

# The Beginning of New Education in Nineteenth-Century Iran<sup>1</sup>

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## Toward a New Education System

The progressive deterioration of Iran's internal situation and the expanding contacts with the West, including the military defeats and the humiliating treaties of Golestan (1813) and Turkmanchay (1828) with Russia, sustained awareness of the country's weakness and spurred the desire to adopt new methods to meet the growing challenges facing the country. All these promoted—much as they did in the Ottoman Empire and in semi-independent Egypt—the twin processes of imitation and change. The Middle East could no longer ignore the threatening strength of the West and sought to “discover and apply the elusive secret of its greatness and strength.”<sup>2</sup> The West, thus, provided both the impetus for change and

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<sup>2</sup>Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 45.

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the model for imitation, generating a conspicuous tension between the urge to reject and the desire to emulate.<sup>3</sup> As the challenge was noticed primarily in the battlefield, the response was first sought in imitating Western military technology. Gradually, it was realized that modern military techniques and technologies could not be implanted into an otherwise unchanged society. The fabric of the social, economic, and political order needed to be reshaped. In the view of a growing number of Iranian thinkers, education was one of the main secret sources of Western progress and its adoption the main route to progress.

In Muslim lands, the value placed on education was readily received. Western models and Indigenous tradition reinforced, rather than battled, each other in recognition of the value of knowledge. In Iran, both the pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions commend education. Both understand it as a twofold process: acquisition of knowledge and character formation. This is reflected in the two-term expressions used to connote the educational process: *ta'lim va tarbiyyat* or *amuzesh va parvaresh* (a neologism derived from old Persian roots). The Avesta contains numerous references to education and educated people. Of even greater relevance to the realities of modern Iran is the prominence of knowledge in Islam. Islamic tradition makes the search for knowledge (*talab al-'ilm*) “a duty of all Muslims . . . from the cradle to the grave” and in any place, “even in [distant] China.”<sup>4</sup> Even greater importance is attached to *'ilm* in the tradition of the Shia—the religion of Iran since the early sixteenth century. The ultimate aim of *'ilm* is the knowledge of God and, thus, traditional schools—*maktab* or *madrese*—concentrate on religious subjects. The admiration Iranians have for classical literature and poetry further stresses the importance of knowledge. Sa'di, for example, devoted a chapter in *Golestan* to *tarbiyyat*. Human beings' ability, he said, is based on knowledge. A phrase from Ferdowsi's *Shahname* became the motto of the Ministry of Education in the 1930s: “Capable is the one who possesses knowledge” (*tavana bavād an ke dana bavād*), or in modern parlance,

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<sup>3</sup>Gustav von Grunebaum, “Acculturation and Self-Realization,” in *The Contemporary Middle East*, ed. B. Rivlin and J.S. Szyliowicz (New York: Random House, 1965), 141–42.

<sup>4</sup>Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007), 89–91, 295.

“education is power.” Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the motto was changed to *ta‘lim va tarbiyyat ‘ebadat ast* (“education is worship”). With all the differences in their approach, both terms glorify learning.

Such proud traditions notwithstanding, the school system in the early nineteenth century was incapable of responding to the momentous challenges of modern times. Yet the plea for change was confronted by the forces of tradition, with the ‘*ulama*’ (prominent clerics) at their head. Customarily, they rejected innovation as un-Islamic—*bid‘ah* (unlawful innovation)—and regarded it as their “religious obligation” to oppose any idea imported from the infidel West.<sup>5</sup> By and large, political dignitaries and social elites, too, rejected any change likely to jeopardize their status. Crown Prince ‘Abbas Mirza thus complained in 1812 that his brother and political rival, Mohammad ‘Ali, had rendered him and his reform plans odious by arguing that “in adopting the customs of the infidels,” he was subverting Islam.<sup>6</sup> Still, some channels for the infiltration of new ideas gradually opened during the century, not from any ideological preference but because of exigencies of the situation.

Since weakness was most painfully sensed on the military front, the first steps were to acquire Western military technology. A French training mission was invited to Tehran (1807–9), followed by a British one. In keeping with the growing contacts with the West, the first Iranian diplomatic mission was set up in London in 1809, followed by resident embassies in other European capitals. Living in Europe, the diplomats and their companions became acquainted with Western culture and politics and, no less important, learned foreign languages, which was instrumental in transferring ideas. The first steps to obtain the benefits of Western schooling were the government’s initiatives to finance students to study at European universities. The process was slow and limited in numbers, but in retrospect, the contribution of returning graduates to the process of change was invaluable. It was no less than groundbreaking

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<sup>5</sup>A lecture by Malkom Khan in London cited in Fereshte Nura’i, *Tahqiq dar bare-ye Afkar-e Mirza Malkom Khan, Nazem al-Doula* (Tehran: Ketabha-ye Jibi, 1973–74), 48–52.

<sup>6</sup>James Morier, *A Second Journey through Persia, Armenia and Asia Minor* (London: Longman, 1818), 213.

change for the government to take upon itself responsibility for the education of its people (hitherto the exclusive domain of religion), and to send their children to learn from the infidels.

