educational projects into their own. These two schools demonstrated considerable creativity and initiative in implementing and reinterpreting what it meant to be an “Islamic citizen.” What made my case studies significant in terms of my research question was that they appeared to be using the framework and resources of Iran’s revolutionary discourse in order to produce an alternative vision or narrative of what the cultural content of the nation ought to be. This seemed to fit into my conception of schools as “ambiguous sites” in which actors are both constrained and enabled by institutional rules.

The success of private Islamic schools like Omid and Entezar in the area of parvaresh does not bode well for the prospects of public schools. Though they represent ideal-type schools in terms of seeing to children’s knowledge and need for religion and science, the replication of their pedagogic methods and general school culture is not likely or practical on the wide-scale necessary to meet the much greater needs of the public school system. Public schooling as it currently exists, is simply incapable of using the tools and techniques available to the private schools. Mass schooling is too blunt an instrument for the task at hand, and at minimum, antecedent conditions of diversity will continue to be a permanent block on the dream of producing uniformity.

**Redefining Failure, Revisited**

I turn now to the second and by far more ambitious question of the dissertation: What is the impact of failed educational policies on patterns of power and rule?

I began this dissertation by making a case for the redefinition of moral failure in education. Rather than setting out to provide evidence confirming that Iranian schools had failed
in their postrevolutionary project to create the Islamic citizen, I sought to understand how the
state survived in light of, or perhaps even because of this failure.

A more creative approach to the topic seemed appropriate given that, despite the litany of
setbacks and challenges to Islamic education, the Islamic Republic still remains in power.
Iranian families have not abandoned the school system. Today Iranian schools cover more
students, and more female students, than ever in its history. Although there is evidence of a
growing gap in student achievement, Iranians for the most part remain deeply committed to the
promise of success that education offers for the future of their children. For students who
demonstrate an ability to navigate and flourish in the system, there is even the promise of being
recruited by western universities. The modernization dilemma can now be said to run, at times,
in reverse: Whereas the Iranian state used to send students abroad for training, now western
countries come looking for students in Iran.  

While we do know what children are exposed to in terms of educational content, we do
not yet have a good handle on the effects of schooling has in places where access to classrooms
and teachers is not restricted, much less the countries of the Middle East. Exposure, as this
dissertation has been at pains to demonstrate, is not the same as influence:

If it were, we’d have to wonder why Saudi Arabia has produced a generation polarized between
radical conservatives, including jihadis, and risk-taking liberals, all of whom read the same books
in school, and why Iran has produced a generation of dissidents chafing under clerical rule, as well
as a voting public that elected an arch-conservative as president.  

Exposure is not the same as influence. Still, can it be said that the school has had no influence?

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721 Thomas Erdbrink, “Iran Makes the Sciences a Part of Its Revolution,” Washington Post, June 6, 2008,
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/05/AR2008060503904.html?sid=ST2008060602843 (last accessed December 27, 2010). This article reinforces the argument, made throughout the dissertation, that the postrevolutionary regime seeks to achieve in both the scientific and religious realms, and does not consider the two to be at odds.

Redefining Success

In order to gain a handle on the difficult challenge of linking political outcomes with the inability of the state to produce and implement a uniform moral and cultural identity through schooling, there is, it seems to me, a need to redefine success. We ought to look for the productive potential of the failure of the educational project.

What do I mean by this? It is clear to me, based on the accumulation of evidence presented in this thesis, that the greatest threat and challenge to the survival of the current regime as it exists today in Iran is not the rise of a secularized society or the ceaseless assault of a western-organized “cultural invasion,” but the development of the skills of modern social subjects, members of society whose language of criticism and inclination for contestation are not against the state, but derived from the values of Islam and the Revolution.

Success in the area of education has always been defined in Iran as the ability of educational planners to separate good knowledge from the bad. Typically this has meant drawing a distinction between western science and technology and western culture. Iran would have it both ways: The country would remain Iranian, while also enjoying the acquired benefits of the best that the west had to offer. This has been how successive regimes have defined their educational goals.

