

IMPACT-se

Iranian Education The Continuous Revolution

Executive Summary



Eldad J. Pardo

2016

IMPACT-se

Suite 15, Belgium House, Givat Ram Campus, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Office/Fax: +972-2-5332497 Website: www.impact-se.org

Executive Summary

For some, a reading of the Iranian curriculum might leave them with mixed feelings. From the perspective of nation-building, one cannot deny that Iran is attempting to create an alternative to the Western way of life. And the authors of the curriculum have provided Iranian students with a wide array of tools for their future lives. These include much of what is good in education everywhere in terms of encouraging students to develop various skills, good habits, self-confidence and cleanliness, along with a level of creative and analytical thinking. Of particular interest are efforts to develop a unique way of thinking, predicated upon the heritage of Persian culture and Shiite Islam, with much emphasis on poetry and mysticism.

There is also the understanding that societies change their identities over time because “culture is learned.” Of course, the hope is that the West will Islamize. We also found in a new fifth grade textbook, a clearer delineation of Iran’s immediate neighbors (excluding Israel) as independent countries. Increasing recognition of women has led to their partial inclusion among historical martyrs.

The Iranian education curriculum includes numerous troubling aspects: from a Manichean division of the world into good versus evil; the ambition to impose Iranian hegemony on the world; a culture of militarism and *jihad*; blind obedience and martyrdom; and hostility and paranoia toward foreigners.¹ Iranian youth—at once seemingly well-cared-for—are at the same time being raised to follow in the footsteps of hundreds of thousands of children already martyred or made invalid during Iran’s recent tumultuous history. *Jihad* war is unending. Creativity and critical thinking are given limited focus; for the rest, obedience and sacrifice are a requirement. The instilled trust in mystical (read, in this context, *irrational*) thinking and decision-making may be useful in some areas of private life, but the assumption that the Supreme Leader and other religious personalities have paranormal powers and thus can make decisions because of their open channels to the angels, the Prophet, the Mahdi or the Divine—is troubling. Of even more concern, is the frenzied rush toward the end-of-time’s “horrifying battle,” through the instrument of continuous *jihad*. All this reflects “a characteristic ambivalence toward human agency” by the revolution’s founding fathers.²

For those who may be interested, some footnotes contain additional transliterated Persian, beyond what is found in the text.

© All rights reserved by Eldad J. Pardo and The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se). I wish to thank Sanaz Toobian for collecting and commenting on the material used here and David M. Byer for his thorough and incisive editing of this paper.

1 On the sources of this dichotomy: Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York: New York University Press, 1993. Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

2 Farzin Vahdat “Post-Revolutionary Islamic Discourses on Modernity in Iran: Expansion and Contraction

Jihad War and Child Martyrdom: Defense?

The curriculum portrays Iran as committed to a total struggle for the creation of a just world order; it envisages constant aggression from all the “arrogant forces,” led by the United States. Put another way, Iran is committed to meddling in the affairs of other countries so it must always be ready to defend itself against (predictable) reactions. Such a condition will remain until the coming of the Mahdi, the Shiite Messiah and the establishment of the “Just World Government.” “By supporting the oppressed and downtrodden of the world, the enmity of the oppressors is expected to be unleashed, but this also leads to the strengthening of the “front of truth” in the world as it brings us closer to the Just World Government.”³

While the curriculum differentiates between “*jihad wars*” as *defensive, internal* (against opposition at home) and *elementary* (attacking other countries), students learn that all three should be considered “defensive.” The need for *jihad*, child martyrdom and inevitable sacrifice are intensively and vividly inculcated into young minds in a myriad of ways, throughout the curriculum.

Led by their “infallible and trustworthy Leader,” Iranian students are expected to propagate the message worldwide and defend themselves from foreign cultural invasions. They know now that a *jihad* war—requiring their possible martyrdom on a massive scale and for which they practice from the first grade—could be launched as part of an Iranian “attack on countries ruled by oppressive governments.” Any such attack should, nevertheless, be considered a “defensive *jihad*” because any “defense of the oppressed and innocent is just like defending oneself.” They are taught that the world is experiencing a major struggle between the powers of good and the powers of evil. And, they are being prepared.