In 1811, the first two Iranian students left for London, placing them among the first Middle Eastern students to do so, followed by another five in 1815. Five more left to France in 1845 (but were rushed home because of the political change in Paris and the shah's death in 1848). Three others studied in Russia and another in Italy. The initiative was accelerated under Nasser al-Din Shah (1848–96). In 1856–57, three students left for France; two years later, forty-two students left for France. This group stands out not only because of its unprecedented size, but also because all its members were graduates of Dar al-Fonun (discussed below), and thus were better prepared for studies abroad than were their predecessors. The early choice of England soon made room for a preference for France, which was to last well into the twentieth century. Almost all students came from prominent, wealthy families.

Returning graduates were appointed to prestigious positions upon their return and rose rather quickly to prominent positions; but their positions often had little to do with the fields of their studies. Given their social background, they would have been assured of a fine career in any case; nevertheless, new education—particularly European education—was of growing weight in their elevation. Gradually, upper-class families came to feel that the careers of their children had to be underpinned by educational qualifications. Appreciation of Western science and technology, coupled with the curiosity toward these “explorers” of Europe, turned the graduates into a focus of social attention. People were not interested much in their academic credentials; what mattered more was that they had had a glimpse of the West and its secrets. As Malkom Khan—one of the most influential proponents of change in the late nineteenth century—put it, anyone who had wandered in the cities of Europe for a few days was regarded as a source of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In “Shaykh va Shukh,”

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<sup>7</sup>See Malkom Khan, “Dastgah-e Divan,” in *Majmu'eh Athar-e Mirza Malkom Khan*, ed. Mohit Tabataba'i (Tehran: Danesh, AH 1327/AD 1948–49), 73–95. Quote on p. 78. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

the author conveys that it did not matter how much the graduates had actually learned of Western science; they were lionized just for having been to Europe. Shukh comments: “Whoever walked in the streets of Paris is appointed upon his return to a directorship in a government hospital [. . .] build[s] himself a large house, is granted a title, earns a good salary, [and] obtains decorations?”<sup>8</sup>

The first six graduates were initially appointed to positions related to their fields of study. Many of those who studied in Europe between 1845 and 1848 did not complete their studies, which explains why most of them served in positions where they could make use of their general education and knowledge of foreign languages, rather than specific training. Those sent out by Nasser al-Din Shah did complete their studies yet usually proved reluctant to work in their fields of expertise. Clearly, the returning graduates and their families preferred political, diplomatic, or administrative appointments. Mirza Asadollah Khan was exceptional in expressing annoyance at such a turn of events. Having studied paper manufacturing and then been assigned to a senior position in the post office, he cynically remarked: “Thanks God, I still have business with paper; although I am not a maker of paper (*kaghaz saz*), I still play with paper (*kaghaz baz*).”<sup>9</sup> Already in the early 1850s, such practices limited the contributions that the specialists were capable of making to the community. While this turn of events was not intended by the initiators of the program, in the wider process of change, the participation of the specialists with new education in the country’s social, political, and cultural life contributed significantly to the overall process of modernization.

The establishment, in 1851, of the Dar al-Fonun (polytechnic college), was the natural outgrowth of the motives that had led to the dispatch of students to Europe—to acquire Western technology. It was the first educational institution in modern Iran to be set up by the government,

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<sup>8</sup>“Shaykh va Shukh,” in *Afkar-e Ejtema’i va Siyasi va Eqtesadi dar Athar-e Montasher Nashode-ye Dowran-e Qajar*, ed. Fereydon Adamiyyat and Homa Nateq (Tehran: Agah, 1977), 144–49. Quote on p. 149.

<sup>9</sup>As cited by Mohit Tabataba’i, *Shafaq-e Sorkh*, “Tarikhche e’zam muhasel beh Orupa,” (6 Murdad 1312/28 July 1933).

and the first to hire European instructors to teach Western sciences. Amir Kabir, the initiator and driving force behind the college, had modeled it after similar schools in Russia (where he had traveled in the 1820s) and the Ottoman Empire (where he had spent a long time in the late 1840s). In Russia, he was particularly impressed by the technical college at St. Petersburg, and in Istanbul, by the Maktab 'Ulum Harbiye and by the wider educational reform in the 1840s. At Dar al-Fonun, Amir Kabir expected to gain the same benefits as were derived from sending students abroad, without incurring the heavy expenses of travel abroad and without exposing them to the "negative influences" of residence in a foreign country.<sup>10</sup>

