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Iranian Textbooks Content and Context

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Iranian Textbooks: Content and Context

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary | 2 |
| Background..... | 2 |
| Educational System of the Islamic Republic of Iran..... | 2 |
| Methodology..... | 3 |
| Textbook Characteristics in Common..... | 4 |
| Internal Issues - Matters Related to Domestic Affairs..... | 5 |
| External Issues – Matters Related to Foreign Affairs..... | 8 |
| Other Important Case Studies..... | 9 |
| Conclusions..... | 10 |
| Appendix 1: List of Textbook Titles | |
| Appendix 2: Textbook Contributors' Names' Index | |

Executive Summary

The study assesses 85 textbooks of the Islamic Republic of Iran for grade school, middle school and high school students. All of the textbooks have been posted by the Iranian government on the Internet. The books appear in the original Persian or Farsi and have been examined in their native language.

This study also reviews existing investigations into the content of Iranian textbooks.

The study's most important conclusions include the following points:

- All of the textbooks reveal a clear emphasis on Islam, as it has been interpreted by the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This emphasis is extreme, and the books clearly aim to indoctrinate students in the logic of the dominant clerics of the ruling Shiite sect.
- The books have inserted direct and indirect Islamic, especially Shiite, teachings. These include teachings on jihad and martyrdom. They provide a distorted view of Shia Islam as the only true path in Islam, and among religions.

Background

The textbooks of the Islamic Republic of Iran have changed since 1979. There is a movement to make the textbooks compatible with the post-Revolution political system, which is controlled by Islamic clerics. Through textbooks, Iran hopes to transform school children into devout Muslim citizens with little regard for the world beyond Iran. The children of Iran are not learning as much as they could be about international standards of human rights as envisioned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations conventions on civil, political, social and economic rights.

Educational System of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Since 1979, when the Islamic Republic came into power and replaced the previous monarchical regime of the Pahlavi Dynasty, the educational system of Iran has changed several times. At the moment, the educational system is divided into five (5) cycles: preschool, primary, middle (guidance), secondary (high school) and post secondary (university). The textbooks reviewed for this study include those for students in:

- Primary school for ages 6-11, Grades 1-5;
- Guidance (equivalent to Middle School) for ages 11-13, Grades 6-8;
- High school for ages 14-17, Grades 9-12.

The schools are under the administration of the Ministry of Education. This ministry employs the highest number of civil servants (42%) among state ministries, and receives 21% of the national budget. Almost 15 million students were enrolled in 87,000 schools in the 1990-1991 academic year¹. The subjects of the textbooks were:

- Language and literature (Persian);
- Arabic, English, and French;
- Koran courses (Motale'ate Ghorani);
- Islamic education;
- Social education;
- History;
- Geography;
- Geology;
- Biology;
- Physics;
- Chemistry
- Mathematics;
- Sciences;
- Arts
- Other (such as Readiness for Defense).

Methodology

This study assesses current Iranian grade school textbooks in order to better understand Iran's educational approach and interpretation of concepts such as:

- Nationalism;
- Iran's position in the region;
- Iran's position in the Islamic world;
- Iran's treatment of minorities (Arabs, Sunnis, Jews, and non-Muslims);
- Iran's understanding of the workings of democracy;
- Iran's understanding of the relationships between Israelis and Palestinians;
- Martyrdom and jihad; and
- Western culture/s.

The study included an analysis of 85 textbooks to determine the extent to which the aforementioned concepts are emphasized in Iranian school textbooks. The books are posted by the Government of Iran on the Internet (<http://chap.sch.ir/MaghtalList.asp>), and are exact copies of the original Persian or Farsi printed versions. The textbooks are currently used for the education of primary, secondary and high school grade students in Iran and for children outside of Iran who are following the Iranian educational system. It is expected that the textbooks will continue to be used in the foreseeable future. Also, textbooks for some subjects, such as mathematics and chemistry, were reviewed for potential relevant information for the purposes of this study.