This basic goal has not changed since the time of the Qajars. Today, the preeminent anxiety of the current regime in Tehran has been how to preserve education against the cultural incursions of the foreigners that, if successful, will surely lead to the ruination of the nation. For Khamanei, the final insurance, the promise of the Revolution’s preservation, will come on that day in which a fully Iranian system of schooling is assured, and Iranians are finally and forever able to leave behind the classroom of the west.
This ambition, I think, misses the point. The greatest threat to the regime is not the penetration of western culture and identity into Iran’s schools and educational system. It is a state system of schooling that actually manages to produce educated subjects. Iran, for all of its challenges, has managed to achieve its modernist ambitions. As it has elsewhere, the school “played its most important role in resistance by developing the skills of modern social subjects. It provided tools for contesting state policies…” The protestors were educated by the postrevolutionary school system, and that they went out into the streets it was not because this system had failed, but because it worked.

At the same time, education has accelerated the nationalization of Iran. At the time of the Revolution, Tehran was the focal point of the modern in Iran, and the source of emulation for other parts of the country. Today, rather than the rest of the country becoming like Tehran, Tehran has become more like the rest of the country. The diffusion of modernity has been in no small measure been promoted by the growth of universities in places like Isfahan, Tabriz, Mashad and Shiraz.

Long ago, the New School movement in Iran managed to achieve a synthesis of tradition and European curricular matter, one that “went beyond simplistic imitation and adoption of European institutions, instead offering a selectively chosen hybrid curriculum designed to meet Iran’s modernizing needs.” The creativity and determination to create a uniquely Iranian modernity, according to Ringer, was perhaps the New School movement’s greatest success and

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724 Many thanks to Dr. Ariel Ahram for the line.
proved more dangerous to the traditional educational establishment than the establishment of an entirely European parallel system would have been:

Indeed, it was the appropriation of elements from both curriculums that made the New schools real alternatives to the traditional system. The New Schools were thus able to claim indigenous roots and objectives and to some extent avoid accusations of "aping" the West.\(^{726}\)

A similar synthesis is taking place today, the fruits of the current regime’s commitment to the shared legacy of modernity as it has existed in Iran for the past two centuries. Synthesis has been far from smooth or consistent. Schooling as it exists today contains within it gaps, places where the state has not been able to reconcile its various and competing agendas. It’s in these gaps in the formal message that the kids and not a few adults step through. Sam Kaplan is correct, I think, when he notes that far from being passive subjects in the hands of the state, school children are in their own way amongst the most liberated members of society.\(^{727}\) The modern form of schooling facilitates the act of talking back to power in ways that are simply unavailable to the adults living on the “outside” of the educational experience.

As we saw this past summer in Iran, state discourse can be used in multiple and unexpected ways. Though in retrospect the seeds of dissent could be found in the soil of the curriculum, very few

\(^{726}\) Ringer, “Negotiating Modernity,” 44.

expected millions of Iranians to (re)appropriate the various slogans and political/religious values of the regime to mount the largest protest movement against the state since the 1979 revolution. Thirty years of Islamic schooling has, it would seem, contributed to an opposition movement driven by a set of demands *rooted in the logic of the IRI*. In this it can be said that the school system was ultimately successful, though from the perspective of the governing authorities, too much so.

A final word on the possibilities of change. Earlier I drew upon Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to describe the uncertainty of modern state authority and power. Using the concept of the hegemonic process, I explained that state and society, the dominant and dominated, are inextricably implicated in one another, and this intertwining meant that hegemonic rule could never be taken for granted by the state.

Gramsci himself believed that the oppressed had little capacity to improve their lives on their own. Writing at a time when education was inaccessible for the vast majority of ordinary Italians living in the countryside, Gramsci believed that the rural peasantry of his country lived lives that were an incoherent jumble of experiences which, although quite real in the sense that they were almost always in the material realm, could only be made coherent through the efforts of the so-called organic intellectual, that individual capable of setting up lines of communication between elite and non-elite groups. The successful counterhegemony can only emerge out of the lived reality of oppressed people’s day-to-day lives, but on their own never see their way to bringing about fundamental political, economic, or social change.

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What Iran intriguingly suggests is that, under the right circumstances, the state itself acts as the organizing force, the organic intellectual. There is no need to mount a separate and alternative counter-hegemonic project, or to engage in the years of hard work in the trenches of theory and culture. There is already enough for protest, provided by the state. Counter-hegemonic projects are already there, contained within the school system and the larger educational apparatus. Iranians, if they choose to, can use the master’s tools, if not to dismantle his house, then at least to reconstruct it.
(Note: Where Farsi sources are cited, dates in the Iranian calendar are followed by the corresponding year in the Gregorian calendar. Some examples of this style include 9 Esfand 1384/2006, 13 Mehr 1387/2008, and Khordad 1387/2008.)


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