Opposition to Dar al-Fonun came mainly from the 'ulama', who opposed setting up schools outside their influence and resented the teaching of modern subjects modeled on Western design. The founders tried to smooth tempers by incorporating religious studies into the curriculum and by holding public prayers at school, but to no avail. Having failed to prevent its establishment, the 'ulama' pressured the shah to deny support for the school, arguing that it was bound to foster anti-monarchical philosophies. Their pressure increased with the spread of the liberal movement in the Ottoman Empire and the approval of a constitution there in 1876, and later with the growth of the liberal movement in Iran, in which graduates of Dar al-Fonun and of foreign universities played a significant part. Even before its opening, the assassination of Amir Kabir had removed the school's most vigorous supporter. Later, the shah's initially enthusiastic support for the school gave way to indifference, before turning more favorable again in the late 1870s. In all, the status of the school alternated according to the shah's arbitrary and inconsistent approach.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Abdollah Mostowfi, *Tarikh-e Ejtema'i va Edari Dowre-ye Qajariye*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Tehran Mosavvar, n.d.), 70; Hajj Mirza Yahya Doulatabadi, *Tarikh Mo'aser ya Hayat-e Yahya*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Ibn Sina, 1957–58), 324–28; Hosein Makki, *Zendegani-ye Mirza Taqi Khan, Amir Kabir* (Tehran: 'Ilmi, 1958), 183.

<sup>11</sup>Mostowfi, *Tarikh-e Ejtema'i*, 86; Doulatabadi, *Tarikh Mo'aser*, 327–29; Mehdi Qoli Hedayat, *Khaterat va Khatarat* (Tehran: Rangin, 1950–51), 75.

Dar al-Fonun became the cornerstone of modern education, and some scholars view its establishment as signaling the beginning of new education in Iran. It trained relatively large cadres of Iranians and acquainted them with Western technology and general education. Many of its graduates later pursued their higher education in Western countries. Dar al-Fonun itself turned into a cultural center, hosting public lectures and discussions and publishing newspapers, textbooks, and translations of Western literature. Graduates, in the high positions they came to occupy, worked hand in hand with graduates of Western universities to support the overall process of change and reform.

Dar al-Fonun owed its existence to a government initiative and relied on its support. The government appointed its academic and administrative staff, drafted the curriculum, selected the entrants, and managed the employment of its graduates. This benefited the school as long as leading state figures (such as Amir Kabir, Mirza Hosein Khan Sepahsalar, Moshir al-Doula, and, at times, Nasser al-Din Shah) supported it, but harmed it when those in power turned against it. In all, the school contributed significantly to the development of modern education and to the larger process of Westernization. Hekmat's conclusion that its graduates were of "the most important service for the advancement of Iran,"<sup>12</sup> and Safa's assertion that they were an "important source for ideological, scientific and literary change," do not seem to be exaggerated.<sup>13</sup>

Almost half a century later, several ministries founded schools of higher learning to provide them with expert staff in their ministries. An important feature of these schools was that they were the first to go beyond imitating the military or technological feature of Western education. In the stormy years of the early twentieth century, *Madrese-ye 'Ulum-e Siyasi* became a center of intellectual activity. In 1907–8, its graduates founded the *Sherekat-e Ma'aref* (Association for Education), which organized cultural events and founded new schools. These institutions of higher learning later became the building blocks of Tehran University.

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<sup>12</sup>Ali Asghar Hekmat, "Ta'limat-e 'Aliye: Notq-e Jenab-i Aqa-ye Hekmat . . ." *Ta'lim va Tarbiyyat*, sal 6, shumareh 4 (Tir 1315/June–July 1936), 249–60. Quote on p. 251–52.

<sup>13</sup>Dhabihollah Safa, "Madrase," *Iranshahr*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Daneshgah-e Tehran, 1963), 736. See similarly Mostowfi, *Tarikh-e Ejtema'i*, 86; Hedayat, *Khaterat va Khatarat*, 94.

New elementary and secondary schools were opened in Iran beginning in the 1870s (missionary schools started earlier). Their establishment was made possible largely through the collaboration between reformist intellectuals and politicians supportive of their vision. Most prominent among the latter were Sepahsalar (in the 1870s) and Mirza ‘Ali Khan Amin al-Doula (end of the century); the ministers of education Ja‘far Qoli Khan and Mirza Mahmud Khan Ehtesham al-Saltane; and to a degree, Shah Mozaffar al-Din himself. In 1873–74, Sepahsalar established in Tehran the first public secondary school, named Moshiriye in his honor. A similar school was established in Tabriz in the same year, to be followed by military high schools in Isfahan (1882–83) and Tehran (1884–85). Public elementary schools were opened in 1890, first by Mirza Hasan Roshdiye and later mainly by Sherekat-e Ma‘aref. Schools for girls were founded in the late 1890s, in addition to already-existing missionary schools and classes in private houses for the affluent. By 1918–19—over a century after the first contacts with Western education—there were a considerable number of new elementary and secondary schools, with a total of no less than thirty thousand students.<sup>14</sup> The curriculum and pedagogical approach differed from one school to another according to the educational philosophy of the founders. It was, as ‘Isa Sadiq (a student at such a school and later minister of education) noted, a period of “experimentations with a new education.”<sup>15</sup> However, each school differed thoroughly from the traditional system: the curriculum went far from what was taught in the *maktabs*, including new sciences and foreign languages. The majority of the teachers and headmasters were graduates of foreign schools or of Dar al-Fonun.