For clarity's sake, the study is divided into two major parts, although some issues discussed in the textbooks are relevant to and may apply to both [parts]:

1. Matters related to domestic affairs;
2. Matters related to foreign affairs.

The first part (internal/domestic issues) covers data gathered about:

- a. The previous regime of Iran;
- b. The interpretation of Islam;
- c. Martyrdom
- d. Islam and government;
- e. Democratic institutions and processes
- f. Civil / Minority Rights and Issues.

The second part (external/foreign issues) concentrates on:

- a. The US and the West;
- b. Israel and Palestine;
- c. Jihad / holy war against Islam's "enemies";
- d.. Iran and the world.

The following section describes commonalities among all the books, and is followed by a collection of passages taken from the Iranian textbooks to demonstrate and convey the common themes that the children of Iran are learning in school. Among the many themes that appear in textbooks, such as Iranian identity, cultural heritage and nationalism, religion stand out as the primary thematic lens through which subjects and themes are viewed.

Textbook Characteristics in Common

All of the textbooks share several characteristics in common:

a. Each opens with a portrait of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who is understood in Iran to be the founder of the Islamic Republic, in its opening pages, accompanied by sentences from his speeches, messages or books. All of them emphasize religion and the necessity of sacrifice for Islam. Here are a few examples of beginning sentences:

- "The Culture must be the culture of Islam. We must leave the culture that is dependent on colonialism," Imam Khomeini (Farsi textbook for the first year of high school, first page);
- "Islam agrees with expertise and science, but only the science and expertise that serve Islam" (Persian Literature textbook introductory page for the first year of high school);

- “If you depend only on Islam and the Quran, the aliens will not dare to impose the documents of bondage on you” (Training Quran textbook introductory page for the third year of high school)
- “The best way for the material and spiritual worlds is insisting on the ideals of Khomeini up to the point of giving our lives for them,” Ali Khamenei (Farsi textbook introductory page for the second year of high school).

b. Islamic concepts of the Shiite sect, such as scarf, prayer, fasting, mosque, pilgrimage, imams of the Shiites, shrines of Imams, martyrdom, religious heroes, chest beating, religious celebrations, birth and death of the imams and close associates of Mohammad, verses from Koran, and so on, are present in all of the textbooks.

c. Direct and indirect Islamic and Shiite teachings are inserted in all textbooks. Studies such as Haggai Ram’s, “The Immemorial Iranian Nation?: School Textbooks and Historical Memory in Post Revolutionary Iran,” have suggested that the Islamic Republic in Iran has remained committed to the nationalist idea of an Iranian nation and that the Islamic Republic has only shifted from “Iran Time” to Islam Time.”² However, a review of the textbooks of the Islamic Republic of Iran demonstrates that the goals of the regime of Iran are not simply nationalist, but expansionist. The most important leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as evidenced by their words in this study, have made it clear that they are pursuing the expansion of Islam beyond their own borders.

Internal Issues - Matters Related to Domestic Affairs

The Previous Regime of Iran

- The Persian Language and Literature textbook for the third year of Guidance indicates that, “Reza Khan [Shah] was under a mission assigned by the aliens to destroy the Islamic theological seminary.” (p. 7)
- The textbook on Sociology for the third year of high school discusses the “concentration of power”. It refers to Stalin, Hitler, the previous Shah of Iran and Mao Tse Tung in China, but there is no reference to the concentration of power in the present regime of Iran. (pp. 78-113)
- In the Persian Language and Literature textbook for the third year of Guidance, it says that, “The colonial government of the U.K. established the Pahlavi Dynasty and made an illiterate oppressor called Reza Khan, the Shah.” (p. 6)