The Mahdi and the Apocalyptic Battle

The curriculum goes a long way toward clarifying whether the Iranian regime has or does not have millenarian-apocalyptic tendencies; it undoubtedly has. Waiting and preparing for the Mahdi-savior, means constant training and participation in conflicts and wars between Iran and the “arrogant ones” (i.e. the West); so when the Mahdi arrives, all is in readiness, including weapons. According to the Shiite interpretation of Islam, as explained in the revolutionary curriculum, “waiting” [*entezar*] for the Mahdi includes fighting other regimes that are not Islamist-Khomeinist: “The ‘waiting society’ does not accept un-Godly, idolatrous governments but stands against them and creates ‘resistance’ against them.” Yet this very “resistance” [fighting, really] also serves as an admission test to join the Mahdi savior. As “people of *jihad* and combat,” only a few of the very best boys and girls will be chosen. “The waiting [student] treats the Occultation period as a [military] operational alert period for helping the Imam [Mahdi]. Each and every moment [the believer] is waiting for the resounding call of the Imam

of Human Subjectivity,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 35 (2003), pp. 599–631.
3 *Religion and Life*, Grade 12, 2016–17 (Iranian Calendar, 1395), p. 140.

throughout the world, inviting people to join the truth.” A frenzy of preparations, training and military actions is already under way. Everything is being prepared for the arrival of the Mahdi and the apocalyptic “horrifying battle of the Imam’s army against the oppressors of the world.”

Clearly, the apocalyptic future “horrifying battle” between Iran and the “world oppressors” has permeated backwards to the present. While the Mahdi has yet to show up, the battle already rages and will never stop. Thus, as the curriculum teaches, we are already there.

Mysticism and Blind Obedience

According to the school textbooks, the Mahdi, or hidden Imam, is strolling in the streets, listening to people and helping the sick and helpless. He provides solutions to problems inside the minds of believers through inspiration—especially religious scholars. Most importantly, he protects Shiite followers from conspiracies against them.⁴ Mahdi birthday parties are celebrated in classes.⁵ The intensive presence of the hidden Mahdi and the frenzied military preparations for his reappearance to lead the war should be taken seriously in the context of the mystical education in all grades (which includes communication with celestial figures).

Since ancient times, “divine” legitimacy for kings and leaders has been a fixture in Iranian political tradition.⁶ The 1979 Revolution—changing much as it did by replacing a kingship with an Islamic republic—did little to rectify this. Iran’s children are educated to blindly obey their divine-instructed Leader.⁷ “All are submissive and obedient to the Guardian-Jurist [Supreme Leader].”

Mystical education begins in the first grade, emphasizing communication with God, and continuing through the upper grades by learning to sense the presence of the Mahdi. There is philosophical and gnostic education aimed at presenting the superiority of Islam’s thinking, but no less to instill full trust in the Leader’s mental powers. Thus, they learn that the leader of such a perfect Islamic polity should reach the spiritual degree that allows: “the very connection with the angel of revelation [*Farabi*].” Such a leader “is the Caliph and deputy of God . . . receives matters and truth directly from the source of Glory (*Sohravardi*).”

4 *Religion and Life*, Grade 12, 2016–17 (1395), pp. 111–112.

5 *Heaven’s Presents*, Grade 2, 2016–17 (1395), pp. 88–91.

6 Divine Splendor, Muhammad’s Light (*farr, khwarena and nur-e mohammadi*).

7 Mehdi Khalaji, “Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions.” Washington DC: *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2014. Nevertheless, within a joint Hebrew University-Goettingen University GIF project, I showed, together with Navid Toobian, that Khamenei’s discourse is more racist than that of the 2004 Iranian textbooks. Andreas Grünschloss, Emmanuel Sivan, and Ronen Feldman, *Opinion Mining in Religious Studies: GIF Final Scientific Report*, 2012, pp. 5, 15, 21–28. See also: Wilfried Buchta, “Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic.” Washington, DC: *The Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy* and the *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, 2000.

The Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself, writes to the children describing the founding father of the Safavid royal-mystic dynasty as, “religious scholar, mystic, exegete and seer [*mohaddas*].” The latter term typically relates to the Imams and denotes an ability to speak to the angels (such as *Jibreel* who communicated with the Prophet Mohammad). The assumption is clear: the Supreme Leader, elsewhere described as infallible (like the Prophet and the Holy Imams), insists that he is privy to celestial instructions and should be blindly obeyed. Religious scholars in power—who are experts in Islamic law, but also with paranormal abilities—have full authority in every field to innovate, including the “procurement and use of new weapons.” This description *rules out the possibility of an all-encompassing binding fatwa* (religious edict) *in matters of weapons*. (Essentially, this means that depending on how the day went with any present or future leader’s particular discussion with an angel, they might—or might not—put nuclear options on the table.)