Few reasons made the opposition by the ‘*ulama*’ to the new elementary schools more forceful and passionate than their resentment of Dar al-Fonun or of the dispatch of students to Europe. They viewed the elementary schools as a threat to the students’ faith and resented their

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<sup>14</sup>Sazeman-e Barname va Budjeh, Markaz-e Amar, *Bayan-e Amari-ye Tahavvolat-e Ejtema‘i va Eqtisadi-ye Iran dar Dowran-e [. . .] Pahlavi* (Tehran: 1976–77), 35–36; ‘Isa Sadiq, *Tarikh Farhang-e Iran* (Tehran: Daneshgah-e Tehran, 1976), 354–59.

<sup>15</sup>Sadiq, *Farhang*, 359.

own lack of control over education, especially as such schools dealt with young children in a sensitive phase of their life. Also, unlike the earlier, numerically limited initiatives, they feared that the new elementary schools would lead to sweeping change embracing the entire country. Sending students abroad or to Dar al-Fonun did not threaten the *madrese*, but the opening of new elementary schools often resulted in the closure of *maktabs*. Eventually, the '*ulama*' also deplored the loss of an important source of income by the *akhunds* (junior clerics). To the clergy, the struggle against the new elementary schools was a struggle for their faith and a defense of their traditional privileges and functions.

Consequently, the struggle over new elementary schooling turned into an acute cultural battle. The '*ulama*' pressured the government to refrain from supporting the new schools, threatened the schools' headmasters and staff, and brought pressure to bear on the students and their families. Roshdiye, the driving force behind such schools, suffered *takfir* (accused of apostasy), and his school in Tabriz was destroyed by *tullab* (theological students). His father had warned him that by founding new schools, he would be branded as an infidel.<sup>16</sup> In 1903–4, a *fatva* (religious ruling) by four *mojtaheds* (prominent clerics) from Najaf urged the shah to forbid the foundation of new schools. The supporters of modern education persuaded the shah to reject the request.<sup>17</sup> Opponents then argued that the new education was harmful to Iran and to Islam, and served as a tool for foreigners to advance their imperialist schemes. Nonetheless, the advocates of the new education overcame clerical opposition. Once the crucial early years had passed, and mainly under Reza Shah (1925–41), the expansion of the new school system—and the concomitant closure of the *maktabs*—became irreversible.

With all its quantitative and qualitative limitations, the new education of the nineteenth century became the cornerstone of twentieth-century education. In a manner neither planned nor foreseen by its initiators, the new

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<sup>16</sup>Doulatabadi, *Tarikh Mo'aser*, 180–84; "Roshdiye Pir-e Ma'aref," *Amuzesh va Parvareh*, Dawreh 14, Shumarah 10 (December 1944), 543–46; Mehdi Malekzade, *Tarikh-e Enqelab-e Mashrutiyat-e Iran*, vol. 1 (Tehran: 1948–49), 150.

<sup>17</sup>Doulatabadi, *Tarikh Mo'aser*, 238–43.

education became extremely significant to the overall modernization of Iran. Beyond the academic contribution, it signified two major innovations: there was a deliberate, even methodical, attempt to learn from the West; and the state assumed responsibility for education, dislodging the religious establishment from its monopoly. These remained major features of Iranian education until the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

### **The Educated Class as a Motor for Change**

The new educated class played a crucial role in the nineteenth-century reforms and the liberal movement that led to the Constitutional Revolution. Although too weak to mobilize mass support for their new ideologies, the members of this class were successful in mobilizing some key politicians to endorse reforms, contributing to the growing intellectual enlightenment and promoting new schools. The fact that many recipients of new higher education had moved into politics, government, or various cultural engagements, coupled with the social prestige that went with being Western educated, rendered them all the more capable of promoting the overall modernization of Iran, despite not working in the fields in which they had been trained. In the hectic years of the late nineteenth century, they proved instrumental in promoting Western concepts and offering the ideology to underpin both the Constitutional Revolution and the tobacco movement. Considering their small numbers, graduates of new schools, overseas and at home, had an astounding influence on the spread of liberal thought and the modernization of Iran. In due course, a number of influential reformist politicians emerged. Most prominent among them were the Crown Prince ‘Abbas Mirza and his chief minister Mirza Abu-Qasem Qa’em-maqam early in the century, Amir Kabir in mid-century, and Sepahsalar in the 1870s. A growing number of intellectuals, most of them graduates of foreign universities, joined their entourage.