The Interpretation of Islam

- In the Persian Language and Literature textbook for the fourth grade of primary school, the famous nationalist story of “Arash Kamanghir,” based on the epic poetry of Abulghasem Ferdowsi, the epic poet of Iran, has been infused with external religious sentiment (p. 112). The Persian textbook also details and glorifies the story of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the third Imam of the Shiites (p. 101).
- The Social Teachings school textbook for the fifth grade of primary school makes statements about religion that clearly tie it to the current system of government. For example, it indicates that, “There must be consultation in affairs. However, this is not always true. If there is a command of God in the Quran, or something is mentioned through the prophet or imams or the leader of the Islamic society, all of the people must obey without questioning” (p. 157).
- The Social Teachings textbook also notes that, “The Islamic government is Velayate Faghih [government of the Supreme religious-Islamic-Shiite leader]” (p. 146). Further, the textbook indicates that the only legitimate definition of Islam is the Shiite definition (p. 76) and that the main task of the government is to protect Islam. (p.148)
- The book entitled “Gifts of the Heavens,” which is used for religious instruction, relates the “Ghadir Khom,” incident, during which Mohammad chose Ali [his son-in-law] as his successor, according to Shia Muslims. The Sunnis, who are the great majority of the Muslims (85-90%), interpret this story differently. (p. 52)
- The Islamic Teaching Textbook for the second year of Guidance defines the *hajj* [the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca, for Muslims] as “a plan of struggle to cut enemies’ hands from Islamic lands” (94). In other words, the religious ritual is defined in terms of a political objective.

Martyrdom

- The Persian Language and Literature textbook for the first year of Guidance contains the following passage: “The people of Iran learned the lesson of Martyrdom from Modarres” [Modarres was an oppositional clergyman who was killed by government forces in 1938 under the regime of Reza Shah]. (p. 23)
- The Social Teachings textbook for the fifth grade of primary school indicates that, “Martyrdom is the highest degree of sacrifice” (p.162). The Persian Language and Literature textbook for the fifth grade of primary school also praises martyrdom and urges children to welcome it. (p. 121)
- The Persian Language and Literature textbook for the third year of high school indicates that, “The Islamic revolutionary literature calls for: jihad, admiring martyrdom, love of leadership, lament during religious commemorations such as Ashura [the date that Imam Hussein, the third Imam of the Shiite, was killed in Kerbela in present day Iraq], call to unity and belief in Mahdi [the reappearance of the Shiites 12th Imam or the Islamic-Shiite Messiah] (p. 133).

Islam and government

- The Religious Teachings textbook for the second year of Guidance makes the claim that, "...in the Islamic state, the establishment and pillars of government must be on the basis of Islam and the Leader must be a devout Muslim that God has chosen for the post. This post is called imamate." (p. 70)
- In the Ethics Textbook for the third year of Guidance (high school), it is stated that, "The foundation of religion is sovereignty of the Supreme leader." (p. 112)
- The *Social Teachings* textbook for the third year of Guidance indicates that, "The duties of the Islamic government are legislation, assignment of officials, supervision over the implementation of laws, and the preservation of Islamic values." (p. 14)
- The *Social Teachings* textbook for the 3rd grade of guidance (high school) indicates that, "In the Kingdom of God, persons or groups govern on the basis of divine laws" (p. 24). The textbook also indicates that, "The definition of Velayate Faghih is: Muslims must accept only the sovereignty of God and follow Velayate Faghih in all conditions. During the period that the 12th Imam is hidden, the leadership of the Islamic society is the expert on Islamic jurisprudence, who is brave and worthy of Imam's representative" (p. 48).

Democratic Institutions and Processes

- The History textbook for the 3rd year of guidance (high school) says that, "Giving the right to vote to women was a clear act of hostility to Islam." (p. 72)

Civil / Minority Rights and Issues

- The Sociology textbook for the third year of high school makes reference to discrimination, but there are no specific cases of discrimination in Iran mentioned (e.g. against women, or particular ethnic or religious groups) (pp. 74-77)
- The Social Teaching textbook for the third year of guidance (high school) says that, "In most advanced states, such as France, the UK and the USA, no religious minority has a representative in parliament, but in the great and free Iran, all religious minorities (Armenians, Ashuris, Jews and Zoroastrians) have a representative in the Majles." (p. 55)
- The textbooks rarely refer to religions other than Islam. Only in the "Gifts of Heaven" textbook is there a small reference made to Moses and Christ. (p. 24)