In short, every graduate of the curriculum is supposed to be able to communicate with the spiritual world, either through prayer or mystical practices. They are taught that this ability is much stronger in those having the most merit, particularly the religious leaders who can easily communicate with the Prophet, angels, the Mahdi or the Divine. Such leaders should, therefore, be blindly obeyed. The Mahdi is alive and present; everyone prepares for helping him in the final war for the establishment of the world government.

Dissimulation (*taqiye*)

Understanding the intentions of the Iranian leadership is further complicated by another trait featured in the curriculum. Iranian students study about “dissimulation” [*taqiye*] and “misleading the enemy.” They learn that in times of need, dissimulation and temporary pacts—even with “un-Godly, idolatrous governments”—are *proper* (but only until such time as the balance of power should change).⁸ We know from Khamenei’s own words, that recent nuclear negotiations followed the pattern of a historical treaty with an “illegitimate” government (concluded in 661 CE between *Imam Hassan* and *Mu’awiyah* and leading to the fateful battle of Karbala two decades later).⁹

8 *Religion and Life*, Grade 12, 2016–17 (1395), pp. 103–4. Shiite scholars had various views on the practice of *taqiye* through the ages and the practice, “while widespread and well known, by no means excluded other, often contrasting, forms of behavior.” Etan Kohlberg, “Some Imami-Shii Views on *Taqiyya*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 95. No. 3 (1975), pp. 395–402, quotation: p. 402. *Defense Readiness*, Grade 11, 2014–15 (1393), p. 54

9 “Heroic Flexibility: Subtle Hint by the Leader to the ‘Peace of Imam Hassan,’” *Asr-Iran*, August 30, 2013, www.asriran.com/fa/news/296106/نسخ-م-ام-ح-ل-ص-ه-ب-ی-ر-ب-ه-غ-ی-ر-ظ-ه-ر-ا-ش-ا-ه-ن-ان-ام-ر-ه-ق-ش-م-ر-ن. Eldad J. Pardo, “Is Fundamental Change Possible in Iran?” *The Jerusalem Report*, October 21, 2013.

One-Sided World View

Further complicating any communication with the regime, are its one-sided historical narratives. Historical facts and processes are carelessly manipulated in order to present a lopsided, imagined reality, in which the clergy and Iranian people are always victimized; regardless of circumstances, the “other side” is always the “wrong side.” Opposition is all too often considered sedition.¹⁰

Regarding the role of foreigners, the lack of introspection about Iranian history tends to reinforce a warped perception of the Other—seen principally as the Western powers—and a constant evil force. Iran’s culpability for its own plight over the centuries, most recently in the Iran-Iraq War, is a case in point. Another example is its obsessive hatred toward the Jewish state and the avoidance of embarrassing facts such as amicable, historical Jewish-Persian relations; the flight of harassed and persecuted Jewish communities from Muslim countries; and the Holocaust. All of these remain non-existent in Iranian textbooks.

Imperial Dreams and the Aryan Identity

Troubling, too, is the Aryan-Shiite basis of Iranian identity, which includes a fascination with imperialism—despite its hatred for foreign “colonialists.” Iranian students look to the past and see the Aryan “Kingdom of Iran extending from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean.” They are taught to be proud because the Iranian-Achaemenid government was “the first ever global empire.” They learn that empires are exciting and, as they look to the present, they see fellow Iranians supporting “the oppressed peoples of Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan.” Looking toward the future, they learn about Iran’s “New Islamic Civilization (NIC)” and its “Full Life Program,” which “humanity at large is now ready to receive.”

In recent years this Shiite/pan-Islamic vision has been married to a renewed fascination with powerful Persian empires, created in the past by Aryan tribes. The primordial identity of Iran as Aryan in the textbooks is not especially associated with a racist worldview, but nonetheless has a supremacist coloring that goes beyond culture.¹¹ With Iran’s historic connection to powerful Persian empires, amid the suggestion that Azeri-Turkish Iranians remain Aryans, such identity can be seen to have an essentialist dimension to it. (Similarly, the Kurds come from the Aryan race.)

10 *Religious Rulings*, Grade 11, 2012–13 (1391), p. 12. Aya’s English rendering from: <http://quran.com/2/216>. *History*, Grade 9, 2013–14 (1392), p. 43. (An almost identical version in *History*, Grade 8, 2004, p. 37).

11 The Aryan myth is an import from Europe and had its roots in Europe’s discovery of India in the eighteenth century along with the discovery of Sanskrit. Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 9–13.