One of the most important testimonies to the influence of Europe on the first students is the travel book of Mirza Saleh Shirazi, who studied in London (1815–19).<sup>18</sup> He expanded upon his impressions of the political

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<sup>18</sup>Mirza Saleh Shirazi, *Safarname* (Tehran: Razun, 1968).

system; personal liberties; the supremacy of law; the limits of royal authority; the concepts of freedom, religion, and the state; and the education system. The notion of political freedom so captivated Shirazi that he referred to England as the “Realm of Freedom” (*velayat-e azadi*). With much amazement, he described how the regent (George IV) wished to build a new street (to be named after him) but failed because a shopkeeper refused to sell his property. Even all the army, Shirazi maintained, could not force the shopkeeper to sell his property against his will, nor could the regent cause him any harm. All citizens—from the poorest to richest—were subject to the same law and enjoyed the same liberties. Even more illuminating is his remark that *azadi* (freedom) did not contradict *entezam* (public order). He wrote of the separation of powers, and tried to make it comprehensible to his readers that the people elected their representatives freely and, thus, became responsible for their destiny; that members of parliament enjoyed unlimited freedom; and that their decisions had sovereign force. “If necessary,” he exclaimed, “parliament can even change the religion.”<sup>19</sup> He took note that, unlike Islam, Christianity was a religion of conscience rather than practice. This led him to conclude that the ‘*ulama*’ were an obstacle to the progress of Muslim societies.<sup>20</sup>

If his was not the first Persian book to describe the European political system,<sup>21</sup> Shirazi was the first student—from anywhere in the Middle East—to set out his impressions of the West for the benefit of his countrymen. Study abroad influenced the students’ personal conduct and behavior and, with the prestige that went with studying abroad, they influenced many others. Shirazi’s descriptions of England were illuminating for Iranians, contrasting Western practices with the situation in Iran. Finally, rather than in its details, the importance of Shirazi’s book lies in the positive image of the West that it conveyed.

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<sup>19</sup>Shirazi, *Safarname*, 325.

<sup>20</sup>Shirazi, *Safarname*, 427.

<sup>21</sup>Two others had preceded him: Mir ‘Abd al-Latif Shushtari, *Tuhfat al-‘Alam va Zayl al-Tuhfat*, ed. Samad Muvahhid ([Bombay: s.n., 1847]; Tehran: Tahuri, AH 1363/AD 1984), 363–67; Mirza Abu-Taleb Khan ibn Mohammad Esfahani, *Masir Talebi fi Bilad al-Farangi* (Tehran: Ketabha-ye Jibi, 1973).

Though not entirely divorced from their Persian–Muslim heritage, the Iranian thinkers found new inspiration in the West. Their writings showed traces of French eighteenth-century thought on education, and some betrayed the influence of the founding fathers of the United States, who held that freedom and illiteracy were irreconcilable. Yet promoting new ideas was not easy. Given the prevalent religious ambience, some of them sought—often unconvincingly or awkwardly—to accommodate Western ideas with Islam. In 1876, Malkom proposed that reformists should present their desired innovations in Islamic terms to make them more easily acceptable. He labeled his approach “reformation of Islam”<sup>22</sup>—a concept reminiscent of the contemporary Egyptian thinker Mohammad ‘Abduh’s “Islamic modernism.” Yet in the second half of the nineteenth century, a new group of reformist thinkers managed to introduce some new ideas and advance the wheels of change.

The interrelation between education, freedom, and progress became the mainstay of intellectual argument then. In numerous treatises, Malkom drove home his view of education as the prerequisite for progress in general and constitutional order in particular. In his *Shaykh va Vazir*, a fictional dialogue between the *shaykh* (conservative) and the *vazir* (reformist), the latter argued that the secret of the strength, welfare, and the survival of nations depend on knowledge, and opined that unless it adopts Western education, Iran will fail to equal the achievements of the West.<sup>23</sup> In *Neda’-ye ‘Edalat*, he stated that only the spread of education had enabled the West to establish a political order based on justice. Iran is poor because it lacks legal justice (*‘edalat-e qanuni*) and because of its leaders’ failure to perceive the importance of education.<sup>24</sup> Sepahsalar was concerned primarily with the establishment of a constitutional order as a guarantor of freedom and social justice. To achieve these, he held that a European-style education was essential. *‘Ilm va Jahl*, attributed to him, stressed: “The key to spiritual and material progress is knowledge,”

<sup>22</sup>Wilfrid S. Blunt, *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* (London: 1907), 83–84.

<sup>23</sup>Malkom Khan, Nazem al-Doula, *Kolliyyat-e Malkom* (Tehran: n.p., 1907), 88–95.