External Issues – Matters Related to Foreign Affairs

The U.S. and the West

- The Social Teachings textbook for the fifth grade of primary school suggests that, “The son of Reza Shah was made the King of Iran by the USA” (p. 126). This textbook also indicates that, “...Reza Shah was a violent, thoughtless man who was brought to power by the British” (p. 125). It is also noted in the Social Teachings textbook that, “On the 15th of Kordad [1342 Iranian calendar] Imam called on the people of Iran to protest against Shah, the USA and Israel.” (p. 15)
- The Social Teachings textbook for the fifth grade of primary school says that, “After the victory of the Islamic revolution, the enemies, especially the US, continued to plot against our country and in 1359 [Iranian calendar] the Iraqi army invaded Iran...” (p. 132).
- The Social Teachings textbook for the fifth grade contains the declaration that, “The Iraqi army attacked Iran with US support.” (p. 162)
- The Islamic Teaching textbook for use in Guidance declares that, “The Muslims must use the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran for crushing the teeth of this oppressive government [the USA] in its mouth...” [taken from Khomeini's message for the pilgrimage of Hajj] (p. 64).
- The Social Sciences textbook for the last year of high school makes the observation that, “For the USA, preservation of dominance over others is important.” (p. 103)

Israel and Palestine

- With respect to Israel as occupier of Palestine, the Persian Language and Literature textbook for the third grade of primary school provides an anecdote in which, “Israeli soldiers threatened a Palestinian child, and they wanted to arrest all of his family because he had thrown stones at Israelis...”(p. 113).
- Also, with respect to Israel, the book entitled “Hadiehhaye Asseman” (Gift of Heavens) for the 5th grade of primary school indicates that, “The Israeli enemies...occupied the Dome of Rock [Alaqa Mosque] and they do not let the Muslims pray in it...the Israeli enemies destroyed the school of Palestinians...” (p. 17)
- The History textbook for the third year of Guidance states that “Israel does not want Iran to have the Quran, Islam, Islamic scholars or an Islamic government.” (p.75)
- The Social Teachings textbook for first year of Guidance is about Palestine (p. 21). The textbook tells Iranian students that, “Many of your brothers and sisters in Palestine have lost their mothers and fathers and other members of their family due to barbaric acts of the soldiers of the cruel regime occupying Quds [Jerusalem]. They are trying to get revenge on the invaders through the assistance of other Muslims.” (p. 17)
- The Persian Language and Literature textbook for the first year of high school says that, “The literature of resistance is the literature that calls for resistance, shows the oppressors, marks the popular heroes and martyrs, just like the

literature of resistance in Palestine, the Sacred Defense and Latin America.” (p. 58)

- Further, the textbook instructs that, “Zionism is an idea that encourages the immigration of all Jews to Palestine for the establishment of a government and it denies the rights of the majority of the Muslim people of Palestine” (p. 111).

Jihad / holy war against Islam’s “enemies”

- The Social Teachings textbook for the fifth grade of primary school declares that, “Our hope is that the Islamic Revolution gets connected to the global revolution of Mahdi [the 12th or the Hidden Imam of the Shiites] and that all deprived peoples eliminate the oppression of the Powers” (p. 134).
- The Social Teachings textbook for first year of guidance (secondary school) claims that, “...our Islamic revolution opened a new path for all oppressed people of the world.” (p. 19)
- The Islamic Teaching textbook, for use in the Guidance cycle indicates that Khomeini said: “The entire country must be military” (p. 61). It also indicates that, “Confrontation with the infidel and global arrogant forces is a duty” (p. 64);

Iran and the World

- The Persian textbook for the fourth grade of primary school claims that, “UNICEF has not done its duties”. Such comments put international organizations in doubt, mock their efforts and question their performance. (p. 23)
- The textbook on the History of Iran and the World for the third year of high school indicates that, “Hitler considered the traitors and Jews as those who caused the defeat of Germany” (p. 94); and that,
- The History of Iran and the World textbook for the third year of high school notes that, “In recent history, the colonial powers have taken steps for creating indolence and depression in the nations and keeping them backward through spreading narcotic drugs” (p. 103).