The perception of shared Aryan roots likewise suggests a simpatico relationship with Germany.¹² In 1935, following pressure from Iranian diplomats in Berlin, the name Persia was abandoned in favor of Iran.¹³ In the curriculum, this includes a historical narrative minimizing the responsibility of Germany for starting WWII, by shifting fault to “colonialist competitions and fascist and racist thinking entertained by European politicians.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the US is seen as culpable for its use of nuclear bombs, while the Holocaust is avoided altogether within the curriculum. German, as a foreign language, has a prominent role in the curriculum, alongside Arabic, English and French (but not Azeri-Turkish or Kurdish).

Imperial and Modular

While retaining its Aryan-Shiite framework, the new global civilization appears to be modular—embracing Sunni Muslims, monotheists, Third Worldists and any oppressed people (barring some notable exceptions). The allure of empires—Aryan-Persian, Muslim and others—is accompanied by much learning of Persian poetry and heroic mythological stories from the past, strengthening the Iranian identity (*iraniyyat*). Such an imperial modular religious ideology that accommodates Sunnis and all the “downtrodden,” allows Iranian governments to garner support for a globalist pan-Islamic vision of world government, in which the Aryan-Persian-Shiite-Iranians will serve as future leaders.

Discrimination

Despite hatred against all manner of enemies, this inventive Islamist model may accommodate more groups than previously assumed, allowing for a more rapid expansion of the Iranian Supreme Leader-centered sphere of influence. Yet, the curriculum describes an environment that inherently favors males who are Shiite-Persians and discriminates against all others to various degrees including: women; Sunni, Muslims who are un-submissive to the Supreme Leader; non-Muslims; Baha’is; LGBTs; Jews; Azerbaijanis; Kurds; Arabs; Christians; liberals; atheists; and freedom seekers of all types.¹⁵

12 According to Küntzel, the economic factor is marginal in explaining Germany’s policy toward Iran and *vice versa*. Resentment for being defeated in WWII, Iran not seeing Germany as criminal, but as fellow Aryans, and a search for a multipolar world are also part of the explanation. Matthias Küntzel, *Germany and Iran: From the Aryan Axis to the Nuclear Threshold*. Candor, NY: Telos, 2014.

13 Houchang E. Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1993), pp. 209–229, p. 226.

14 *History of Iran and the World (2)*, Grade 12, 2012–13 (1391), p. 88

15 See also: Saeed Paivandi, *Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran’s Textbooks*. Washington D.C.: Freedom House, 2008.

The Iranian education curriculum includes a long list of troubling features. It speaks defense, but often means aggression and hate. It teaches love and intimate relations with God, but manipulates students' deepest emotions—toward martyrdom, self-sacrifice, *jihad* war and blind obedience to the all-powerful Supreme Leader. While it boasts of an ancient tradition and refined culture, it nurtures imperial dreams based on a radical religious ideology and an essentialist-racial worldview predicated on Aryan-Persian superiority.

The extremism of this ideology is not only religious and political, but also incorporates a belief in paranormal powers granted to the leadership. The Iranian curriculum justifies all manner of discrimination—from gender segregation to religious and ethnic classes—but confidently teaches a modular political culture that can transform *all* into an ever-expanding Islamic empire. It fans the flames of eternal victimhood among young Iranians, with its one-sided self-righteous historical narrative, but blocks the development of genuine historical understanding. While proclaiming to lead the camp of “truth seekers against the arrogant ones,” the curriculum teaches students to dissimulate.

This is a curriculum that calls students to experiment in the laboratory, but warns that human life is too short for experimenting. It encourages creativity, but insists on an attitude of militarism. It fuses a totalitarian mentality with unsettling mystical paradigms that assume communication with celestial beings. A *jihad* war lingers perpetually, culminating in a Mahdi-led apocalyptic battle. And while *jihad* “resistance” wars and frenzied preparations continue incessantly, the hidden Mahdi is understood to be everywhere—preparing followers before his reappearance to establish a utopian/dystopian world government led by Iranians.

While it is unlikely that every Iranian student will take every element of what they learn in school seriously—and some certainly don't—the curriculum will no doubt raise enough radical leaders, dedicated military commanders, scientists, technicians and other elite groups who are committed to this problematic perception of reality and blindly loyal to the rulers of Iran.

IMPACT-se

Suite 15, Belgium House, Givat Ram Campus, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Office/Fax: +972-2-5332497 Website: www.impact-se.org