<sup>24</sup>Malkom Khan, “Neda-ye ‘Edalat,” in *Majmu‘e Athar-e Mirza Malkom Khan*, ed. Mohit Tabataba’i (Tehran: Danesh, AH 1327/AD 1948–49), 193–217. See also Nura’i, *Afkar-e Mirza Malkom Khan*, 35–57.

adding that “one can achieve perfection only by knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> Mirza Yusef Khan Mostshar al-Doula attached similar importance to the spread of education, but considered a constitutional regime its prerequisite. In *Yek Kalame*, he claimed that “a single word” contained the key to progress: “Law.” However, without education the reign of law would not survive.<sup>26</sup> In a report to the Crown Prince Mozaffar al-Din, he opined—apparently for the first time in Iran—that education was also vital for fostering national unity.<sup>27</sup>

At the turn of the century, intellectuals’ appeals to expand new education turned more insistent, as was their critique of traditional schooling. Inaugurating a new school in Tehran (1898), Malek al-Motakallemin gave vent to his boundless expectations: “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.” Turning to the young students, he said: “Having come to study at these factories for producing human beings (*karkhane-ye adam-sazi*), you ought to know that the destiny of the world, the fate of your nation, your own future and that of your children—[all] depend on knowledge alone.”<sup>28</sup> In Malkom’s *Shaykh va Vazir*, the shaykh queried, “How is it at all possible to adopt the principles of infidels?” just for the vazir to respond: “I do not deny that they are infidels. My only claim is that the strength of Europe derives from their unique mechanisms [. . .] The ‘*ulama*’ should either permit us to imitate the principles of Europeans’ strength, or bring some squadrons of angels down from heaven to rescue us from European rule.”<sup>29</sup> Abul-Qasem Khan Nasser al-Molk, a statesman educated in Britain, regarded constitution as “the origin of happiness, nobleness, and honor.” However, in Iran it may become the “origin of chaos,

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<sup>25</sup>Guity Nashat, *The Origins of Modern Reform in Iran, 1870–1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 144.

<sup>26</sup>Mehdi Bamdad, *Sharh-e Hal-e Rejal-e Iran dar Qorun-e 12-14 Hejri*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Navar, 1968–69), 490–93; Ferydun Adamiyyat, *Fekr-e Azadi va Moqaddame-ye Nehzat-e Mashrutiiyyat* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1961–62), 182–211.

<sup>27</sup>See the report in Nazem al-Islam Kermani, *Tarikh Bidari-ye Iraniyan*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Bonyad-e Farhang, 1967–68), 206–11.

<sup>28</sup>Malekzade, *Tarikh-e Enqelab-e Mashrutiiyyat*, 152–54.

<sup>29</sup>Malkom, *Kolliyyat*, 89–91.

destruction, suffering, insecurity, and [. . .] sore evils,” because Iran lacked “the knowledge and potential” to turn it to good use. Constitutional order could not survive in an illiterate society as progress did not depend on the formal approval of a constitution but on the spread of education. He added passionately: “In the name of Allah, we need educated people. In the name of the *Ka’ba*, the prophet and faith [. . .] we need educated people. The one and only way toward progress, equality, justice, happiness, sovereignty and pride is through spread of knowledge and existence of people who are educated according to the requirements of the times.”<sup>30</sup> For ‘Abd al-Rahim Talebov (Talebzade), the “lack of knowledge and spiritual poverty” were not only the “enemies of freedom,”<sup>31</sup> but education also had a significant economic value. In line with Adam Smith, he regarded “human potential” (*este’dad*) as “economic wealth” and education as the main means for its cultivation. In his words, “If we will have a constitution, we will have education, and will possess wealth, order (*nazm*) and independence. But if we ignore these truths, we will be nothing but fools who betray their nation, homeland and religion.”<sup>32</sup>

At the end of the period under review, the intellectuals’ optimism was further fueled by the modernization of Japan. Its victory over Russia (1904–5) fired the imagination of Muslim intellectuals and breathed confidence in the East’s ability to equal and, eventually, outpace the West. They were impressed by the way the Meiji restoration benefited from educational reform. The fact that Japan, an Eastern country with a constitution, defeated a Western power with no constitution was especially illuminating for them. Ignoring what was unique in the Japanese experience, Iranians used it as a paradigm, a proof of the linkage between education, constitution, and advancement. They often seemed to view education—and in a way also parliamentarism and constitutionalism—as an entity isolated from social, economic, and political structures, one that could be easily transplanted from one country to another. Malek al-Motakallemin

<sup>30</sup>Nazem al-Islam Kermani, *Tarikh Bidari-ye Iraniyan*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Bonyad-e Farhang, 1967–68), 214–23.

<sup>31</sup>Mirza ‘Abd al-Rahim Talebov [Talebzade], *Azadi va Siyasat* (Tehran: Sahar, 1978–79), 111–13.

<sup>32</sup>Mirza ‘Abd al-Rahim Talebov, *Ketab-e Ahmad*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: 1895–96), 80–84, 89–90.

and Malkom Khan attested to their underlying sentiment by referring to schools as “factories for producing human beings.” Just as industrial factories “take in raw materials and turn out final products,” Malkom opined, the schools “take in ignorant children and turn out engineers and accomplished thinkers.” Setting up several such “factories” would enable Iran “to advance by 3000 years in the space of three months.”<sup>33</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed by Talebov in his fictional book *Ketab-e Ahmad* (inspired by Rousseau’s *Emile*) in a dialogue between the author and his sons, Ahmad and Mahmud. Soon after Ahmad entered a new school, the father told him that in only four months, “you have gained more knowledge than Mahmud, who is attending the *maktab* for over three years.” Before the age of nine, students at the new schools learned the history of their nation, religion, geometry and arithmetic, geography, physics, chemistry, literature, and several foreign languages. “While the *tullab*, even at the age of seventy, are still stuck in the laws of *taharat* (purification), wondering how to spell that word.”<sup>34</sup>