Other Studies

The most relevant and comprehensive study on Iranian school textbooks to date was completed by the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (CMIP) in 2006.³ Titled “The Attitude to ‘the Other’ and to Peace in Iranian School books and Teachers’ Guides,” the study examined 115 textbooks published in 2004, as well as teachers’ guides published in 2003. The studies conclusions included that:

- Iranian textbooks prepare students for a global war with the West in the

- name of Islam;
- Young Iranian students are pushed to take part in global jihad against infidel oppressors, especially Israel and the USA;
- Stories, poems and exercises glorify martyrdom and the importance of defending the Islamic Republic to attain eternal happiness;
- Young people are indoctrinated in hatred and intolerance to other religions and cultures;
- Israel is not recognized as a state and is portrayed as a danger to the Islamic world;⁴
- The textbooks emphasize the teachings of Ayatollah R. Khomeini and repeatedly refer to the USA as the Great Satan and Israel as the regime occupying Jerusalem;⁵
- These textbooks are a danger to world peace and security;⁶
- In the words of Ghazal Omid, an Iranian human rights activist who has reported on the study, “The hardliners in Iran are using the [school text] books to turn the children into ticking bombs”;⁷
- The study refers to a Grade 11 (2004) textbook in which the Ayatollah Khomeini is quoted as saying, “Muslims and the oppressed nations of the world, in general, should wage a life-or-death war against the infidel oppressors, America in particular”. (p. 24)

In 2006, Saeed Paivandi, a professor of sociology in France originally from Iran, published *Religion et éducation en Iran : L'échec de l'islamisation de l'école* [Religion and Education in Iran: The Failure of School Islamization]. Speaking in 2007 to a correspondent from Radio Farda, Professor Paivandi observed that, “The measures of the Islamic government for making the textbooks more Islamic has forced Iranian students to face a kind of identity crisis, because the Iranians are not actually cut off [from] the world [as the regime desires] and the global culture affects them in various ways. This has led to a generation that suffers from psychological problems.”⁸

A study by Mehran Golnar in 1987 titled “The Socialization of School Children in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Study of Social Studies Textbooks,” concluded that:

- Social studies textbooks in Iran have been rewritten since 1979 to achieve the socialization of children into Islamic political thought;
- Explicit political textbooks are used to teach state-approved values and political behaviors while preparing the children to become citizens in a country with a narrowly-defined framework of governmental ideology;
- Islam is presented as a political religion and topics included are used for political ends;
- They [the textbooks] depict the USA and the West as the enemy;
- They try to say that political dissent does not exist.⁹

Appendix 1: List of Textbooks

| Textbook Title | Years taught | Number of books |
|---|--|-----------------|
| Persian [Farsi] Language and Literature | All | 12 |
| Gifts of Heavens (religious instruction) | From 2 nd year elementary through high school | 11 |
| Learning Quran | From 2 nd year elementary through high school | 9 |
| Social Teachings | From 3 rd year elementary through high school | 8 |
| Experimental Sciences | From 3 rd year elementary through high school | 8 |
| History and Geography | From 1 st year Guidance through high school | 6 |
| English Language (with options for German and French) | From 1 st year Guidance through high school | 6 |
| Arabic language | From 1 st year Guidance through high school | 6 |
| Readiness for Defense | From 3 rd year Guidance through high school | 4 |
| Islamic views | High school | 4 |
| Arts | High school | 3 |
| Physics, Chemistry & Mathematics | High school | 3 (each topic) |
| Religion and Life | From 2 nd year of high school through high school | 2 books |
| History of Literature of Iran and World Literature | Third year of high school | 1 book |
| Psychology | Third year of high school | 1 book |