Graduates of universities abroad and Dar al-Fonun were also the driving force behind the first newspapers. The first newspaper, *Kaghadh-e Akhbar*, published in 1837, eventually led to the publication of *Vaqaye'-e Ettafaqiye* in 1851 at Dar al-Fonun, which lasted until the Constitutional Revolution. Later, official or semi-official papers—such as *Iran*, *Sharaf*, and *Ettela'*, still habitually praising the shah and his conduct—also included some educational and literary articles. Much more important were the newspapers published in the diaspora by expatriates mainly from the 1870s onward. Free from supervision or censorship, they argued for reform and for a constitution. The most significant of them were Malkom’s *Qanun* (London, first published in 1890); *Akhtar* (Istanbul, 1876); *Habl ul-Matin* (Calcutta, 1893); and *Thoraya* and *Parvaresh* (Cairo, 1890s). Many more were published closer to the Constitutional Revolution. Altogether, Browne lists 371 newspapers published until the revolution, some of which were of “a very high order, and afford

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<sup>33</sup>Tabataba’i, *Malkom Khan*, 8–13; Hamid Algar, *Mirza Malkum Khan: A Study in the History of Iranian Modernization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 28.

<sup>34</sup>Mirza ‘Abd al-Rahim Talebov, *Ketab-e Ahmad*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: 1895–96), 10–11; Talebov, *Ketab-e Ahmad*, vol. 2, 5–7.

examples of a prose style, forcible, nervous, and concise, hitherto almost unknown.”<sup>35</sup>

Another important avenue for intellectual discourse was translation and critical writing. Most prominent among the early translators was Mirza Reza Mohandes (studied in Paris), who translated (in 1829–30) Voltaire’s essays on Peter the Great and Charles XII of Sweden and later Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Many more books appeared with the establishment of Dar al-Fonun. In addition to textbooks, they included translations of European classics, such as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Moliere’s plays, Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers*, Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and, of particular significance for Persian readers, Morier’s *Hajji Baba of Isfahan*. Additionally, biographies of Napoleon Bonaparte, Nicholas I (Russia), Frederick the Great, William I (England), and Louis XV, and short histories of Rome, Athens, France, Russia, and Germany also became available in Persian. The shah likely commissioned some of these translations to glorify the monarchy, but they inadvertently allowed for unflattering comparison, contrasting the shahs and the prevalent poverty in Iran with famous world leaders and an advanced Europe.

In the last quarter of the century, numerous original books were also published, usually conveying critical messages. Most influential were the books by Talebov (such as *Ketab-e Ahmad* and *Azadi va-Siyasat*), Zayn al-‘Abedin Maraghe’i (*Siyahat Name-ye Ebrahim Beg*), Mostshar al-Doula (*Yek Kalame*), the treatises of Malkom, and the publications of Mirza Mohammad-Hasan Khan E’temad al-Saltane (who studied at Dar al-Fonun and later in France). It is not certain whether the last actually wrote and translated the countless books appearing under his name, or if some of them were written by the team that he headed in the Ministry of the Press, but they are believed to reflect his views. Among such books are the *Salnames*, *Mir’at al-Boldan*, *Matla’at al-Shams*, and *Al-Ma’ather va al-Athar*. His sharp criticism of the mismanagement of

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<sup>35</sup>Edward Browne, *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 27–153; Edward Browne, *The Persian Revolution of 1905–1909* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 127–28.

Iranian affairs came out most clearly in *Khalsa* (*Ecstasy*), also known as *Ketab-e Khab* (*Dream Book*). Like Maraghe'i's *Ebrahim Beg* and Talebov's *Ketab-e Ahmad*, *Khalsa* adopted a loose fictional framework—a poetical dream—to castigate Qajar dignitaries for the decline of Iran. In *Khalsa*, the nineteenth-century chancellors were called upon to confess their sins in a tribunal “in the presence” of the great rulers of Persian history, standing accused of Iran's decadence. Reviewing the Qajar period through their actions, eight years later, Seyyed Jamal-al-Din Wa'ez, Malek al-Motakallemin, and Sheykh Ahmad Kermani wrote *Ro'ya-ye Sadeqe* (*True Dreams*), making the dignitaries, clerics, and governors account for their sins at the Last Judgment. Among the charges against the 'ulama' was their opposition to new education.

Gradually, many more intellectuals felt an urge to make their newfound views public. Though merely “inexperienced youngsters,” Hedayat wrote about the returning graduates, “each holds under his arms a thesis (*resale*) about the French Revolution and wishes to play the role of Robespierre or Danton.”<sup>36</sup> Writing about the leading intellectuals of that time, Mangol Bayat stated that they perceived themselves “as the new apostles,” spreading reason, science, liberty, and progress.<sup>37</sup> They did not necessarily share the same perception of Western civilization, nor did they want to imitate it in every respect, but they were impressed by what they witnessed and viewed borrowing elements of it as indispensable. However, a major barrier was the perception that change and innovation are un-Islamic (tantamount to *bid'ah*). Yet throughout the century, intellectuals managed to mitigate such concerns, at least to some degree and in certain limited groups.

The urge to publish was supplemented by a desire to read. The reading public fed on political treatises, periodicals, and newspapers. Banned publications were smuggled into the country and read avidly, even at the shah's court. Iranians, with their traditional admiration for verbal skill, marveled at the new idiomatic style and popular language of such books.

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<sup>36</sup>Hedayat, *Khaterat va Khatarat*, 150.

<sup>37</sup>Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 134.

“The intricate tales and excitements of this new literature were so fascinating [. . .] that families used to gather to hear them read aloud.”<sup>38</sup> The urge to write, however, seemed stronger than the aptitude to read. There is some truth in what Hedayat grieved: “Of books we have enough; what we lack are readers [. . .] The customers are illiterate.”<sup>39</sup>

Thus, when it came to mobilizing mass support for the tobacco revolt (1891) or the Constitutional Revolution (1906), the intellectuals needed elite groups as a driving force. The main contribution of the intellectuals was in influencing the influential segments of the elites, including some ‘*ulama*’ and officials, not the populace. When political change was finally in the offing and revolutionary forces were searching for an ideology to unite the divergent components of their camp, the intellectuals offered their ideology as the cohesive element. Freedom, parliamentarism, and constitutionalism were their contribution, and the wording of the constitution of 1906 carried their imprint. In the 1970s, their fellow intellectuals could not claim as much.

In all, the nineteenth century was a significant phase in transition from traditional schooling to new education inspired by the West. It was a slow process—in fact, too slow—involving severe ideological and political clashes between contradictory convictions. The following overly picturesque description by Mojtaba Minovi, a prominent twentieth-century historian, seems to properly illustrate the situation. He compared the role of the recipients of new education to spreading seeds in an uncultivated soil, where the land had not been fertilized or irrigated, and weeds and stones had not been removed. Some of the seeds, therefore, fell on spots where they could not germinate, but a few fell on fruitful soil and yielded the crop of progress.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Hassan Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 28.

<sup>39</sup>Hedayat, *Khaterat va Khatarat*, iii.

<sup>40</sup>Mojtaba Minovi, “Avvalin Karavan-e Ma’refat,” *Yaghma* 6 (1953–54): 181.

## Conclusion

In the search for a path to confront the challenge of modernism, Iranian political thought over the last two centuries has fluctuated between extremes. From the Islamic doctrine that characterized the country's general outlook until the late eighteenth century, Iran gradually underwent a phase of change, inspired by the West, that was exacerbated in the generation preceding the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Integral to the general fabric of society, education has been a catalyst for change and an element itself subject to transformation. In the contest between traditional-religious and new, Western-style schooling, which took on the nature of a *Kulturkampf* in the late nineteenth century, the latter emerged triumphant and the religious establishment lost its age-old monopoly over education. Once the government had control, it changed the structure and content of the schooling system. New subjects, not previously included in the traditional curriculum, became the stock-in-trade of the new education. The new education of the nineteenth century was only the prelude, still limited at the end of the century. This initial change was underpinned by the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–79).

Perhaps the most significant testimonial to the value of the new education and to the degree to which it has become rooted in Iranian culture has come from the Islamic regime. With all the opposition of the '*ulama*' to Western-style education, the elementary school system, despite significant changes in the content, follows the new patterns. Even as they became firmly in control in the first four decades of Islamic rule, the '*ulama*' did not reverse the process. Education, with the exception of the *madrese*, has remained much closer to Westernized education than to traditional schooling. New sciences are included in the curriculum, and English language is taught at schools. Universities, closed for Islamization immediately after the revolution, were reopened after two years with their overall structure intact. The clerics in power have used the fruits of modern education in the service of their revolutionary goals in spite of their initial opposition. In a way, they seem to aspire to turn the wheel back to where it had been at the outset of the period discussed, when a

distinction was made between (desirable) Western science and technology and (undesirable) Western culture. There is no reason to think that it is more feasible to make such a distinction now than it was then.

Finally, Iran's historical identity has long been based on two main pillars—which did not necessarily live in harmony throughout the centuries—ancient/imperial/Persian and Islamic/Shi'i. Since the nineteenth century, a third layer of Iranian identity seems to have emerged—modern/Western. Together, they shape Iran's new distinctiveness. New education has had a significant role in introducing Western-style education and, through it, has influenced other aspects of Iranian life. Constitutionalism, parliamentarism, and nationalism, as well as modern education—deeply entrenched in modern Iranian history and endorsed also by the Islamic regime—are borrowed from Western culture. The question, it seems, is not if Western civilization and local traditions can live together, but rather if it is at all possible to totally separate them.