Appendix 2: Textbook Contributors Name Index

The following is a list of the writers and compilers of the textbooks that were reviewed for this study. The numbers after the names indicate the number of textbooks to which they contributed, if they have contributed to more than one. The majority of the writers of the Iranian textbooks are either clergymen or those very close to the political regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Abbasi, Effat

Abbasi, Javad

Adel, Gholamali Hadad (presently the Speaker of the Iranian Majles)

Allahverdi, Mohammad (2)

Alvikia, Mohammad Ali

Davoodi, Hussein (4)

Doran, Behzad

Ershad Sarabi, Asghar

Etessami, Mohammad Mehdi (4)

Fanaie, Sayed Mojtaba

Farahani, Mohammad Taghi

Farahani-monfared, Mehdi

Farhad, Abulhussein (2)

Ghafarian, Syrus

Gharani, Mohsen

Gholchian, Massud

Haqshenas, Ali Mohammad (2)

Hassan, Frahnaz

Ibrahimi, Nasser (2)

Jafari, Nasrin

Jafari-mazhaby, Mohsen

Javadian, Massud

Javar Shakian, Mahmud (3)

Karimi Nouri, Reza

Khairandish, Abudl-raul

Khaleghian, Abbas (2)

Khorasani, Sayyed Hussein

Kowsari, Massud

Maleki, Hassan

Mirbagheri, sayed Mohsen (3)

Mirjafari, Sayed Ali Akbar (3)

Moghaddam, Hussein (6)

Moghimi, Afzal

Mohebbi, Nassrollah

Mollabahari, Fraydoun

Motevalli Al-moti, Mohammad Sharif

Nasser, Mohammad Mehdi

Norian, Sayed Mehdi

Ohadi, Mahmud

Omrani, Gholamreza (5)

Rabbani, Jafar

Rajabzadeh, Ahmad (3)

Rasteghar Fasaie, Mansur

Rozbehan, Mahmud

Sadri, Jamal

Salimi, Heshmatollah

Sanghari, Mohammad reza (4)

Sayyedi, Fereshteh

Shabani, Aziz

Shatghi, Mohammad

Soozaneh, Hussien (3)

Taki, Massud

Taleban, Mohammad reza

Talebzadeh, Hassan (3)

Vahidian, Kamyar (2)

Vakil, Masoud (3)

Yahaghi, Mohammad Jafar (2)

Yousef Shahi, Mir Hussein

Zahedifar, Parvaneh

Zakeri, Nasser

Zarsang, Mohammad reza

Zolfaghari, Hassan (6)

¹ Student Advisory, Educational System in Iran, School Education, <http://www.iran-embassy-oslo.no/embassy/educat.htm>

² Haggai Ram, “The Immemorial Iranian Nation?: School Textbooks and Historical Memory in Post Revolutionary Iran,” *Nations and Nationalism*, 6:1 (2000): 67-90.

³ Arnon Groiss and Nethanel (Nahid) Toobian. “The Attitude to “The Other” and to Peace in Iranian School Books and Teachers’ Guides. Downlo” Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace,” October, 2006. Study downloadable from: <http://www.edume.org>.

⁴ Gareth Harding, “Study: Iranian textbooks Promoting Global Jihad,” *The Washington Times*, January 30, 2007. <http://wpherald.com/articles/3220/1/study-Irariantextbooks>.

⁵ Thomas Wagner, “Study Says Iran Textbooks Urge Martyrdom,” *CBS News*, February 7, 2007. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/08/ap/world/mainD8N5NB0G0.shtml>.

⁶ Mark John, “Iran Schools Feed Pupils ‘War Curriculum’ – Report,” *Reuters AlertNet*, January 30, 2007. <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L30464650.htm>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Arman Mostoofi, “The Islamization of Education and a Generational Identity Crisis for Youth” [Persian], *RadioFarda.com*, September 27, 2007. <http://www.radiofarda.com/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=413969>

⁹ Golnar Mehran. “Socialization of Schoolchildren in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” *Iranian Studies* 22 (1989): 35-50.